

Classic Learning Test – A Conversation with Jeremy Tate

Transcript of Podcast Episode 357

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 students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Nathan King: So, Andrew, I’m not Julie.

Andrew Pudewa: No, you’re not.

Nathan King: No, I’m taking her place. But I’m sure I’m going to be a sore substitute for Julie.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I don’t know. We can have a lot of fun if she’s not here. You know, when the cat’s away ...

Nathan King: ... the mice can play. Absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: But I am super excited about today’s guest.

Nathan King: Yeah. So we have heard ... we’ve all heard about this amazing movement, this classical learning movement. And it’s exciting to see how much that has grown in just recent years. And our guest is going to be able to tell us all about it.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and the amazing accomplishments. I mean, if I were to list, like, five guys who’ve accomplished a tremendous amount in a very short period of time, our guest, Jeremy Tate, would be on the top of the list. So welcome. Welcome to our Arts of Language podcast, my friend.

Jeremy Tate: Wow, Andrew. Thank you. Nathan, great to be with you as well.

Nathan King: Absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I met you. I don’t actually know the first time I met you. Maybe you remember. The first conversation that we had, I remember, was actually at an SCL conference at King’s College in Manhattan, which was a completely and totally weird conference in my experience. But I remember having such a great conversation.

I felt that that was the point where I really got to know your heart and your vision for the Classic Learning Test (CLT). And I remember thinking at the time, if he can make this thing fly, that will be a miracle because you’ve gone up against the vilest forces of the world. And so give our listeners just a quick overview of what the CLT is and how you got into the determination to fight, you know, Pearson and the other evil forces behind the SAT, the College Board. And then,

how big is it now? Because every time I hear, it's a bigger number of colleges accepting this as an alternative. So give us a little history.

Jeremy Tate: Well, Andrew, thank you so much again, and thanks for the invite to be on. So you know, we're about seven years old. And whenever I, you know, kick off, I do love to tell the story of kind of why we started and how this thing came about. But I always think for a listener, you know, sometimes they'll be like, wow, we're going to talk about standardized testing and the College Board.

Doesn't sound very exciting to me. And I think maybe precisely because standardized testing can seem so boring, it tends to kind of fly under the radar as this extremely powerful kind of lever that I think has a tremendously powerful influence on mainstream American education. I think this is one of the few concepts actually that almost every teacher agrees about.

And that's just the idea that testing tends to drive curriculum to at least some degree, right? What is tested ends up getting taught. David Coleman, who is the CEO of the College Board, brilliant Rhodes Scholar, he puts it this way: that it is a statement of reality if we like it or not, that teachers will teach to the test. And the way he puts it is that there is nothing on earth powerful enough to prevent that.

And so if we accept that that is a reality for better or worse, that teachers are going to be teaching to the test, it really does need to be a test that is worthy of the time and attention of students. And the SAT and the ACT—and I think there's a myth out there that these tests are somehow becoming less important—not at all the case. You know, millions of students take the SAT, but especially the PSAT now every year. And these are tests that really do censor the entire Christian Catholic intellectual tradition, really much of the entire Western intellectual tradition.

And in doing so, they drive curriculum in the wrong direction. And they give kids a very distorted view. And keep in mind, this is coming from the College Board. You know, the College Board, who you look at what they're putting on a AP US or AP Euro – they could not possibly in some ways minimize the influence of the Church or Christianity more than they do. And they give kids a very distorted view.

So CLT was born really out of my own experience working. I was working at an all girls' Catholic school, a great school, Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville, Maryland. And you know, it was run by the Dominican sisters out of Nashville. A fantastic order. One of the few growing orders of nuns in the US. And I was also running an SAT prep company back in 2015. And I, for one, was shocked with what was on the SAT. It was very different from the test that I was taking in the late nineties. I graduated in the year 2000.

