Podcast 537: Getting at the Source

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: I think we also see with the kids that come to our classes, they have this experience like, “Ooh, I added that cool -ly word,” or, “Oh, I put in these dress-ups,” and that feeling that you've been able to improve on something.

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, our marketing team has decided we need to do video podcasts, and here we are

Andrew Pudewa: Here we are

Julie Walker: …doing our very best to... Well, you're in front of the camera all the time. I'm not so much, so I'm reminded of the first time we ever did a podcast. I had all kinds of notes, and I was reading and wanting to make sure I sounded articulate and intelligent. It was so bad.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, but, but now we're seasoned pros.

Julie Walker: We are seasoned pros, but that first episode, if you go back and look at it, it's not there anymore because it was so bad. We actually got rid of a lot of our older podcasts just because didn't want to burden people with having to go back. This is episode 500-something. It's way high up there, and if you like what we're talking about, great. You want to go back and listen to the beginning, we will save you the trouble and say you can't actually go back to the beginning. Just go back and find some really cool episodes.

Andrew Pudewa: You're just a meanie

Julie Walker: I am just a meanie.

Andrew Pudewa: But we did start revisiting the themes, and so the library of ideas is still pretty much available,

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly right. So this episode is part of our Laying the Foundation series that we're doing in the year 2026. So every month we wanna start out a podcast. So every month we-- our first podcast of the month, uh, generally is about that theme for this month, and this... That theme for this year.

And this theme is laying the foundation, and we're specifically talking about source texts. And of course, we use source texts when we teach children to write. When we teach anyone to write, we start them with a source text. And one of the interesting things about these podcasts that our listeners may not have ever known is I usually bring in a bunch of resources to refer to, and today I have Dr. Webster's *Blended Structure and Style in Composition*. This is his... Honestly, Andrew, I was kind of paging through this going, “Thank God for you. Thank God that you have made this much more simple to use.”

Andrew Pudewa: If that had been the book that we tried to sell and used to teach everybody, I don't think we would've had the level of success that we have had.

Julie Walker: I agree, yes

Andrew Pudewa: It is interesting because this idea was not clear to me until, I don't know, maybe three or four years ago when I started to include it in various explanations.What has to happen in order to write something? And looking at that question, because so many kids are kind of like dead in the water, “I don't know what to do. I can’t think of anything. I don't know what to say.” That's very common. And I asked the question, “Well, what has to happen for a child or anyone to write something?”

Well, the first thing that has to happen is there must be an idea. If there's no idea, there is nothing to write. And then I started to look at, at kind of categories, and I said, Well, there's two basic. . . I mean, there's a little overlap, but there's two basic categories of ideas, ideas that exist inside the memory and imagination and ideas that are more immediate.

And I have used as an example to say, well, if I ask you to write about the last trip you took with your friends or your family, I'm asking you to go into your memory and imagination and reconstruct events, sensory impressions, thoughts you had, conversation, whatever, and find that stuff inside your memory and imagination. Whereas if I said, “Write something about the room you're in right now,” that would be a very different thing, because you could just look around the room, look at stuff, and say, “Why is that there? And how come that is that way? And what is that thing? And why do we have this?” Right? And so you could, you could access ideas more easily when they’re immediate.

Andrew Pudewa: The second differentiation is that ideas can primarily exist in sensory impressions. So if you're writing about being at the beach, you're trying to remember, well, what does it feel like to be at the beach? What do you see? What do you hear? What do you taste? What do you touch? What do you sense? And then attaching words to that. Whereas if I said, “Just tell me your favorite Bible story, Aesop fable, fairy tale thing you read or that was read to you,” that's different because it came to you in words.

Julie Walker: It came to you in words.

Andrew Pudewa: And so when we look at this brilliant idea of source text and key word outlines, it’s saying it’s immediate. You don’t have to go and search around and get frustrated

if you can't find things, and it pre-exists in words. Therefore, you're not necessarily limited to the words you can find and affix to things that are less verbal. And so it's the greatest place to start when you start learning teaching, learning writing. I don't know that Webster ever had that figured out. I doubt it. Like many good ideas, there's a truth behind them, and I think that's kind of been exciting for me to understand a little more and more over the three decades I've been doing this.

