

Leading and Loving Compelling Literature Discussions

Transcript of Podcast Episode 346

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, I’m sure you are aware, and I believe our listeners are aware of our tagline: Listen. Speak. Read. Write. Think!

Andrew Pudewa: Aware? I thought of it.

Julie Walker: It’s true. It’s very true.

Andrew Pudewa: It’s a little bold.

Julie Walker: Yes, it is. It is. But I know that at least the first of four words of that come from this idea of there are actually only four language arts, which are ...

Andrew Pudewa: Listening, speaking, reading, writing. And we’ve talked about that. And you know, we differentiate because the academic world – when you say language arts, they think of this laundry list of curriculum that you have to force into kids, whereas we say “arts of language” just to shift the context there a little bit.

Julie Walker: Exactly. Exactly. And so today we want to spend some time zooming in on the “Read” part of our tagline. So we have certainly had conversations about the importance of reading aloud to your children even when they’re no longer children. As they get older and teenagers, it’s still a valuable thing to do.

We’ve actually spent some time talking about learn-to-read strategies and phonics and our Primary Arts of Language program that we have. But then there’s this other part of reading that I wanted to spend some time talking with you about today, and that’s this idea of reading great literature and having conversations about it. And so when I pitched the idea to you, you said, “I don’t want to do it.”

Andrew Pudewa: I did not say that. I was thinking of who might be able to contribute more to the conversation than I could.

Julie Walker: That’s true. That’s exactly true. And you had just gotten back from a conference in Eugene, Oregon, the Gutenberg ...

Andrew Pudewa: Classical Education Conference there.

Julie Walker: And you had sat in on a talk of a good friend of ours, a good friend of our company, Amanda Butler, who I just learned today has a new title. She is the vice president of training and support for Classical Conversations. So welcome, Amanda, to our podcast.

Amanda Butler: Thanks, Julie. I'm excited to be here today.

Andrew Pudewa: It was such a good talk. And I don't want you to regret that talk. But I do want our listeners to know that if they ever have a chance to hear you teach, it would be worth making the effort to be there because you engaged that audience in a way that was as good or better than almost everyone I've ever heard.

Amanda Butler: Oh goodness, Andrew, you're making me blush, and you can't even see it because it's a podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that's okay. You know, you can sit in your own home, and your head can grow big because something I'm sure will come along to, you know, pop the bubble. It always does for all of us, but ... So this is wonderful because the whole idea of read to your kids out loud and talk about stuff and define stuff is really in that language building zone: you know, furnishing the mind, putting in the raw material, vocabulary, syntax, basic understanding. But there is a level of literature experience, and I wouldn't even say "study" because that conjures up, I don't know, comprehension curriculum or something, which to me is like yuck.

Andrew Pudewa: It has its place. But you have experience, and I have a little bit. But we have experience, and Julie does too, of spending time just reading great works together with basically teenagers and having discussions that are not scripted, that are not, you know, the comprehension question list, that aren't the "give me the Socratic manual for this particular book." So I was hoping you would just share some of your experiences, both the the high points and maybe some of the frustrations and how you've got past them.

Amanda Butler: Wow. Okay, Andrew. That's a really big question. We'll see if I can do just a little bit of that. Like you said, I primarily work with students now who are eighteen, nineteen years old, seniors in high school. And we read the ancient epics. And we also read the Old Testament. We read C.S. Lewis, and we read Western history from a more global perspective not based in chronology.

And so with ... Oh, and we study physics and throw in a little bit of trigonometry and some good math. And with all of that, it just becomes this really beautiful fruit salad or buffet of ideas that we get to pick through all day long. And one of the things I think I've learned over the years is that students are more apt to share with you what they're thinking if you are gracious with their mistakes and their foibles and the silly things that they say.

And a lot of times, I'll just talk off the cuff too and be a little bit silly myself to kind of reduce the stress that can be in a classroom at any given time. And I think my number one tool is the **Five Common Topics of Dialectic**. So it's back to that thinking idea that you were talking about it a minute ago. And it feels good to think well.

I think every human being wants to, inside themselves, be able to think well and to contribute to a conversation or be part of something. And one of the things that we can help our students do is be part of that larger conversation by training them as they're working through their school studies, to think well and then to be able to communicate that, so ...

Andrew Pudewa: And I want you to unpack the common topics for us, but I want to mention that this kind of reminds me of something that John Taylor Gatto wrote about in his *Underground History of American Education*. And he tells the story of teaching eighth grade in Brooklyn, New York, and wanting to teach for various reasons he kind of explained....

