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Transcription by Keffy

[00:00:00] [Sound of book pages being rapidly flipped.]

Courtney: [00:00:08] Welcome listeners to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast, where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. In today's show, we'll talk about a common question: what is the best online curriculum? Next, we'll talk about different kinds of curricula, and finally, we'll talk about Pandia Press's Ancient History Level 2 curriculum and why won't use it.

[00:00:30] Jen and I have very different perspectives, I think, on online curricula, but we both see all these parents who are moving to homeschooling and want this all-online curriculum. You see that too, right?

Jen: [00:00:42] Oh yeah. Everybody I talk to says, what's online? And, what's free?

Courtney: [00:00:47] Oh yes, the free. What is that saying? You can have it good or cheap or fast, but you can't have all three. Pick one.

Jen: [00:00:53] Yeah. And you know what? Even public school isn't free so I don't understand why this is supposed to be free.

Courtney: [00:01:00] Well, they perceive public school as being free, and they also, I think, very much discount the role of the teacher whereas I, when I think about homeschooling, think about it in terms of the interaction that I can do with my child that makes the most difference. That different perspective, I think.

Jen: [00:01:17] Yeah, that's true. I think that the two of us have read more about educational theory than most parents today that are starting to homeschool.

Courtney: [00:01:25] You might be right about that because it is kind of an esoteric and niche kind of topic for the normal person. Seeing as how we have read a whole bunch about educational design, let's talk about that.

[00:01:41] My problems with all-online curriculum is that number one, you need really high quality, consistent, internet access, and they may

not always be available to you. I live down a dirt road with four-inch ruts and I pay almost \$80 a month for high quality internet access. And it's not even as fast as an inexpensive, urban internet plan. Not everybody's going to have that.

[00:02:06] The other thing is, I think when a lot of educated parents think about doing all-online curriculum, they think first of those massive open online courses, the MOOCs. And the problem is, they're actually not very successful. I'm so old that when the MOOCs first came out, they were supposed to transform higher education and everyone was going to just move away from brick and mortar colleges. Has that happened? I don't think so.

Jen: [00:02:35] Not yet.

Courtney: [00:02:35] Mm-mm. They have abysmal completion rates. If I recall correctly, off the top of my head, I think it's something like only 5-10% of everyone who starts a MOOC actually finishes it. But also, they're aimed at college students. There really isn't an equivalent for younger students. There are these self-paced courses with no direct instructions, but they, too, have terrible completion rates. And if you have a student in high school, you've probably heard of those credit recovery courses. Have you heard of those, Jen?

Jen: [00:03:08] I have. Yeah.

Courtney: [00:03:09] They're awful. They are really terrible, and anyone who works in a school could probably tell you all the ways that they're terrible. But Slate, a couple years back, did a whole investigative series that revealed huge problems. When they do have teachers, they often have no direct instruction, which means that they have no live streaming, synchronous sessions. I've read that some teachers had as many as 275 students per class, which makes it really difficult to get help when you need it.

[00:03:37] The other thing that I have a concern about is that they're extremely poorly designed. Memorize and regurgitate. We talked about that with Time for Learning. But a lot of time, it's not even memorize.

[00:03:49] Okay, read this. Take this quiz, maybe get a unit test on Friday, and then you'll never touch that material again. That doesn't mean that people are going to learn it. They just learn it well enough for the test and they move on. The other problem that I have seen is that we tend to assume that because something is popular, there's some sort of quality check. Oh, I've heard of this, everybody else is using this. This must be all right. In fact, they're often really heavily biased materials not

written by professionals or subject matter experts. And I was... Jen, what is that lady's name? Farrar Williams? You know who I'm talking about?

Jen: [00:04:27] Yes. I think that's her name. We'll double check and put it in the notes.

Courtney: [00:04:33] We were... we're Facebook friends. She was talking about how she had done some research behind, I want to say it was Acellus, which is now Power Homeschool, and how a lot of that stuff was just written by the guy who owns the program.

Jen: [00:04:48] Oh, no.

Courtney: [00:04:48] Oh, yes. There were some issues there. Ahem. But of course, one of my problems, also, is that there's little interaction with peers. When my kids take an online class, or when I teach an online class, I'll work really hard to make sure that there are subtle ways that students can interact with each other. That doesn't happen a whole lot.

