

Unit 5: Tell Me a Story about Teaching Thinking

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: So now, although I still can't say Unit 5 is my favorite of the units, I don't skip it because I realize the value. And the other thing is there are a lot of kids who really do like the Unit 5.

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 spent the last 12 months, well, I should say 11 months because this is the 12th month, talking about thinking and how to teach, thinking, how to learn to think. And we of course have in our tagline, listen, speak, read, write, think. In some ways it's kind of presumptuous.

Andrew Pudewa: It's very cocky.

Julie Walker: Right. But somehow we are able to teach thinking through the structural models and just the exercises that we give the students at the appropriate level.

Andrew Pudewa: And it's such a critical idea.

Julie Walker: It's now more than ever teach your students to think.

Andrew Pudewa: but how?

Julie Walker: But how? Right. And the one that I wanted to focus on, one of the units, and that unit is Unit 5, which coincides with this one unit a month schedule because you might start Unit 5 in the month of December.

Andrew Pudewa: might, you might also just wait until the chaos is over and start in January, but either way.

Julie Walker: There's so many holiday themes that we could pick on, capitalize on for a Unit 5. So I would like for you to tell me the story. Tell the listeners the story about when you were first learning this structure and style method and your allergy. That's probably not the right word, but you didn't like teaching Unit 5.

Andrew Pudewa: So yes, I went to Grouard; I learned the program from Dr. Webster.

Julie Walker: Okay, hold on. Listener. Look at a map and see where, see where Grouard.

Andrew Pudewa: It's not on a map.

Julie Walker: it. Yeah. Right. It is such

Andrew Pudewa: four hours north of Edmonton.

Julie Walker: It is very small.

Andrew Pudewa: There, there might be Slave Lake on the map.

Julie Walker: Slave Lake, okay. Is very small, but you'll kind of see I've been there and is very remote. It took me longer to drive from the airport to Grouard than it was for me to fly at the time from California to Edmonton.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that also happened to me when I flew to Mexico City,

Julie Walker: Oh.

Andrew Pudewa: But I was only going about 20 miles—the traffic in Mexico City, incredible.

Julie Walker: Oh, the traffic. Oh my goodness. Yes. Well, there's no traffic on the way to Grouard.

Andrew Pudewa: No, not, not any. Yes, it's way, way up in the middle of nowhere, and that's where they did it every year for probably 20 years or so. Well, anyway, I went up there and I learned the thing and I came back and I taught, you know, Unit 1 and 2 using those Tip the Monkey stories.

And then I floundered around a little bit in unit three. And then I really liked the unit four with the topic-clincher. And now you can use encyclopedia articles. And then Unit 5, this Writing from Pictures. There was the one set of pictures, which was the same one. The chick pecking the hose.

Julie Walker: There you go. Chick pecking the

Andrew Pudewa: And I floundered through that thing and I thought, what's the point of this? I dislike this intensely. I'm not creative by nature. I'm not imaginative by nature, so I just skipped the rest of Unit 5 went straight into unit six research, you know, which I was interested in getting some experience there. And I brought the writing samples from my students from the Unit 8 and Unit 9 up to Grouard the following year.

And I showed them to Webster and he's always was pretty critical of everything, but that's his nature. It's curmudgeon nature. But he did not think that the conclusions of the students' Unit 8 and 9 were very good. So I went back, okay, how can I improve this? And again, I skipped Unit 5 and went up, and I don't remember exactly when it was that I realized it, but I made this connection between skipping Unit 5 and not learning the skill of how to think about those comic-y dumb pictures. And I started to kind of think, well, thinking about something that

you wrote about, thinking about something in the world, thinking about some history, thinking about a person—it's really the same thing as thinking about a cartoon in terms of what do you have to do to figure out what you can think about something?

And of course we know from decades of watching children, that's the thing they most often will say when they don't know what to write. "I can't think of anything."

So gradually I started to understand that by giving short shrift to Unit 5 in particular, perhaps I had been depriving them of the action of being able to look at that thing. And in that process, I became clearer and clearer that it's all about asking the questions.

And that wasn't something that was really strong with Dr. Webster in Unit 5. He was like write from these pictures. But he was imaginative. He was inventive. So I realized, you know, Unit 5 is not like Unit 3, which is the story sequence chart with the characters in setting the conflict or problem, the resolution, outcome.

