

Podcast 546: Teachers Do the Assignment (Laying the Foundation)

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: I, I'm not saying that I did every assignment I ever gave, obviously not. But occasionally to do that I think is one of the best forms of preparing yourself as a better teacher

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 was sitting in this room just over a year ago watching you teach a group of teachers, parents, and some of our staff members the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, third edition. And I was sitting in the back, and I was taking notes on a variety of topics like, "Oh, we have to fix that shot...or That's going to work out really well." But then I realized some of the things that you are talking about. I want to be sure that we do a podcast episode on, and this is one of them. You encouraged the teachers to do the assignments, and it's kind of both. Do the practicum assignments in the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*.

Andrew Pudewa: baseline

Julie Walker: Yes, that is baseline. Well, let's go beyond the basics then. What else should they be doing? Well, let's just start there. Do teachers do the assignments? And what does that mean?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it's very easy, I think, for us as teachers to be in this, create the lesson, plan the lesson, teach the lesson, and that's, that's our job. And then the kids do the assignment, and then we have to basically figure out how well the lesson worked by looking at what they were doing.

And then depending on what kind of assignment, how much time, what our obligations are, we have to give them some kind of feedback, and then we would plan the next assignment based on our experience of what they did for us.

And that's kind of a normal way of operating, which is fine. I mean, that's the way I think teachers have been doing it for a long time. But, it's very interesting to create the lesson, create the assignment and the lesson, teach the lesson, and then do the assignment the way you ask the students to do it.

Andrew Pudewa: And it creates a different experience of the whole thing, which I believe helps us become better teachers.

Andrew Pudewa: And I guess I got my first glimpse into this. I was in Grouard in Alberta, Canada, and I think it was the third time I had been there.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: And, I was starting to help Dr. Webster teach some of the sessions. And so he let me choose the source text for the Unit 3 assignment. And so I got the story, and we read it, made the key word outline together with the class. We... And in those days, he just hazed everybody by dumping the entire checklist on everyone from, from the very first Unit 2 thing. So it was all the dress-ups, all the openers, a decoration, a triple, all on the checklist on the second time these teachers.

Okay, so that was the way it was going and, so I taught the whole thing, and then we went back to the staff room where we were, and I was waiting for him to give me some feedback, like, how did it go? And he said a few things and basically encouraging, and then he said, “Well, you’re going to do the assignment yourself, aren’t you?”

And I said, “Well, I wasn’t planning on it.” And he said, “Well, you should.” I said, “Well, I’ve done this before.” And he goes, “Yeah, but this was yours. You should do it.”

Andrew Pudewa: And I didn’t think it was entirely fair because I know for a fact he didn’t write every assignment that he gave to everybody. But okay, he’s the, he’s the Grand Poobah, and I’m the lowly minion entering into the throne room. And he kind of made it clear that I was going to have to do this. And I thought, “Oh, no, because if I’m going to do it, I have to do it perfectly. Like, absolutely perfectly. Like, every last little thing.” So I started working on it, and this was in the days before I had a computer.

Julie Walker: Oh, okay. Okay

Andrew Pudewa: So I had to handwrite.

Julie Walker: Okay.

Andrew Pudewa: And this is three paragraphs, and it was one of my favorite stories ever. I even put it in the TWSS. It’s “The Bat and the Nightingale.”

Julie Walker: Yes, it’s a great story.

Andrew Pudewa: And I loved that story for many reasons. Anyway, I thought I have to think of a good variation, and I wrote the thing, and then I underlined, and I put the numbers, and I put the decoration in the margin, and I... And then I had to recopy it because of course you can’t do it perfectly the first time.

Julie Walker: No such thing as first and only draft.

Andrew Pudewa: I thought I could, but I had to re-- So I, it, it was hours. It was hours, and I was kind of resentful because there was a lot of other stuff to do, and we're trying to run this whole course, and I'm squeezing this in, and I wanted to play games with everybody.

I didn't want to be spending my evening finishing this thing. But anyway, I finally did finish it, and I gave it to him, and he read the whole thing, and then he gave me a score, 99.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, what, what possibly could be missing there? And I had not followed the checklist perfectly. I forgot to put the date on the paper. Like, this is the dumbest thing. But it was very interesting because I had written three-paragraph compositions before, but I had never really done it off the assignment I gave. And I took that experience back and on other occasions, I would actually do the assignment before teaching it. Because you start to realize, oh, this could be a little block, or this could be a thing that's going to come up.

