

Podcast 502: The Writing Skills Gap with Colin Chesley

Episode Transcript

Colin Chesley: The paper in one sense is to assess, okay, what do they actually know about this thing? But the process of writing improves their ability to recall information. It helps them make connections between concepts or between different areas too.

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: So Andrew, we have a guest on our podcast, and I feel a little bad that we waited this long to get this guy on our podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yes, but we've known him for a while, and that just shows the durability of our friendship.

Julie Walker: Yes, it's true. It's true. Well, and who we have with us is Dr. Chesley, who is a professor, and actually you're more than just a professor. You are the Associate Vice President of the College of Health and Public Services at Daytona State College in Daytona Beach, Florida. That's a mouthful.

Andrew Pudewa: That is a mouthful of a title, but perhaps more important than all that is he's a dad.

Julie Walker: He's a dad, and his family is an IEW family. And we're super grateful for that. So the reason why I feel like we're remiss and finally getting him on our podcast is he has an article in our school's magalog called “The Writing Skills Gap” that we will link to in the show notes, of course.

But I thought this would be appropriate though for us to have a conversation with him now because this is the season where seniors in high school are busy applying for colleges, and so we just want to talk to you, Dr. Chesley, about your experience working with college students who may or may not have been prepared for the rigors of college life.

Colin Chesley: Absolute.

Julie Walker: Tell us a little bit about your history, how you got to be in the position that you're at.

Colin Chesley: Sure. So I actually started out as a health administrator. I was a CEO executive in healthcare. I worked in long-term care, and that's a unique industry because I was

able to do that with a bachelor's degree. I found myself as a 24, 25-year-old with, I was married and had two and a half kids, one on the way. And I found myself running a \$13 million operation with 130 employees and physicians and therapists and nurses, and it was a wonderful industry to be in because it was a baptism by fire. It taught me very quickly how to work with people and manage things and just work in operations. But I realized I needed more education, or I wanted more education because I saw myself working in, in, in additional settings.

And when I went back for my MBA. I had a professor who, his first class was incredibly inspiring, was a leadership class and was highly engaged, and I was able to take things back to work and share them there and teach them with my department heads and with my employees. And I don't remember what the situation was, but his name was John Burch, Dr. John Burch. I can't remember if we were engaging in a debate or if we were, if I was giving a presentation, I don't remember, but he said, "You would make a great professor." And lo it lodged in my head. And I thought, oh golly, I had never thought of that. Maybe that'd be a great retirement thing.

And I finished my master's degree and not long after that I had a university where we were living, we were living in Johnson City, Tennessee at the time, East Tennessee State University. I, I reached out and said, Hey, what, what would it take to become a professor? Maybe an adjunct? And they, the chair, her name is Dr. Amal Corey, a wonderful chair. She reached back and said, "Well, why don't you consider applying for this position?" I had never considered being a faculty member, I was 30 at the time. This was 12 years ago. And I thought, wow, that's, I was doing well in healthcare and I was, I was good at it. That was actually sort of the few things I can look back and say, I was good at that. But it was like an allure. It offered the opportunity for me to earn my doctoral degree and begin teaching. And I hadn't had any formal teaching experience up to that point. I taught Sunday school when I was a scout master and had worked with youth in that capacity for a number of years, but I had not had any formal pedagogical training.

So I took the bait, and my wife is just a wonderful woman. She was amazingly okay with the vastly different income that started out with. And then the rigors of going through a terminal degree. And then she was also pregnant at the time with our fifth child. And so she was a huge support. So I went and started teaching in a college of public health. I taught health administration. That was my discipline. I earned my doctoral degree, and I dove into everything that I could about the science of teaching and learning. I conducted research on it. I published on it, but I also went to lots of seminars and conferences, and I loved it.

I said I was good as an administrator, but I love teaching. Teaching is the best. I will say this, that teaching is the absolute best. It was the most fulfilling experience ever. On Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is self-actualization. It was wonderful. And I was good at it. I can look back and say I was good at that.

I really enjoyed it. But then, the time came where our family needed some, some different scenery and more opportunities as far as homeschool went. And so I had gotten to the point where I was an assistant dean in that school. And so this opportunity came up for the Associate Vice President of the College of Health and Public Services at Daytona State College. It's a fancy title, but I'm the dean. And essentially what it is, I've got four schools, the School of Nursing, School of Health Careers, School of Emergency Services, and the School of Dental Sciences and, and I have chairs that run those. I am over the college, and of course next I report to the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost, and then the president.

