

Where It All Began – IEW's Founding and Mission

Transcript of Podcast Episode 329

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.

So Andrew, we’re getting ready to start a new year at least in the northern hemisphere. Some people are just becoming familiar with IEW for the first time. They heard IEW was amazing. It was great. They went out and bought our materials to help them teach writing to their students whether they’re in a school or co-op or even just moms or dad sitting at a dining room table.

And they may not have ever heard the story, our story here at IEW, which I think is a great story. It’s not as important as their own story. Their own story is just as important. And we look forward to hearing great results, but I thought it would be good for us to spend some time talking about how you stumbled upon this writing method and how it has become more and more popular over the years.

Andrew Pudewa: Sure. Yeah. I tell the story at the beginning of the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, but yes, a lot of people aren’t doing that, or they don’t hear it, or it doesn’t strike them as interesting because it’s all so new. But my background is, of course, not in English or education per se. My formal training is as a Suzuki violin teacher. So I was working for this small school in Montana. It was a private, unaccredited school, and it was kind of this, anybody who’s available should be able to teach whatever we need. So while I was teaching music, I was also teaching PE and a little bit of computer programming.

Julie Walker: Interesting.

Andrew Pudewa: But you know, in a simple way.

Julie Walker: Well, and this was in the nineties.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, early nineties. Actually it was in the late eighties. And I was very young.

Julie Walker: Not a lot of computer programming going on.

Andrew Pudewa: There was some, but one of the teachers at this particular school was a Canadian. And she kept talking about this thing—she was so excited—called the Blended Sound

Site Program of Learning. This is the best way to teach reading and writing to everyone. We've got to go and learn this from the Canadians who developed this. And she was very persuasive, so much so that the school decided their whole faculty should go, which was honestly only about seven teachers and one administrator. So it was, like I said, a small school, and my wife was also working for the school at the same time. In fact, that's where we met. So we all went up to northern Alberta, four hours north of Edmonton, where the sun doesn't set till midnight.

Julie Walker: I've been there. I know that's true.

Andrew Pudewa: And we took a ten-day training course from Mrs. Anna Ingham; her daughter, Shirley George; and her nephew, James Webster (Burton), James Burton Webster; and a few other teachers that had been doing that. And they'd been doing this for, I don't know, ten, fifteen, maybe twenty years before I got there, which was in 1990.

That's when we went for the first time, and so we kind of did a divide and conquer thing. They had a Course A which was primarily for teachers of younger children, so first grade, second grade. That was kind of Mrs. Ingham's big thing. Like how do you get a whole room of forty first graders reading and writing independently by Christmas?

You know, that idea. And then, of course, B, which was mostly for teachers of older students. So how do you use the same ideas to strengthen their reading if it needs strengthening? As well as Webster's writing program. And his writing program had developed over many, many years, starting thirty, forty years before that, when he was a new teacher, and he had come up with various ways of teaching kids writing stuff that was working well. And then he went off to become a professor of African history, and he kind of refined some of his ideas about teaching writing for the university level. And then he ended up helping Mrs. Ingham and her daughter, Shirley George, teach this summer course, and then he would create handouts. And the handouts gradually became a book, and the book was disorganized and unmanageable.

So then it got rewritten into a less disorganized and unmanageable book, which is about where it was when I came on the scene.

Julie Walker: And that book is a book we sell.

Andrew Pudewa: It's called *Blended Structure and Style in Composition*, but we sell it with a caveat, which is don't start here. Start with our video course. Maybe a student course or a theme book, and teach that. And then if you really want to get into the minutia of Webster's way of thinking ...

Julie Walker: Yeah, kind of a legacy type person.

Andrew Pudewa: you might enjoy this book, but it's a very big book. It's not terribly user friendly in terms of books.

Julie Walker: There are lots of stories in there about his dog, Foxy,

Andrew Pudewa: There are a lot of stories.

Julie Walker: and about the monkeys.

Andrew Pudewa: So, but the thing that struck me so strongly was ... I studied in Japan with Dr. Shinichi Suzuki, founder of Suzuki method. And we've talked about the pillars of talent education. And when I saw the writing system that he was teaching, I thought this is as close as it gets to a Suzuki method for teaching English composition.

