

Podcast 528: The Power of Asking Questions

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: It's the power of the questions that creates the cognitive habits that allow the children to access our memory and our imagination into a cohesive unit of thought.

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, I want to remind our listeners of the Vince Lombardi story. At the beginning of every year, he would tell his professional football team, like these are pros. He'd hold up a football and say, "This is a football." And I just think that's so powerful, such a good image for us because of course these professionals know what a football is. And of course we just imagine that those of us who know and love and are using IEW know what we're talking about this year in our back to basics theme. But I think it's so good and so powerful to remind people what we do, why we do it, and that power behind it. And today is very much one of those basic things that we do in teaching writing, and that's asking questions.

Andrew Pudewa: So a lot of people when they first start teaching the Structure and Style stuff or their kids start getting it in a class or something, they are struck by the fact that, oh, this kid's immediately using better vocabulary—writing more complex sentences, not having the problem of, "I don't know what to say. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to write." And so they kind of look at that and they chalk it up to dress ups and they say, well, that's those dress up. That's, that is the thing that makes all the difference.

Julie Walker: The stylistic techniques, that's what it's all about.

Andrew Pudewa: That's fair enough because it can have that effect and usually does. And it was even my experience the first couple years that I was teaching, but over time I started to understand the real power of the system isn't in the style techniques, which are wonderful and helpful in many, many ways. But the real power is in the structural models because of two reasons.

Number one, that's how you get the kids from, "I don't know what to say" to "I can write about anything." And that you, you just can't jump there, and a lot of writing programs, they, they want to start and say, "okay, here's your prompt, here's your subject. Brainstorm topics, brainstorm, brainstorm, make your mind maps." And for some kids it works, but for most, they just don't get there from where they are. Whereas what we've seen is that we teach this

system using key word outlines and we can get them, we can get almost every single kid to a point where you can throw them a subject and they know what to do with it. It may take more than a year,

Julie Walker: Right,

Andrew Pudewa: But in two or three years, I think it's a rare case where we don't see this huge, huge growth. But it's more than just the writing side. It's really the thinking side.

Julie Walker: exactly. That's a bold claim, Andrew. We say in our tagline, listen, speak, read, write, think. Are we actually teaching students to think?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, depends how you define thinking. But if we were to look at thinking in a more formal language-based, recordable, communicable way, then yes, because we're doing two things. We're empowering the language, and we're developing the processes of thinking. But I like to kind of tease teenagers and I used to travel around and, and do this thing called the *High School Essay Intensive*.

And it was a six hours all in one day for high school students. And at one of the points I would say to everyone in the room: how do you think of stuff like, how do you think, how's it done? If someone says to you, "think." How do you make that happen? And very few people can answer this question.

Very few adults I've met can answer this question. The most common answer that I would get would be that you use your brain. Okay, fine. How do you use your brain? "I don't know. You just think of stuff. It just happens. If you wait around long enough, it will come to you." However, what we realize is things don't actually come to you. They come from you, especially if you have to write an essay for, say, a college entrance exam or the way they used to do on the SAT. You have to think of stuff and write it down right now. So how do we streamline that process and how does our Structure and Style methodology train that?

Julie Walker: I just want to do a quick, the *High School Essay Intensive*. You and I worked together on a project even before I was working directly for IEW. When we read, we didn't redo that one. Well, we did, but when we discontinued that one, we discontinued it because we came out with *University-Ready Writing* and we took the concepts there and expanded it to make it much more relevant to today.

Andrew Pudewa: And much more complete

What I like to point out to the kids is thinking of stuff in this context that you have to write. It's getting something out of your mind, out of your brain, outta your memory. And the good and the bad news is you're not going to get something out of your mind that isn't in there to begin with, right? You can't think a thought you can't think. So relax. You don't have to. You just have to find something that you do know. And so that's kind of freeing. And then I will tease them some more and say, well, if you know something and your mom wants to know

what what does she do? Asks you questions. They can always answer that one She asks you, although one time you know it was, she hits you, but before she resorts to punishments and violence, she generally ask you:. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why did you do that? Who else was there? What are you going to do next? How are you going to clean this up?