Julie Walker: So paging through this book, I never found any information that says why we use source texts. But I go to the next book, this of course is our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*. And you include in this book the little article about Benjamin Franklin.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Yes, and from *The Autobiography*. And he talks about how he determined that he wanted to improve his writing, and in order to do that, he used a magazine called *The Spectator*, and then he did what he termed "take short hints of the sentiment of each sentence"–key words–and then laid them by a few days, and then without looking at the original, tried to reconstruct the ideas from those short hints.

And so when I saw this, it was kind of obvious that this is something that he figured out, but I doubt he figured it out so much as he. . . There was some tradition, and I think you can, you can go all the way back to the ancient progymnasmata, the exercises for the training of rhetoric, and the first one, usually in most progym systems, is to retell a fable.

So they're working with existing content that essentially is in words, and you're taking it and then putting it into words. So it's a tight loop, and that allows for a lot of safety and security. You know what you're doing. You can... And then he talks about, "I compared mine with the original and discovered some faults and amended them."

But then he says, "I had this feeling that in some small way I had been able to improve on the original." And so that I think we also see with the kids that come to our classes or, do a video class or take a class in a school. They have this experience like, "Ooh, I added that cool -ly word," or, "Oh, I put in these dress-ups, and I think mine is better than the original."

Who knows if it is or isn't, but that feeling that you've been able to improve on something. And there are other people who also use this in a way to practice and improve their writing skills. And it goes back to a fundamental idea, and that is imitation.

Julie Walker: Right. Exactly. What I find so fascinating about this conversation and kind of what I intuited by not finding Webster coming up with, "and this is why I use source text," is that just what you said, this has been going on a long, long time, and yet I find it interesting that so many other writing programs just expect the students to have a paintbrush. And Dorothy Sayers talked about that in her "Lost Tools of Learning," where she talks about you don't just give a student a new tool and tell them to come up with something, but you need something to imitate. And I love that idea.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And she wrote her little essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” I think it was in 1947. But it was in a way a reaction to a modernist idea that was gradually working its way and was firmly entrenched by the late 1900s, which was writing is about expressing yourself and creativity and you. Whereas actually, writing is about expressing ideas, and maybe if you're lucky and you live long enough, you'll have some original ideas. But so much of what we think and say and talk about, it comes from somewhere.

Julie Walker: Exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: So if we can acknowledge that and look at this more traditional way. The the little story about key word outlines…

Julie Walker: Yes, I'd love to hear this.

Andrew Pudewa: It is very interesting. I spent quite a bit of time with Dr. Webster before he passed on. I went to visit him in Vancouver at least once, usually twice a year for almost a decade. And so I was collecting up little interesting bits about his life and the writing program and his early years of teaching. And so he once told me the story of how key word outlines came into being, and I was just very amused by it. So when he was teaching, I think it was middle school, before he got his PhD, he was teaching various... He taught almost every grade level for a while, one-room schoolhouse all the way up to high school.

But in middle school, he was telling me about how the school district had this new idea that he had to try, which was collaborative writing. So he was supposed to stand at the chalkboard and write down sentences that various kids in the class would offer. And so it was, “Okay, we're gonna write about this thing, and we'll do it together. So who's got an idea?” And then someone would say something, and he would write it down and then turn around and, “Who else has an idea?” And they would say it, and he would write this down. Well, the problem is when you're a teacher, and all teachers know this, if you are face to a blackboard or a whiteboard, you are back to your students

Julie Walker: And teachers don't have eyes in the back of their head?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's funny because there's a composition in Webster's book, Unit 7, about the ideal teacher, and it is this concept of they have eyes all around their whole head so they can see everything all at once.

But what he noticed was that with these long periods of time where he's writing sentences on the whiteboard, the kids are just doing whatever they do, and passing notes, and talking to each other, and reading their comic books, and throwing spit wads. I guess shooting spit wads would be better. But so, he realized that if he only wrote down a few words from the sentence that was given to him by the group, he could quickly turn around and minimize the aberrant behaviors.

But then he noticed that when they went to rewrite it, he got a much greater variety of ways of saying things because they didn't have a whole sentence to try and rewrite. I mean, it's kind of hard to rewrite a whole sentence. But if it was only two or three key words, then they would rewrite it, and he would get higher levels of engagement, higher amount of creativity, and it still solved the problem of kids who didn't know what to say.

Julie Walker: Classroom management plus comprehension plus creativity. Wow. Key word outline. And we've done a whole podcast on key word outline, more than one.