[00:05:10] The idea is that these are often used at online charter schools, and a lot of people don't realize just how bad they are. Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes authored a study of online charter schools across 17 states, and in that study, students actually lost ground in reading by a half a year and made no gains at all in math. Basically, it was like they didn't attend school for an entire year. That is not where we want to go when we talk about online programs.

[00:05:41] You can do it well. There are some programs, especially ones that cater to homeschoolers that do it well. And I work at one of those, the Well Trained Mind Academy. But. That means that we have to be really careful about choosing curricula. Jen, what do you think about choosing curricula?

Jen: [00:05:57] Well, the first thing that I wanted to point out is not to get too caught up in what kind of homeschooling that you're doing. You're basically going to be accosted with all different methods and you're going to even know, really, what those things are. Don't think about it. Put all that aside. If you're homeschooling because you don't feel safe sending your kids to school this year. It doesn't mean that this year is going to be the only way you homeschool. This is simply your first year. And maybe your kids will go back to school and maybe they won't. But what you really want to do this year is take advantage of this time.

[00:06:35] I've gotten calls from people that say, listen, I'm going to homeschool and my kid's not very good at this and that and I'm trying to

help them see that starting a little bit below the level that their child is on is actually the way to go.

Courtney:

[00:06:50] Mm-hmm.

Jen:

[00:06:50] If you can, the best thing you can do this year is to use this year to fill in gaps. If you are teaching and your ratio is now one on one, or let's say you have three kids, or four kids, it's one to three or one to four. That's still an amazing amount of attention that you can give each student compared to what they are going to get in a classroom of 20 or 30.

Courtney:

[00:07:11] Absolutely. Robert Slavin is a researcher who has done a lot of studies on the most high-quality interventions that you can do in education. And the number one, most effective thing that you can do is one to one or small group tutoring. Surprise! Here we are!

Jen:

[00:07:28] Yeah. And it doesn't take as long as you think. I would suggest starting with a placement test in reading and math, no matter what age your child is. If they are five or if they are 15 and you've never taught them, you don't really know where they are.

[00:07:45] I use the Let's Go Learn website. We do the DORA test. What's the math test called, Courtney?

Courtney:

[00:07:50] The ADAM. I love Let's Go Learn. They have these criterion reference tests which give you so much more detail than those big, annual standardized, the Terra Nova or the Stanford. You need the detail.

Jen:

[00:08:02] Right. If you were to give, what is it? The Iowa Basic, or the California Achievement test, that does not tell you how to pick a grade level of the subjects you need to teach at home.

Courtney:

[00:08:13] For example, I gave one to Elena in the end of May. She did surprisingly well on the math test that breaks it down in these fine-grained details. So I can say, ah-ha! She understands a fraction, but she does not understand how to add fractions. That's the kind of detail that you need.

Jen:

[00:08:31] That's exactly right. Especially if you're going to go with a math curriculum that is subject-based, one of the easiest thing to jump in to fill in holes would be Math Mammoth.

Courtney:

[00:08:42] Oh, seconded. Hard, two thumbs up.

Jen: [00:08:44] I know you're a fan, too. I like Math Mammoth because there are no games. It's simply a little bit of instruction and here's the work because I am highly in favor of immense amount of repetition. That's how my kids learn. Some people say drill and kill is old school, but hey, people were done with school in ninth or tenth grade back then, so it can't be all bad.

Courtney: [00:09:08] And they were using it in their day-to-day life. But here we are, we're putting our kids in school for a long time and they're learning a lot of stuff that is not immediately applicable, and so they need that practice to keep their skills sharp. The whole thing about different kinds of practice. Yeah, I'm with you on the Math Mammoth.

Jen: [00:09:24] I don't want to get into too much about how to choose and throw out a bunch of curriculum names but what I would suggest is that you need a math, a science, reading, grammar, and a history. And history, for public school parents, is social studies. That's what... you're calling it social studies, we're calling it history. Both are basically history and geography except for high school when history and geography can be separate because a lot of states require you to have a year of geography.

[00:09:53] I think Oak Meadow lists psychology under the history titles, too, which is weird.

[00:09:58] First, you want to find out what level your child is on. And then you want to choose a basic program for all of these things, and maybe it's a box, or maybe it's separate. It depends on how you want to mix and match and your particular situation. I know Courtney is also willing to help, and anybody who wants specific help, if they want to say, this is my exact child and our situation, you can join our Facebook group and there's both of us and 800 other people will be willing to help you.

