

Thinking Like Shakespeare, Part 1

Transcript of Episode 398

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, many months ago we did a series of two podcasts where you talked about your book of the year. And we went from 2022 and I think we went back a couple decades maybe. I’m wondering, it’s almost at the end of 2023, do you have a book of the year for 2023?

Andrew Pudewa: You know, it’s hard to call an election before the last votes are in, but I find it almost impossible to imagine there will be a book that beats this one I’m holding in my hands right now. *How to think like Shakespeare: Lessons from a Renaissance Education*, by Scott Newstock.

Julie Walker: You know, maybe we should see if we can get him on as a guest on our podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: I think we did. That’s why I’m so excited.

Julie Walker: Welcome, Dr. Newstock.

Scott Newstok: Thank you for having me.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I don’t know who we may have in the world of mutual friends, but this book was recommended to me by someone I respect very greatly, and I got it on Audible, and I started listening to it. And it was one of those cases, within 20 minutes of listening, I knew for a fact I was going to have to buy this book on paper, read it again and again, mark it up like crazy. And as you went through the chapters, I would let out these audible squeals of delight in my car, hearing what you are saying. And I’m just so excited to meet you virtually and have you share a little bit more about this incredible book, *How to Think Like Shakespeare*.

Scott Newstok: It’s exciting to be in conversation. You know, one of the premises of the book is that writing and thinking are forms of conversation. So it’s a delight to be in conversation with you here today.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, so give our listeners just a little bit of background about your education and what you do now and how you came to put together this marvelous collection.

Scott Newstok: Sure. My undergraduate education was at Grinnell College, a great liberal arts education I had there. And then I went on to graduate study at Harvard and was really blessed with an extraordinary range of teachers across my whole life, but especially during that graduate program. And boy, I guess I would say my training there was still fairly broad

across the liberal arts and not really concentrating in one period, but I was drawn to the Renaissance, and I was drawn to the intellectual ferment of that era, as well as the long history of the training of rhetoric and rhetorical practices.

So I finished that program and had a number of temporary visiting positions, teaching here and there before eventually landing at Rhodes College in 2007, where I continue to teach. And in particular, I teach Shakespeare, and I'm in charge of a very generous endowment for Shakespeare studies at the college, which has enabled us to do all kinds of wonderful things about Shakespeare's life, bringing in speakers and artists and actors and musicians to help contemporary audiences think their way into Shakespeare. So in many ways, this book is an outgrowth of that position that I have here at Rhodes College. I've taken the charge of that position to be translating the excitement of Shakespeare's own intellectual formation to audiences today, and the book really condenses a lot of my teaching and a lot of my thinking that has been an outgrowth of that programming.

Andrew Pudewa: And you took your PhD from Harvard, is that correct?

Scott Newstok: That is correct.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I feel like I'm just at the feet of an intellectual giant here, but what's very interesting to me is as I started listening right in the beginning, just your very first prologue to the book, you started articulating ideas that I have tried to say for years and, and I started to realize you are possibly the most like-minded person to me that I have never met.

For example, right in the beginning, you said, "The investigation of words is the beginning of education." And of course, when I heard the audio, I thought you thought of that. And then, when I got the actual book, I saw you were quoting some ancient guy. And, I thought, you know, that's where we start with everything—is what do the words mean. And all through the book you're unpacking the thoughts of others and then the application of it in our world today.

I'm going to just apologize in advance to our listeners, this may be a 20 minute advertisement for this book because I think every person I know should read your book more than once. And I was reading part of it to my wife, and then I offhandedly commented, "I would just, I don't know, move to Tennessee so I could just listen to this guy talk for a year." She of course vetoed that idea right now, but it had a tremendous impact on me.

Scott Newstok: Oh, that's wonderful to hear. And I especially like that you began with the connection to that quotation. It is a book saturated with quotations because in part, what I'm trying to do is distill in a very dense, but I hope accessible, format, a lot of wisdom from centuries, if not millennia of other thinkers, many of whom overlapped with Shakespeare's lifetime or helped produce the kind of circumstances for his own education.