But also just the overall influence of the College Board. And this was really the catalyst for launching. I mean, this is a school that has a focus on Christ, on academic excellence, a deep focus on the humanities. But there is a real tension in some ways with the College Board. And this is what I mean: Everything in some ways that we tried to do, that we did as a school to market to new students – almost all of it was connected to the College Board, right? We're marketing on our average AP score, how many APs we offer, number of National Merit, average

PSAT score, average SAT score, kind of on and on. And a moment that really hit me was when these Dominican sisters rolled out a new introduction to philosophy as well as, I believe, a Christian apologetics class.

And the students didn't really want to take these classes. And I was talking to students about why not. You know, this is philosophy. These are the great questions of human existence. They didn't want to take it because it wasn't five AP points. And I thought, wow, this is not good, right? The influence of the College Board is such that at our Catholic school in Maryland, there is ...

And so this was the immediate catalyst. One more thing here though. And then the timing providentially worked out this way. SAT and ACT also aligned with the common core standards in 2015. Because I was running an SAT/ACT prep company and working even with some homeschool families, I was able to hear the homeschool world especially was very upset when this happened.

If you know anything about common core, I think it's fair to say it's anti fiction. The math is just weird; nobody's really sure what's happening with the math. And certainly a further step towards secularism, an end of education, which, as classical education enthusiasts, I think many of us would disagree on: that it's just about, you know, kind of college and career readiness.

So there was a demand for an option. And the way that it worked out, providentially I was also a college counselor. I knew a lot of people who were working as a director of admissions at places like Thomas Aquinas College or Franciscan or Christendom. And somebody said, hey, if there was another test that better reflected, you know, the academic focus at Christendom College, would you be open to changing your admission standards? And the response right away was absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. That is fantastic. So you pitched the idea to a few schools that you knew pretty well, and then you started to create an alternative to the SAT or ACT test. That must have been kind of a daunting thing. Like how do you do that? And I guess, you know, many listeners would want to know, well, okay, what's the difference?

Does it look different? Does it feel different? Why is it a "classic" learning test? And do you have to have a classical education to take the Classic Learning Test? Because a lot of people might think, well, you know, my kids didn't study Latin, and they haven't read Homer, so I guess it won't work for them. How do you help people understand what it is and how they can best prepare for it?

Jeremy Tate: That's a great question. There is a built-in dilemma in kind of launching a new standardized test to compete with the SAT and ACT. And the dilemma is that in order to standardize the test, you have to have a ton of volume. You have to have a ton of test takers to actually get it norm referenced and standardized. The challenge, though, is that it's really, really hard to get a ton of volume unless it's already standardized.

Andrew Pudewa: Right – chicken and egg problem.

Jeremy Tate: That's right. That's right. We were facing this on ... A lot of standardized testing companies get out of it by just paying kids to test. But we had no money in—zero—at the beginning. And so essentially it was just talking about mission and vision, right, to give people this hypothetical ... Imagine it for a second: The College Board, America's most powerful educational entity. Imagine if they had the DNA, the educational focus of IEW or the Circe Institute or ICLE or the Society for Classical Learning. Imagine the profound impact on American education.

So we were kind of casting this vision for a future that didn't exist and really just kind of selling that vision because there was nothing else to do. But thankfully we were able to rally people kind of around that, including people with means and investors to actually have a go at this thing.

So your question: What is actually the difference? Well, two things here. In order for CLT to be interpreted by colleges, we have to have a concordance chart. A concordance chart is what allows you to know, well, what does your SAT equate to on the ACT? Or what does your ACT equate to on the SAT?

So we needed to be able to have a concordance chart so the scores could be digestible and then used for colleges, both for scholarships and for admissions. We had to have that. But we also wanted the test to be considerably different. And so the main way the CLT is different is really just source material, right, and then in a couple different ways.