So I was lined up with it very immediately in terms of the philosophy of education and the pedagogy. And that interested me more than the idea of teaching English composition per se. But anyway, I stayed there the whole ten days. We all came back, and we transformed the school into a blended sound site, which we nicknamed "Bless," for blended and then sound site program of learning.

So we wanted to bless the students. Sounds just better than BSS generally, but ...

Julie Walker: That's true.

Andrew Pudewa: And so I was then teaching through the units with middle school aged kids. It was a grade seven, eight combination English class. Somehow there was no one else to teach it. So I did, and I just used the Structure and the Style and the checklist.

And I created some source texts and found some others, and it went so well. It surprised me. It surprised the kids. They were like, wow, I didn't know I could write so well. It surprised the parents and the other teachers. So the next summer I decided to go back and take that same course again because I felt there was so much more I could learn.

You know, when you hear something one time, it goes by awfully fast. And although it was stretched out over ten days, it still went by awfully fast. And then you come back to real life, and you forget so much of it. So I went up and took that same ten-day course again, and then this school kind of changed a bit, and our personal situation changed.

And so we actually moved about an hour away, and I wasn't working for the school anymore. I was teaching music full time: violin, Kindermusik®. But I kept my hand in the writing by doing some afterschool writing classes mainly for my two oldest daughters and their friends. And so I just had this kind of extracurricular creative writing, I think is what I called it or Structure and Style writing class or something. And again, it worked very, very well. The product the students were producing was good. I was happy. They were happy. It was all girls oddly; I don't know how that happened. And they just had a blast.

And I thought this has potential, and I wanted to go back a third time. And I said, you know, would it be weird if I came back? And they said, oh, come on back. And if you're going to keep coming back, you can join our team and help us present this stuff. So I went up a third year, and I knew Dr. Webster better now. And he took it pretty seriously and made me his little protege and said, you're going to do this lecture, and you're going to correct all these papers, and you're

going to make my life easier by doing all this stuff. And so that was really when our relationship started. And then I had a couple years of not really doing that. I tried some other business things, and I was pretty miserable. And I went back to teaching music, and then this school ... And we moved out of Montana. So we were in a completely different state, northern Idaho at that point. This school called me and said, hey, we have some new teachers. Would you come back and do a little workshop for our teachers on that writing thing that you learned when we all went to Canada? I thought, oh, that's a good thing to do, especially if they're going to pay me. And my mother lived over there. So it was a chance to go visit her. So I went, and I did this, and there were a couple of parents that were connected with the school, who also were either homeschooling one or more of their kids while they had other kids in school or they had been homeschooling or somehow. And they said, well, there's nothing like this in the homeschool curriculum world. This is great. And I had been looking for a side gig.

My actual goal was to figure out what kind of side business could I do, where I could make enough extra money so that I could afford to teach music because quite honestly it is a hard, hard way to keep your wife home and be self-employed and sell your hours for dollars. Teaching music is a tough way to go.

So I wanted something that had a little more scalable nature to it. And I always liked teaching. I got comfortable talking to groups of people ... did a Toastmasters® thing for a while. Did some customer service training seminars for businesses. That was awful because nobody wanted to hear what you had to say. So anyway, I put together a little flyer. I put together a little business identity: Institute for Excellence in Writing. It's a little wordy, but thank heavens I didn't stick with the original, which was Institute for the Achievement of Excellence in Writing. And I sent out these flyers to a homeschool group that was willing to work with me on this.

And I got twenty people to pay forty dollars to listen to me talk for a whole day. And I thought, whoa, that's as much as I make in a whole week of forty, fifty hours of teaching music! This is a good deal. And so my original plan was to kind of teach maybe one or two of these seminars and see if I could get an extra couple thousand a month that would crack my nut.

And that was my plan. But after essentially four years of doing that and making some videos and making our spelling program with Dr. Webster, I was actually making more money running around teaching writing seminars and selling videos and spelling programs than I was teaching music as hard as I could, four days a week.

So at that point, we had decided to relocate out of Idaho back to California mainly because grandparents on both sides were there for my children. And I thought, I can live on this now if I really devote myself to it. So I went full-time right around the year 2000.