If I understand it, I'll be ready to answer that question or help with that thing. And so I'm not saying that I did every assignment I ever gave, obviously not.

Julie Walker: right

Andrew Pudewa: But occasionally to do that, I think is one of the best forms of preparing yourself as a better teacher.

Julie Walker: Yep. I'm thinking about two stories that come to my mind. One is when you were teaching for the *Structure and Style for Students*, I believe it was Level B

Andrew Pudewa: Yep. Level B, Unit 7

Julie Walker: Yes, and you decided to teach the students how to mark their papers by doing a sample yourself, and you provided that sample to the students, and then they got to mark all your dress-ups and sentence openers.

Did you have the date on the paper, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: I do not know. I've actually used that since then, so it was a good investment because now I had a good sample. And, I think when you get to that level with Unit 7 and you're dealing with introduction, conclusion, key words, topic clinchers, it's pretty complicated business.

And it's one thing to explain, it's another thing to have an example, whether that sample is just for you, the teacher, to see how it all works out, or a sample that you can show to the students, here's the idea. Here's what I'm looking for. Here's how your thing could look. Obviously the subject matter is different, but I think that's very useful.

I have mentioned to teachers many times that we have our *Magnum Opus Magazine*, and we only put in the *Magnum Opus Magazine* student writing that does follow the units and that is

pretty close to exactly following the checklist. That way we are guaranteed that if teachers want to use that to show the students, “this is how you do what I’m trying to explain to you.”

I think our kind of American way, if I want to say that, and I don't know if it's distinctly American, but I think our default is to explain everything and then say, “Go try this.” Whereas, my experience, say, in Japan with things in general, whether it was martial arts or flower arranging or calligraphy.

Julie Walker: Or learning to play the violin?

Andrew Pudewa: Or learning to play the violin, it was much, much more, “Here's an example, imitate. Here's an example—imitate. Here's an example, im-” And that going back to the basic foundation of learning is imitation. Human beings learn almost nothing that we don't learn through imitation, and then we imitate enough that we start to innovate. But innovation as, Mike Rowe of,

Julie Walker: Dirty Jobs,

Andrew Pudewa: We should link to that because his TED Talk is one of the best I've ever heard. But he, I believe, had a quote that said, “Innovation without imitation is a complete waste of time.”

And I think we kind of are hoping that our students will have this burst of creativity, and if we kind of point them in the right direction, it'll work. But all too often, maybe one kid gets there. But most of them: “No, I don't know what to do. I don't know what to write. I don't know how to do this.” So with Structure and Style, what have we got? Models for imitation, checklists, exercises with the stylistic techniques, practice. And then you imitate that, and then you get a better result. And sometimes you want to take that imitation all the way into “here's a version of something similar,” and they get the vision. They get the vision from the version.

Julie Walker: Okay. I like it. I like that. There's another story I'm thinking of, and I don't want to go into have you tell the whole story because I think we'll be out of time or maybe not. Maybe you've got time to tell it, but it's a story you tell in *The Four Deadly Errors*, and you talk about the teacher who gave an assignment, and I'm pretty sure she never did the assignment herself.

Andrew Pudewa: I would assume that. So I was at a teacher's convention. I think it was a Core Knowledge convention, if I recall, but it was some kind of teacher's convention. This was 20 years ago. This was a long time ago. And I was all alone setting up my little stuff, and this woman comes up and says, “So you teach writing?” And I said, “Well, I try.” She said, “Well, I teach writing.” And I thought, “Oh, this could be a long conversation.” But I'm there and she wanted to talk, and I said, “Who or what do you teach?” And she said, “Freshman comp.”

Andrew Pudewa: And I thought, “Oof. Okay. I could be out of my league here. I’ve never done that, teach freshman comp in a public school, but

Julie Walker: At the time you hadn’t.

Andrew Pudewa: She obviously wanted to talk. So I said, “Well, how’s it going teaching freshman comp?” And her answer was something like, “Well, I give everyone an assignment, and no one can do it.” So I’m thinking, “Well, if you give everyone an assignment and no one can do it, whose problem is this?” But I didn’t go there. And so I asked her, “Well, what kind of assignment is it?”

