

Podcast 513: Who Should Use AI and How?

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Kids don't need to know things anymore because they just have to be able to ask the question of the machine. Not only will they not be able to judge the output of the machine, at a certain point, they won't even be able to ask a decent question of the machine.

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: Being an IEW teacher at heart, I like to start these podcasts with sometimes a bit of an attention getter as a way to kind of tease the listener into, I wonder what they're going to talk about today.

Andrew Pudewa: Everybody tries to do that.

Julie Walker: Well, that's true, but the truth is.

Andrew Pudewa: It works.

Julie Walker: It. Well, it doesn't. I mean, everybody knows what we're already going to talk about because I saw the title, they heard the little poll quote that, I don't know what you're going to say yet.

We always have some pithy statement that you make that we put at the beginning to kind of bring us in. But here's my attention getter for today.

Andrew Pudewa: Alright, let's hear it. See if it works on me.

Julie Walker: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”

Andrew Pudewa: One of the most masterful sentences ever constructed.

Julie Walker: I don't know that I realized until today that that was actually one sentence.

Andrew Pudewa: Dickens had a penchant for long sentences, but there is something truly timeless about that because probably every period of man from ancient to the present, we've been able to think that thought only not as well as Dickens articulated it for us in the opening of a Tale of two

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly. And of course, and I'm sure every single one of our well-read listeners knew exactly what that quote came from, which book that came

Andrew Pudewa: It. It's almost cliched, but it's too good to ever become a cliché,

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: But yes, it is the best of times and the worst. We are wealthier as a people on the planet than we ever have been. We have more convenience and luxury and cheap food. And even with inflation, everything is better than it was even a hundred years ago. And at the same time, everything seems more ominous.

Julie Walker: Yes. Well, and we've got all this tasty food, but how healthy is this food? And, and I think what I, my takeaway in this context is how polarized we've become. We have people on this side and on that side, I think C.S. Lewis talks about this in *That Hideous Strength*, one of the, the last of this space trilogies.

And he says, "Merlin lived at a grayer time, but now the world has become more black and white." And I absolutely see that in the context of AI. We have people that are embracing it and saying, run, go. And we have other people who are saying, if there's AI anywhere in this thing that I'm experiencing, I don't want anything to do with it. Wow. What do we do with that, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: By the time we finish this conversation and this podcast is edited and ready. Things will have changed. So we can't know. We can only speculate, and even that is speculative. It's iffy. So where do you want to go with this, because it's a huge, huge subject and I'm sure we need to get a little bit more focus than just let's chat about AI.

Julie Walker: Topic restriction. So here's our TRIAC. The restriction is AI is here to stay, we believe perhaps. And can we find middle ground and say, in this case, AI is dangerous. In this case it's helpful. How and when should a teacher, should a student engage and use the tools of AI?

Andrew Pudewa: One thought that comes to me and I, I think it was Sam Altman chatGPT guy, although I, it might have been someone else, but it was one of these top guys in an AI company, and he said, according to our studies, people in different age brackets use AI differently. So old people, that would be me—boomers plus or minus a little bit. We mostly tend to use AI as a search tool, so it's a glorified Google. I'm not even sure it's as good, but that is pretty much the only thing I have really wanted to do was get information.

Younger people, kind of the millennials, plus or minus, they are more likely to be using AI as an operating system. So they will have the facility to say, plan my vacation for me. Here's what I want to do. Tell me all the things that I need to arrange and go ahead and book everything.

Julie Walker: Oh my goodness.

