

Podcast 498: Playing Catch-Up to Help Students Who Join Class Midyear

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: The idea is you want everyone operating at that proximal level of challenge, the easy plus one (EZ+1) thing, and then everyone will be, they'll be happy. They'll be working where they need to be. They'll be learning what they need to learn.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: I love the way we teach writing, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: I do too. I think we share that love. That's why we're still here doing this after all these years.

Julie Walker: True, it's true. And I heard you say something recently that was a light bulb moment, and after all these years of working with you, I'm like, aha, you have used the term, we teach a technical approach. Then you said, and that's why we practice our techniques, and I went, technical techniques, they go together.

I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: I remember the first time I said that and I thought, oh, duh. I mean the words obviously, but we don't think about a technical approach necessarily when it comes to art.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: Right? I mean, you think of art as being creative and self-expression and exciting, I guess. But if you look at the people who are really good at, whether it's art or music or dance or martial arts or writing—how did they get really good? It wasn't by just trying to be good and do the same thing every day. It was, there's a path. There's basic skills, there's a technique, and it is a technical progression.

Julie Walker: Exactly, and I have a friend, and you know this friend, she's illustrated one of our theme-based books, *Bible-based Writing Lessons*, and she was teaching art. As far as I know, she's still teaching art. Good friend when we lived in Southern California, we homeschooled together. But she taught dots, lines, curves. And when you look at her artwork and we'll post a picture in our show notes of some of the work that she's done for us, for

Bible-based, it is so beautiful. And you think, wow, I guess that's what it is. Dots and lines. So this technical approach that we have for teaching writing of course is structure and style, *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*.

The structural models are the paragraphs, the units, the building upon each other. We start with something super simple, could be a one or two paragraph assignment and grow to more complex writing.

Andrew Pudewa: And there's rules, and sometimes people bristle against the rules. But we have found that if you follow the rules and you teach the kids to follow the rules, they make really good progress. Unit one. It's a simple rule, three words per sentence max, symbols, numbers, abbreviations. Okay. You

Julie Walker: I want to do four. Nope.

Andrew Pudewa: You go into the zone.

Julie Walker: do three.

Andrew Pudewa: But there's a rule. You get into Unit 3, each paragraph has a purpose. There's three paragraphs, and you ask the questions that correspond with the paragraph. Unit 4, topic-clincher, right? And so as you conform to the constraint of the rules, then creativity becomes more possible. You remember we had Scott Newstok with *How to Think like Shakespeare*. And we talked a little bit, I believe in that podcast, certainly in his book, about the value of constraint in nurturing, nourishing and building creativity. It's like the rules create the game. The frame creates the picture, right? The meter and the rhyme scheme create the poem.

Without that, what do you have?

Julie Walker: Right. Well, my grandson, who's two knows the constraint is you cannot go in the street without holding someone's hand. And this is a very good rule, and I love that he knows this.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, but isn't his creativity stifled?

Julie Walker: It. Oh my goodness. His poor mother is finding him climbing on bookshelves just like her husband used to do when he was a boy. But I digress.

So the structural models, the stylistic techniques, these are great techniques that we teach. And we review them, and students when they come in at the beginning of the year, we start over again with the structural models. We build on the stylistic techniques year after year, and they become excellent writers.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, and, and if anything, the techniques become kind of second nature.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: And that's what we want. We want kids to be able to sit down at the piano or pick up a pencil, and the artistic expression is now just natural for them. That's what we want in writing. We want it to be natural, but there's a path through unnatural before you get to natural.

And then when there's a new idea, a new technique, there's always a period of awkwardness. I taught violin for a long time. Still am actually because now I have grandchildren and there's this one point where you have to teach students to play in third position. This causes them to have to move their hand to a completely different place on the fingerboard and use the fingers in different ways.