But I'm trying to convey a continuity to the richness of thinking and language and rhetoric. And that, you know, some 2, 000- 2,300 years. So it's a long history of loving words that we're talking about.

Andrew Pudewa: Then, uh, write in your first chapter, and let me, I'm just going to read the chapter titles because they're, it reminds me of Francis Bacon, actually.

Scott Newstok: Mm hmm.

Andrew Pudewa: But you have chapter one, “Of Thinking,” two, “Of Ends,” three, “Of Craft,” four, “Of Fit,” Five, “Of Place,” six, “Of Attention,” which is particularly important to me right now in my area. “Of Thinking,” seven, “Of Technology,” “Of Imitation,” which I just about, if I hadn't been driving my car, I think I would have just jumped out of my chair in excitement on that chapter “Of Exercises,” “Of Conversation,” “Of Stock,” at which point I looked at the beautiful fact that your last name is Newstok.

Scott Newstok: And there's a pun, yeah, there's an Emerson quotation where he's talking about making new stock out of old stock. So I was really happy. I was able to blend that in there.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, it's providential Of Constraint, which I found to be so very, very valuable Of Making and Of Freedom. And as soon as I finished the book, I just wanted to start all over again. But one of the things I had come across many years ago, as you did, was Ken Robinson has this super popular TED talk with many, many dozens of millions of views, where he talks about, you know, schools kill creativity.

But there's a fundamental flaw in his argument, and he goes through the whole beginning, which is industrial revolution, mechanized, everybody does the same thing in the same way, according to the same schedule. And then, you pointed out what I had been thinking. He does not have a solution. He is relying on a faith in progressivism and technology. And your whole book then points to the fact that we can look back and say, what did people used to learn and study and how did they used to live and think when they actually could live and think better?

Scott Newstok: Yeah. I think, as I hope I make clear in the technology chapter, I'm certainly not against technology. And I love deploying all kinds of resources towards the end of better thinking and better speaking and better writing. But I do think that there is, it's a very human tendency that we have to presume that the newest technology is the best thing and it supersedes everything that preceded it. And that is, that certainly applies to electronic and digital technologies that we think that magically they surpass anything that came before. And that's just not true. And it risks falling into a kind of naive techno-utopianism that this next thing is always the new thing that will solve everything. And it also just ignores again, hundreds, if not millennia, of years of fact related to incredible intellectual and artistic production from across the globe in a pre-electronic, pre-digital age.

So you know some of what I'm doing in the book is trying to reverse engineer and think about, how does someone come to write this well? And in a world that is deeply literate and heavily invested in words and in the history of rhetoric but is certainly pre-digital in terms of its technology? And that's not to say that there aren't other kinds of technology that are incredibly valuable before the digital and before the electronic media come to exist, including books. A book is a form of technology. Writing is a technology. Having spending time in a room with someone else is actually a techne in the very oldest Aristotelian sense of what techne is. We tend to conflate technology with electronic technology, but there are many wonderful ways in which we shape our lives and practices that don't have anything to do with that.

So yeah, the Ken Robinson YouTube clip from his TED talk is, I think, the most viewed clip ever in the TED series. And he's clever and he's funny, but I think it's based on a lot of

mistaken premises and, and that quickly, I think, helps illuminate what is interesting about Shakespeare's own intellectual formation.

Andrew Pudewa: You made the observation that while Ken Robinson says it must have been annoying for Shakespeare to be in somebody's English class, you said there was no such thing as English class. In those days, his grammar school was conducted in Latin, and I had read, and I'm sure you've read Mulroy's book, *The War Against Grammar*, wherein he points out that Shakespeare had the Latin to grammaticize his English, and it was the standards of Latin that really gave birth to the English literary renaissance. You know, in my world I talk to a lot of people about the value of studying Latin, not from a practical point, but from a you-get-x-ray-vision into your own language. You get the structure of language itself.