Your mom tends to be a master question asker. So the trick to thinking well is to become a master question asker to yourself. And that's where we get into the units and we see the brilliance of the way it's put together. And I don't think that Webster ever really understood what he had come up with. There was a certain amount of intuition, a certain amount of inspiration, divine direction, I don't know. But it's so brilliant because it works so well with everyone.

So how do we start? And a lot of people look at this, especially with older kids, and they'll say, "Well, you're giving them a source text, and then you're just letting them rewrite the exact same thing. They're not even thinking. They're not even creating, it's just, it's like copy work only, not quite as bad." And what I like to point out is true, but nobody has the problem "I don't know what to write."

And there is an activity that happens here. You have to read a sentence and then you have to stop and ask yourself a question: What are the key words in this sentence? It's an easy question. Almost everybody can do it, young or old, but it is that first step. You have to ask yourself the question, what are the key words in this sentence? Choose them and copy them and do that for the whole source text.

And then you have to ask the next question, which is, why did I write these key words? And then you have to remember, call to mind, find in your memory. The idea that was connected with the key words, either to tell it back or to write it out. And that's what we do in Unit 1 and 2. And it's interesting because some people immediately see the value of this and other people, especially if they came from a modern, progressive approach to teaching, they just think, well, that's just too easy. Too easy, but like anything, it's the Vince Lombardi. This is a football, this is how you put on your socks. This is how you hold your utensil. This is how you begin the process. And that's why we include Unit 1 and 2 with every single level, whether the kids are in second grade or graduate school, we start there.

Then we move to Unit 3. Now this is a big step for a lot of people because it is different. You are not looking on the page for the key words. It's a different process. You take the story, you read it, you talk about it a little bit, you put it into the mind. Then you use the Story Sequence Chart to pull those ideas out of the memory, and the questions are very structured.

So the first paragraph gets the who's in the story, when and where is happening? What's the situation? And then in the second paragraph, it's basically what do they want or need? What do they think? What do they feel? What do they do? And you can run through that sequence of questions several times, depending on how complicated a story you're trying to retell.

And then the third one you have—how is this problem solved? And that's usually a climax or a resolution. And then you kind of have a tag on question, why even have this story? What's the message? What's the thing you get from it? What's the value? So we have embedded then in the three paragraphs, the who, what, where, why, when, how, but in a categorical way that allows a child to methodically go through this process of put a story into the brain, into the mind, into the memory, and then pull it out and reconstruct that story, using the questions of the Story Sequence Chart.

Again, it doesn't require them to make up a story from nothing. It gives them a story to retell and then we have variations on that. So down the line, once you've done that a few times, if it's going well, okay, well let's allow the children freedom to change elements of that story, maybe change the characters or the setting, keep the problem, or keep the characters and have a different problem and all sorts of variation.

But working with the Story Sequence Chart is kind of that next step into accessing the memory. And when you access the memory, you activate the imagination. That's something I think a lot of teachers don't necessarily understand and something I've been thinking about a great deal. We need a whole different podcast on this, but the relationship between memory and imagination.

So we start to see kids if they didn't like writing very much anymore, well now they're able to tell a story, which is a natural function, and they have the tools, the questions of the Story Sequence Chart.

Then we move to Unit 4. Now we're back on text with Unit 4. So here's an article with information, but the trick here is there's too much information, and that's a place where lots of kids get overwhelmed. Like, I don't know how to deal with all this. And the word summarize, which is popularly used in the world is not a great word for most children because it doesn't mean anything to them. And if they know even a little bit of math, sum “s-u-m” means the total. So they may inadvertently think, well, what I have to do then is tell all that much only in less space. Nobody can do that. So. How do you negotiate this? And that's where the question becomes a little tougher because it's a decision you have to make of all the information you have, what is the most interesting or important or relevant bit of that. And so I like to point out when you're summarizing, you're just choosing some of it, not all of it.

So it should be spelled SOME-A- RIZE. Because you're “some-arizing” and that makes sense to kids. Okay? Then they get to wrestle with, well, which sum of it should I choose? And this is where I introduce the idea of Webster's edict, hands on structure and style. Hands off content, right? Follow the rules, follow the checklist, do the topic-clincher, follow the model, do that stuff. I don't care what you choose. And I kind of joke with teachers sometimes too. I think that if you let kids choose what they think is interesting, you'll get more engaged kids and probably better writing than if you try to manipulate them into choosing what you think they should think is important.

