

Podcast 544: Revisiting AI and Education

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: Anybody can say something that is or isn't true, and you may or may not know. You've got something that seems to be all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful, but it has no soul. And that's where I believe some of the danger lies.

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: Well, Andrew, here we are again.

Andrew Pudewa: It happens.

Julie Walker: Occasionally, periodically, right?

Andrew Pudewa: Sometimes in spurts

Julie Walker: It's true. But today, what I mean by *here we are again* is we are again addressing the topic of artificial intelligence, and it seems that this is a really hot topic, has been now for a couple years. And I remember when we first started talking about it, you used the metaphor of entering a river of knowledge.

Do you remember that? Where you were talking about there's still a lot more to come, and we're just entering the stream, and we really don't know what we don't know.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, so we're entering, yes, not a river of knowledge in general, but about what AI is, what it can do, where it's going to go, and how we can get swept away with it

Julie Walker: Exactly. I think our very first conversation that we had on a podcast was with a young man who went to school in this area, and he was talking about AI and kinda what...

Andrew Pudewa: and how it was affecting college students.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly. And it was like, "Whoa, we, we better look at this." And then last year in the 2025 Magalog, you wrote an article, "Writing Maketh an Exact Man," and in this article you were being challenged by the credit manager who helped us purchase this really expensive new printer.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, actually he didn't help us purchase it. We ended up having to go through other banks. So I don't know how persuasive my interview was with him, but it brought out a lot of thought. So to that degree it was very good.

Julie Walker: Yes, because he was asking you, challenging you really, saying, “Well, why do we need a writing company? We've got AI.”

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Do people really care about reading and writing on paper? Because that's what we do is we print on paper. Do people even care?

Julie Walker: Hold that thought. Right, that's what we do on paper. Our COO, chief operating officer, reported to us just this week, he hit an all-time record. His crew hit an all-time record. They printed one million impressions in one day.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, which exceeded our normal monthly average on three of our old machines a few years ago.

Julie Walker: So the printer's working.

Andrew Pudewa: The printer's working. Sadly, it's not always working, but that's the nature of the beast. So, his question was, “because everything is online everything, do you really think people want to buy paper? Will they? And because AI can put sentences together and write better than most people, are people going to even care about teaching it?” So that was where the question started. I think the AI conversation, there's just so many different aspects to it, and I've been talking about it at homeschool conventions a lot this year, and the responses have been quite interesting.

A good number of dads have come up to me afterwards and said everything from, “I use AI every day a lot in my work” to “I use AI a lot. I'm in the world of AI, and it's much worse than you can imagine.” Right? So I'm getting all spectrum. The role of AI in work and the potential for displacing jobs and all that, it doesn't really interest me that much because it will be what it's going to be. The river will roll on. What interests me is AI in education and what people think that can do, will do, might do, can't do, and then the role of students using AI themselves. So those are the areas that I think about the most.

Julie Walker: Right. Right. And back to this idea of the Magalog articles that you had written in 2025 and then wrote for 2026 was also touched on this idea of the problem with AI and that it's replacing writing instruction and ultimately replacing thinking, and that you had, read an article that you thought was satire.

Andrew Pudewa: No, it was a TikTok video.

Julie Walker: Oh, a video. Yeah. Right,

Andrew Pudewa: And it was actually a teacher who said, “New pedagogical idea: don't teach math.” And, and so, I listened to this, and then I wrote in, I commented, “Is this satire?” And he wrote back, “No, I am a real teacher, and these are my views.”

And so that just kinda set me off on this.

And I'm not the only person. There's a lot of people. In fact, we had a guy on our podcast some time ago. He writes on Substack under Hilarious Bookbinder.

Julie Walker: Yes

Andrew Pudewa: Love this guy, professor of philosophy somewhere in Pennsylvania, and I read almost every post. And his most recent post was, "I'm never going to use this. Why should I learn it?" And he listed all the possible things that you will never need to use in life, so why should you learn it? And, and then he just ended there, and you got the feeling like, well, if you had this attitude, you would pretty much learn nothing,

And so it was a beautiful example of an enthymeme. He gave you the premises, and then he leaves you, the reader, to come up with the conclusion. So maybe we can link to that post. I think people would enjoy reading it, and he is a very good writer. But it is that case where if we don't keep in mind that technology will atrophy the skill which it replaces, we pretty soon can become victims to this line of thinking: why should I develop this skill? I don't need it. I won't need it. It doesn't benefit me because there's no practical use. And we could apply this to any area of thinking or wellbeing

Julie Walker: Right. Right. You know, Andrew, you and I both love to cook, and I just think even as you're, you're talking a little bit, I'm thinking about highly processed foods. It's so easy. You go down the frozen food aisle, you buy whatever brand of...

Andrew Pudewa: No, I don't.

Julie Walker: garbage, and you throw it in the microwave, and you eat it, and you think you are putting something nutritious in your body, and you are actually creating more harm than good.