But it gives me the opportunity that is this beautiful marriage between my experiences, health administrator and my experience teaching in a college setting. Because now I'm, it feels like I'm running a hospital now, but I've got 30, 35 nursing faculty and total of 60 faculty across the entire college campus.

And it's just a fantastic thing. I still get to teach some. I teach a graduate course for East Tennessee State University still and teach some undergraduate courses. And here I went from a university setting to Daytona State College, which is at, at its heart a community college. Florida is very unique in that the community college system is huge. Florida's number one in higher education. And we have 28 state colleges, community colleges that have been granted the opportunity to award baccalaureate degrees. So we're unique in that. And it's amazing the cost of the credit hour cost is \$120 a credit hour for bachelor's degrees and \$102 a credit hour for associate's degrees.

So people can earn an associate's degree for \$7,500 or a bachelor's degree for about \$10 to \$13,000. It's just, it's an incredible thing.

Andrew Pudewa: That's a good reason to move to Florida..

Colin Chesley: It's a great reason. It's a great reason. It's been a great opportunity. I've loved it. And so that's how I got to where I'm at.

Julie Walker: Amazing. And so you are teaching...Andrew, this kind of reminds me of Dr. Webster, right? He was a professor of West African history and through all of his experience, ultimately came up with the Structure and Style syllabus for Teaching English Composition. And yet here we have another professor who sees the value of writing as more than just a skill in English and dissecting literature, but actually learning.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I'd like to dig into that a little bit because I get this question all the time now. In fact, just a few days ago I was doing a webinar. In the q and a right at the end. Someone said, how do you respond when people say, "Why bother teaching writing when we have AI and it can do it better than we can?"

Of course, I have kind of some material I can throw into that. It's a huge question, but I'm wondering if you, Colin, have got that question from anyone, and if so, how have you answered it? And if not, how would you answer it?

Colin Chesley: Of course I get that question, and you're right. As I was teaching, I had the unique experience of being a college professor while at the same time earning a doctorate in education, and so I saw it from both sides. I was being taught about education at the same time that I was an educator. And I saw the value of writing in an immense way during that time period. The doctorate degree, because of the writing that it required of me and because of even the research that it required, my other degrees were beneficial, but they were professional preparation. This one changed me cognitively more than anything had, because of the writing component. It made me, it required me to engage with material in a way that I had not previously done as far as analyzing, synthesizing, examining, pulling it together, and formulating new ideas or presenting ideas in a way that I had not done before.

And so we were introduced to IEW actually at this time while I was teaching, entering the doctorate degree. We were part of a co-op for about two years at that point. And I watched my kids, I mean, we were..my wife Austin and I were nervous about teaching writing because my, our kid, I just, I just felt like the kids, well our oldest son has autism and, and so that kind of exacerbated that he was our oldest and we were kind of seeing what was going on with the other kids. And we went with that first year from them not being confident in writing a sentence to, by the end of that year, not only writing a three page paper, but then presenting it to a group and then we just watched it go on from there.

I do get that question. What's the point? And, and, and Andrew, you wrote about this in the Magalog, and I love the article by the way. You talked about purchasing the new printer and the credit manager asking, well, what's the point of this? I thought that was a great, insightful question that led to a great article. There's a huge value to this. I mean, teachers, they'll ask students to write about a topic, and we use it to assess. The paper in one sense is to assess, okay, what do they actually know about this thing? We want to see if they can tell us what they know about a certain concept or. But the process of writing improves their ability to recall information. It helps them make connections between concepts or between different areas they wouldn't have done before. And then they can actually synthesize the information in new ways.

So writing isn't just a tool to assess learning, and we do use it that way. You'll find that on every college syllabus we use writing to assess learning. But writing promotes learning. Writing is the learning process. I still remember, from the microbiology class 20 years ago, what *Clostridium botulinum* is and how it's an endospore forming bacteria and then it creates botulism and because of a paper I wrote on it. There's a memory recall that comes from writing and you'd mentioned ai.

Is AI going to replace writing? Oh my goodness, do I have concerns! And so does the entire college community and anyone who has anything to do with pedagogy. We're concerned about the loss of critical thinking and what AI is doing, and we're seeing this with college students coming in. I know I've mentioned in the article that there are some gaps that we see

between that K 12 setting and their collegiate writing acumen, their readiness for college level writing.

