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"Ayers All Access" Podcast

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SPEAKERS:

Mr. Forrest Doddington Technology & Digital Communications Specialist,
Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation

Dr. Andrea Pewitt Director of Academic Innovation and Strategy
Clarksville Christian School

FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Forrest Doddington: Hello. Welcome to the Ayers All Access Podcast brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation. This podcast is a chance for us to help you access compelling people, current topics, practical tips, and innovative solutions— all related to the field of education. To find out more about this podcast and all the work of the Ayers Institute, check out our website at AyersInstitute.org. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook at @AyersInstitute.

I'm Forrest Doddington, the Technology and Digital Communication Specialist at the Ayers Institute. Thanks for joining us for this "favored book" episode. Our featured book was written by Kim Bearden, co-founder of the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. This book was nominated by Andrea Pewitt who is here to share with us about it. For 5 years, Andrea served as the program director for the IDEAL program at Lipscomb University, offering a full university experience for students with intellectual or developmental disabilities and helping them prepare for their futures. Before that, her career included 18 years as a classroom teacher and as the supervisor of special education services for a school district.

Andrea has joined us before for the Ayers All Access podcast, and we're glad to have you back.

Andrea Pewitt: Thank you so much. Glad to be back today.

Forrest Doddington: Today you've brought us the book written by Kim Bearden, "Talk to Me: Finding the right words to inspire, encourage and get things done." I know that you told me this book has had a really positive impact on your career, and I'm excited to hear what you have to share with us.

Andrea Pewitt: Thank you.

Forrest Doddington: Let's start with a quick summary. How would you describe the book to someone who hasn't read it yet?

Andrea Pewitt: Yeah, this book is really a great guide to help understand conversations (and either written or oral conversations) with with people. She breaks it down into six principles of thinking about what's behind the conversation, and what's driving the conversation, and how to prevent conversations from escalating into more aggressive type conversations.

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Forrest Doddington: Okay. That sounds really good and probably applicable to a lot of people. Who do you think would benefit the most from reading this book?

Andrea Pewitt: So she designed this book specifically for educators, but she actually mentions in the book that it can be applied to anywhere. It can be applied to business leaders, it can be applied to community members, to family members. So it can really (because everyone talks, everyone communicates)– and so I think it's applicable to just about anyone.

Forrest Doddington: So think about your own professional journey. I know you've been a classroom teacher, a K-12 district leader, now more recently you've worked in higher education and in that space. What do you think drew you to this book and made it feel important to you?

Andrea Pewitt: So what most drew me to the book was how to communicate with difficult people and how to communicate in general and the effective methods of communication. That is one thing that I learned from my father is to always listen first and respond second. And so she really kind of talks about that. And so I love the art of communication and I love talking. I do it way too much, I think. And so I thought this might be an interesting read, and I really value Kim Beard's education philosophy. And so I was just really drawn to reading another one of her books. But the title intrigued me immediately with just about communication and how to do that effectively.

Forrest Doddington: I know that one thing that we've been trying to get stronger at in higher education programs is preparing teachers for those things beyond the direct instruction time, like parent teacher conferences. Is that an area that you think has been overlooked in the past?

Andrea Pewitt: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I don't think it's been overlooked intentionally. I think it's just kind of the nature of education. It's not something that you really believe that you would need to train someone on how to effectively communicate. But the way that we communicate with parents and with families can go one of two ways. It can be excellent or it can be read from their family as "they're attacking me" and vice versa. And so I think this book– I would recommend everyone read before they walk into a classroom and before they begin that communication with families.

Forrest Doddington: Okay. So we're talking with Dr. Andrew Hewitt, experienced educator and special education specialist, about the book "Talk to Me" by Kim Bearden. At different points in your career, has the message of this book impacted you differently or has the meaning remained the same across different jobs that you've had?

Andrea Pewitt: And it has impacted me differently, and I wish that this book had come out when I first started teaching or even when I was working in the district supervisor role. Just because there are ways that I reflect back that I could have handled the situation differently in the way that I communicated. And so if I had had this, then it might have looked a little different as far as working with families and parents. And then also just in personal relationships. How you communicate?

Forrest Doddington: Yes. Well, you know, I believe it's Maya Angelou who says "when you know better, then you do better." But this is definitely one you wish you had earlier in your career. And you'd recommend earlier.

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Andrea Pewitt: Yes. And I don't think that I did horrible at communicating with others, but I can definitely see times when situations could have been handled differently, especially early on in my career.

Forrest Doddington: Sure. Sure.