One is we are drawing from the Great Tradition. Students who take the CLT ... And it's really, they may read a passage from Dante; they may read Saint Augustine. They may read C.S. Lewis, Catherine of Siena. Maybe they read Flannery O'Connor, Frederick Douglass. They're going to read passages from authors they would never see in an SAT race. We've got John Paul II on one of our practice tests. But sometimes parents are surprised; especially sometimes our Christian parents are surprised. Oh, wow. You had Darwin on the CLT. Oh, you had a Nietzsche passage on the CLT. Well, I think this is a mark of an educated mind – this ability to engage with ideas and understand them.

Chesterton was the master at this, right? He would debate, and people would say he understood his opponent's position far better than they did, right? And so for our young people to be able to understand what Darwin and Nietzsche said and in a way without being threatened by it, is really important.

And this also makes us very different from the SAT or ACT is they really do; they censor material. They censor. But they partially do this out of what are called ... They both have a "sensitivity committee." SAT and ACT both have sensitivity committees. And the idea is that, you know, if a student can in any way be upset or triggered by a passage, then you're not going to get an accurate score. So you need to remove that. And I get that. There should be, you know ... Let's take a scenario of something like suicide, right? If a kid dealt with that—maybe mom or dad or an aunt or uncle, you know, committed suicide, heaven forbid—the last thing you would want is a passage that would reference that. That would be understandable.

But it's gotten really, really carried away, where almost any passage now can be deemed to be offensive by somebody for some reason. And I'm currently reading the beginning of *The Coddling of the American Mind*. But it's just part of this attempt to kind of protect, insulate students from ideas.

Ideas are inherently dangerous. Philosophy is inherently dangerous. So we put students in front of text that might be a bit unsettling. But for the most part, they're all old. You know, we're really drawing hardly anything even in the twentieth century. And CLT source material, we go way back to, you know, Plato's *Republic*.

Andrew Pudewa: Now, if someone is not familiar with, say, Plato or Dante or Darwin or Chesterton or some of your selection, that doesn't really handicap them, though, because this is a reading comprehension. I assume it includes elements of grammar and/or at least parsing sentences to understand what they really mean. So it's not necessary for students to have read a lot of classic literature to take your test?

Jeremy Tate: That's accurate. About ten percent of our students are public school students. You know, we are able to see from the data side that that group doesn't do as well, especially in some of our sections. You know, we have a philosophy and a religion section on the CLT. And so it's kind of both, you know. Can you take the CLT if you've never read from this tradition at all?

Absolutely. Right? If you can read anything in English, you can read these passages. Are you going to have, though, a kind of a fluency, a familiarity, a comfort if you're used to reading these kinds of texts? You're used to reading maybe C.S. Lewis. Maybe you read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. You're going to be more comfortable picking up, you know, similar authors from similar time periods. So we want to encourage fluency without being what you would call kind of "prescriptive," saying you should have this particular course of study to do best.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Well, that makes a lot of sense. And it fits in with your goal, too, which is to encourage people to read better stuff as they are preparing for the test. So now, I imagine you fought a real uphill battle convincing colleges and universities to accept this test in place of the College Board tests. Just maybe how did you go about that? And how have you made such incredible gains in the relatively short period of what – seven years you've been at it?

Jeremy Tate: Yeah, I appreciate that. You know, well over two hundred colleges accept the CLT. And you know, it's interesting; I think in some ways colleges, especially your mainstream, more established, kind of more elitist colleges – part of CLT they don't really like, right, because you know, they're sometimes not big fans of the Western intellectual tradition. I think CLT, you know – we actually have a politically diverse company, but we're pretty much all educational conservatives, meaning this older view that education is fundamentally about the cultivation of virtue. It's fundamentally about human formation.

It's about passing down an intellectual tradition that has boundaries and is a set canon, right? That is a educational-conservative kind of way of thinking. And so for that reason, I think a lot of the mainstream colleges don't really like that. And that's pretty odd. As you know at IEW, in the education space at large, not too many educationally conservative companies out there.

