

Podcast 547: Magnum Opus Magazine

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: We really are doing a great work. The impacts of helping children learn to, listen and speak and read and, and in particular write better, they're so lasting

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, today we are talking about Magnum Opus.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And so I heard this for the very first time decades ago with Dr. Webster. And the history of it is that when he was teaching, each year at the end of the year, he would ask every student in his class to take one of their favorite pieces of writing and then rewrite it again with everything as perfect as it could be. And then he would collect them all, copy them all off and bind it in a book and put it in the school library.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: And so that would be like *Fifth Grade Magnum Opus 1950*, whatever year, I don't know. And so that was an idea that I was kind of blending into what I was teaching with, with the early versions of *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*.

Julie Walker: Right. So each teacher would be encouraged to create their own magnum opus for their class of their students

Andrew Pudewa: And, and he said it was, it was sweet because the younger siblings of kids who had been in his class could go to the library, pull off the shelf a book, open it and see their older brother or sister's story or report or essay or whatever in there. And then they would get to be in there.

And so I, I don't know how long he continued doing this or in what context, but,

Julie Walker: Did he do this at the university level as well?

Andrew Pudewa: He kind of did. Actually, he didn't use textbooks.

Julie Walker: Okay

Andrew Pudewa: All of his students had to use primary sources.

Julie Walker: Graduate level, yeah

Andrew Pudewa: But he did take, like, the best 10 papers from the previous section and copy those off or, send them to the university print shop. And they would, they would copy that off and bind it, and then that would be the textbook for his class.

Julie Walker: Oh, interesting

Andrew Pudewa: So he could then, in his normal teaching style, read something and point out all the dress-ups and point out the topic-clinchers and point out the metaphors and point out all the style techniques, and then comment on the content, I suppose. But so he would teach writing by using the samples of the previous year or the previous course's students, and then he said, "If you want an A in this class, you have to write this well or better."

Julie Walker: Or better,

Andrew Pudewa: That kind of created this feeling where each year was getting a little better, a little better, a little better, a little better. So when I kind of heard about this idea and started to promote it, I thought, "Well, this could be done on an individual basis with a teacher in a school. It could be done better by a whole school, and you might not be able to publish something from every student the way you could with just a teacher, but you certainly could get a good range."

And then you could perhaps have a local printer or some sponsors who want their name on it or the logo on it or something, print it, and then you could distribute that out. And it also is kind of a nice showcase to show people that this is one of the things we do in this school. We have students who write well and produce excellent compositions.

And then, as I got more into the homeschool world, I thought, "Well, you could do this in the homeschool co-op or the homeschool micro-school or, or even in your family." And for a while, I was saying, your kids could put their stories on a blog, like a family blog, and then send links to grandparents, relatives, friends, and all that.

But there's something about being published that does something for a child that's really elevating. Same thing about writing contests. Just entering a contest raises the level of effort a student is willing to put into the project. And even getting an honorable mention in a contest is a huge boost to the self-perception as, "Hey, I'm pretty good at this."

And of course, when we believe we're pretty good at something, we like doing it and are happy to do it more.

Julie Walker: Exactly

Andrew Pudewa: So I don't remember what year it was. You were around, I'm sure.

Julie Walker: I was around, and I'll tell that little story. It's, it's kind of a fun, the evolution of what has, is now our Magnum Opus Magazine. But when, it was probably close... So I've been working now for you at the Institute for Excellence in Writing for 19 years.

Andrew Pudewa: 19

Julie Walker: So it was probably close to 17 or 18 years ago. So it was toward the beginning of my career in this space. Denise Corella.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh yeah

Julie Walker: She was our first editor of the *Magnum Opus Magazine*. And she, it was just a, a fold in half small magazine, and she would try and collect student samples, and then she'd go out and try and get advertisers to advertise in the magazine.

And she did that for a couple years, and then she grew up and got married. And then we tried various other ways to do this. And we, where we landed today, which we've been doing now, this now for a half a dozen years or so, I think is a really good, really good solution. Anyone who is an IEW student can submit their very best work and potentially be published either in this once-a-year print magazine or in our online digital magazine.

And this is beautifully designed, and winners are named. And one of the things... And every month, this is the online version, every month has a theme based on the nine units.

Andrew Pudewa: The units,

Julie Walker: Yes. And so in September, the theme is poetry because we haven't quite received all the unit twos. Unit 2 is October. Unit 3 is November.

There's no newsletter in December. Everybody gets a break. Unit 4,5. So we do about nine or six, nine or 10 newsletters a year electronically. But then this one goes out in every single one of our orders for two reasons. One, to encourage your students to enter into our *Magnum Opus Magazine*.

I can't say it strongly enough, so I'm stumbling over my words. We crave their excellent writing because we want to include it. But also, we want to be able to showcase what is possible for our students. If they've gone through IEW, this is what's possible. And families that are brand new to IEW, teachers that are new to IEW are very impressed.