Courtney: [00:10:24] Some people with real expertise. There are some really high-powered parents who have excellent backgrounds and really know what they're talking about. I give all the respect to my fellow members of the Secular-Inclusive Classical Teachers Facebook group.

Jen: [00:10:39] It is one of the best places to go and ask what you think is going to be a crazy question and have people jump on immediately, know what you're talking about, and say, oh, here's a book for that.

Courtney: [00:10:51] Yeah. Fantastic social networking knowledge.

Jen: [00:10:54] Social networking, yeah. Yeah. And very supportive. The other thing I would recommend is a great online store called the Rainbow Resource Center. You can search any subject you'd like and they are going to have a lot of homeschool programs with very detailed descriptions. They have sample pages of nearly every book that they carry. They do include religious curricula, it's all marked. It will say that in the description, you will be able to see that on the sample pages. You may find that you're willing to tweak some religion out of a book if it's otherwise a perfect fit for your family. They have lower pricing than what you would pay if you order it from each publisher individually.

Courtney: [00:11:34] They have the best customer service. Skip Amazon, go straight to Rainbow Resources. They will treat you right. They have a fantastic return policy, and they have excellent customer service. I just wouldn't order their paper catalog unless you needed a booster seat for your toddler.

Jen: [00:11:52] It's like the old Sears Christmas Catalogue, the Wishbook for people of a certain age.

Courtney: [00:11:58] Mm-hmm.

Jen: [00:11:58] But it's a homeschool mama Wishbook. It's got toys and puzzles and educational games, curriculum.

Courtney: [00:12:06] All of the things. All of them.

Jen: [00:12:06] All of the things. It's so fun.

Courtney: [00:12:09] When I think about choosing curricula, I think about it in terms of the types of knowledge that I'm going to teach. Whether I'm teaching declarative knowledge, fact knowledge, or procedural knowledge, aka, how to do something, or experiential knowledge. Because really, some things just cannot be learned unless you do it for yourself. That's a true thing.

[00:12:29] When I think about ordering curricula, I'd like to look at the scope and sequence. A well-designed curricula should tell you exactly what they're going to teach and when they teach it in any given year. Then I think about whether it's a mastery, meaning you teach it once, you teach it really thoroughly, and then you never see it again. Math-U-See is a mastery curricula, versus spiral. A spiral's where you keep coming back to it but you go more in depth every time and of course the classic spiral curricula is Saxon.

[00:12:57] I really like Saxon because it has interleaved, interval space, varied retrieval practice. So that helps you keep that information in mind all year long.

[00:13:10] The other thing that I really like is when a curricula has a subject matter expert. So, for example, one of the things that I think makes Story of the World such a good curricula is that it's written by a historian. Because history is an actual academic discipline with its own rules. I like curricula that's written with a subject matter expert and an instructional designer, because there is an art and science of teaching. So you get those two things together, you get a really top-notch curricula.

[00:13:38] I like one that takes into account a teacher's experience. That includes hands-on tasks. That has professionally designed assessments. I will reserve this for another episode, but I will tell you, there is a very popular science curricula that I absolutely cannot stand because their assessments are very obviously designed by an amateur, and they test on things that are not well-covered within the curriculum. It is so frustrating for your student.

Jen: [00:14:06] I was just going to interrupt and say, honestly, nearly all science programs that I've tried have maybe a 60% fail rate on experiment.

Courtney: [00:14:17] We, in the homeschool community are waiting for a really kick-butt homeschool open and go, easy to use, high quality science program. Especially for the K-5 age range. So get on it, people. There is a market.

Jen: [00:14:33] For sure.

Courtney: [00:14:34] Then I also like programs that have an appropriate level of difficulty. You cannot easily scaffold down from a high school to a kindergartener. It doesn't work that way. Can you scaffold up, yeah, but it takes a lot of work and I have other things to do with my time. I'm going to shell out money for a curriculum, it needs to be appropriately difficult.

[00:14:54] Which also means that I don't want to spend my time doing it myself. I don't want to spend my time making up things or editing things or adding things, because I might not get it right. I might not make it appropriately difficult. I might not cover it at the right depth, and I might leave stuff out because I'm not an expert.

[00:15:09] Which is one of the problems I have with those third party supplement sites like Teachers Pay Teachers or what have you. Also, they seem to have a real issue with copyright. For example, we saw that in the Secular Inclusive Classical Teachers group last week, did we not?