He wanted to teach *Moby-Dick*, the book by Melville, which most people haven't read. Most people would die in the first chapter, but he wanted to teach this to these 13-, 14-year-old kids. And so he ordered a set of books, a classroom set of books, and it came. And then he realized these books contained, supposedly helpful, a chapter summary and a list of questions that the teacher should ask and that would guide the discussion. And what he said in his description of this was that these questions preempted the opportunity for the students to have a personal relationship with the book. And I thought the way he said that was quite interesting because yes indeed, you can steer a conversation so radically that the students can kind of just disengage. Or they default back to "tell me the answer that you want me to give you."

And so what Gatto said was he threw out that whole set of books and bought what he called an undoctored set with his own money so that each student could have a personal experience, a relationship with the author. And so that just stuck in my mind forever. Like, how do we avoid making the thing a right answers, wrong answers game, which is what most students, you know ... Especially if they came out of a school or public school, that's what they're kind of used to. So how do you start your conversations, and what are these common topics that are so useful as tools of thinking?

Amanda Butler: Oh, I'm so glad you asked. So I'll start; I'll ask your last question. I'll answer your last question first. So the five common topics are the five "common" ... just like Boston Commons was a park that everybody in Boston used to graze their animals. It was a common space. So the common topics are available to all domains of knowledge.

And then *topics* comes from the word *topos*, and *topos* is from the Greek. It means place. And so the five common topics are the five places that you can go, common to all subject matter in the universe, I would argue, to think about something well. Back to that idea of thinking. And so they start off with ... And you don't have to do them in this order that I'm sharing with you. You know that, Andrew.

But for your listener's sake, the first one is **definition**. What is this thing, or what kind of thing is this? What are the parts of the thing? What groups does the thing belong to? All of those kinds of questions. And so if we were reading, say, *Julius Caesar*, or even if we're reading *The Odyssey*, you could choose a character like Odysseus or Julius Caesar or Brutus. And you could start going down those definition questions with the students one day and just say, well, what is Brutus?

Well, he's a man. He's a husband. He's a this; he's a that. See where it goes. See where the students ... where their eyes light up. Or if they get bored with it, and it gets exhausted really quickly, then I'll say, okay, well then, what is a man? Well, that's interesting conversation these days. You know, just real light or something like that. So definition can be really fun because you can make it go really deep, really fast. Or you can keep it really surfacey, depending upon the age of the kiddos too.

And you're just ... It's like fishing. You're throwing the line out into the water to just see what hooks the students' interest because where their mind is already working is where it's easiest for you to start developing it and making it work more or harder or something like that. So to me, the common topics are all about making my job easy and making the students work hard because it's their brains.

Andrew Pudewa: And definitions are so important. I know you've had experience teaching kids debate. Right? And that's the first thing that you have to show everyone is your definition of the terms in the resolution or whatnot. And you know, one of the things that I've heard said is "he who controls the definitions controls the debate."

So starting there is so wise, and you could end up on any number of rabbit trails as you mentioned. What is man? That's a wild one. And so at some point you kind of exhaust at least that level, that layer of definition. And then you can go where?

Amanda Butler: Yeah, so sometimes you can go ... So in the next common topic, but again, you don't have to do them in this order. But the next one you could go to would be **comparison**. And you want to think about ... Whatever the thing you defined, you could start there. And then choose something either inside the piece of literature, or maybe it's a piece of literature that you just finished before, or it's something that you read a year before. Or I've done this, believe it or not; I have looked out the window, and I've just picked a noun of something that I saw out the window. And I said, okay, let's compare Achilles to a tree.

And it can be really fun. The first few times you do something that wild, you have to offer a lot of ideas yourself to kind of train them to see how those things might have anything in common at all. But because we live in a universe, you need one verse, one word. Everything's related to everything somehow, and the categories that we like to compare are the categories of "are." What are the things? What do the two things have? And what do the two things do? And I guide my students to think about the similarities. Always, always, always first, always think about similarities first.

And then to take each of those similarities and think about how that similarity looks different between the two items that you're comparing. And that's not natural to do because every time we go to the mall or the grocery store, or we're driving down the road, what we pick up on first ... I think this is true for all mankind: differences. How is this thing different from this over here? How are these two things different?

How am I different either for better or for worse? That comparison always wants to break things apart. And so one of the things that I want to do with my students and my own children (we

homeschool) is to to draw their eye to think about how things are the same, how we're all united before training myself to think about how we're apart. Because I think if we could just think more together, it would be helpful.