And in the beginning it would be very easy to say, well. It would be so much easier to not play that in third position and just play it in first position. And it might even sound better because it's easier. But if you were to take that approach, you would never acquire the skill of moving that hand into the third position, and then you would never be able to play the things that require it.

And then after that, you've got to get the second position... fourth...and it just goes on. But I like the analogy because there's always that point where, well, couldn't I just do it the old way? Well, you could, but you won't get to where we need to go. And yes, there's going to be awkwardness. You're going to have to work on playing those notes in tune until it becomes easy.

Julie Walker: Easy. I knew you were going to say easy.

Andrew Pudewa: The writing stuff is just like that.

Julie Walker: Yep. Okay, so I'm thinking as you're describing this, Andrew, this is our Unit 3 model, which is we've got characters and setting. We've got teachers and students who are in a setting and they're learning how to write using this technical approach, but we have a conflict.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, okay. That's not the problem. That's the setup.

Julie Walker: Yeah, that was the setup. And here's the problem. A new student joins the class. It's October, or it's January, or this happens all the time in schools, and this even happens in homeschool co-op settings. And so how can this student who is brand new to this classroom get up to speed so that he or she can enjoy the writing process with his peers, with her peers?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, there's probably no just categorical answer here. There are circumstantial differences. We might address them in a slightly different way. If you are in a circumstance like a co-op or a hybrid school where the parents are going to be very involved or as involved as. need to be as, as much as you can hope for.

Then I think what is going to work best is to try and then educate the parent about the Structure and Style system and have them work with the student to do the assignments that the other students kind of already know how to do because they've been doing them. So I think parent involvement is hugely valuable and if, if at all, it can be harnessed that power of parental involvement is going to be the best way to accelerate the process of the student feeling more integrated, feeling more comfortable with the checklists, feeling more confident, competent. And of course, that's the key to enjoying the process is being confident and competent. So I know that we have our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* course, which would be great if parents wanted to invest the dozen hours they need to.

Julie Walker: They might learn something themselves, right?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, , I was just telling a guy I was talking to earlier today, how many hundreds, if not thousands of times, I have had people come to the seminar, the parent seminar and say, oh, this is going to help me so much in my work, in my business, in my ministry. If only I had learned this. I'm taking a graduate course in school right now and I'm going to use this.

So is there application outside of just teaching it? Yes, absolutely. But it's an investment. And you don't have to do all twelve hours nonstop, but you can do a couple hours, do the practicum work with the kid, do a couple more hours, do a practicum work with the kid. You can stretch it out. We also have kind of the super abbreviated version of that, the *Structure and Style Overview* that would allow the parents to at least have an idea of how it all works, not necessarily a deeper understanding, but it would still be better than nothing. So if you're in a co-op, a hybrid school, a pod school, micro-school situation where the parents are just naturally more involved and wanting to be more involved, then that would be the first thing I would recommend.

Now even with that, there's going to be a runway to—I don't necessarily like the term up to speed—but it's an analogy that makes sense to people. It's going to take some time because we don't want to violate the EZ+1 principle and say, okay, well everybody in this class is now doing all six dress ups and three sentence openers, and we're in Unit 4 following the topic-clincher and...Here's your assignment, kid who just walked out of someplace where they never, ever heard any of that. So that's where we would get into this idea of customizing the checklist and giving enough help through modeling.

And I think one of the important ideas is to become unattached, if you will, to that student being able to do everything perfectly independently, right away. There is this feeling like, oh no, if, if this kid's not doing it all by himself, then he's not learning as much as the ones who are. We could reference the *Four Deadly Errors* where I actually point out that if a child isn't getting the help they need to do it, that's when they're not learning. And if they're not getting the help they need and they're not doing it, you're not going to expect learning to magically happen.

So, it's all about imitation. And so how do we do that in an institutional kind of setting? Obviously if the parents are involved and they've got time, it's the time that's really the challenge.

