

Podcast 499: A Conversation about Critical Thinking with Jennifer Mauser

Episode Transcript

Jennifer Mauser: When you are expressing to your students or children in your home, this inquisitive nature, this desire to read and to cut through what is the false from the truth, I think that's really important that we model for our children.

Julie Walker: Andrew, this year is starting to come to a close.

Andrew Pudewa: That does happen with almost every year so far, at least in my experience. And what does that mean for us?

Julie Walker: Well, for us that means that we've spent this entire year kind of a thread of thinking, talking about the value of thinking, how to teach, thinking. We've even talked about how AI is a technology that's atrophying the skill of thinking in some of our podcasts. So today I thought it well and good for us to talk about this idea of critical thinking.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, so we're moving. From a thread to a rope here, this is serious business.

Julie Walker: This is serious business, and I just know that when I go to a school conference or a teacher supply store, I will see workbooks on teaching critical thinking.

Andrew Pudewa: I was at a conference once and there was a booth that was selling one book, one product, and I believe the title was something like Teaching Critical Thinking through Writing.

Julie Walker: Oh, nice. Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: So I asked the person standing there, "How would you define critical thinking?" She had no answer. She just stood there and looked at me for about 20 seconds and says, "I'll have to think about that." Like you're selling a book on it. You should have some definitions here to go with your titles, but.

Julie Walker: Well, we should start there and because this is such an important topic, we brought in an expert to have a conversation with us. And of course, this is our own very dear Jennifer Mauser, who works for us at IEW. So welcome to our podcast, Jennifer,

Jennifer Mauser: Thank you so much. I'm really glad to be here, Julie.

Julie Walker: It's so nice to actually have you here in the podcast studio.

Jennifer Mauser: Indeed. I'm really excited to be here.

Julie Walker: Yeah, we've done this once or twice before. So let's just start with that question that Andrew asked that author.

Andrew Pudewa: Well. Some people might not know who Jennifer is.

Julie Walker: Oh, we should start there

Andrew Pudewa: She should give just the tiniest little bit of background about what she does for us, how she found us, what she does for us, and why she loves us so

Julie Walker: And we'll put a link in the show notes to her page.

Andrew Pudewa: Then once that's done, then we can hit her with hard questions.

Jennifer Mauser: Oh dear. Okay, well let's start with the easy ones. I became aware of IEW when I was a very young homeschooling mama, so my avenue to IEW was through the homeschooling world. And of course I became one of those fan girls for Andrew and kind of followed him around on the circuit for a while when he was giving his presentations.

And I was fortunate enough to be asked at one point to help out in the booths. So I came to it that way. I was hired on as a 911 team member back in I believe, 2016, and contributed to the blog.

Julie Walker: I wanna talk about 911. We used to have a team that we call 911-ers, and this was a group primarily of homeschool moms. Or maybe homeschool mom emeritus, maybe they were all done homeschooling that if we got those long questions like help, I'm homeschooling, I have no idea what to do, we would say, please hold and we'd transfer them to our 911 team.

But we no longer have a 911 team. We just have a fuller, richer customer service team.

Andrew Pudewa: Of which you are now a full rich part.

Jennifer Mauser: Yes. I enjoy being a full rich part of that full rich team. I now serve as an Educational Consultant in the school's department and really enjoy connecting with schools, administrators, and teachers, and helping them find solutions for their students so they can become competent and confident communicators and thinkers.

Andrew Pudewa: And we've had many conversations about dyslexia and learning challenges, and you have some special training in that area as well.

Jennifer Mauser: I do. I have a master certification with the Barton Reading and Spelling program, and I work with students that have impacts in dyslexia and dysgraphia and dyscalculia. And I recently also completed a certification with evidence-based literacy instruction.

Andrew Pudewa: Great, great. And I have been known to send you emails from parents with kids who have one or more of those things, and you always take care of it so nicely for me.

Jennifer Mauser: Well, thank you. I try.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you. Alright, but we're here to talk about critical thinking, which I will be totally honest: I don't like the term. Why? Well, it's kind of because nobody knows what it means, or everybody has their own little definition.

And I get irritated when words don't mean what they should. Like for example, progressive. You would think if something was progressive, there would be progress associated with it. But certainly progressive and education do not seem to be showing much progress, at least over the past several decades. And critical thinking gets bandied about a lot. A lot of people

say, what do you want for your kids' education? Critical thinking, what do you want? So how would you, Jennifer, define that critical thinking idiom.

Jennifer Mauser: When I think of critical thinking, I think of a way of taking information and not just accepting it at the face value, but really turning it over in one's mind. For me, critical thinking starts with building a schema as a child would, whether it's through play, through travel, through books, through conversations, through education, and as they build that background information, they can access different parts of it as they take in new information, mull it over, and possibly be able to come to a decision about its veracity or its nuances that they take and take into themselves and are able to apply as they continue to grow and learn.