And I've spoken with composition faculty. I personally don't teach in the composition area. I teach healthcare, health administration. And so a lot of the students have been through their general education by the time they get to me. And so their writing skills usually are what they are, but of course we have a writing center that we send them to all the time.

But in talking with composition faculty, I talked with one recently who's in our school of communications. She's taught in this field for 35 years and has noticed the gap getting bigger. And I think that AI is exacerbating that, where I'm seeing that in articles through the Chronicle. One of the things she had just told me anecdotally is that she's seeing students coming in feeling more insecure about their own ability to write. And that the likely culprit is that they're not writing enough, and they're not reading enough. We're seeing more and more students coming in, not able, this is terrible to say, but they're not able to engage in a level of reading that promotes understanding. They're used to snippets of information, engaging with small pieces of text, and then sometimes using AI to analyze text and come up with just a few talking points so they can come to class with this false feeling that they're ready, and they're not.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I think that's maybe one of the greatest concerns is, is it's almost like a self-deception. Like, okay, yeah, I use technology, and AI and I created this thing, and I'll put my name on it. And in the process convince myself that I learned it or I know it. And how do we combat this? Like if you could talk to all the high school teachers out there, what would you say to them to say, "Hey, there's this gap between the skills they're leaving high school with and what we need in higher education. Here's my advice for you." Not that you could tell all the high school teachers in the country what to do and they would listen to you, but if you had a magic wand...

Colin Chesley: That's an interesting question. I have never thought about that before. Currently they're focusing on a couple of things in high school, which I think are beneficial, but they're teaching toward a pretty wide group of students as far as their academic readiness. And so they're, they're trying to cast a pretty wide net, I think, which is, I'm not saying is inappropriate. They need to do that. I think I'd rather talk to parents than teachers. If,

Andrew Pudewa: Interesting.

Colin Chesley: If I, if I can be quite frank. I worked in the College of Public Health where we look at health disparities and things of that nature. And oftentimes it came back to what was learned in the home.

One of the actual health disparities was reading comprehension. There's data that shows that people that can't read past the third grade reading level are more likely to be incarcerated. Those kinds of things. I think I would rather talk to parents than high school teachers because I think high school teachers do the best they can, but I think sometimes there may be some

apathy that we find in the home. So the strength of a society really comes from the strength of a family, and I don't mean that in a critical way to say that any certain family structure. I know there's all kinds of family structures, but no matter the family structure, there can be strength in the home as it pertains to teaching and training children and getting them ready for education. Education is the key to change their whole life and their world.

Andrew Pudewa: I think there's a big shift probably, I'm guessing, starting in the sixties, seventies, maybe firmly in momentum in place by the eighties of this kind of parents being responsible for their children's literacy to schools being responsible for their children's literacy. I know my parents both thought it was their job to be sure that I learned to read, I learned to spell, I learned math and that I would be successful in school because they did a lot of stuff with me. And I don't know that we can recover that very easily. I mean, we're trying to do our part. You're doing your part. But I think the teachers used to have the support of the home in a way that maybe they don't anymore.

And then the home had communication with the teachers that maybe they don't anymore. And I feel like screens, especially from say 2000 on just became this, almost like this wall between parents and their kids, and the kids and the teachers, and the parents and the kids. And rather than pick up the phone and talk, it had to start being email.

It had to be technology in the classroom. Parents, you don't know, education is a modern thing now, and you have to have special training to teach your kids to read that whole thing. Would you concur that maybe there was a shift? I mean, I'm obviously almost old enough to be your father. But it seems like there was just this shift, and I'm not sure how we can try to convince parents, Hey, it's your job to teach your kids to read and spell and do math, and the school's there to help if you put your kids into school.

Colin Chesley: I agree. I think it would need to be a shift of, look, education is home centered, public education supported, but the education and wellbeing of your child is your responsibility, and the public education system helps with that.

Julie Walker: I'm also thinking about the problem, just the inherent problem that we have as human beings that we want to win the game of school, and AI is allowing us to win that game. I want to get a good grade on a paper. How can I do that? I'll just give AI my prompt, massage it around a little bit, turn it in, and then I get a good grade assuming the teacher or professor didn't catch me using it. Or maybe they're trying to train students how to use AI so that they can win the game of school.