We put the names, just their first name, how old they are, and if they're using an IEW what curriculum they're actually using in our magazine

Andrew Pudewa: And I know some teachers have used that as samples to show students. So here's a Unit 5, and here's how you do a topic-clincher there. Or here's a Unit 8, and here's the five-paragraph model. Here's a critique. And because these are pretty much the best of the best that we get, they are good models to show to students in a classroom.

Or, I know someone who kind of helps the teachers in their school, kind of the writing lead for their school, and they'll be sure that all their teachers have one of these, and they'll look through and talk about it a little bit as they kinda go through the year. So, funny little story though.

So, I knew *magnum opus* because Webster said it and Mrs. Ingham said it and said it, everybody said it. And we were doing this before we moved to Oklahoma. And when we moved to Oklahoma, I started teaching Latin, and I didn't really know much Latin. I was just learning right along with the kids. So I'm in first year Latin and the first declension nouns, agricola, a, ae, am, a, a, animi, sasis, all the case endings, right?

And then we get to the second declension nouns, which are us, like equus for horse, right? Usi, o, o, i, onomi, sosis. So I am assuming that opus is a second declension noun,

Julie Walker: okay

Andrew Pudewa: And almost all of those are masculine. The -us second declension nouns are all masculine.

Julie Walker: More Latin than you wanted to know.

Andrew Pudewa: s- but magnum wouldn't match in case and gender,

Julie Walker: Okay. Yes, that's right

Andrew Pudewa: right? It could either be in the accusative case or it could be in the nominative case, but in that case it would be, it would be neuter. So I woke up one morning thinking, "Have I been doing this wrong all these years? Should it really be magnus opus so that they match or opus magnus? Like, what happened?" And I was a little panicking, but then finally I discovered opus is not a second declension noun. It's a fourth declension noun, and the endings are us, us, ui, u, us, u, us, ibus, us, ibus. However, they can be neuter. So opus is a fourth declension noun in the neuter, therefore magnum matches. And I was somewhat relieved realizing that we had been promoting this and sending out great loads, and anyone who knew any Latin might think we're idiots, but now we're not. So I was happy

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes. excellence is our middle name, right? we have

Andrew Pudewa: We try. But when it gets into Latin—unknown territory

Julie Walker: Yeah. Well, you mentioned writing contests, and I want to speak to that too because I love that idea of encouraging students to up their game, so to speak, by entering writing contests. And of course, at the Institute for Excellence in Writing, we too hold a writing contest, and those winners are published in our online newsletter.

And to be honest, I know you're not seeing this in July, but we're recording this in July, and the winners were just announced.

Andrew Pudewa: So if you didn't get that email and you want to see some of the winning essays, you can go to magnumopusmagazine.com where we have the writing contest winners from really many past years. But this would be the 2026 winners.

Julie Walker: Yep. So every year we go to Andrew and say, "Okay, the writing contest is in March. We've got some really great prizes for these students, but we need a prompt." And the reason we do this in March is in our one-unit-a-month schedule, by March they're doing Unit 7, which is the blank page, which now they're responding to a prompt. So if they've gone through IEW, then they will be pretty comfortable writing a prompt-based essay. And so this prompt was on

Andrew Pudewa: A book. A book or a story or a character in a book mostly. And the level A, which of course would be approximately grade three to five, we give them the number of paragraphs so that they get, well, length dictates structure, so they know what to, what to think about. So I just thought it might be fun to read one. Is that okay? Because I got this in my mailbox, and unlike most of the emails I get from IEW, I delete. This one I looked at because it said, "Writing contest winners."

Julie Walker: Well, okay, to be fair, the reason you delete them is all the news in there you already know, but you wouldn't know who won the writing contest.

Andrew Pudewa: It's true. And, and for some reason I still don't understand, I always get about three or four of the same emails. Nevertheless, I did take a look at these, and I have to say, I was mightily impressed, particularly with the depth of thought that even these young children were able to put into this.

So I just wanted to read one, if that's okay. This was the first place winner, age nine, Ella P. And the title is Chasing the Pages of a Book,

Julie Walker: Oh, what a great title. Yes

Andrew Pudewa: "Honey is sweet and so is knowledge, but knowledge is like the bee that made that sweet honey. You have to chase it through the pages of a book," writes Patricia Polacco, author of *Thank You, Mr. Falker*. Understanding that knowledge is something you have to chase through a book is why *Thank You, Mr. Falker* impacted me. It made me want to work to get stronger at reading, even with dyslexia. This story is about the author as a little girl who had dyslexia just like me, and she fought through it. It was challenging for Patricia to read in front of the class and to understand how the letters went together to make words.

I saw myself in the book as Patricia, since sometimes I cannot figure out what a word means, and I have to stop to curiously ponder the meaning of the words. When I figured out that the girl in the story was the author, and even with dyslexia, she wrote seven captivating books, I felt amazing. Dyslexia did not stop her. She pushed through and kept her motivation. Now, even when reading tutoring is taxing, it can help me not give up, because Patricia also had to pay careful attention and listen to her reading teacher, Mr. Falker. There are many things that I have in common with the main character, Patricia. We both have dyslexia, a love for art, get a little scared when we are supposed to read aloud, and most of all, cherish ama- amazing stories.

