Podcast 554: Indicators: A Teacher's Best Friend

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: You know, this checklist is not the end. It is the way to improve the skills so that you have, as you like to say, the confident and competent communicator

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, we have spent the year at IEW contemplating this idea of back to the basics, laying the foundation. And so every few episodes we're back to that theme. And this particular episode is about the indicators and why did Webster feel like this was so important, and why is it so important for teachers in turn to require-- I, I love what you say in the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* video course that we teach.

You said it's not the ten suggestions. These are more like the Ten Commandments. You must do these things, and you must use the indicators. So give us a history on that.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yes. Obviously the problem with the ten good suggestions is who takes your suggestions, right? The people who can, and it's easy, and they're already pretty good, who kind of says, "Well, I don't wanna do all that."

Julie Walker: More like guidelines to quote the pirates, right?

Andrew Pudewa: We do have this–I think some people perceive it as a little bit rigid.

Why do you have to do everything in every paragraph? Well, because if you don't set that as the standard, then people will just do some things in some paragraphs or whatever they want, whenever they want, and you're losing the opportunity to refine that technique to the point where it is easy.

And I think a lot of people do understand what I've tried to teach over and over and again and again in the TWSS and every time I talk: this checklist is not the end. It is the way to improve the skills so that you have, as you like to say, the confident and competent communicator. Can I share one interesting thing with you? 'Cause it, it fits right in with what we're talking about.

Julie Walker: Okay. Well, and he had this in his hand and I guessed what it was and I guessed wrong. So I'm very curious, Andrew, what do you have?

Andrew Pudewa: So I got a text yesterday from one of my friends, Sarah. She wrote to me a few years ago a long, scathing, angry, handwritten letter accusing me of giving spoilers on various great novels in one of the video courses.

Okay, so this started our relationship. I promptly wrote her a letter back and gave her more spoilers for more novels, and we've written a lot of letters. Mine are much shorter. She's written me 12-page handwritten letters.

Julie Walker: Isn't there a proverb about wounds of a friend?

Andrew Pudewa: I guess. And she came to meet me when I was in Dallas, and her family's actually come here. I've seen her many times. We talk. And remember the first time she texted me, I said, "Do you really want to text? This will change the nature of our relationship." Because up to that point, it had only been handwritten. Anyway, so she's done, I think, six years of IEW courses, like all the way up through SSS 2C.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow. Amazing

Andrew Pudewa: And she wrote the absolute best super essay that I have ever seen.

Julie Walker: Wait a minute. I'm assuming this is an adult, but this is a student.

Andrew Pudewa: she...

Julie Walker: Well, now she's an adult.

Andrew Pudewa: I'll finish the story. Yeah, so she did, she did all this, and then she applied for a scholarship to the University of Dallas, and she got, I think, one of two full, four-year scholarships to UD in English.

Julie Walker: Oh, wow. Okay

Andrew Pudewa: And so she wasn't even sure she wanted to go. And we talked about it. But anyway, so she's at UD. She's in the first or second week of school. She texts me, "Guess what they gave me in lit class today" Of course, I responded, "An A?"

Julie Walker: Yes. That's good. That's great.

Andrew Pudewa: And she sent me a picture of a checklist, which has way too many things to read all of it. But I thought it would be interesting to note a few things on this checklist that are very similar to what we try to accomplish with our checklists.

Julie Walker: Amazing

Andrew Pudewa: Title. Does your title grab the reader's attention and give some indication of your argument? This is, by the way, liter-- This says, Checklist for literary tradition essays.

Julie Walker: Okay

Andrew Pudewa: All right. And it appears that it's all about poem, poetry, right? So anyway, it's got a whole thing on the thesis and introduction. Does it stimulate the reader's interest? Do you indicate the importance of your interpretation? Does it lead to the thesis statement as the concluding sentence of the paragraph? Okay, so structure

Argument: Do you anticipate and respond to counterarguments? This is right out of our persuasive essay checklist there.

Paragraphs: Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence? Do you explain how the material cited supports your interpretive claims? This would fit right in with the TRIAC idea that we teach at the higher level.

Julie Walker: Sure, sure

Andrew Pudewa: Conclusion: Does it do more than recapitulate? Does it indicate why the thesis is worthwhile, important?

Julie Walker: Most important and why? Wow

Andrew Pudewa: Mechanics: Do you avoid fragments and run-ons? Do you maintain consistent verb tense and subject-verb agreement? Is your essay written proper academic style? Do you employ a varied, accurate, and interesting diction? Did you consult a dictionary and a thesaurus while writing your essay? Do you use all punctuation properly? Do you use the proper format for citing?

Julie Walker: Nice.