Andrew Pudewa: I think there's a big emphasis on it's like a calculator. It's technology. The most important thing we can teach is how to use the technology. Meanwhile, the technology will continue to atrophy the skill which it replaces. Do you see in your network, and I know you're kind of in a specialized area there, but do you see anywhere kind of a return to in class writing assignments, like the Blue Book exam, making kids actually write in the class time, under supervision, on paper even? Do you see that happening?

Colin Chesley: I have seen calls for that. And actually, it's funny you say the blue book, that was literally the picture that was shown. And again, I'm taking this from some of the national publications. There are professors out there that are saying, Hey, we do need to return to more in classroom writing. Others, and this is varied across institutions, across disciplines, across even professors. Others are finding ways to say, okay, how can we engage with AI as a tool that will help write it. So we're not going to, you see this across the spectrum. Some classes will say. Use of AI is prohibited. Others will say, you can use it moderately, and others will say, have at it, whatever it may be, and they'll give some parameters.

But some of the ones that even say, use it moderately, they'll give suggestions. Okay, you can use this for idea generation and other things because there is some value to that.

I mean, I'll admit, this past summer, my wife asked me to teach a Shakespeare unit study with my kids, and I loved it. I love Shakespeare. I'm definitely not a Shakespeare expert, but I did go to AI and say, okay, create a seven, eight week structure or a lesson plan for Shakespeare. And I wanted to do this, I wanted to focus on a couple of works, and I wanted to incorporate scenes from different plays or from different movies. And within seconds it spit out a beautiful thing.

Now I went back to it, and I was able to go through it and because I had experience with it, was able to make some modifications, but it was, it was fairly accurate based on the prompt that I gave it, that it included some key scenes, like from *Julius Caesar* and some other things that I wanted my kids to really engage with.

I used other sources. There's a book called *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, which I absolutely loved. I read it and was more excited about teaching it than my kids were about learning it.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah.

Colin Chesley: But, uh, but I had a great time. We ended up reading *Hamlet* and it was just, I, I loved it Anyway.

Julie Walker: By virtue of the fact that you took that material and taught it is going to be something in and of itself, is you're going to own that more. You're going to be thinking more carefully about what you're teaching rather than just submitting a paper that someone else wrote.

Colin Chesley: That's exactly right. So I am seeing in some circles, let's return to doing this in person because we need to ensure that it's done correctly or that that's their original work and their thought process, and not so much from a grading standpoint. Although, yeah, we could talk about grading and the pitfalls of grading and how in a K 12 setting it gears students to seek to achieve a grade as opposed to looking at it from their cognitive standpoint and metacognition all those things.

But, so I think it has its pitfalls, but some are returning to that, and others are leveraging it as a tool because they know that it's not going away. And how can it be used to enhance the learning process? So it is all over the board.

Andrew Pudewa: I want to recommend to you one of my absolute favorite books of all time, and I might have mentioned it to you before, but I'll re-mention it so all our listeners can know. It's called *How to Think Like Shakespeare* by Scott Newstok. I believe he teaches in Memphis, actually, professor of English. But this isn't really about Shakespeare per se.

It's about the world and the educational environment that Shakespeare would have grown and developed in. I had Dr. Newstok on the podcast last year. It was great. We had a fantastic conversation, but I think you would really enjoy this book, especially having done this Shakespeare unit with your kids. So you might look into it. *How to Think Like Shakespeare* by Scott Newstok without N-E-W-S-T-O-K.

But getting back to the college bound student, let's say that they came out of a high school experience where. They didn't necessarily do a lot of writing because they bumped into teachers who said, well, the kids don't read, so we're not going to make them read.

They don't write, they can't write. We can't make them do something they can't do. They apply. They can get into a college or university. What would you suggest to the parents hopefully that they could do to help to close that gap and help them be more ready? And it's kind of unknown. You go to college, you're a kid, you don't know what you're going to bump into.

You don't know what kind of teachers you're going to get or classes you're going to have. Although you could look, I suppose, on a rate your teacher.com kind of website and find out which ones don't require the most work and choose them. But what would you say? Okay, between now and almost a year from now when you walk onto that campus, what in, I don't know, enrichment sounds like a the wrong word, but what more than what the school has done could they do?