Andrew Pudewa: That is so important. Everyone should reflect on what she just said because kind of normal, superficial conversation is that critical thinking is a skill which somehow you can teach. But what she said is you have to have a lot of information to be able to have any judgment of new information coming to you. Therefore, it reinforces the idea that knowing stuff is good.

Julie Walker: I love the part, Jennifer, that you said about turning it over in your mind. That takes a little bit more time. And, in our world today, everything is so fast, fast, fast. Our reels that we see on social media, [if] they're longer than 10 seconds, we're just swiping past them and yet we don't take the time to ponder.

Andrew Pudewa: But it's hard to ponder if you don't have connections to ponder with. And I think that might be part of the whole conversation is just—we have lost what I think used to be an instinctive knowledge that knowing a lot is good, it's valuable, it helps us. But now we see that people kind of argue—well, why know names and dates and places and why learn the capitals of the countries and why even learn math facts if you've got devices and Wikipedias and calculators and AI to just give you all that stuff.

So make a little apologetic for us here on what kinds of things that you can learn will help you when you get to this wanting to think critically.

Jennifer Mauser: Well, when I think about the aspect of taking in this knowledge and making it a part of yourself, but not only that, having it reflect your own values, your mores, and what it is that you want to do, and how you want to make the change in your world is you have to decide truth. And truth is not something that we can get access to in a, in a meme or in a ten second video snippet, as Julie recommended or mentioned. It's really something that we first have to come to with, I think, a certain sense of humbleness that we don't necessarily know everything. And just because we have an assumption that there's a truth, if you will, that we're willing to humble ourselves and become learners, active learners, no matter what stage of life.

And children come at it with different wealth. A child that sits at home and doesn't have a whole lot of socioeconomic wealth is not going to be as exposed to experiences, to trips to activities. So how does that child get it versus a child whose parents maybe take them on trips and read to them all the time? There's a real challenge sometimes with just giving children access to be able to obtain some of this knowledge and take it into themselves.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I see three challenges here. One is that your typical 12-year-old believes everything they think. And they believe that what they think is true, whether it is or not, they believe it is. And obviously not everything that every 12-year-old believes is true. And so that's kind of a tough thing. If you're wanting to define the need for truth as a part of being able to do critical thinking, you do need that humility. And that's a very hard thing, especially for middle schoolers. It's not their nature yet. And even many older people don't have that idea that humility is important for learning.

But then in this modern world where we so quickly redefine truth as our truth or my truth, that this relativism that has infected so much. Certainly there are things that are subjective. My truth is that hot peppers are good for me and I like them and I should put them on food, but I know people for whom that is not true. But I'm willing to admit that's an opinion. However, I think so many people now just want everything to be a matter of opinion, even history.

How do we combat this with our kids, with our students? How do we cultivate this humility and willingness to acknowledge that everything we think may not be true?

Jennifer Mauser: Modeling is one way. When you are expressing to your students or to your children in your home, this inquisitive nature, this desire to read and to cut through what is the false from the truth and reflect on that and even comment out loud how maybe that has impacted your life and changed a perspective. I think that's really important that we model for our children.

But not only that, I also think that we need to expose our children to a wide variety of experiences, and those experiences I think are encountered in, well, frankly. I think IEW has a wonderful way of sharing knowledge and information that students can take into themselves and learn about their world in a manner that causes them to have to think.

Because writing—if you think of it—writing is really this physical manifestation of a brain-based activity. We can't just turn over these thoughts in our heads when we read, and then especially with the writing method, with the way we teach the keyword outline and the way IEW introduces this idea of what's the most important thing.

These aspects that students come to in our writing units really go to a very large impact on critical thinking. And I love how it's encountered in such a non-threatening manner because of the incremental steps, starting at unit one and building through and unit three, for example, reading the literature, even these small Aesop fables, we are taking this information and breaking it apart and asking ourselves questions and maybe that's it. Really, it's the art of the question.

Andrew Pudewa: I was speaking with someone earlier today about how doing an art, and we were talking about the relationship between music and writing, how that has the capacity to cultivate virtue. And when we don't pursue excellence to the degree that our natural talent allows, we fail to cultivate the virtue as well as we could if we were to engage with it more fully and really pursue the excellence. And I think we've seen students we've known who really did become a bit more virtuous, but when we say virtue, well what does that mean? Right? It's a pretty big term. The four cardinal virtues are prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice.

Or we could use the words judgment, moderation, courage, and justice. That idea of the cardinal virtues, the cardinal means hinge. Everything hinges. So judgment—but in order to judge well, we get back to, we have to know stuff. So I think Webster's idea that you learn something better by writing about it, and he had lots of stories about that.

We work hard in this area. And trying to find useful information and useful subjects for research and contemplation that aren't hotspots. It seems like everything is a hotspot now. It's hard to say anything about anything and not have someone who just without even thinking reacts. So how would you say that there's this relationship between judgment, contemplation, knowledge, and writing?