Okay. So let's dig into the content of this book and why it's been so impactful for you. Think about teachers and about education leaders who may be new to the profession or may be very much experienced in the field. What are some takeaways? What takeaways have you found in this book that could have a positive impact?

Andrea Pewitt: Yeah, so I found a couple that I think could be very beneficial and impactful for anyone, especially going into the profession. One that kind of resonated a lot with me were her "six principles" that she had. And so the six principles really focused on consideration and motivation behind (especially) written communication. You have to consider, why did they send the email? What was the motivation behind it? And I think if you stop and really think about that before immediately assuming you know why they had sent the email (and firing back an email in response) will really change the direction and the tone of the conversation.

She also talks about appreciation and validation. That a lot of times letting families know when they respond, "Thank you for bringing this to my attention." You know, "I appreciate your acknowledgement or your work that you do with your student and kind of helping us through that." And expressing appreciation just for the conversation as well, because that can change the tone. Instead of feeling as if you're being attacked or the parent can feel that they're being attacked. And then throughout the conversation, providing clarification or asking for clarification instead of assuming.

One of my favorite, favorite words that I used to say a lot is, "When we assume, we cause ourself to have assum-a-cide." And so, you know, when that happens, we can assume that this is what happened and it's really not. But then something traumatic can happen out of it because you assumed the wrong thing. And so, that didn't come out of the book. That just popped in my head. So that was a random conversation. But really focusing on again, under the surface of what that basis is behind the communication, really is.

Forrest Doddington: So it becomes— it becomes a filter through which you see other things because of that assumption that you made early on. And then, it may cloud you from understanding what's really going on.

Andrea Pewitt: Right. Right.

Forrest Doddington: Wow. The lasting effects of that early assumption.

Andrea Pewitt: Yes. Absolutely.

One of the other pieces that I thought was great is when she talked about communicating with others who have hurt us in the past and how difficult that can be. And that first we have to forgive others, which is just about as difficult as communicating with the person who has hurt us. But once we forgive others, it releases us from the power of that hurt that we have. And so then it opens you up for better

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communication. And so that can be applied in personal life, in work life— just about anywhere. And so that that was pretty powerful to read that as well. It's not something that I had thought about.

Forrest Doddington: So that's interesting to me. We're talking about a book about communication and now you've gone to forgiveness and how a lack of forgiveness affects your communication. Maybe you can flesh that out for me a little bit.

Andrea Pewitt: So I think when someone has hurt you or has wronged you or you have a sense of being wronged, it clouds your feelings and your thoughts on that person. And so when you're able to you kind of step back from that and look at motivation or look at the things behind the conversation, then you're able to move forward from that. And so when you can forgive, it kind of releases you (in a sense) to clear your mind a little more and then you're able to communicate more effectively with that person.

Forrest Doddington: I get it. Okay.

What else did you find in the book?

Andrea Pewitt: So another piece that really hit home, because I do like to talk a lot, is to listen. So when you're communicating with someone is to listen. Sometimes when friends come to you and they're sharing a personal story, something that has hurt them or something that has happened, they're coming to you for for a listening ear. For empathy and for sympathy. But what we tend to do as human nature is, "Oh, well. You know, that happened to me. And mine was much worse because X, Y, Z."

Forrest Doddington: So it becomes a comparison.

Andrea Pewitt: It becomes a comparison. And it's always— you always want to show that you were hurt more than what they're hurting. But that's not what they came to you for. And so being able to step back and just close your mouth, and just listen, and feel their pain and feel alongside them instead of trying to show that your pain was more hurtful than theirs. And and if you're in a group, it seems to kind of circle around. The next person had something even worse, and it just keeps building and building.

Forrest Doddington: I think sometimes the motivation is just to show that I've experienced that too. Like to connect. But the way it comes across is not caring.

Andrea Pewitt: Right. And she talks about that, that it's— it's just human nature and society. We want to show them that we feel your pain because we've been there. But the way it comes across is, "But my pain was worse than yours, so I can't really feel sorry for you right now." Type of thing, instead of listening and just really providing support and comfort.

Forrest Doddington: Yeah. What about the other side of that? If somebody's sharing celebration or something happy, is a lack of listening a problem at that time?

Andrea Pewitt: I think it can be. I think it can turn into the same effect that, "You know, that's so great. But listen to my good news that I have?" And so I think it has the same ripple effect both ways.

Forrest Doddington: Yeah. Yeah. I can think of times when I've wanted to share something and people have just been distracted. And then it went from being something happy to being a hurt situation, maybe even connecting to your previous point about now. Now I've got to forgive that. They don't

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always ignore me, but it can be hurtful to not be heard. Whether that's something I need empathy on or whether it's something I want you to celebrate with, really feeling heard is important.