Jen: [00:15:26] Boy, they were all over it. There was a post where someone said, this is a website, a school, I think, or a curriculum provider that I found, and this seems weird. Has anyone heard of this? And I took one look at it and thought, oh, that's a scam. So, I'm like a homeschool psychic. And I was pretty much going to leave it at that, but the power of the group kicked in. They, I think, emailed just about every single curriculum company that was being ripped off. I didn't read the resolution of that. Is the whole site gone?

Courtney: [00:15:59] I don't know. I think that they are in a state of confusion, but yeah, the curricula companies were not amused that somebody was copying their stuff, pasting it into a packet and selling the packets. This leads to a level of quality, because a lot of those curricula include other parts that help make it a better curricula. You cannot just slice things out and say, ah, I will take this part and it will be good because it doesn't differentiate for your individual student, which is one of the beauties of homeschooling, is to customize it to your individual student. I wouldn't even go there.

Jen: [00:16:34] It seems hard to believe that they didn't realize that you can't buy a book, photocopy it, and sell it.

Courtney: [00:16:43] A lot of people who traditional teach in public school classrooms are accustomed to a different kind of copyright law, because there exist, in the law, special exemptions for public school classrooms for fair use for instructional purposes. However, those same exemptions do not exist for online curricula and especially, doubly don't exist for for profit, online learning providers. Those permissions are narrowed even further. I suspect that they had a public school teacher, who was like, oh, I'll just teach this class that I would normally teach face-to-face online and it will be fine. And no, you cannot. This is not fine.

Jen: [00:17:25] Wrong.

Courtney: [00:17:26] This leads us right up to History Odyssey Level 2, which is a Pandia Press product. They have a whole bunch of products. One of those is Level 2, with Ancients, and one of the reasons that I don't like it is that they use The Story of Mankind by Hendrick Van Loon as a spine.

[00:17:47] I quote, "It is optional reading in this level 2 course. It should be considered a possible resource for gathering information if they choose not to read *The Story of Mankind*, they might need to seek out other resources on the internet or on a library in order to complete some of the lessons." Which says that actually you do need it, and if you don't like it, that's just too bad, you're going to have to make up the curriculum yourself.

Jen: [00:18:08] Which is a lot of work because my middle school student is not going to be able to find the answer to that specific question to fill in their worksheet.

Courtney: [00:18:17] And you may say to yourself, well, okay, why not just use the curriculum. Well, keep in mind that we're talking about ancient history, right? And part of ancient history is how various religions come to be and intertwine into history. This is an important part of history.

[00:18:33] When I go, for example, to look at Mohammed, he doesn't actually call him Mohammed. They call him Ahmed, the camel driver who became the prophet of the Arabian desert. And they begin with, "In the seventh century, another Semitic tribe appeared upon the scene and challenged the power of the west. They were the Arabs, peaceful shepherds who had roamed through the deserts since the beginning of time without showing any signs of imperial ambitions."

[00:18:58] There is so much wrong with this on so many levels, that to illustrate some of the wrongness, I went to Wikipedia, not that Wikipedia is a great source, but it's readily available. It's right there, and found a corresponding line.

[00:19:11] Wikipedia says, "The Nabateans, an Arab people, formed their Kingdom near Petra in the 3rd century BC. Arab tribes, most notably, the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, began to appear in the southern Syrian Desert from the mid 3rd century onward, during the mid to later stages of the Roman and Sasanian empires."

[00:19:28] Does that sound to you like a people without imperial ambitions? And it just goes on and on and on with all of this horrible kind of thing. I don't know about you, but when I talk about religious figures with my children, I try to treat them with the respect that they deserve.

Jen: [00:19:47] Yeah, and you have to give them the whole story. I can't remember how old that book is. It's at least 100 years old, right?

Courtney: [00:19:53] Mm-hmm. I think it came out in the early 1900s.

Jen: [00:19:56] I have nothing against old books.

Courtney: [00:19:58] I do.

Jen: [00:19:58] But, well, okay. [crosstalk] I wouldn't use a whole curriculum built on older spines. That book, I just have a hard pass on that book. I know a lot of Charlotte Mason programs use a lot of older books. If you want to reach way back, there was the Robinson curriculum and that was all old books. In fact, I think when you bought that curriculum, you got a floppy disk or something with a whole bunch of books on it that were in the public domain. Their theory was the old, old books from the late 1800s, early 1900s would provide your children with large and diverse vocabulary. It would make quirkier than ever.