Andrew Pudewa: That is so ... I was just ... That is so, so relevant to the world today because it seems as though in anything that is even slightly controversial there's people just trying to drive wedges by pointing out these extreme differences where ... And we're not starting with the conversation: What do these two political groups or theologies or lifestyles – what do they actually have in common? What can we work on together and the similarities?

I think we have a mutual friend who said, "Anything can be compared to anything." And I remember the first time I tried this; I was teaching a high school class. And I held up a dry erase marker, and I said, okay, dry erase marker and a cloud. What are some similarities between these things? And I was operating totally on faith that anything could be compared to anything. And of course, what I have found—I'm sure you have many times—is, you know, a room full of teenagers have huge advantages over me, myself, and I. Because first of all, there's more of them.

Second of all, they're not limited as much by the rules of logic that we seem to accumulate that can be limiting in our imaginations. So that's wonderful. And so starting with similarities and then looking at differences. And what does comparison then lead to?

Amanda Butler: Well, it can lead, I think, to a lot of different places. Sometimes I leave comparison actually to last because we've thought about things so thoroughly with the other topics that that comparison almost becomes the summary of the conversation. And other times just like you said, it could lead to something like circumstance, which is our next common topic that we can use.

The common topic of **circumstance** is the question, so what's happening here right now? And then thinking about, so what's happening somewhere close by at the same time? And then what's happening at the same time somewhere a little further away? A little further away? And a little further away? And what I enjoy ... Oh, and there's two more questions that I like to use especially with the older kids.

I don't use these two questions with the younger ones because I don't think they've got enough background and experience to be able to enjoy pondering these two questions. But the 18- and 19-year-olds really like them because this idea of what's possible and what's probable as well. So all of that is part of circumstance. And so thinking about maybe something like *Jane Eyre*: And while she has left her home and has crawled through the snow, what's happening back at the mansion at that same time?

Andrew Pudewa: So speculation to some degree about what's going on that isn't clearly elaborated by the author or the source.

Amanda Butler: Yeah. Yeah. And that lends to some imagination. It lends sometimes to, no, that's not what's happening at all. That can't be happening because the book says da da. Oh,

okay, well, why do you say that? Or well, what else could be happening? Those sorts of things. And that really gets the juices flowing with their imagination sometimes. And like I said, that also blends really well into what is possible for this? Or what could most likely be happening at this time? And of course, those two questions – there's lots of argument space to argue there or to think and test hypotheses.

Andrew Pudewa: And so you're always pointing people back to the text to support or refute a claim or a thought based on the text?

Amanda Butler: Generally. When it's possible, that's the idea. Sometimes when ... Of course again, these are big kids who have jobs and are filling out college applications, so they don't always have everything read before they'll come to seminar. And so real life, right? So we'll read a passage together out loud so that we all have a common place to start again. And then we'll branch off from there. And so when we have a day in seminar like that, then it's less easy to ask them to go back to the text because they may not have anything else other than what we just read aloud.

So you know, it's a lot of discussion. And I'm sure, Andrew, you've probably got a thousand stories about this. I think a lot about discussions is just holding your hands open and allowing the group of human beings that you are with at that moment to kind of figure out where you're all going together at one time. So I've kind of given up predetermining exactly what our theme or our thesis is going to be at the end of any given class time because I don't know; it's not up to me.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. You may or may not get there, and it may or may not even be a good thing to get there. All right, we've got definition, comparison, circumstance: what's going on nearby or at a further location or in the same situation. There's two more.

Amanda Butler: There are. So I'll try to cover those quickly, and then I bet you'll have an awesome story. **Relationship** is the next one, and relationship is the idea of, so we're at a point in the story or in the history. Or you know, this also works with physics or science really well or math. Actually we've used relationship in talking about math too.

So you get to a certain point in a process or in a storyline, and you can stop everything and say, okay, so what happened right before this? And is that a cause of what we just heard or read or did? Or is that just something that happened to happen at the same time? Because there's a difference between something being a cause and something just being on the timeline of something else that happened.

And so with relationship, you can work your way back by asking, so what happened before that? What happened before that? What happened before that? Or you can ask the question, so why did that happen? Why did that happen? And why did that happen? And that'll drive them faster to this cause and effect idea.

And then of course, you can, if you're reading a piece of literature, and you already know what has happened, you're reviewing something, then you can ask, so what happens next? What

happens next? What happens next? Or what causes ... What is the effect next? Next? Next? So you're building the timeline.