It's not the same set of questions, but the act of asking the questions is what allows you to pull the story out of your memory. And so looking at these pictures, it's the same thing. And I realized, I would've done, I probably did do very badly when I was 10 or 11 years old if someone said, here's a picture, write about it. I just, I wouldn't have known what to do. And once upon a time, there was a guy in a boat. Done. Like what else can I possibly say?

But over the years. I've learned that you ask questions like, who is that guy and why is he in the boat? And what is he thinking or feeling or doing while he's in the boat? And where did he come from and where is he going?

And is there anything right outside the picture, like a big ship about to crash in and smash that boat? Is there anything invisible, other people down that you can't see? Right? And so this habit of asking questions helped me a lot in this problem of how do you write something when you don't think of anything? And so now, although I still can't say Unit 5 is my favorite of the units, I don't skip it because I realize the value.

And the other thing is there are a lot of kids who really do like the Unit 5, and they will tell me. In fact, you know, if I'm out at a convention, meet some kids doing it. What do you like about the writing? Usually it's the jokes, but if not, then they'll often say writing from pictures because it's free. You don't have to obey facts and you can be wild and crazy and put a mad scientist with nice nitroglycerin who lives in the house where the chick is packing the hose. I don't think like that, but some kids do.

Julie Walker: I'm remembering, I think it was probably from *Structure and Style for Students* year one, level A, where Josh was looking at the picture. It might be one A or two A, but Josh was looking at the picture of the couple that was sitting at the table, and the server was going to give them a meal, and we couldn't see what was underneath the lid.

Right. And you said, what do you see in the picture? And he says, well, I see a shark. There was no shark in the picture, but what he saw was the, these are very simple line drawings, which is like we, what we like to do, but what he saw was the corner of the tablecloth that to him looked like a shark fin, which in Unit 5, that's totally legal. So now we have a couple that is sitting, floating somewhere, being served with sharks, circling them. That kind of fun, creative

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I just don't get there myself. But I do see the brilliance of it. You know, some people don't know the story of how Webster came up with the writing from pictures idea, and it had to do with contraband. It had to do with a serious behavior problem that he faced when he was teaching middle school back in probably 1950 something.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: That was the smuggling into class of comic books.

Julie Walker: comic books. Ooh, that's serious.

Andrew Pudewa: Deep, evil stuff, and the kids would put their comic book inside their textbook and thinking he didn't know, so he had to confiscate the comic books.

Julie Walker: I think it's really important for every student who is listening to this podcast right now to know this. Your teacher has a really good view of what you are doing in class. Don't think you're hiding things from him or her.

Andrew Pudewa: One time we did a little Unit 7 inventive creative writing thing with the perfect student and the perfect teacher.

Julie Walker: Oh, right.

Andrew Pudewa: And the perfect teacher, of course, has many sets of eyes all around the entire head, so he or she can see everything that's going on. But, so he confiscated all these comic books and he thought, if they like these things, maybe I should make them write.

So he cut up the comic books into just one frame or multiple frames and put three on one paper and handed it back out and said, okay, here, here's some comics. Write about these. And you know, he found, and I think a lot of people do, especially at that middle school level, three paragraphs is a comfortable length for a composition.

It's not too much to feel like it's going to take a long, long time. It's enough to be able to play with it and do something. And so he kind of defaulted to the three paragraphs corresponding with the story sequence chart, which he got from Mrs. Ingham and put into three paragraphs. Why? Because his students had a formula for writing their science experiment reports, and it was three parts.

It was supplies and hypothesis, and then procedure, and then outcome and conclusion. And he liked this idea of, okay, it has a structure. So he applied that to the story sequence chart, three paragraphs, and then he started Unit 5 in that three paragraphs.

But we've done in the SSS, fewer than three pictures or three paragraphs. You can do one, you could do two, you could do four. I always like to tell the story of this. These twin boys I met long ago in Southern California, and they had gone on a trip with their grandparents to the Grand Canyon, and they had taken a lot of pictures and they decided to write a caption for each of these pictures using the Unit 5 idea, which is, what do you see now?