Andrew Pudewa: And give it access to your passwords and whatever you need to do to plan, to plan something. So as an operating system. Or, I have this task, it's going to take me a certain amount of time, I can figure out a prompt, give it access to the documents that I need, and it can do this analysis of these documents, whatever. The part that kind of bothered me said young people, and that would be your Gen Z, Gen, I don't know, Alpha, whatever. But the young people under the millennial age are more likely to use AI for companionship and advice.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: And that, I think, woke me up a little bit and yeah, you hear the stories of some kid who was chatting with AI and wanted to know should he kill himself? And AI said, yeah, you probably should. So he did. And so you've got these smattering of stories out there and then it hits a headline. AI is already killing people. So, yeah, that's kind of where I see it. I know some people who work in software development, and it seems to be very strong in that area. Like coding is a pretty good and safe way for people to use AI, but you have to be able to supervise it. Right? And it's kind of the same way. I may ask for information and then I get an AI summary of information. I like to use the tool that tells me where it got everything.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: But I have to have common sense. I have to have a little bit of wisdom. I have to have some judgment based on some life experience and a general set of facts that I have in order to judge in any way the usefulness of that information. I'm asking about something I know absolutely nothing about. I have no way of knowing if a hundred percent of it is true, or 98% of it is true, or 50% is true, or nothing is true. I would have no way of knowing. And so this is where I think that it's still extremely important that we learn and carry around in our memory stuff, for lack of a better word, but what am I talking about? Well, some history, some knowledge, some math, some literature, some geography, some current event, something that we can have a higher degree of certainty.

And then judge new information against that. We did a session with Jennifer on critical thinking, right? And what's critical thinking? I hate the idiom, right? Critical thinking, what is it? But one thing she said that I particularly appreciated was, you have to know something to be able to do critical thinking. And I fear that these people who are careening headlong into this world of "kids don't need to know things anymore because they just have to be able to ask the question of the machine because the machine knows everything." Not only will they

not be able to judge the output of the machine at a certain point, they won't even be able to ask a decent question of the machine. And so.

Julie Walker: As you're speaking, I'm thinking of the famous line from Ronald Reagan Trust, but verify. But how can you verify if you don't have that database of knowledge in your own mind?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and now it's increasingly difficult, especially for young people, to actually believe anything anymore except what suits them, right? So, I hear something, I like that idea. It fits my worldview, my life. It fits my truth. So I will embrace that as true, and I will ignore things that don't fit my truth. Well, how is my truth being constructed? By algorithms that are feeding you a preponderance of information to convince you of one thing, because that's what sells. That's what sells advertising in the end.

Julie Walker: And what you're talking about, I've heard call an echo chamber. You are stuck in this way of thinking that you can't escape because what's being fed to you affirms what you already believe.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that's kind of always been true, but it's magnified many times over at this point. I remember as a kid before we had computers in our house...

Julie Walker: Yes, of course.

Andrew Pudewa: If we think back that far, I read the newspaper. And it was just our local *Daily Breeze*, local newspaper.

Julie Walker: I know the *Daily Breeze*. Yep.

Andrew Pudewa: and you could trust the news to a degree, but you didn't feel like everybody's trying to give you information to manipulate you or skew your perception. And then there was the opinion page. And the opinion page would have a subject and it would have two columns, right? One opinion and then a differing opinion.

I remember as a high school student, I really liked reading that because I thought, that's interesting. Here's two different views trying to support it. I didn't really have the knowledge of what logic and rhetoric were back then, but that was what people were trying to use. So I had an instinctive appreciation for this willingness to present opposing views and disagreement. It's hard to find that kind of thing anymore.

Julie Walker: Do you remember that we included that type of assignment in SSS? They have to compare two articles, opposing viewpoints on salvaging, and to whom does a spoil belong? Does it belong to the finders keepers or does it belong to the country that it came from?

So it's a great article that we wrote, I think, a couple articles and good thinking skills are presented there.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and we're trying to set up people to be able to collect up and document and use information in that argumentative or persuasive way, not so much as an academic exercise, but so that they realize this is how people do this. They collect up, organize, and present information for a particular end. And I think the AI, in a way, is making it less clear that that's happening.