I want to talk a little bit about the source text that we as a company provide in our curricular materials, and I have to reach in. This is our *Adventures in Writing*, and we did this in collaboration with Hillsdale College K-12 program. And one of their goals was to have the students in their classrooms, in their schools, write about things that they're already studying in other content areas. And so we looked at their program guide and came up with source texts based on that. And I want to read one to you, Andrew. This is one of my favorite ones.

Andrew Pudewa: can I just explain a little bit how that would work?

Julie Walker: Oh, sure. Absolutely

Andrew Pudewa: We have the units of the syllabus, and Webster, Unit 1, keyword outlines, Unit 2, summarizing or retelling from source text using that, Unit 3, summarizing stories, Unit 4, summarizing references with too many facts and pictures and research and creative writing essays critiques.

So the basic idea is you would go through the school year at approximately a unit per month. So what we did with Hillsdale is we looked at their whole curriculum map and said, “Okay, what are the fifth graders reading about in history or science or culture or literature in March?” And then we would be able to choose some ideas, create some source texts that would correspond with the unit and the content

Julie Walker: Right. And sometimes we would move the content not perfectly corresponding, but either before or after, and the kids were like, "Oh, aha, I remember studying that, and now we're doing..." And that's an example that I'm about to read. This is the Hagia Sophia. Hagia Sophia. Hagia. Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: I think. That's the way I would pronounce it.

Julie Walker: Okay. Hagia Sophia. So this is the source text. I'm going to read the whole thing. This is a unit four for third grade, so too much content to do a key word outline from every sentence. You just have to choose the most important or interesting facts.

The Hagia Sophia is a stunning building in Turkey that holds more than one surprise. It has a huge dome and marble pillars and was built almost 1,500 years ago. [That's pretty surprising, but here is the surprise.] *Recently, it was also the home to a gentle gray cat named Gli. Gli*

had green eyes that were a bit crossed. She acted like a queen as she walked around the beautiful rooms. She loved to pose for pictures with people who visited the splendid building. Famous people like President Obama petted her when they visited. Gli lived in the Haga-Hagia Sophia for 16 years, and she died on June 11, 2020. She is buried in a special place in the Hagia Sophia garden."

So it's about the building, but it's about this interesting thing that we wouldn't necessarily know. So these are not history books. These are just things for the students to write about, and we want the content to be really interesting.

Another source text that I just want to allude to because this was something that I helped with, is about the *Mayflower*. And did you know, Andrew, that the *Mayflower*, I'm just going to read one or two sentences here, is it was about as long as the ba- this is the sailing ship that brought the Pilgrims over. "It was about as long as a basketball court. The Mayflower had a lower deck called the hold where the pilgrims and the crew stored cargo. Now, this is a Unit 6, so this is more than one source. The other source, this was source text B. Let me read you what source text A says. So "The hold was the ceiling in that space was only five feet tall. So tall people could not stand up straight in the hole."

These pilgrims were crouched over into this tiny little space. It was a miracle that they even made it. These ships were not designed to be transatlantic ships, but yet they were. Anyway, I was just, it was fun for me to come up with the content because I was doing all the research to do it, and I learned so much more about the *Mayflower.* And the students, when they're doing just these two source texts, are pulling what they find interesting or important, and coming up with the content for their little report that they're writing, but learning so much more from the source text. So the source text becomes a source of content so the students don't have to come up with the what to write about, but it's also enriching their own.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and that's one thing that we've noted over all the time that we've been doing this, is that if you want to learn about something, you can read it, but how much sticks? It's when you represent that either verbally or better in writing that you really do learn it well. And so the other thing we've noted is that children are attracted to things that are interesting, and they're likely to remember those interesting things more than kind of the general encyclopedic knowledge that most people might say is more important.

And so that's why when we get to Unit 4 and 6, we're always saying interesting, important or relevant and, and then giving kids the freedom. And so I find it very interesting that you learned things in the process of researching and contributing to the writing of these source texts that delighted you.

And I had that experience in the early days. I wrote a bunch of source texts, or I found stuff, and it just tickled me. And of course, delight is a wonderful thing, you know? And I get a lot of letters from kids, and one of the things that I've read in these letters more than once is not I

learned so much from your writing program as...Well, I get that, but I also get “I learned so much from all the interesting articles and stories that you provide.”

Julie Walker: So source text, a great way to learn to write

Andrew Pudewa: I wouldn't do it any other way.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Andrew

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you will find our show notes and relevant links. One more thing: would you please rate and review our podcast? This helps other smart listeners like you find us. Thank you.