At what point do we say, "Stop with the crazy and just eat clean food?" Right? And this is kind of that idea. Do you know—I've never told you this story before. A friend of mine, Debbie, was at a conference, and she was, of course, talking about our materials, and right next to her was a booth, and they were talking to another teacher and explaining what they do, and all you have to do is answer these few simple questions, and then AI will create a story for your student that they can then read, and it's all about them. And this teacher was just enamored with this great resource available to them that contributed nothing except more junk on the shelf, but nothing really thoughtful, nothing really that the student... It's kind of that, that myth that you talk about that I want you to speak to, right? They believe they wrote that, but they didn't.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it wouldn't even be junk on the shelf, it would be junk on the screen. I think we can, we can wax somewhat philosophical and somewhat pessimistic about the idea that this ability of these large language models to put words together, it can make sense, but it has no soul. And you can maybe try to inject some soul into it, and yeah, it can write a book, and people are now actually publishing books that list ChatGPT as a co-author. So written by

the person and ChatGPT, which I think there's a level of honesty to that that I can appreciate, but it doesn't make me want to read it at all. Maybe out of curiosity. But there's something distinctly lacking in things I've read. And, and what is it? You can't say it's not good language. You can't criticize the syntax or the vocabulary or even the logic or the reasoning. It may say things that aren't true, but unless you have general knowledge, you wouldn't know if it's true or not. But that's true about anything. Anybody can say something that is or isn't true, and you may or may not know, but what seems to be lacking is the soul of the thing, and that's where I believe some of the danger lies, is you've got something that, that seems to be all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful, but it has no soul. What's the effect of that on society?

So my guess, and I kind of side with one of our good friends, Dr. O'Toole from Hillsdale, who essentially shares with me the idea that really using AI is not healthy for people in a developmental stage. Now, can you use AI to get information? I suppose. It's a glorified search engine. But when you use it to replace human functionality, whether that's doing math or writing or composing or doing art or whatever you do, you're just abdicating your own development. You're saying, "I don't need to develop this skill."

Research is the same way. I've thought about our Unit 6. Okay. So Unit 6, that was my favorite unit for a while because it replaced the kind of overwhelmingness of the great note card project and brought it into a manageable state. What is it doing? Well, you have multiple sources of information, two, three, maybe more, and you take some information from each of those sources. You have source outlines, and then you choose kind of the best of the best, what to put in the fused outline, and then you write from that.

Okay, that is exactly what the AI does, right? If you ask it a question and you say, "Tell me about something," it goes and grabs information from multiple sources, chooses everything, fuses it together, and gives you grammatically correct text. Okay, so why learn? Why bother doing that when it can do it for you instantly, effortlessly? Well, it's back to the processed food argument in a way. Why bother cooking when you can get something that tastes just as good and maybe is just as nutritious? You don't know for sure. But it removes the human element. It removes the discernment. And for children, it removes that sorting that's so important, right? We're always dealing with too much information in our life. So what are we trying to do? We're trying to sort through, pull out those things that are interesting, important or relevant, and then organize them and then act on that level of information. It's the doing of it that's important, not the product. But I think the AI enthusiasts don't get this.

Julie Walker: Right. Right. Exactly. So when you use AI, and I was actually talking with someone, I did a podcast about just our method of teaching writing for an organization, and he was talking about how helpful this would be and how this would combat AI. And he said using AI would be like giving a power saw to a 10-year-old. It's probably not too safe, right? It's a little dangerous, like very dangerous. But we can teach students how to think and how to

ask good questions, and that can help them become more effective at using AI, right? Do you want to speak to that a moment? Because we've talked about this before.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yes. We know there's a whole career category now called prompt engineer. What's a prompt engineer? Someone who designs questions to be able to use AI to accomplish things, and that can happen in any field. What I find very interesting is that if you don't ask good questions, you don't get good results. So in that way, it's a harsh environment. And the AIs seem to be designed to want to make up for your lack of knowledge, your lack of ability. They want to make you feel good about everything, so you use it more.

Julie Walker: Yes, it's true

Andrew Pudewa: I find it very humorous when people will make little videos talking to ChatGPT, asking them simple questions that you know the answer to. It gives a wrong answer, and then the person will challenge it and say, "Are you sure about that?" And then the AI will say, "Oh, you're right. You caught me. Yeah. actually..." And so it's this weird, weird thing.

And of course, people, when they do the talking back and forth, the voices are simulating in such a realistic way a real voice. It is very easy to get duped into having a relationship with this thing. This is why I never talk to AI. I always type what information I want, and I'm very narrow in my use of it. And then I always try to double-check the source because I don't know necessarily everything, but I do know it can give wrong information. Therefore, I've got to double-check the information it gives. I actually hate it, but you're in this world, and now all the search engines are driven this way.