Andrea Pewitt: Absolutely. Absolutely.

So my last takeaway, this will really resonate in the classroom and in the school setting. But one of my largest piece of my education philosophy is building relationships with students. And so one thing that Kim talks about that they do at the Ron Clark Academy is at the beginning of the year, all the teachers write down all of the students names on index cards or a piece of paper for every student in the building. And they hang these cards around the library or the room that they're in. And then all teachers are given a stack of colored dots.

So when I first read that, I immediately went to Max Lucado's book about the dots and how we label people, right? And so I was like, "Why are we putting dots on students?" But then when she explained what they were doing, I fell in love with this strategy and this theory. And so all teachers are given dots like a red, a yellow and blue stack of them, and they go around the room, they put on some music and they spend time being very intentional. Looking at every student's name and placing dots on them. So the red dots they place for students who "I could have birth that child, I know everything about them. I go to all of their games. I know their family history and everyone." You know.

Forrest Doddington: Strong relationships.

Andrea Pewitt: Very strong relationships. So they get the red dot.

The yellow dot, "I have a, a pretty good relationship with the student. You know, I've been to a couple of their games and I cheer them on or they do well in my classroom. But I don't have this strong history, but I have a good, good relationship." So they'll get a yellow dot.

And then the green dot or blue dot (or whatever other color) are students that you know nothing about. And so then they place those dots. They don't get dots for every single student. They all get just a certain number. Because there's not enough time to do that for everyone.

So then they pull all the names off and then they categorize them. And the beauty of this is they take all of the students that have that blue dot or that green dot, the ones that don't have relationships, and that's the students that they'll focus on that year.

Forrest Doddington: So this is a way to pull people into a relationship circle.

Andrea Pewitt: Exactly.

Forrest Doddington: Wow.

Andrea Pewitt: And so these are students who would be left behind or slipped through the crack because they're not being focused on. And so it's a way to really be intentional of looking at every single individual student in the building at one time and everyone identifying who are the students that we are forgetting about. And refocusing our attention— not taking away from our red dot students or yellow dots (we're still going to cheer for them and still go to the games). But we're going to pour into these students that are being forgotten about. And so when we think about that, it ties with the

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communication of how we communicate with those students, because right now we're not. Because we're forgetting about them. But how much greater success that student will have when someone pours into them and builds that relationship.

And so it's powerful for me when I think about students that I've worked with through student discipline, hearing committees or things that were just reaching out and in inappropriate ways to get attention. Now we're flipping that circle. So we're going to start at the beginning of the school year and focus on those students and give them that attention they're desperately seeking. They were just seeking it in ways that were not appropriate or ways that we wanted to see them.

Forrest Doddington: Wow. What a powerful, intentional practice. And how many places we could apply that.

Andrea Pewitt: Absolutely.

Forrest Doddington: You know, churches, youth groups, adult groups. You know, I think there are human tendencies. You know, our human tendency to click and to hang with people that we already know and to avoid the unknown. And yet we don't most of us don't want to be that way. We want to be welcoming and include other people. But here, I guess these teachers have right in front of them, 'here are students that will fall through the cracks if we don't reach out and find the right person to connect with them.'

Andrea Pewitt: Absolutely. They're the students that are often forgotten and then left aside. And but they're the ones who need you the most.

Forrest Doddington: Right. Wow. That would change the culture of the school significantly.

Andrea Pewitt: Absolutely.

Forrest Doddington: Have they done studies into impact on results and outcomes for those students?

Andrea Pewitt: I'm not sure. I haven't dug into that, but I think it would be an amazing study. And if they haven't, for another school to take on and try that. Because even just changing the structure of the school's discipline, moving from punishment to positive reinforcement can change an entire school setting.

Forrest Doddington: Okay. So here in the book, "Talk to Me," you have you've talked to us about some takeaways about relationship, about communication and listening, and about connecting with everyone. What are some ways that educators can put this into practice and apply it starting tomorrow?

Andrea Pewitt: So I think one of the biggest pieces that I took away from this is when you receive that email communication or that phone call is immediately not jumping to a conclusion or jumping to a reason. But really trying to figure out what was the motivation behind the email or behind the phone call. And then, reshaping your communication style with that person. Changing it to try and understand where they're coming from— it was really one of the biggest pieces that came away. And then just getting to know your students in the classroom and building those relationships as well.

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Forrest Doddington: Andrea, thank you so much for sharing with us about the book, "Talk to Me" by Kim Bearden and thank you for your work in education.

Andrea Pewitt: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

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