And of course, with maturity, their choices improve. So that summarizing it requires this kind of act of choice, and that's a tough one.

Julie Walker: Yep. But even with choosing, they're asking themselves questions.

Andrew Pudewa: What is interesting and why? So then we get to pictures. Pictures. There's no source text. So now there's just a picture or a set of pictures, and you have to write a paragraph about each picture. And we give them a little bit of help saying that the topic sentence is what you see in the picture. So now you have to write a whole paragraph about that picture. Now you really have to access the tools of—who's in the picture. What is that animal or person or thing, thinking, feeling, doing? Why? When did it start? Is there anything invisible in the picture? Is there anything outside the picture? And that really forces access to memory and imagination because there wasn't a story that came to you.

You have to now invent the content. And the word invent is a good one to use in that it's derived from the Latin *invenio*, which means to find or discover. It's a verb, meaning I find or discover *invenio*. So we get invention, invent, and inventory, and we can't really invent something without stuff to invent with. This is why the more stories kids have heard and read, the more life experiences, the richer the imagination, the more easily they will be able to find ideas to go with these pictures.

Unit 6 is Unit 4 on steroids. You not only have a source text with too many facts, too much information, you have too many sources with too much information, and there's two ways to approach this. Plug it all into AI and ask it to do it for you. Or learn the process of collecting up, choosing and then organizing in a logical way as best you can how to write a little mini research. And we've talked about AI. I'm sure we will more.

Julie Walker: I just want to say we have most recently done a podcast called “When and How to Use AI”. So we're not ignoring that as a tool but what's appropriate.

Andrew Pudewa: but the idea is. If people say, well, why bother teaching kids to do this when technology does it way better than they ever will? It's almost like saying, why have a child learn to walk when they could be driven every way, right? I mean, no, you're developing cognitive function, you're developing thinking skills. And then the questions are not just what's important, interesting, or relevant, but what's important, interest and relevant, and how do those ideas fit together in a logical way or for a purpose or to support a topic?

Okay, so I think then we're in Unit 7, and this is the blank page. This is write about this, write about that. Write about something you read that affected you in some way. Write about your favorite thing to do, write about an imaginary event, all that kind of prompt stuff. And it's just you and your brain and whatever you happen to carry around in it and the blank paper. And a lot of times if you start there, the kids just don't have a way to do it. But if you've built up over the six units, they've got fluency with questions and asking the questions, they know how to think about things.

And then we add in a couple more skills such as division, which is kind of the first of the important critical thinking skills. So you have a big thing divided into topics. Then ask questions about each of those topics. And then we can expand our questions from who, what, where, why, when, how. Into different categories of questions. So there's a sensory category. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? What do you taste? What do you smell? And then there's also the critical questions, like what's the best thing about something? What's the worst thing about something? Are there any problems? If there are problems, are there solutions? What's the value? What's the significance? What's the impact?

And so that moves us then into being ready for a Unit 8, which combines collecting up, organizing and presenting facts

Julie Walker: Like we did in Unit 4 or 6.

Andrew Pudewa: ...in Unit 4 or 6, but with now the added purpose of arguing a point, or at least telling of all that you said about something, what's the most important or significant or valuable thing and why?

And once you get the Unit 8 model, then of course you can do anything with it. You can expand it out into all sorts of academic writing, and by this time, they understand enough to be doing this fairly independently. And I love it when I go to schools and I'll meet some teachers who said, oh, these kids came into my class this year, my history class, or my science class, and they knew how to write.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: I haven't had that happen for a long time ever because someone in that school had given the foundation of the units the previous year or two.

Then of course, we kind of have the frosting on the cake, which is the critique and the writing from literature, and this is a Unit 3-8 hybrid. So you're retelling a story, but also telling what you think about that story, and then we have even offshoots of that into literary analysis and things like that.

But I think it took me a number of years to understand that it's the power of the questions that creates the cognitive habits that allow the children, allows all of us, to access our memory and our imagination, and then organize what can be kind of a mishmash sensory impressions and things we remember or things, snippets of something we heard or read into a cohesive unit of thought and combine those cohesive units of thought into a well done composition.

Julie Walker: And that's what we do at IEW.

Andrew Pudewa: That is what we do.

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

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