Julie Walker: Earlier than that.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I was full time. Yeah, so I was teaching music up until '99.

Julie Walker: Which is when we met.

Andrew Pudewa: And we met because you had found out about it from the homeschooling. And I had at a couple homeschool conference speaking gigs, and there was really almost no internet so to speak. I mean, the first flyers I sent out, people had to mail back with a check or filling in their credit card information. I'm not even sure I could process credit cards at the beginning. It was like check or cash or just show up. I don't know. And then it was right around that time when it was possible to communicate to people through the internet. And so that gave me some tools. How did you first hear about me?

Julie Walker: I was at a homeschool convention, was actually working at a booth for Biola University. We had just

Andrew Pudewa: In California?

Julie Walker: started our homeschool outreach program, yes. And I had heard from our friends at Beautiful Feet Books that you were doing something because I was looking for a way to help these kids in my program, which is now, thirty years later or so, has evolved to become Star Academics, which is based in Yorba Linda, California. So shout out to Robin and her team for continuing that vision. And they still use IEW. But I found you because I was desperately looking for a writing program to help these junior high and high school students learn how to write so that they could be college ready.

Andrew Pudewa: I remember the first big seminar we did at Biola. It was bittersweet in that we were in like the chapel of the college, and everybody was sitting in pews, and I had never done a seminar where people didn't have tables so they could write and do all the practicum exercises and all that. They were all sitting in pews. I just didn't know how to manage that: like, is this even going to work? But you had, I don't know, close to 180 people there, which was by far the biggest thing that had ever happened.

So I thought, well, this is the biggest thing. So that's good. There's no table, so that's bad, but we'll survive it, which is generally my attitude about any circumstance. And then, I don't know, it just, every year got better and better and better.

Julie Walker: Yeah. And you teased me and said, hey, why don't you leave Biola and come work for me?

Andrew Pudewa: I think the way I put it was if you ever leave Biola, then you should come because I thought, hey, if she can get two hundred people in a seminar, she knows something that I don't know because I had never been able to muster up that many.

Julie Walker: So fifteen years ago in 2007, I picked up the phone and said, hey, did you mean it because I'm ready to move on. Because my youngest had graduated from high school. I wasn't homeschooling anymore.

Andrew Pudewa: And you finished your master's in business administration, right? MBA?

Julie Walker: I was actually working on my MBA when I started working for you. So a lot of my course requirements, I used IEW as the lab to try these things on.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it served us very well. And of course, you know, we look at the—I won't say *exponential*, because that would be an exaggeration—but the very, very significant, steady growth over that fifteen years' period of time.

Julie Walker: Well, and I remember you saying to me—you know, this would've been maybe fourteen years ago—we have saturated the homeschool community. And I said, no, we haven't. Let's see how ...

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. I still often think that these days because now I go to a convention, and pretty much everyone I talk to knows all about it, but I don't talk to everyone there. And of course we see now, not only is homeschooling growing, but the whole phenomenon of hybrid schools and charter schools being much more aggressive about finding best practices for their students. And someday we could do a whole podcast on schools that are really trying to do it well and be great.

Julie Walker: And we have many, many of those schools.

Andrew Pudewa: And we really ... I think it's a case where probably the world of opportunity has grown way faster than our little niche in that. So I'm no longer worried about having saturated a market, especially because people come in and out, right? Their kids grow up, and then they're not there. But then there's new people who come in, and, of course, we have had marvelous partnership types of relationships with groups like Classical Conversations® and the National Association of University-Model Schools, or I think now they call them University Model-Schools® International (UMSI) and probably a dozen other organizations that have seen the efficaciousness of our approach. And even in some ways they've helped us refine our products to be even more effective.

Julie Walker: Right. Yeah. Because one of the things that we have worked on is more consistency in our student material. So our mission, our goal, is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will train them to teach their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Andrew Pudewa: You have articulated that so beautifully that everyone in the company except me practically has it memorized. And yeah, I never had ambitions. In fact, this has been a little point of contention because I'm always like, we don't want to be too ambitious. We can get in trouble that way. And you, on the other hand, have said, but there's so much good we can do if we reach out and be a little more ambitious. So I think that to the degree we've been ambitious to serve, we've been blessed and effective. And then try to just keep the personal ambition side out of it.