On the flip side, though, a college entrance exam is really ... It's inherently an enrollment engine as well. And right now, every college—not just colleges that are struggling for students but every college—always wants more and more applicants. If you're Harvard or Yale, you want to keep your four percent acceptance rate. And they want the very, very best of the very, very best, right? And so colleges and for a lot of other schools with a little bit of a decline in the number of students going to four-year, brick and mortar, especially liberal arts colleges – these schools are hyper competitive for great students, especially students coming out of the homeschool world now.

I mean, it's how funny. You know, two decades ago the homeschoolers were the weirdos. And now, colleges can't get enough of these students. And it's interesting the reason why: I mean, they need almost no remedial help almost ever, right? They thrive academically. Often, and this is a big deal for colleges, right? If a student goes to college, and they get in all kinds of trouble; they're rowdy on campus, and they're causing, raising problems – that's a big liability, right? And so there's kind of a premium right now on just, like, “normal.” Colleges want just normal kids who are going to go to class and be involved and not cause all kinds of problems.

And those typically are ... That's kind of the CLT test taker. They tend to come from great families, great schools, great churches, great homeschools. And so for that reason, even if colleges are a bit suspicious about this whole, you know, educational-conservative idea, the kind of students—we hear this all the time—the kind of students the colleges connect with from the CLT are perfect, mission-fit students.

And typically what'll happen is a few of these students will get on campus. They'll often end up in the Honors College. And then it's typically, you know, the professor, the dean of the Honors College will go back to Admissions saying, you know, where ...?

These students coming out of classical schools, these homeschool students – they're incredible. They're dialed in; they're engaged in discussion. They do their reading. It's everything the professors are looking for. So I think it's going to be, you know ... The more CLT's able to grow ... And we're really, Andrew, trying to also, and this is something I know you do at IEW (as an IEW fan and parent), is provide a great user experience.

And what I witnessed from the SAT, you know, kids getting up really early in the morning, going to an uncomfortable setting they've never been in before. Somebody reads them directions for an hour. You sit there for thirty minutes after you're done. You're there for basically six hours by the time the whole thing's over. CLT – you're taking it from your house. It's remotely proctored. The whole thing is about two hours and fifteen minutes, starting to finish. We get results back. We work really hard to make sure that we're offering the very best analytics, insight, kind of student dashboard.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I'm sold. I'd be curious to know: What were a couple of your biggest wins, like a school that signed on that you kind of thought they would never go for this? They're just too progressive and modern. And then they did, and you were kind of like, yes! Because obviously you have to get outside the relatively small number of private liberal arts, classical oriented schools. So what were some of the victories along the way so far?

Jeremy Tate: Yeah, one of the biggest, of course, was Hillsdale. The first time we talked to them, they said, we love this concept. But you know, to have the Hillsdale name behind the CLT, we're going to do a very kind of serious vetting process. And they did. And it was very good for us at the time. This was kind of all of 2017. And by the end of the process, so many other colleges knew about it. I kind of thought, man, if Hillsdale does not adopt, we're done. You know, we're ... this whole project is over. And they did. It was one of those moments I'll never forget, Andrew. Doug Banbury, the VP of business partnerships – he called and said, Jeremy, we're all in; Hillsdale's doing this thing.

And it was a moment. I'm not going to lie; many, many tears were shed that day, tears of joy. It seemed like it was ... And you know, *National Review* and some other bigger platforms picked it up for the first time, including the *Wall Street Journal* shortly after that. Kind of put us on the radar. So something interesting happened. To answer your question, though, during Covid, right, we went from about forty percent of colleges, "test optional," to about ninety-two percent very quickly. And so some colleges, even some very elite colleges, including Princeton, including Duke especially, have said, yeah, absolutely we accept CLT. But we're also test optional. And we'll really look at anything a student wants to send our way.