Courtney: [00:20:39] I find this whole blatant disrespect for other religious figures to be one of the defining reasons. So, for example, you would not go up to a Christian and start talking about how Jesus was not really divinely inspired. Right? You wouldn't say that. And here, Van Loon is saying that Mohammed was an epileptic. He wasn't divinely inspired, he was just suffering from spells of unconsciousness.

Jen: [00:21:11] That and wasn't it that he only got money from marrying the boss.

Courtney: [00:21:15] Right? He portrays him as a gold-digger. Mohammed decided to be the Moses of the Arab people, he could not well be a prophet and a camel driver at the same time, so he made himself independent by marrying his employer, the rich widow, Khadija. Are you serious? Because here's another perspective from Wikipedia, which is, "His reputation attracted a proposal in 595 from Khadija, a successful business woman. Mohammad consented to the marriage, which by all accounts was a happy one."

[00:21:48] Yes, they both tell the same events. Can you tell that one is different from the other?

Jen: [00:21:52] Yeah, and I'm very surprised because I've never used any of Pandia Press, but I'm aware of them. I've seen them at conventions. I have heard a lot of people that use their products and really like them. My impression is that they are trying to be a very forward-thinking, scientific, secular curriculum provider. I'm very surprised that they would choose this as a spine for their middle grade, when middle grade is where we really don't have a lot of choices for classical history. They were writing this very recently, which is something you could do. Not everyone has that choice.

Courtney: [00:22:29] You're right. Not everybody can do that, and I think it is not well done of them just to say, well, if you don't like it, use something else and you'll have to do it yourself. That's not okay.

Jen: [00:22:37] Yeah, not at all.

Courtney: [00:22:38] I also noticed that last autumn, that would be 2019, they revamped their first grade curriculum to not use Story of the World. Now I know that a lot of people have a hate for Story of the World. But I like it. They're accessible stories, covers things that are not normally covered. Pandia Press apparently hired someone to write a very lengthy read-aloud book for first grade ancient history. And by lengthy, I mean it is 512 pages.

Jen: [00:23:11] That's very long. I did download a sample of that text and I read the first 50 pages and then listened to a five minute sample, because they're offering it as an audiobook, which is awesome. And for that tiny little chunk, because 50 pages of 512 is not enough at all for me to give it a thumbs up or a thumbs down. It sounded interesting, but without the whole package in front of me, I can't really say.

Courtney: [00:23:36] Well, I did notice that it's not written in story style, it is written more like a traditional textbook. This is what happened, this is what happened, this is what happened, kind of thing. Which, you know, it's not a bad thing, but it might make it less accessible to younger listeners. I have a hard enough time getting Elena to sit still for a story. I am not sure that I could get her to sit still for what is clearly a non-fiction historical excerpt.

Jen: [00:24:03] Yeah, that's a lot. And then they have an activity book. It's basically, I think they tried to write a completely secular Story of the World copycat book.

Courtney: [00:24:10] Them and the Curiosity Chronicles.

Jen: [00:24:13] I haven't looked at that either. I feel very much like a curmudgeon at this point, with all the young folks talking about all these programs with cute names. I mean, the Curiosity Chronicles, Blossom and Root. They all just sound like you're going to be sitting on a fleece blanket with a [unclear].

Courtney: [00:24:30] With a blossoming cherry tree, and your children ever so politely and carefully saying, "More, mama, read me more while I drink my tea and eat my cookies."

Jen: [00:24:39] One standing on the corner reciting Shakespeare to the others while they raptly listen in silence.

Courtney: [00:24:45] Yeah. As if. That's why I like the very short chapters in *Story of the World*, and I feel curmudgeonly, too. I do not feel the need to entertain my children, so there we go. We're definitely not going to use *History Odyssey Level 2*. Make sure to join our Facebook group, *Secular Inclusive Classical Teachers*, if you haven't already, where we talk about homeschooling all the time with many veteran homeschoolers.

[00:25:07] Thanks for listening to *Good Enough Homeschoolers*. Before we go, show some love for your favorite podcast by leaving us a review on Soundcloud. Then stay tuned for next week where we will show some love and hate for other curricula.