What's going on before, after behind the scenes, invisible thinking, feeling, doing all that stuff, and then a clincher. What do you see? So these were short, you know, probably 3, 4, 5 sentence paragraphs that were captions. And they ended up just kind of going wild with this. And they made an entire book with each picture that they used and a caption for each one and gave it to the grandparents as a thank you gift.

So that's another interesting side effect of learning Unit 5 and being able to, to do that. But you know, we. We hear news, we see things happening in the world. We notice our ability to think about those things that we see in the world. Well, some people just their thought goes as far as, I don't like that, or I do like that.

We have with the same problem with Unit 9—the conclusions of the critiques. What do you think of this story, this book, this movie? I like it. Why? I don't know why. I just do. So how do you get past that? And those are the questions. So it kind of starts with Unit 3, what are the key elements of the story? And then Unit 5 puts that in a different level of required thinking.

Julie Walker: Right, because there's a set of questions that apply to all the paragraphs in Unit 5, not specific to a section of the story, like Unit 3, there is a difference.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And it's more than just telling a story, and some kids do have a hard time with it, but what I've realized is if you have a group, this is why I really prefer Unit 5 in a small group, because you can ask a question. And not everyone may get an answer in their mind to that question, but some people will.

So they'll say something, oh, that's interesting, and someone else will say something and then, then the kid who didn't have an idea might get an idea that's tangent to one they heard. And it goes back to what I say in the TWSS, it's kind of like the Robin Hood style, right, of teaching. You steal from the rich, give to the poor, but you're, you're bringing up lots of ideas and then watching where they kind of settle down, where they fall. And then the people who felt kind of impoverished with nothing to think of can borrow and change some other idea. And this is, I remember we had our podcast with Scott Newstok of how to think like Shakespeare, and we talked a bit about the idea of copiousness and that idea of stock and how do you get the stock, the copious stock, the abundant supply of ideas? Ask questions and share answers.

Julie Walker: Do you think that the word cornucopia comes from? Copious?

Andrew Pudewa: Oh definitely. As does the word copy.

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting. Yeah, so I can just imagine all that fruit pouring out of the children's minds to their teacher who may reluctantly not be able to come up with anything, but now he can.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and one of my problems is I'm older, and so I operate most of the time under the rules of reality and logic. Children are not so attached to reality and logic. They are more free. And over the years, and I just had a question recently, someone asked me, what about the weird stuff my kids do? Where do I draw the line? Like, how weird is okay? And you know, I said, well, Webster's idea is hands-on, structure and style, hands-off content. I don't care what you write. Follow the rules. Learn what you're trying to learn. I remember. I was in a class. It was when I was traveling around doing a lot of teaching out on the road, and this kid had written just the weirdest weird thing. I can't remember what it was, but it barely made sense and it broke every rule of reality, common sense, logic, fact. And I was kind of allergic to it. And then I flashed on Veggie Tales. Do you remember Veggie Tales? Okay, Think—these are adult people. Who made cartoon movies about things like a talking cucumber Who sings a song “Where is my Hairbrush?” Right? Like beyond the scope of anything I could ever imagine. I thought those were adults who had a million dollar idea. Like it or not, they had a great success. So who am I to criticize this 10-year-old kid who's breaking every logical common sense thing about the world, like Veggie Tales.

I don't want to stifle that. So I'm glad I had that experience of thinking of it because it's a good illustration I believe, of why it's okay to let kids go wild and crazy with their imagination on this. Better that than say, oh, that doesn't make sense, and then just shut them down. Save doesn't make sense for Unit 6.

Julie Walker: Exactly right. Exactly. Well, it's been a good year talking about thinking. I'm quite sure that we will not stop talking about thinking because it's so core to what it is we're ultimately trying to do because writing is that wonderful vehicle for teaching thinking, and we've had so many great conversations

Andrew Pudewa: We have, and we've had letters from most, the ones that strike me are the grownup kids, right? The ones who did structure and style for three or four or five years as a kid, and now they're adults. They're in their master's program, and they just get out of the blue, send me a message, write a hit me on LinkedIn or something, and so often they'll say something like this writing thing, it helped me what I'm doing. But even more than that, it helped me learn how to think better. So when that's someone's experience, then we realize, okay, it works.

Julie Walker: It works well. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: 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.