Scott Newstok: That is a great way to put it. Latin is particularly rich in that way, though it frankly can be any 2nd or 3rd language that helps provide you some distance from your own 1st language that helps give you some clarity and gives you some perspective on what you previously took for granted.

And it has that quality of kind of sharpening up the contours and the features of what you've just thought was natural, but in fact, you realize is wonderfully artificial and developed over time through human interaction. So, yeah, it is a kind of, it sounds like a paradox when you first say it, that an enormous generation of writers across Europe became better writers in their own native languages by not practicing in their own native languages. That humanist education was almost a decade of immersion in Latin, whether they were in southern Europe or northern Europe or in England, and they were rarely trained in their own language, but they were incredibly fluent in their own languages because they were fluent in Latin. So there are many ways in which kind of distancing yourself from the familiar helps you become more articulate in your day to day speech. It's funny the timing. I just want to mention. Just today I was reading an essay by W. H. Auden from 1964 on the value of the classics. And the first thing that he says is that learning Latin and Greek didn't actually make people better poets, but it made them better writers and ultimately better citizens. And again, it's that productive alienation from your own native language, which I think is kind of baked into the process of humanist education.

Julie Walker: So, Dr. Newstok, I am quite sure right now that listeners are asking this very question, so I'm going to ask it of you. How young should you start teaching a foreign language? Should you wait till you're there in high school, or can you start earlier than that?

Scott Newstok: I think if you have the capacity to speak in a second language to a child, that's wonderful to start as soon as you can, I think writing is such a complex cognitive task that demands a lot more structure in terms of inculcating it, that that's something that, in Shakespearean education, it was around age six or seven that after familiarity with English. Language, they would then proceed to Latin instruction. It depends on your capabilities in your household or in your school in terms of what's available, I guess I would just make that distinction between spoken language, which we take up with great facility, and writing which is cognitively much more complex and a kind of weird back formation from all kinds of other cognitive capabilities that we have that's not as intuitive to a child.

Julie Walker: Super, thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. In your chapter “Of Ends,” you make the interesting use of the two definitions, “the end of something, meaning it ceases to exist,” or “the end in the teleos, the function, the ultimate purpose of the thing,” and how many people are saying, well, technology is going to bring about the end of education as we know it, meaning there will be something completely different. And then you shift that and say we must think about the ultimate reasons for education. And I just love the way you do that. And in there, you talk about how tests, along with shooting under competition, are trying to hit the target because the goal is to hit the target, as opposed to hitting the target because you are practicing the proper form. You are pursuing the art of the thing itself. And I've found that—I have a bit of a background in martial arts myself, and I find that to be just constantly recurring. Now I'm kind of into weight training and fitness, and I find myself getting caught up in, can I add five more pounds to the bar, as opposed to how's my form? And I think this distinction goes just far beyond language, but into every aspect of what it is to be human.

Scott Newstok: I agree. And I think there are a number of moments in the book where I'm trying to raise what I think is a paradox in our thinking, or at least a kind of contradiction. And there is an odd way in which if you only try to do a thing by itself, you don't end up doing it well. That part of human development is doing many things and stretching yourself in many directions and attending to the larger goals or the larger ends of a task rather than fixating on the kind of short term and or the short term goal of a task. So the archery analog, I think, is very palpable in part because in the last couple of decades, learning targets have become a kind of cliché in educational programs and in educational assessment. But if you actually talk to an archer, they say exactly what you said. That really what's most important is form and not aiming at the target or not fixating on the target alone, but kind of thinking through the larger practice of that embodied activity and looking beyond the target as it were, and concentrating on your whole demeanor and your whole bodily comportment. And I think that is analogous to the physical activity that we are really readily able to grant that we need to have practice and we need to have guidance from informed teachers. I think that transfers over to cognitive and social skills like speaking and thinking and writing.