Andrew Pudewa: Most of your students have a pretty good foundation with a couple years of logic, I would assume. So they can almost police each other in a way, on is their observation consistent with their understanding of logic. You know, I often think in today's world there's so many people who will get all up in arms about two things that are happening and assume that they are causally related when just, say, a basic peripheral knowledge of logic and observational skills would show that no, you know, those two things are not causally ... But that opens up a whole dangerous line of thinking about something, to make errors in that way. So you know, I've always thought one of the greatest things about literature is you get to practice thinking about life without having to make decisions about life yet.

Amanda Butler: Well, and right along with that is that you get to talk about decisions that other people have made that are not close enough to hurt your own heart or your own ego or your own psyche. You're ... It's distanced in a way that you can evaluate that without it being too painful as well. And what they're doing is, then, they're practicing the thing.

They're practicing thinking logically. They're practicing thinking this way so that then when it is time for them to be introspective and look in the mirror and say, "Oh, wow, yeah, I'm wrong; that was poor thinking," they have the tools to do that and because they've been practicing for so long. But so then, the last of the common topics is the common topic of **testimony**.

And that's the idea of interrogating or asking good questions of eyewitnesses who were there, who actually saw what happened, and of talking to experts or authorities. And an authority could be a book; an authority could be clergy; an authority could be a book of law. So authority doesn't have to be a human person sitting in front of you. It could be the axioms of Euclid's geometry, depending upon what you were talking about there. And then really interrogating or thinking through those eyewitnesses, and what did they really see, which is just reiterating, using all the common topics that we've just talked about again.

Andrew Pudewa: And part of that with testimony is having good judgment as to the qualifications of the authority of the expert. I always laugh when you get these celebrities who then want to mouth off their opinion about politics or economics. And they don't appear to have much grounding in terms of knowledge or fact base or even time spent contemplating. And then you're like, well, why should we even listen to Cardi B or whoever and that opinion she has about this problem in the world?

Okay, well, maybe she does have something, some reason that we would listen to her, but that has to be established. It can't be assumed. And I think too many young people today are very, you know, enamored with fame and wealth. So if someone is famous or wealthy, they must be smart, and they must have a valid opinion. I mean, you're so easily manipulated if you don't have processes to think clearly about that stuff.

Amanda Butler: Well, and I think too, if we're working through the common topics, and we're having open and honest conversation about these things, that it really can lend to building

humility not just in each student, or not ... At first, I think humility comes to the class or to the group of people because you learn to listen to one another. But then also personal humility as your own thinking gets assessed by your fellow human beings in seminar with you, and you realize, oh, I was thinking poorly about that, or I was being unreasonable about this. And hopefully over time if we practice this for six or eight or—I'm not going to tell you how old I am—but for more than ten years, you can have that gift of humility to not be enamored maybe with fame or not be enamored so much with yourself or anybody else.

Andrew Pudewa: There's a ... I don't know where it originally came from, but an expression sometimes pops out in conversation. You'll say, or I've said, "Come, let us reason together." And you know, that attitude of let's pursue truth together using our intellects. I often daydream like if there was a really great leader ...

What would happen if that leader were able to take time with his, you know, cabinet or whatever you want to call it, and they just did some distinctly human things, like sang a song together or read a poem together or read a story, you know, Job or the story from *The Odyssey* or something and just spent maybe half an hour talking together. And then when they had to move in to hard subjects, they'd be tuned to that. But I'm not sure I could convince some future president to have his cabinet sing songs for fifteen minutes at the beginning of a meeting. But you know, there's that element of connecting with, and it goes back to our idea of comparison. How are ... What is our shared identity?

Amanda Butler: Yeah. You know, Andrew, maybe you've got a future president listening to this podcast right now. I have hope. I have hope.

Andrew Pudewa: We have to have hope. I heard a very interesting talk on hope not long ago because just by my nature it's something I tend to be short on. So it was a theology guy, and he was saying hope – in order for it to be hope, has to be difficult, but not impossible. If your goal, your objective, your desire is not difficult, well, you don't need hope.

There's no virtue in that. There's no dependence on God and other people. You know, hope is dependent by nature, but it has to be possible, and so it has to be hard but possible: I hope I can do this thing. I hope we together can accomplish this. So yes, I hope that you and people like me and all of us in this country and around the world will see good thinking ten years down the line when our students are all grown up, taking positions of greater responsibility.