Julie Walker: Right. And you know, Michael Hyatt ... a podcast. I am a fan of his podcast and his books and leadership. He says I don't want to grow. And so I'm just using his words. I don't

want IEW to grow because we need to grow. I want IEW to grow because we have something that is so valuable that we want more people to benefit from.

Andrew Pudewa: And part of the real joy for me in having done this for twenty-six years, twenty-seven years,

Julie Walker: almost thirty

Andrew Pudewa: is that now I frequently meet adults who learned our program when they were kids, either from a teacher that I trained or from a video or being part of a co-op or group, who will tell me it was so good growing up, doing that. It made their writing in college or university so much easier. And now they're so excited because they've got kids, and they're going to teach it to them.

And you know, you have that long vision on it. It's not just, oh, things are better now than they were a year ago. It's I look back on my childhood, and that was one of the really good, important things that I remember from my youth.

Julie Walker: And because of that longevity, we can honestly say that we have these long-term research data to show that this is an effective method of teaching writing. And we've done several studies—probably time to do another one—because you know, we've got to love those studies that demonstrate this way to teach writing, the structural models, the stylistic techniques, really do come together to help students regardless of their age or ability or their proficiency, whether they have special needs or whether they're talented. It moves them along to become a confident and competent communicator and thinker.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. And one thing to note is that there's nothing that we do that is particularly new, nothing particularly innovative. Webster developed his ideas, really, which came from his experience of being taught in the early to mid 1900s.

He was born in '27, I believe. And so there was kind of a strong tradition of imitation, of modeling, of using the wisdom of the past to teach the present. And I think this whole idea of, "well, let's get rid of the tradition and replace it with something new," that kind of started when we were in school in the sixties, seventies. And we're at a point now where it's almost as though anything new must be better than anything old. And, of course, that's a profound fallacy.

But that's kind of the mentality. Like that's progressive, like it has ... If it's new, it has to be better; that's progress, whereas what we really see is that elements of what we do, you can trace back all the way to the ancient rhetoric exercises and things that people were learning much more effectively all up really until the late 1900s. So in a way, yes, Webster added his flavor to something he had learned. I have added my flavor to things I've learned from him.

And the stories of how he kind of codified each unit are very interesting. We could do a whole podcast on how each unit came to be, but they're all on that same foundation of modeling and imitation and understanding. We don't have to reinvent the wheel on how to communicate with clarity and good effect. People have been doing this for a very long time, much more effectively

than is happening in our modern world we see now in many cases. So there's nothing particularly new, but I guess, you know, Providence put me at the right time in the right place with the right needs and the right opportunities. And tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands—hopefully someday we can say—millions of students will be, will have been (future perfect tense) blessed to gain these skills when they're young and empower them to be more effective as they grow older.

Julie Walker: Right, right. And good writing is good writing. How do you get from “I don't know how to write” to “I'm a good writer. I write clear, cohesive paragraphs. I write with a variety of sentence structures and interesting vocabulary. And every now and then, I throw in a literary device, and I can communicate something clearly and effectively.” That's good writing. That's what we teach in a very systematic, sequential, easy-to-understand, easy-to-teach method that doesn't exist anywhere.

Andrew Pudewa: And we have enough people who've attained that goal that we can be totally confident that the pathway we present to get there works. And honestly I would maybe be a little bit bold, but I don't know of any reason I can't say that it works a hundred percent of the time. The only people I know for whom it did not work are the ones who gave up early on for one reason or another.

Julie Walker: Trust the system is something that we often say here at IEW.

Andrew Pudewa: Trust the system. Yeah.

Julie Walker: And when I say “we here at IEW,” it compels me to think of you in your garage with your kids, putting together books and stuffing envelopes to now dozens and dozens of people who are pleased to call IEW their family. Their family, yes, more than just employer, but family. Indeed. Well, thank you, Andrew. This, I think, was very insightful and maybe a little bit nostalgic for both you and me as we reflect on this and hopefully helpful to our new families in particular, to understand a little bit of what, but more importantly, why we're doing what we do here at IEW. So thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you.

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.