Julie Walker: It's true

Andrew Pudewa: So there's an efficiency to it, but there's also an uncertainty. And maybe it's just my skepticism having been, having grown up in a pre- pre-internet, pre-computer

Julie Walker: It's true. We are not digital natives, are we, Andrew? Yes. So let's, let's just spend a few minutes as we're wrapping things up here. When... Mm, that's not the right question. I need a prompt engineer to help me out here with this actual question. Not when is the right time to use AI, but how can we prepare our students today while they're in their formative years to become better functioning adults, to be more in tune to how AI can help and not harm their lives?

Andrew Pudewa: like Dr. O'Toole said, just don't. It's not necessary. There's no real advantage of teaching a 12-year-old how to use it because then it will become a replacement in so many ways. So I really like the calculator analogy, and it goes back to the article. The guy said, "Why are we teaching kids math?"

Julie Walker: Yeah

Andrew Pudewa: Why not just teach them how to use AI?" Well, we had a great podcast with Jennifer Mauser about critical thinking, right? And everybody wants critical thinking. It's a buzzword. But what you need is information. You need knowledge. You need background. You need to be able to look at something and have things to compare and judge with, right? Critical thinking is judgment, and if you don't know anything, you can't possibly judge anything.

Julie Walker: Right

Andrew Pudewa: And so I think we would all do best to work on building general knowledge and basic skills. and the calculator analogy is perfect. Who's going to use a calculator better, right? Someone who knows their multiplication, can do some mental math, could figure out 24 times three in their brain, can understand fractions and decimals and calculate without the aid of a calculator, and then, and then you give them a calculator, right?

As opposed to someone who can't do any of that, and you give them a calculator, and then you give them a complex problem. One person will have a good sense of whether they are using the calculator well and are they getting an answer that's in the range of correct. Another person would just punch buttons and take whatever they get and have no clue whether it's, it's in the right zone or

Julie Walker: Think of order of operations, man, you can really get the wrong answer if

Andrew Pudewa: Order of operation. Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally. You

Julie Walker: oh, that poor Sally

Andrew Pudewa: So I would think, yes, indeed, well into the teenage years, we would do better to use our own research capacity to use real books, verifiable information, our own knowledge of grammar and mathematics, and just build that until it's really solid.

And then once there's that level of confidence and competence, okay, now there's a technology that can help you be more effective in the world. But I am pretty sure that what we're seeing all over the place is kids who are not knowing stuff, not able to do stuff, don't have a sense of whether something is right, wrong, correct, not correct, good, bad.

And they're being deprived of a certain aspect of humanity. The technology is there in their life causing the skill that should develop to not develop, and that's what worries me the most. Now, there is a silver lining here, Julie.

Julie Walker: Do tell.

Andrew Pudewa: The silver lining is that a lot of people are waking up to and there is a real significant, almost a backlash against the one-to-one Chromebooks in every grade level and that every assignment has to be done on a screen, and kids and parents don't... They know instinctively this is not right. This is not a natural world for children to be learning in. And so

we're seeing a huge increase in interest in classical education, charter schools, real books. What I would love to see come back is the printed encyclopedia on the shelf of every home.

Julie Walker: I have a set of encyclopedias. I had to go... I think I had to go to eBay to find a set of children's encyclopedias so that I could have them for my grandchildren so they can have that experience that I know that you had. We'll link to your Encyclopedia Dad article.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh yeah, that's a fun one

Julie Walker: But this idea of going back to basics and learning those skills of thinking, I mean, really that's what we're all about here, in that our method of teaching writing requires students to ask themselves questions, to come up with the answers, whether it's what's the most important key words in the sentence to what did I like or dislike about this book that I've read.

That's units one through nine. We teach all those thinking skills so that they can... We're basically cultivating prompt engineers, people who are able to ask good questions, and then detect falsehood. We would only hope.

Andrew Pudewa: We will hope. The other thing that I'm seeing is not only this backlash about AI, but kind of the search for the authentic, right? I believe that authenticity will be the currency, if you will, of the AI age because we can no longer really trust anything, right? We can't watch a video and be sure the person on the video is the person on the video. Maybe someone stole that person.

Julie Walker: Are you really Andrew Pudewa?

Andrew Pudewa: N- I don't know. Are-- am I?

Julie Walker: Yes, you are. He really is.

Andrew Pudewa: But we can't, we can't look at a photo, we can't listen to music, we can't read anything anymore and know that it's authentic, that it was authored by a human being, and I think that that's causing, on one side, kind of a cynical, like, question everything was a bumper sticker in the '70s, right?

But on the other hand, what we're seeing is people want authentic experience. They want to go to a poetry slam and listen to people sharing their hearts through poetry. They want to go to real concerts. They want to read things that are created by real people. So I think to the degree that we can help parents and teachers equip children to become adults with authentic skills, they are then going to be very valuable in the post-information AI economy of the future that nobody, none of us can predict.

Julie Walker: Yeah. Wow.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, well

Julie Walker: Thank you, Andrew

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, let's be sure we get AI to clean this thing up and make me look better and get out all the uhs and likes so that we are just flawless.

Julie Walker: no, no. Not going to happen.

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.