So, in the other chapter “On Exercises,” I talk about my college track coach who would encourage us to do all kinds of odd exercises that look like everything, but running anything, but running in a straight line. So running sideways, crossing our legs, scissors, running backwards, hopping in all kinds of odd ways. And the point wasn't that we would ever actually do that in a race when we were running, but that by stretching ourselves or kind of cross training in all of these different ways, it actually made us better at the running itself. And you can think of all kinds of physical analogs from sport and music practice, where you do have to think about larger goals or larger ends beyond the kind of narrow form of the short term end. And I think that that really mars our current sense of how education is conceived in our world.

Andrew Pudewa: I love the way you connected that with the problem of assessment. And when you ask your daughter, have you learned any new words? And she kind of whispered, assessment. And you realize she didn't learn that at home. And that idea of how when we teach to the test, for use of the idiom, we miss the purpose of education itself, assessment in itself can have a valuable contribution, I think, to the teacher knowing how to better teach. But we see whole school districts, whole countries going crazy about standards and scores, and the only result is we've lost the soul of the school in a way. I love how you made that connection there.

Scott Newstok: Yeah, I mean, the book was really—I appreciate you reminding me of that anecdote with my daughter who is now 17. But I think she was around seven years old at that time, about a decade ago. And the book was in some ways animated by that chilling moment when this bright young child was really kind of facing the onslaught of the assessment transition in American education that came about as a result of a number of reforms in the early 2000s, but really came to the fore with both No Child Left Behind and other massive reforms that really overcorrected towards numerical assessment and kind of lost in the fixation on quantitative assessment and lost richer forms of qualitative assessment. Or maybe I would say evaluation or judgment would be a better word for what we try to gauge in education rather than measuring a number.

I think it's indisputable that the kind of assessment regime of the last fifteen years has drained a lot of the joy out of education for students and teachers. I distinctly recall the moment that a lot of these external reforms were being forced on friends of mine who were teachers in the Memphis public school system. And it was an extremely stressful time and an extremely unhappy time. Thankfully, it's not as intense as it was some ten, fifteen years ago, but a lot of teachers left the profession in part because the joy had been sapped out of the room by the fixation on short term testing and the obsession with preparing for the test, which seems to turn the entire educational processes into nothing other than preparing for the test. And that leads to a kind of cynicism on the part of everyone.

Andrew Pudewa: Right? And that's so tragic.

Scott Newstok: It is tragic.

Andrew Pudewa: Elsewhere in the book, you said, I'm not quite sure where, but you said that rhetoric was not part of the curriculum, it was the curriculum because speaking and writing and conversation and debate are the keys to society. I may be paraphrasing not as well as you said it. And this reminded me of something.

So the system that we teach here at IEW is called Structure and Style in Composition. And I learned this many years ago from a Canadian history professor who tells the story of his first couple years of teaching school. And this was in Canada in the late 40s, right after the end of World War II. And he said, the province had its tests. You had to test the kids every year, whatever grade he's teaching. And he said, you know, what I did was basically just have the students write about everything. So they would write about history, and they would write about science, and they would write about sex ed, which was a new crazy idea at the time. They would write about geography. He just had them basically writing all day. And at the end of the year, he was a little nervous because he hadn't taught to the test, and yet his students scored so well, the superintendent of the school district said, how did you teach these students? And he said, well, I just had them write about everything.

Scott Newstok: I mean, that's based on the old premise that the best way to do something is to do a lot of it, that the best way to learn how to write is to do a lot of writing, or the best way to exercise is to exercise. It's not as if you need to abstract it into kind of vague and general principles, which are, which are often very alienating to the student and in particular to the child. And I think that a lot of those types of pedagogies tend to almost take the soul away or take the animating principle away from why would someone do this in the first place? Why would someone—you know I think this is true even in other domains like mathematics. Like why would someone want to know the acceleration of a falling object?