Colin Chesley: This is not a plan by the way. That was not preparing this. We didn't discuss this beforehand. I will say that *University-Ready Writing* was and is a fantastic tool to use for high school seniors who are applying for college or who maybe don't feel as confident in their writing and don't feel as prepared.

And, and, and there's a myriad of reasons for that. And I point to some of those in the writing skills gap. And there's some different fo there's a different focus in the college setting. I mean, we're, we are not as concerned about structure necessarily. We just want them to get off the ground. We want them to be able to express ideas and synthesize ideas and concepts, and then focus on some content. And also that they need to realize that they don't have to forget everything and they don't know what they're doing. But I think a great way to prepare themselves to enter the collegiate setting is to do something like *University-Ready Writing*.

I'm assuming because they're listening to the podcast, they already know the value of IEW and Structure and Style, which is what this follows.

And, and what I particularly like about this is that it does focus on note taking, which is if I remember right, my two of my kids have gone through this. They did it in the first couple of weeks, and that's incredibly important. There's a lot to be said for being able to effectively take notes and to do that handwritten. By the way, there's a lot of research that shows that students that hand write as opposed to type students that take notes as they type, they're just a lot of times repeating verbatim what somebody was saying as opposed to actually synthesizing that and putting it in the way that they need to do it.

But there's some benefits of note taking. It helps them encode information. They can actually put that into short term memory. It can help with studying in the future. They can consolidate, and it helps with retrieval and so there's a lot to be said for note taking. What I liked about URW is that it talked about some effective ways to take notes, like the stick and branch method and some other things, and, and that was incredibly valuable.

And then it also gets into writing essays. And then it reminded me, one of the, one of the weeks reminded me of Unit 6 in Structure and Style, right? Where we take multiple sources and then synthesize them into, we streamline that into a single area. Mr. Pudewa gets into that. And that's a skill that's needed for students who are coming into this setting to take multiple sources and then be able to, to streamline those into a single composition where we're gaining ideas and extrapolating ideas from multiple sources to form our own ideas.

And so I was, and the other thing I loved about this, I know this is again not a plug it because it's 12 weeks. It's very digestible. Most, most summer semesters or 12 weeks. Julie, I don't know if that was done purposefully, but it was, it was done just right between a spring semester and a fall semester start. Typically, there's a 12 week gap in there, 12 or 13 weeks, and so this fits beautifully in between a summer as they're preparing for that. That is my shameless plug for URW, and I see it as a benefit.

Andrew Pudewa: I think we've read some of the same research about how writing on paper actually activates parts of the brain and stimulates memory in a way that typing does not. But now kids have devices and they'll just go to a lecture, record the whole thing, send it to their AI, say, summarize this thing in bullet points, and they'll think that that is sufficient for getting the most out of the experience of the lecture. It's almost like they're going to be cheating themselves

Julie Walker: That's exactly right, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: And so how do we help them realize the value of doing the harder work? That's the challenge. And I'm sure you face it every day with your team there, and I think we feel that people who work in medicine, they should be the most well-educated, thoughtful, informed, competent thinkers out there since their lives may be in our hand.

Julie Walker: Yes, I was thinking that very thing. You know how important your role is there at that college to be sure you're training future health practitioners. Oh my goodness, yes. We want to be sure, Andrew, that those dentists and nurses know how to take care of us as we age. You know what our timekeeper has told us we are out of time, but I want to just take a few minutes to summarize to our listeners where you can read, we will put a link in the show notes, this Writing Skills Gap. There's a truncated, abridged version in our magalog, as I mentioned, but then we also have the full version on our website. We actually did a video where we sent a team out to your home and actually to your office at the university and just interviewed you. And I think with the goal of helping these parents, primarily these parents help their kids be ready for university writing. And we are here to help and we want to be able to provide the resources to make sure that your college students will be successful, whatever discipline they choose. So thank you so much for being a part of this podcast. I just wish we had more time together, but perhaps we can talk again in a future date with you.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm always grateful to meet people in higher education who really have insight, common sense, understand the things that are kind of obvious to me, but not everybody in the world, and that are doing really good work out there in the public sector. And I just appreciate your commitment and your enthusiasm for us as well. So thank you so much.

Colin Chesley: My pleasure and thank you for all that you all have done for my family. I can't tell you how much it's meant to all of us, especially with our kids and their academic preparation. And so thank you and please keep doing the wonderful work that you're doing.

Julie Walker: Will do. Thank 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.