Julie Walker: So what you're saying then is basically lower the expectations for that brand new student.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I wouldn't even say lower the expectations. I would say just have reasonable expectations based on who that child is, where they came from, what's their aptitude? What is their, how much time do you have to take them aside and explain something? And it would be okay for that student to have a checklist that is different than most all the other kids in the class, but.

I was doing some PD for a school system

Julie Walker: Professional development.

Andrew Pudewa: that is really doing well. They are really doing well, and they have the problem that even though the kids are age segregated—like you've got a fifth grade class and a sixth grade class and a seventh grade class, and they're all nine months apart from each other, so they're all the same age—there's still a wide range of aptitude differences and not everybody gets it as quickly. So I do my normal explanation. You go over to the kids who got it real fast, they're chomping at the bit for the next thing. You can secretly show them the next technique and say, I'm not going to show this to everybody, but I think you could try it, give it a shot, and they'll be delighted for the challenge.

Because they'll be at the proximal level of challenge, so they'll be engaged. You can also go to the kids who forgot everything and never really understood to begin with and just cut a few things off that checklist and say, look, I think this is a little much if you just do these two things, these two style techniques, and follow the topic-clincher rule, and get your title, just do this. Don't worry about the whole checklist and just cross some things off. And if you want to go to the added effort of customizing a beautiful looking checklist, we have the Checklist Generator tool

Julie Walker: Are reading my mind because I was going to insert a plug for our checklist generator, and I want to share just a couple things about that. First of all, it's only available to our premium members. People have asked, can I get it without being a premium member? The answer is no. You have to be. It's affordable to be a premium member. No big deal.

Andrew Pudewa: Cheaper than a cup of coffee a month.

Julie Walker: Absolutely. The other thing about our Checklist Generator is checklists from our curriculum is preloaded in there. And so if you are using *Adventures in Writing* or you're using *Investigations in Writing* or a.

Andrew Pudewa: It's all there for that lesson, and then you can just add or subtract anything you want to add or subtract. It's a great tool. I use it myself, but I always want people to feel like it doesn't have to look perfect. You can handwrite on the next technique. You can cross off two of the dress ups and customize for the kids.

And so the idea is you want everyone operating at that proximal level of challenge. The EZ +1 thing, the easy maybe plus one thing, and then everyone will be, they'll be happy. They'll be working where they need to be. They'll be learning what they need to learn and then having time to work with the kid and help them understand how to do the outline or help them understand how to work the story sequence chart, understand them, help them understand how to make a topic-clincher.

And you do this basically by modeling. You can't really explain beyond a certain point and make any more progress. It's like I've told you a hundred times. If I've told you once, I've told you a million times. Well obviously the telling a hundred times, if it's not worked on the 99th, it might not work on the hundredth.

What does tend to work is "let's do it together. I'll dictate a sentence to you. I'll dictate another sentence to you. I'll dictate a clincher. Tell you what? I'll give you two options. You pick one. Which one do you like?" Okay now that the student's will and intellect is engaged to some degree, I have to make a choice. Which sentence do I like? Which word do I like? Which dress up do I like? And so that idea of giving them a couple choices and then they're more engaged in the process. And what I have found is that if you model it real tightly like that, that's when they learn how to do it. And then the explanation starts to make sense to them, but the explanation without the modeling can just not make sense for a long time, and that's frustrating of course.

Julie Walker: So we've spent a little bit of time talking about how you can modify the checklist, and of course that's speaking to the stylistic techniques. I have a question about the student that parachutes in the class, say in December or January and you're in Unit 5. Are you going to take them back to unit one or are you going to have them do Unit 5 with the rest of the

Andrew Pudewa: I am not, unless you have a lot of time and a lot of parental involvement. I think one thing about the units is they aren't really cumulative in the same way that the stylistic techniques are. So ideally you learn topic-clincher in Unit 4, you practice it in unit five. You didn't do unit four, you don't have time to get a kid to do 2, 3, 4 Unit 4 assignments. He's got to be with the class. And so you make some outlines together. You give him a chance to maybe do the last of the three paragraphs or to try one on their own. And then you've got a few kids, the new one, plus a couple others who need to go and make that outline together. So, and then you explain the topic-clincher. You give some examples. They may or may not do it, and if they don't do it, then just...