Well there's very good reasons for that and you can be inspired by thinking alongside someone else and seeing why they came up with differential calculus.

And I think it's the same for rhetoric and the arts of writing and speaking, which is, you know, why, why would someone want to be eloquent? When are the moments in your life when you wish you had better ways to say something and better ways to articulate something and better ways to write something? It's not abstracted from human activity; it's embedded in and emerges out of human activity. And it gives you a complex form of power and authority in the world to be able to write well and to and to speak well. So I think the more you can kind of stage that excitement about why would someone want to write a poem or why would someone want to write a manifesto or why would someone want to write a treatise or a letter the more you can animate the scene of writing for the child and the student, rather than making it seem like this is something that's outside of me, or this is something that I'm alienated from, or this is from long ago, and it doesn't matter at all.

I think another enormous thing that's happened in education over the last few decades is—this is related to the assessment regime—is a massive decontextualization of writing. That writing, especially on tests for a complicated set of reasons, is often presented excerpted and decontextualized from its larger context. And again, why would someone want to write like that in the first place? And what are the circumstances that would lead to that form of articulation?

Andrew Pudewa: I guess I'm going to have to skip ahead a little bit because I want to be sure and mention this. This was another of those moments where if I hadn't been driving, I would have just been jumping out...

Scott Newstok: I'm glad you didn't have an accident.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I'm, I'm glad too. My excitement in this was one of these cases where I just would sit in my car for 15 minutes after I had arrived at my destination, trying to eat every possible minute because I was so excited. You quoted Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, which is pretty much the exact same quote that I have used in my *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* seminar for over twenty-five years.

Scott Newstok: That's great.

Andrew Pudewa: And I was so excited. And then you even mentioned that you had come across a computer programming, I guess, practice model or education model that did the same thing, taking short hints of the sentiment and then reconstructing the ideas, the idea of cross translation, writing something into a different language and then trying to get it back into the original. And this idea of imitation, it just seems to be so under attack right now in our modern world. This idea of, I think you even quoted Emerson, you know, envy is ignorance, imitation is suicide. How did we get to the point where everybody thinks it's so bad to imitate...anything.

Scott Newstok: Gosh, that's a big question. It probably goes back a couple hundred years to a pivot around 1800 across a whole generation of writers who were reacting against 18th century overfixation on imitation. Again a lot of what we're talking about here are pendulum swings that go too far in one direction and then they're overcorrected too far in the other

direction. But the hostility against imitation goes back a long time in part because if you value, I think, a somewhat naive ideal of self expression, you might presume that the way to express yourself would not be by imitating other people. However, that's just not the way it works. Again, if you make a sports analogy, that's not the way that great athletes become great athletes. They often become great athletes by imitating other great athletes and the same for great musicians. When they're young, they will pay attention to a certain way of comporting oneself when playing the piano or playing violin. Or a dancer will imitate favorite dancers in order to kind of create a repertory of their own motions that eventually become their own signature style or signature sound.

And then ultimately people end up imitating them, but this again goes all the way back to Aristotle, who says humans are by nature, imitative animals, that's inescapable. So how, how can we best deploy that and shape that in productive ways? And if you agree with that premise, then the next step is pretty clear, which is you want to have good models to imitate, whether again, that's in the sports world or the music world or in the world of writing or in the world of other kinds of human performance. That's a developmental fact. And it's great, it's a wonderful thing that we know how to imitate people that we admire and that we love and that we would like to be like in some way. And we can incorporate their virtues and their activities into our own repertory of what we do ourselves, even if we're not exactly like them. And in fact, we don't want to be exactly like them, but we're imitating them in a strange way to become the best version of ourselves that we can be.

Andrew Pudewa: Mmm. I love that.

Julie Walker: So we're going to have to stop here because we're out of time. Thanks so much for listening so far. This conversation is going to be a two-part podcast, so be sure to tune in next week as we continue our discussion with Dr. Newstalk.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.