And so it's a little harder to define when they say we're test optional. We'll accept the CLT, but we'll also, you know, accept the tap dancing video. It makes it a little harder to define who is and who isn't a CLT partner college. But I will add this, is that we do see an increasing number of students who are in our top five percent: "high flyers." And they're sending their scores directly to Columbia, directly to MIT, which now requires an SAT or ACT. But students can still opt in to supplementally submit the CLT as well. And one of the reasons that's helpful is because the SAT – I mean, if you're applying to MIT let's say, almost everybody's got a 760 or higher. Almost everybody's got a 34 or higher, right, if you're applying to MIT.

And the real part of the problem is that the SAT and ACT for decades now have competed against each other by actually kind of watering the tests down. You know, so you might think, well, why? Why would they water the test down? Well, it actually would give them a market advantage, right?

If they became the easier path to scholarships and to admission, they would have an advantage in the marketplace. So it was kind of this race to the bottom. And it went on for decades where the test became easier and easier. People will deny this, but it is absolutely true. And in fact, when the College Board in 2016 ... When they went back to the new SAT again, and they went back to the 1,600-point scale after being on the 2,400-point scale, they had a concordance chart.

It's just right there on the new 2016 SAT, the new common core one. For the math, everybody gets forty points, right, from compared to the old math score. And so it is absolutely a watering down. And so CLT came in, and we were able to kind of hit the reset button in a way. And so a score of a 115 or higher is off the charts on the SAT or ACT. It's beyond a 36 or beyond a 1600.

This was actually a problem in the early days. You know, we were trying to get the test calibrated. And we've got seventeenth-century philosophy. How are we going to equate this with passages? I mean, I'm not making this up: literally, you know, op-eds from Bernie Sanders. How

are we going to equate these two things for ...? And then ... Yeah, that's true: 2020 SAT had a Bernie Sanders op-ed. How are we going to equate these two things and realize actually that's a big advantage for students to have something that can kind of showcase their academic ability in a more powerful way?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, that's so interesting because I had heard about, you know, some of the larger well-known schools going test optional. And I had thought, well, that's just because their whole admission strategy is based on race and gender and orientation and what you've done to prove that you're progressive enough to join their school. But you know, the colleges – they can't completely give up on academic aptitude either. So that's so interesting. Nathan, you had a question?

Nathan King: Yeah, I did. And Jeremy, I've been speaking with Soren, of course, one of your right-hand men. And you know, he'd mentioned that you guys have, of course, a curated list of colleges that accept the CLT. And I'd like to ... First off, I'm going to say we're going to put that list in the show notes so people can get ahold of that. If they want to see colleges that are friendly to classical education, classical students, we can provide that list for them from you guys. But I also wanted to kind of ask you ... I mean, it seems that CLT has kind of become a nexus point for maybe even more of the classical movement as a whole. Could you speak to that a little bit?

Jeremy Tate: Absolutely. It's interesting you said that. I mean, it's absolutely been the case and I think even a litmus test for some parents. If they want to send their son or daughter to a college, the values, what they value ... That – the CLT can reflect that. And honestly, Nova College is so progressive and so kind of anti West. It's true; they're certainly not going to be talking to the CLT. So we have heard it used in that capacity more and more.

Andrew Pudewa: I want to piggyback on that. And this may be an unfair question, and you can totally refuse to answer it if you want to. It's a question that people ask me frequently, and that is, what are the, say, top five schools you would send your own kids to? Like, I know you've got younger kids; mine are all past the age. But a lot of people would just say, you know, point me in the right direction. So they can look at the list of schools that accept CLT. But you have a much more intimate knowledge of all these schools than almost anyone. So would you be willing to name the top five that you would send your kids to?

Jeremy Tate: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. And I'm kind of going through this now. My oldest is a junior. And I don't know if any of my top five will make the cut because she's a big runner and is looking to run (unintelligible) once. We're navigating kind of some different factors. But in terms of like just, you know, the very best possible academic formation, I easily list, you know, kind of a top five here. The first one may be a bit surprising. It's actually the University of Navarra. It's in Pamplona, Spain. It was founded by St. Josemaría Escrivá. It's an incredible ... He also founded Opus Dei.