Amanda Butler: Well, and just for those listening that have ... they say, oh, I don't have hope because this feels way too hard. What we've already talked about is a lot of words and a lot of questions, and I can't keep that in order. My offering to them would be that it is hard to retrain yourself to not blather at your students all the things you think are really cool about a book, and instead to back up and ask questions.

And if that first baby step could be that you just take each of the topics and write them on a piece of paper. And choose a short passage from whatever book it is that you're reading with your students right now, and write out one single definition question, one single comparison, one circumstance, one relationship, and one testimony question.

So you've got five questions on your piece of paper. And just use those, and see how it goes. And then the next time, write five different questions with a different passage, and shake up the order a little bit. And if it flops the first time, you still have hope because it was hard. It's a hard thing, but it'll work just a little bit. And the next time that you try, it'll work just a little bit better.

Because not only do we have to train ourselves as teachers to ask these questions, but our students, some of them if not all of them, have to learn how to answer them again because they've been so trained to just look for the multiple choice answer sometimes.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and even going one step past that is them learning to ask the good questions. It reminds me of the first time I was trying to teach through some classic literature with a group of teenagers. This is a very long time ago. And I would prepare, and I would get this great list of questions, and I would get the kids, and I would, you know, okay, you were supposed to read these chapters.

And I would just ask them questions, and they would give me very short answers. And this went on for weeks. And I'm exhausted, and I'm not even happy. And then I realized my problem is they're totally dependent on me to ask the questions. So I said, okay, we've got to flip the thing here. And so I told them one week ... I said, next week, okay. You all have to ask the questions. So think of some questions you can ask. I didn't have access to anything like, you know, the common topics or anything. It was before I got into that world. And so I said, your homework is to make a list of questions.

Well, they didn't because they hadn't had any experience with that. So they come in. And I said, okay, who's got a question? Nobody. Right? And so I said, well, we'll just sit here until someone thinks of a good question. Oh, I tell you, that was the longest however three, four minutes. And they just looked at me: Come on now, Teacher. You're supposed to be the conductor here. And I said, I'm not going to ask any questions of you. You, someone else has to start this conversation. That was a tremendous pivot point for me.

Julie Walker: So what we've been talking about these last, you know, twenty minutes or so, on these asking questions. And I loved how you turn this, Andrew, to having the kids ask the questions and to hopefully get to that and to wait for them. These are all active learning strategies, and we know that when students who are actively engaged in their own learning ... Those are the students that are going to be successful. Those are the ones that are ultimately going to walk out of that classroom feeling, you know, pumped and energized and hopeful that ... They're looking forward to their next class.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it's so useful as an adult. Think about when we interview people, you know, to work with us. If that candidate had in their mind and in their experience these common topic question categories, they would ask some really good questions. They would learn more about what we do, and we would learn a lot more about how they think.

Julie Walker: Oh. P.S. to any teens who are listening to this podcast: When you are being interviewed for a job, always, always, always be prepared to ask at least two really good questions. And now you've got them.

Andrew Pudewa: The interview needs to go both ways; otherwise it's a dead thing.

Julie Walker: It does.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, Amanda, I am sure we could talk about this for hours. Any like last thoughts? Or I think some people at this point will say, I love those five words. I really don't know what they mean. Is there something you would refer people to in terms of how to learn and contemplate and start practicing using the common topic questions?

Amanda Butler: Yes. As a matter of fact, Lee Bortins has a book or a series of books. It's three of them, called *The Core*, *The Question*, and *The Conversation*. And what we've been talking about today is covered in *The Question* at length, applied to many different realms of human knowledge. And so that would be a very accessible way to get started with some more information about this.

Julie Walker: Super. And we'll be sure and put a link in our show notes to that series of books and specifically *The Question*.

Andrew Pudewa: And we'll finish up as so many great writers and thinkers have articulated in one form or another: "Common sense is most uncommon." These common topics today, unfortunately, are uncommon. But to the degree that we can give these tools to our students, every little bit will help.

Amanda Butler: And ourselves too, Andrew. May we all become better thinkers even as we're teaching our students.

Julie Walker: Amanda, it's a joy to have you as not just a guest on our podcast but truly a friend: a friend to IEW, to Andrew, and to me personally. So thank you so much for joining us. I'm sure that our listeners will all be better.

Andrew Pudewa: We've got to do this again ...

Julie Walker: We should!

Andrew Pudewa: Because there's so more to unpack.

Julie Walker: So much more we could talk about, Amanda. We appreciate you.

Amanda Butler: I've loved the time. Thank you, Julie. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: God bless.

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

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