Right? So the *Daily Breeze*, it's the opinion page. It says right at the top, this is the opinion page. But now everything that comes through a screen is an opinion page with only one opinion. So it is very easy to kind of get stuck in that area. And then AI supposedly has some kinds of, if you ask it for its sources, it will tell you, or you can ask it to only use a certain set of sources. But you have to have general knowledge to even construct a prompt by asking it to limit its sources to things that you believe would be reliable.

Julie Walker: This may be too soon in the AI timeline to be able to ask this question, Andrew, but I'm sure our listeners are curious of what your thoughts are. Take us through the AI pathway. We've talked about this in many podcasts. Screens, keep your kids away from screens as long as possible. Well, if you keep them away from screens, they're not going to be interacting with AI. Great. Okay. Now they're in elementary school, and they're starting to do writing how, and then middle school, then high school. At what point does it make sense for students to learn the tool of AI and how to use it appropriately? You got five minutes, go.

Andrew Pudewa: I am in no way an expert on that. Although it was interesting, I was having a conversation with Dr. Kathleen O'Toole, who's the vice president of Hillsdale in charge of K 12, which we have a fantastic relationship, and we were, we were just having lunch together and I don't know how serious she was about this statement, but she said, I don't think anyone under 35 should be using AI at all for anything.

Julie Walker: There you go—35.

Andrew Pudewa: And I thought she's probably about 35.

So it is a very difficult question and rather than at what age, I think it would be under what guidance? So if you have parents that are knowledgeable, can judge well, and can supervise and help a young teenager to extract information by using tools that use AI to consolidate information, that's going to be a much safer environment.

Teachers may be able to do this, but it's harder because a parent's got a few kids, a teacher's got dozens of kids, or hundreds depending. So that's going to be a lot harder for a teacher to give that type of guidance.

I think schools are all working on their AI policies. I get *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and it's just constant. What do we do in colleges? Teachers on TikTok—Out of 30 papers, 28 of them are just obviously AI. And she said, I don't even need an AI detector anymore. I can tell when these kids use words they're not capable of actually knowing and using. And then you

see the joke where the kid actually forgot to take out the prompt and turned in the paper with the prompt.

Right? So I guess the bottom line here is. We will be safer, and we will all be happier, and we will get better learning if we delay the use of that tool for as long as possible.

But I keep going back to the calculator analogy because what we know is that technology will atrophy the skill which it replaces. And okay. Calculators exist. They can do math better than you or me, right? With greater speed and greater accuracy. But who's going to use a calculator better? A person who knows multiplication can do a little bit of mental math, can estimate, understands fractions and decimals in a general sense, even can do some algebra versus someone who can't do that and just punches buttons? Obviously the person with math knowledge will use the tool better.

And one thing I heard, and I think this is the scariest thing, is that AI is replacing entry level jobs. Okay, well now where do you get people who know how to do something? They have an entry level job, and then they learn that thing as they move up, over years of having work experience with senior people. Well now if we eliminate entry level jobs and then all the old people die off, who's going to know anything? Who's going to be able to do anything? Who's going to be able to guide the AI applications in an organization? So, I don't know.

I kind of have this hope. I mean, it's kind of a bad hope because it would be a lot of misery and unhappiness for everyone. But if the whole electric grid just shut down for a year, it would kill lots and lots of people. But it would also kill AI. And in a way, we would have to move the other direction, and we would have to become better thinkers, more resourceful, have greater ingenuity. We can't just ask AI how to do something and then have it do it for us. So there is this kind of, we all have it, I think, this love-hate of technology, my life is easier because of fill in the blank technology. My life would be harder without it, but am I actually better as a person? That remains to be seen.

It was the best of times, and it is the worst of times. It is the best of times. It is the worst of times. But every generation complains about technology. We complain about young people, we complain about advertising, but I'm sure that was true a thousand years ago too.

Julie Walker: Well, thank you Andrew. This has been very insightful.

Andrew Pudewa: Maybe. We'll have to revisit this topic in a month when everything's different.

Julie Walker: No doubt.

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

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