Andrew Pudewa: Proofreading. Anyway, so I thought this is, this is just the next level of what she has already mastered. And

Julie Walker: And she will no doubt get an A

Andrew Pudewa: No, and, and then that's what I texted back. She sent this, and I texted back, “Well, the next thing you'll get is the A.”

Julie Walker: Right. Like nice, nice

Andrew Pudewa: She's an example of, I think, of a very well-read, articulate kid who really embraced the challenge of the checklist. She could have made this argument, “Well, I'm already so good. Why do I have to do all this stuff?”

Julie Walker: Right.

Yes

Andrew Pudewa: I've-- Sometimes that happened. But no, she said, “Okay, I can do this. I will make it work,” and she did. She checked-- She did every single thing on these checklists because she actually sent me one of her assignments with the checklist in.

So I think that when we see the combination of a good language background, right? And being read to as a young kid, reading well, and then a certain humility, like, “Okay, I can learn from this exercise,” rather than, “I don't need to do this because…” and then you see that you just supercharge, , the, the intellect, the spirit, and what's the result?

You go off into the world of elite higher education. A lit class at the University of Dallas is not your typical first-year college class at blah blah U.

Julie Walker: Well, especially if they're analyzing poetry. That's pretty high level right there.

Andrew Pudewa: So anyway, I'm excited to see what other observations she has. We're pretty good friends now, so I think she'll keep me posted on her experience.

Julie Walker: That’s great. That's fantastic.

Andrew Pudewa: So back to the why the indicators. Why the indicators? Well, it's, it's kind of one of those things. If you want to teach your children to clean the bathroom well, first of all, you would teach them one thing, watch them do it, show them how to do it, watch them do it, coach them, and be there with them, right, until they could. And, and then you would show another thing and another thing, and you could gradually build a checklist of how to do the sinks, the tubs, the mirrors, the floors, the toilet, under the toilet, the bowl cl- .

And that gradually would become, , a checklist. And so when you, when you do some very physical chore like that, you see the result, right? There's

Julie Walker: The indicator in this case is the clean bathroom.

Andrew Pudewa: It is, is the, is the shinier, more sparkling, m- less, less, I don't know,

Julie Walker: Dingy and yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: grungy, so it's clear. So when we have a checklist and we say, "Do this," it really helps the student to have this method of knowing for sure they did it, and acknowledging that by the underline and the check mark. And of course, anyone who's been doing this for a while has seen kids who will write the whole paragraph and then just mindlessly look at the checklist and go, “Check, check, check, check, check, check. Yeah, I did all that stuff.” Or they'll write the whole paper, three paragraphs, five paragraphs, whatever, and then just, like, draw a line through all the check marks.

Well, and then you, the teacher, look at it and you say, “Well, I don't see that you did this thing you checked off.” “Oh, I forgot.” Okay, we don't want that.

Julie Walker: Is this a character issue or perhaps?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I don't know if we would go so deep as like life-threatening character, but there is this idea of do what you check, check what you do. And we have a business here. You, you deal with a lot more of the people here than I do, but I know that

what we like are people who come to us and their attitude is, “Okay, what, what needs to be done?” And do it and be very meticulous about doing what is asked and being sure to ask what needs to be done.

And so there is a life skill in using the checklist, and it carries over. It carries over to higher academics. It carries over to the workplace. I think it carries over into all of adulthood–just taking care of your, yourself and, and parenting and, and everything.

So it's, it's one of those things Mrs. Ingham used to use the word. You know what I'm gonna say.

Julie Walker: Intangibles. Yep

Andrew Pudewa: And she'd talk about how she had this library and books, and she had a special bag, and the child had to put the book in the bag, and they would take it home, and then they had to put the book in the bag to bring it back to school.

And the importance with the bag to the child was protect the book. But the importance to the child, the importance in a higher way, was this intangible of responsibility. And so I think Webster continued that tradition, and we've refined the indicator system over time just to make it more consistent and, and underline the dress-up, sentence numbers in the margin, bold or highlight the topic clincher, use italics for the decorations or put dec in the margin, all of these things.

And I've watched my grandchildren and what I notice is that there's a kind of deep-level satisfaction. Once you get over, “Do I really have to do this?” Once you get over that, then it's the mark the dress-up, check it off. Find the prepositional opener, put the number in the margin, check it off. Look for the topic clincher, check it off. Yeah, it takes time, but oh, the benefits

Julie Walker: Yep. I have, of course, our newest seminar workbook, and I love that... I mean, we've talked before about the new printer and the high volume that it's capable of doing. But what it's also capable of doing is printing in color, which I think really helps with clarity. And this is fun to have a section on our stylistic techniques about painting with words, and I love that visual of that.

But here on page 176 is all of the stylistic techniques, and of course, the following pages explain how to do them, basic ideas, and then a little bit more higher level when we get into does this prepositional opener need a comma or not? Those kind of things we address.