It's a 12,000-person research university. One of the members of our academic board, who's the professor – he describes it as the only authentically Catholic research university in the world. And it's an amazing, amazing place. I think they completely solve ... And some ways in

America, if a parent has a student who's an absolutely, you know, a high flyer, and they really care about the Christian identity, the list can start to get a bit short if they want to find a place that also has all of the rankings and kind of those worldly accolades. So this is a university that's ranked third only behind Oxford and Cambridge in Europe for best teaching universities. But it is as authentically, faithfully Christian as you'll ever find.

Andrew Pudewa: Do you have to do all the coursework in Spanish, or can you get by in English?

Jeremy Tate: The first year you can do all of your courses actually in English, and then second year it's about half of it in Spanish. But also when you graduate with an excellent education, you know another language as well as you know your first language.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. Huge advantage. Well, we're running out of time. So give us your next four, and then we'll have to wrap it up.

Jeremy Tate: Yeah, so I would add Thomas Aquinas College absolutely. Onto that I would add St. John's in Annapolis. They're right here near CLT headquarters. I would definitely add Grove City College and Hillsdale College, and I may throw in Patrick Henry College as well. I mean, these are and at many times, I think right now, well over fifty percent actually ... About fifty percent of all of CLT either went to St. John's College in Annapolis, Patrick Henry, or Hillsdale.

And so we get to experience the fruit of this kind of education. These are our young people who have been taught to really think well, to think clearly, to write well, to speak well, to speak clearly. So those are six, but there's so many more there. There really are a lot of great options still.

Andrew Pudewa: One last thing that I know many listeners may be curious about is, the SAT and the ACT once upon a time had an essay attached. And then as far as I know, that essay became optional in terms of the college wanting it or not. Most of them didn't because they didn't feel a timed essay accurately represented, you know, the writing skills of a student. And now I think it's just completely not done at all. Is there an essay portion on the CLT? And if not, how do colleges use those tests to know if kids can write as well as their little personal statement that they send in?

Jeremy Tate: Yeah, you know, College Board got rid of the essay. CLT has an optional essay that we allow students to do. But what it does is, we actually don't grade it. It just allows them to send to the college an authentic writing sample that hasn't been edited or anything. So the colleges appreciate that. And it gives students an opportunity to kind of showcase what they can do, you know, without it being copy edited a handful of times.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. That's perfect. All right, what's your next big goal? Notre Dame, University of Chicago? What do you think? Where's it going to go with CLT?

Jeremy Tate: Appreciate you asking that. I mean, we've never wanted to be kind of a niche classical option. You know, I believe mainstream education in America has really embraced a

new kind of education. I think it's exactly the kind of education that C.S. Lewis describes in *Abolition of Man*, and as the *Green Book*: an education that in many ways is increasingly divorced from—he uses the language of the Dao—but we could say from natural law, from reality itself.

And this is new. This all happened in the past hundred years. And so CLT wants to be a part of reclaiming education that's focused on the cultivation of virtue, on moral character, on human formation. And then we're grateful to be alongside folks that have been doing it much longer: IEW. And Andrew, very grateful to your leadership. The first time I heard you speak was ICLE summer, I believe, summer of 2016. And it was formative just hearing you and now benefiting as a dad from what you've built at IEW. Just very blessed to have your support and your friendship.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I will hope that we meet up in person maybe sometime this year. I'm doing a lot of shows, a lot of events. I don't know. But we are huge fans. I tell everyone about the CLT. And the website they should go to is ...

Jeremy Tate: CLTexam.com

Andrew Pudewa: CLTexam (all one word) .com and we'll put a bunch of stuff in the show notes. Thank you so much for your time, Jeremy. I know you've got a lot of demands, running the organization and continuing every day to fight against the evil forces and bring more goodness, truth, and beauty into the lives of students through this means. So God bless you. And keep up the good work. And let us know anything we can do to continue to support you.

Jeremy Tate: Andrew, Nathan, thank you both.

Nathan King: Absolutely.

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.