And I was expecting something like, “Well, I give them a poem by Maya Angelou or somebody and ask them to reflect on how they feel about it.” Some super fuzzy thing, and that would kill all the boys, half the girls right there. But I was a little surprised because it was a pretty good assignment. She said, “I have them write about an occupation or a profession.” And I thought, “Well, that’s good for a couple reasons.” Number one, you don’t have to tell how you feel about something.

Julie Walker: Yeah, it’s pretty concrete.

Andrew Pudewa: You can go collect up some actual facts, right? The other thing is it’s relevant to kids that age because all these 14-year-olds are starting to think, “What am I going to do when I grow up? What am I going to do with my life?” And so I probed a little further, and I said, “Well, do you give them some kind of rubric or checklist?” Like, I’m trying to see how close is she to my way of thinking. And she said, “Oh, yes, I give them a list of ten things to be sure to include.”

Julie Walker: Wow,

Andrew Pudewa: So I’m kind of mystified, like, why is this so hard for everybody?

And then I probed a little bit further, and I said, “Well, do you give them a sample, like a composition that is approximately the size and shape that you would want it to be?”

And that’s when she said, “Oh, no, I would never do that. That would be helping them too much.” And so then I got it because her checklist was probably a checklist that you could do everything on the checklist and, and some kids could give you ten sentences and do all ten things, and other people might give you ten pages.

And, and so if that’s not what you want, you have to communicate that somehow. But I think in her mind, she was in this idea like, “Well, if they’re not figuring out how to do that, they’re not learning how to do it.” Whereas my approach would be: If you don’t give them a model to follow, they probably won’t figure it out especially if they’re coming out of who knows what was their experience the year or two or three before that. So I did try to convert her to my way of thinking, and I showed her, “Here’s how we would do it with the outline” and all that. And I think she was not impressed. She just had her way of thinking.

But I think, I don't know if I said it to her, but if she had written a composition similar to the one she was hoping they would write and then read it with everybody, it would still be different because everybody would be writing a different occupation or profession or whatever.

Julie Walker: She could pretend that she's in ninth grade and wanting to research being a teacher, English teacher.

Andrew Pudewa: Exactly. Yeah. That would have worked. So I think that there's certainly a lot of stress and demand on teachers' time. No one will dispute that. Teachers and parents and tutor- like anybody teaching anything is busy. I get that. But sometimes carving out a little bit of time to put yourself in the position of the students you're teaching will give you the empathy, maybe help you foresee some of the things that might derail some of those kids and teach better, so

Julie Walker: Well, it looks like we're just about out of time, but we need those clear expectations, right? As we're talking about teaching writing. So I do hope at the beginning of this school year, perhaps you're a month in, perhaps you're a week in listening to this podcast, I hope you have the opportunity, you take the time to maybe do one or two of the assignments that you're assigning to your kids, whether you're a parent, whether you are a co-op teacher, whether you're teaching in a classroom, to do those assignments just so that you have a better expectation of what your kids can and cannot do.

Andrew Pudewa: One more thing that's kind of funny is I've written a number of things over the years. Not that I enjoy the writing, I actually don't. I like having written things, but I'm not all too keen on getting from here to there. But nevertheless, there's two things I've written that were both forced on me by Dr. Webster that I am probably most proud of. One is that story that I wrote way back in Gouard.

Julie Walker: I wish you had a copy.

Andrew Pudewa: years ago.

Julie Walker: You don't, he doesn't have

Andrew Pudewa: The problem is it wasn't typed, so I never got it into a computer, but I remember being particularly proud of that. And then the other is that sonnet he forced me to write. One of the last times I visited him before he passed, he just forced me. He was just like, "Sit here and do this sonnet, and we're not going to get dinner until you get going on it." And, and it's just funny how I kind of bristled the most about those two things, but the product was something that in the end I was really quite proud of. So

Julie Walker: There you go.

Andrew Pudewa: We experience probably what our students might experience sometimes that way.

Julie Walker: Hard work, after all, is immensely satisfying.

Andrew Pudewa: I knew you were going to say that.

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.