But right here on the chart are the indicators. This is something that you alluded to. So what happens to a... You mentioned the student, that feeling of satisfaction, of “I did it.” You mentioned once before about the adrenaline that you get when you actually check something off a checklist. Oh. Is it adrenaline or some type of neurological function there?

Andrew Pudewa: I guess dopamine falls in that category.

Julie Walker: Oh, okay

Andrew Pudewa: So you get that feeling of elevation.

Andrew Pudewa: But, but you have to work for it, right? It, it's, you, you have to say, "Okay, I'm going to attend to this and put my focus on it," and then having accomplished it, there is a reward mechanism

Julie Walker: So that student who just ran a line down, he's missing out.

Andrew Pudewa: But we all, human beings are designed to be lazy. I mean, we're des- we're-- essentially, we're designed to use as little energy as possible for, I suppose, survival. But that's not the way to a better life. And so we know in anything, whether it's an art, whether it's physical exercise and fitness, whether it's the organizing of our environment, the use of a system that allows us to little by little by little accomplish more. Yes, there's an energy expenditure, but then there is a growth that results, and, and that's just part of the, the irony of being alive.

But yeah, I was just reading an article this morning about a woman who banned AI from her classroom three years ago when it wasn't, when it was first a thing. And she said, "High school students are lazy. It is their nature to put out the least amount of effort, but consequently, they get the least amount of benefit. Why would I empower that?"

And I liked her argument. I thought it was a very well-done argument. And I will mention that good news out of New York

Julie Walker: Okay. Can that, is that possible?

Andrew Pudewa: It is possible. And it was even the mayor of New York, of whom I'm not a huge fan, but he was announcing that the entire New York schools has eliminated agentive AI from grades K through eight.

Julie Walker: Great. Yep

Andrew Pudewa: They're also reducing screen ratios in classrooms. And why? This was the one where we heard this rumor that there were gonna be robotic AI-powered teaching assistants in New York City classrooms.

Julie Walker: It's true. I remember that,

Andrew Pudewa: They've scrapped the whole plan.

Julie Walker: Oh, good. Okay

Andrew Pudewa: Why? Well, because they found that kids need to do the work themselves to learn.

Julie Walker: Well, I love that, Andrew. There's hope for--

Andrew Pudewa: there is

Julie Walker: hope. There

Andrew Pudewa: There is hope

Julie Walker: So let me, let me switch over now to the teacher. We just in the few minutes that we have left, tell me how, what it's like for you when you're grading these papers for students who are using the indicators correctly versus those students who are being lazy.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it, it makes a world of difference because if you have–if you had no indicators at all and you got a student paper and it had a checklist, you would be the one who would have to then go find all the dress-ups, openers, decoration, topic… it would take you a long time to just see if they did what was required. The temptation would be to not check it because that's an expenditure of time, and if you've got a dozen kids, if you've got two dozen kids, if you've got five dozen kids, you don't have that much time.

With the indicator system, it's so helpful because you can just count one, two, three, four, five, six. Okay, got 'em, right? however many is on the checklist. Next paragraph, one, two, three, four. Four. Okay, something's missing. What's missing? Right? Then you can either just throw it back at the kid and say, “What's with this? You got four underlines. There's five things on the checklist. I'm not gonna find this for you. This is your job.”

Well, it makes them a little irritated. Or maybe they just say, “Well, I don't know what it is.” Okay, well then that helps you understand, okay, here's something that needs to be re-presented and, and discussed and pointed out and explained. But for the most part, it allows you to know very quickly– Did they do what was on the checklist or not?

Now, sometimes it'll happen where a kid will get confused about a part of speech, and they'll underline two adjectives rather than one quality adjective and one strong verb. Okay, well, that's okay. That's getting a little granular, but at least you know that that's where the problem is.

If you don't see the indicators, you don't. Also, I know for a fact that some kids have tried to slip in words like is in a topic clincher, two-word minimum. Okay, well, what's the rule? Two or three key words. “Is” just doesn't qualify here, sweetheart. And what's interesting is if you make them, box it or highlight it or bold it, well, then they have to acknowledge to themselves that they're trying to slip this off on you. And then they say, “Oh, no, that's not gonna go.” Whereas if you're not indicating, “Oh yeah, I did it.”

Julie Walker: Yeah, exactly. Yep

Andrew Pudewa: I think Webster was just so brilliant in so many ways, but this idea of the indicators at first to some teachers it seems, it's like an added burden on everybody. But the truth is, it makes life better and it creates this kind of internal accountability for the student.

And that's what we want. We want them to be accountable for what they give you, and that's why university, top-level university literature teachers are using a checklist like this, which really is an appropriate extension of what we do in a much more basic way, trying to train students so they can do that.

Julie Walker: All right. Well, thank you, Andrew. Very helpful.

Andrew Pudewa: All right

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.