What are some really practical ways that parents and teachers out there can just strengthen that?

Julie Walker: Say those four words again, Andrew. And then I'm gonna add the queen of virtues, which is humility because you mentioned that earlier, and I love that to be able to approach something with humility. So what were those four things again?

Andrew Pudewa: The relationship between right judgment or wisdom and knowing things and contemplation and writing. All those things.

Julie Walker: And add in humility with that because we don't know it all.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. So in five minutes, what are some kind of just practical things that you have thought about or encountered that we could just leave people with if they leave this saying, yes, I want better all of that.

Jennifer Mauser: In one word, I would say IEW. The process—start with but don't limit yourself. Look at IEW. The structural models go through those. Unit five, for example, is one of my favorites because it takes the pictures and the student is tasked with looking at these pictures and making determinations about these pictures by using the questions.

So that student will ask himself what is in the picture? Why is it there? What could have happened before? How did this situation happen? What is going to happen afterwards? And in the process of asking himself questions, he comes up with a composition that may or may not be necessarily narrative in style, but it's going to relate those series of events. And that's all part of the judgment.

But added to even that, the writing. I would say also encounter literature, whether you are a tiny child who's not reading, or a child who struggles with reading, taking in audio books, listening to mom or teacher read, and then discussing that literature because it's in the back and forth of this conversation about what's going on in literature that we actually add huge pins to our pin board of knowledge that we can use to access other areas of content that we might not have even experienced yet. But it all goes into that repository that we can call upon later on as we're gaining more and more maturity, wisdom, knowledge, and accessing the information.

Andrew Pudewa: And this makes me think of the people who say, well, telling kids what to do and making them memorize a bunch of stuff and telling them what to write about and controlling everything is kind of the opposite of what we really want, which is imagination and creativity. I have some thoughts on that, but how would you respond to that criticism?

Jennifer Mauser: I think that putting things in our memory makes it accessible for us to pull out and apply in other areas of our lives. That goes for vocabulary. It goes for dates, it goes for poetry, scripture, if you will. Anytime we can add something that we can access, it's a treasure within us, and that gives us even more facility with other information as we encounter it.

So I think memorization is incredibly important, and I think it's a travesty and a tragedy that our phones have taken over as the repository for our access of information.

Andrew Pudewa: And it affects young people so much more because my first inclination, if I need to know something, would be to try and remember or find a book that I might have read or know about, or even go to an encyclopedia or something, even an online encyclopedia. But I want to, I want to find it. Most young people, it's just like, just ask your phone.

There's no engagement with the search. And I don't know where that's going to bring us eventually, but there are a lot of us out there that really are realizing that we've got to be careful. As Julie said at the beginning, this technology will atrophy the skills which it replaces. How far down can we atrophy the skill of thinking and still be operating in a human way at our potential?

Jennifer Mauser: I don't know the answer to that, but I can say it's very concerning when we are asking artificial intelligence to tell us how do we think about something, analyze this. That's a real scary thought.

Andrew Pudewa: And if there's one thing we are clear that AI lacks is virtues, such as judgment, such as prudence.

Jennifer Mauser: I would argue such as a soul. It's soulless.

Julie Walker: Okay, so I wrote down four takeaways. You ready? See if you can add to this. All right. Number one, limit screens and technology. If we want to build critical thinking skills, limit screens and technology. Number two, read good literature either to yourself or to your children, or have your children read to you, but definitely read alouds and see a link in the show notes for some suggestions on some good literature.

We have a book list. And then number three would be memorizing poems and maybe snippets of literature. I like what you said about the peg board, Jennifer and how we can just refer back to that if we've read it and we've memorized pieces of scripture, if we've memorized pieces of literature. I love that idea.

I was watching a movie, it was actually *Sea Biscuit* where at the beginning the dad is sitting with the kids and he's having them quote from Charles Dickens and gives great accolades to his oldest son who's able to do it. But then he himself was able to finish the quote, and everybody stands up and cheers. And I'm like, wow, that's amazing. But yeah, we can't do that today. I don't know about that. And then of course, number four is learn to write with IEW. Did I hit 'em all or do we?

Jennifer Mauser: I think you did, Julie. I think you did an admirable job.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's obviously a conversation that really needs to continue, and I'm hopeful in that I think even people who aren't kind of in our world, they're not in the thinking

about education the way we do, but there's a reaction against kind of the inhumanity of the cutting edge technology right now.

And so a lot of people, I think they're going to be looking for ways to think about this and maybe returning to the idea that carrying information around in your head is good, and the best way to learn it is—memorize and write. Yeah.

Julie Walker: Our time goes by so fast, Andrew, doesn't

Andrew Pudewa: Why don't we do those long form two-hour podcast?

Julie Walker: Let's not. Jennifer, thank you so much for joining us for this podcast today. You're always a delight.

Andrew Pudewa: Always a delight. Yeah. God bless you.