At the beginning of the book, Patricia chased the bee through the pages of books read aloud by family members. I have fallen in love with books read aloud to me, such as *Ballet Shoes*, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Penderwicks*, and *Little Women*. Since reading *Mr. Falker*, I've learned that books and stories are sweet like the bee's honey and worth the tremendous effort it may take to read the books filled with knowledge. *Thank You, Mr. Falker* impacted me so much that I wanted to become a better reader, and one day I want to be an author too.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: Isn't that sweet?

Julie Walker: Very sweet for probably around a 10-year-old with a learning challenge.

Andrew Pudewa: nine. I

Julie Walker: She's nine. Okay. Amazing

Andrew Pudewa: And, Kyle, age 11, wrote about, *Anne of Green Gables*

Julie Walker: Wow

Andrew Pudewa: and

Julie Walker: How long was that essay? What was the requirement on that one?

Andrew Pudewa: Five paragraphs. Five paragraphs. I'll just read the last paragraph here. the title was Mistakes Have Purpose, and the last paragraph, which would restate the topics, I assume. "*Anne of Green Gables* imprints many virtues on one's heart, like kindness, honesty, and forgiveness. Ultimately, learning from one's mistakes will foster many virtues. This will help many lives be righteous. Also, it will spread the love of Christ far and wide to the ends of the earth, which is what Jesus instructed. Jesus emphasized the importance of virtues such as kindness, honesty, and forgiveness, teaching that these qualities reflect the heart of God and guide us toward righteous living. So practice virtues and do not be afraid to make mistakes, because mistakes have purpose."

Isn't that great?

Julie Walker: That is great. Okay, level C, that's our high school submissions

Andrew Pudewa: place was Gianna, age 16, and she wrote *Growing Up With Number the Stars: A Story of Love and Altruism*. And if we-- And, and this was long. She wrote six paragraphs. So she must have had,

Julie Walker: Five to seven was probably the required length.

Andrew Pudewa: know, four, probably four topics

Julie Walker: And, and I'm just going to speak to that right now. When I just said required length, it reminded me of one of the very first things we do when we get these hundreds of submissions, and we do. Every year we get more and more, and we've had another all-time record of submissions this year.

The first thing we do is, did the students follow directions? Grades, the level C, it had to be five to seven paragraphs. If you did eight paragraphs, you were eliminated. If you did four, you were eliminated. But here we go. Our winner followed all the rules and wrote an excellent paper

Andrew Pudewa: It's fair enough. So anyway, there's, there's a good smattering of inspiration, a, a lot about books, some of which I haven't actually read, and I am now inspired, especially this *Thank You, Mr. Falker*. I think that would be an interesting one. I think most of us know or maybe even had one or more children with some degree of dyslexia, and the fact that this inspired little Ella so effectively makes me think it would be a good book to have on hand.

And I was thinking about this podcast and how you and I, in our meetings and conversations, very often touch on the fact that we are I, I mean, we're a business, but in a way, we are more than a business. And over the many years, you've been more pro-growth than I have. I'm kind of, "Things are fine. Let's just keep them going the way they are," and you're kind of like, "But there's so many more people who could benefit from what we do, and think of all the schools and the home schools and the teachers and the tutors all over the world, and let's do this bigger." And I can't say that I've always been hugely enthusiastic about growth in that way.

But what are we really doing here? We read these essays from kids, the compositions, the stories, the letters I get from kids who... I just-- Izzy wrote, she wrote this essay about how her writing has improved so much in two years, and what she learned from the SSS class, and that she likes the jokes, and that she learned history through the, the source text in Level B, Frederick Douglass, Sally Ride, Lewis and Clark, Harriet Tubman, Marie Curie, Gutenberg.

Andrew Pudewa: And then, and then she finished, and it was very sweet because she wrote, "If I hadn't paid attention, I wouldn't have learned about the important historical events or how to improve my writing skills. He made writing so much fun for me that I am writing this, not because my mom told me to or because it is an assignment, but just because I wanted to. Thank you, Mr. Pudewa."

And I get letters like this fairly often, and I realize we really are doing a great work. We--the impacts of helping children learn to listen and speak and read and in particular write better are so, they're so lasting and, and so dispersed throughout the thousands of people.

Maybe we're into the dozens of thousands. Maybe we're into the hundreds of thousands. Who knows? We don't know our reach, but we do know that every, every little echo that comes back to us is representing a, a joy, a growth, a, a satisfaction, and a, a meaning. And I'm just

so grateful. I will say to you, thank you for pushing us to be better and bigger than I would ever have imagined we would become

Julie Walker: Well, as I say every week in the podcast, it is an honor to serve IEW and you. So thank you, Andrew

Andrew Pudewa: And if you don't have our *Magnum Opus*, call up or email, get a copy, and check out the website magnumopusmagazine.com. And especially I would encourage you, read these essay winners because some of them are just really powerful.

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.