Julie Walker: You'll get topic-clincher in Unit 6.

Andrew Pudewa: You'll get it again. You'll get it again. You'll get it again. So I wouldn't worry about trying to make up the units because you can move forward without doing that. It won't be maybe as easy, but it's still doable. And then just be available and help. With the style techniques, however, that's where you do want to start with one or two techniques, whatever, and work with that. And then you can even say to the student, you tell me when you think this is easy, and then they'll come to you and say, okay, it's easy.

Julie Walker: And then you go, yes, I get to give you more work. And they'll be thrilled.

Andrew Pudewa: And some people they, some people have this erroneous idea that children don't want to do something a little harder, that they don't want the next challenge, that they wouldn't ask for the next technique because they're coasting and it's easy. That's not the nature of children, right? The nature of children is to want to be in that perfect zone where I can do what I can do, and I think I can do what I think I can do. So I will try. That's where they want to be, and. I really don't believe that children are lazy in the sense that they're always going to take the least challenging route. I think they default to lazy when they believe they can't have success, when they can't do the harder thing, they'll default and then we just look and say, well, they're not trying.

If you get it just right, maybe they have a habit of trying to dupe everyone around them to thinking that they are incompetent and shouldn't, not much should be expected of them, and that they're lazy, but that's just a game they've been playing because they've been outside of that motivational zone. I think we can recreate that, and writing is, I think, one of the best places to do that with our system because our system is the best way to give that proximal level of challenge

Julie Walker: Yep. Yep. I will be sure that we put a link in our show notes to your talk on motivation and the...

Andrew Pudewa: *Four Deadly Errors.*

Julie Walker: *Four Deadly Errors.* Yes. And I love the secret weapons that you include in your motivation talk. So I'm not going to tell you what they are, listener. You're just going to have to go and listen to it. I think you'll find it delightful.

And I just want to end with this one thing that I think is really, I just want to affirm classroom teachers, whether it's hybrid, co-op, classroom teachers in a full-time school, the benefit that you have with a group of students can really help you become a better teacher and help your students gain the experience that they need at their level.

That new student that came in in January, and now you are spending a little bit more time with that group, Andrew, that you were talking about, that's really going to help those students that need that extra practice without, without them feeling embarrassed or singled out.

Andrew Pudewa: I'll throw in one more idea here because I was talking to the teachers I was at last, last couple weeks ago. We have this odd idea that everyone, because they are the same age in the same class, should do the same amount of work. And that somehow if you ask someone to do more than someone else, well now you're being unfair.

We have this, this really distorted egalitarianism going on, and Webster just thought that was ridiculous, and I kind of do too because everyone's in the room, but everyone's different. And you can give another writing project to the kids who finished the one you did while you're helping the ones who aren't finished yet. That is totally valid.

And the default in a classroom is, oh, you finished. Okay, sit there and read. Well, I had one teacher who said, well, my kid, he likes reading so much, he just does it as quickly as possible, doesn't put any effort, thinks it's pretty easy for him, and then he can just sit there and read. I said, well, why don't you give him a second writing assignment? And the light bulbs went off in her mind, like, oh, then he might, he wouldn't be motivated to finish up as quickly as possible to read because he's going to be writing anyway. Maybe he'll put a little more thought into what he's writing. So we'll see how that goes. I hope she gets back to me, but I think that's very fair is to say, oh, great, you finished. Fantastic. Here's another one for you. I mean, if you finish your ice cream, you might like some more.

Julie Walker: Sounds great. Well, thank you Andrew. This has been very helpful.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you. As always, Julie, a lot of fun talking with you.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.