Learning Resource Spotlight: Amy Pregulman

We all remember the scrawlings many well-meaning grade-school teachers made at the borders of our earliest forays into essay- and creative writing. Have you ever received the margin note—helpfully in blood-red pen—“awk” or “wc”? (If you still don’t recognize these abbreviations, that’s ‘awk’ for ‘awkward’ and ‘wc’ for ‘word choice’ not ‘water closet.’) Stanley’s K-5 Instructional Coach Amy Pregulman enters every writing conversation with every student and teacher with a certain fierceness about avoiding such marginalization—an approach which manifests itself in ferocity about developing each writer’s voice alongside the writing practice.

Amy grew up on a cattle ranch in Northern Wyoming, learning to ride a horse at about the same time she learned to walk. She lived five miles from a town of 655 residents—recalling the number because of the population sign as she went to and fro. At 14, Amy left that small town to attend boarding school at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Through those years, an avid reader and writer, Amy would occasionally receive those ‘helpful’ margin notes.

“I would get a paper back with the note ‘v’ in the margin,” says Amy. (You can almost see it, right? ‘v’ for ‘vague’ to be precise!) “I had no idea what that meant—where to go, how to become a better writer. So when I started digging into what it means to be a writer, often I used those experiences to inform how I model the writing practice for students, and to be transparent about teaching. It’s the same with reading,” adds Amy. “I was told, ‘Read through chapter four and pick out the motifs,’ but nobody ever modeled what that meant or how to do that.”

Students of Amy’s hear her ask lots of questions and learn to do the same. “I ask questions and also paraphrase what I hear. Then students will respond, ‘Oh. No, this is what I meant...’ That helps clarify thinking.” She always brings students back to the page—student writing, her own, published texts. “Here is an example of using evidence,” she points out... Or: “This is an example when the writer isn’t precise.’ For 3-4-5 writers, the word choices ‘stuff’ or ‘weird,’ are not precise. Together, we turn that around and ask, ‘What do you mean, exactly?’”

That deeper thinking infuses Amy’s beliefs and philosophy: “I love language. I love being precise and clear with language, and I love teaching kids how to do that. It’s not about getting students to ask, ‘Is this right?’ But to hear them state, ‘This is right, and it’s what I’m thinking about, and it reflects how I express myself as a writer.’ If you have that independence and autonomy as a writer, you can do anything.”

Writing and reading are partnered skills. Working with small groups of students, Amy uses the Wilson Language Instruction program to structure more practice with how words work—concentrating on phonics, spelling and what each student really understand about words. Says Amy, “When we catch reading issues early, the Wilson program is very comprehensive, and we apply it at the learner’s pace. We’re not teaching to the curriculum; we’re teaching the child: For a fifth grader, we go quickly through what he knows and slow down for the holes he needs to fill. You can only do that with a comprehensive, structured program like Wilson.”

With students, Amy pays close attention to the technical aspects of language, too. With writers, for example, they go beyond conceptualization and think deeply about revisions. “I like that struggle,” says Amy. “That’s part of what we want kids to understand: Being precise is not easy, but that’s the beauty of it, and that’s where learning happens and what remains of it. Nobody can take that expertise away. Students move on from 3-4-5 with skills, and they’ll only build upon those and get better.”

By the way, being a lifelong reader, Amy is a good source of book ideas for kids and adults, too. (Right now she’s loving “The Underground Girls of Kabul”). And she has many favorite quotes: “One of the ones I love the most is from my grandmother, who never went to college. She said, ‘Things can be taken from you, and jobs can be taken away from you, but no one can take away your education.’ She was a tremendous believer in education and that had a lifelong impact on me.”
Amy shares that ethic in her work with Allan in our library, where they envision our collection as the literary center of Stanley. Helping bring that to life most recently, the two wrote a grant for Parent Association funds to develop the library’s new ‘Cozy Corner.’ “That’s what encourages a love of reading,” says Amy, “and read aloud, and develop the conversations about books.”

The ‘Instructional Coach’ part of Amy’s work encompasses professional development for new teachers and teaching teams specifically in reading and writing instruction. Amy helps teachers plan units of study concentrating on long-term planning and helping teachers back those plans into the day-to-day picture asking “What’s the big picture?” and “How can we break it down” – a delicate process for new teachers. Another important role Amy plays is conducting 9-10 seminars each school year in reading and writing instruction in the Stanley Teacher Prep program.

Amy often helps teachers integrate reading/writing into the classroom study. “On any day, I might be doing book clubs in one room, a fifth-grade news writing unit in another room, or videoing teachers for feedback for themselves,” says Amy. “Right now, I’m facilitating a professional book club reading on a Patrick Allen title with members of the 3-4-5 team. I like to think of working where the energy is in a positive way. We’re very strategic about that, while at the same time building capacity. It’s all relationship-driven. I have to develop solid relationships and trust with these teachers to do what we do.”

How did Amy get to Stanley? After university at Whittier College in L.A., Amy taught English for a year in Madrid, Spain. “The changes in culture throughout my life,” says Amy – from the West to the East Coast and beyond – “had a profound impact on my life, my interests and my decision to become a teacher.”

Thus, in 1994, Amy moved to Colorado for the Teacher Intern Program where she worked with teacher mentors at the time Lynne Forstot and Nicole Walravens. That beginning took her to a position as 3-4-5 Bilingual British Primary teacher at DPS’s Ebert Elementary. And when she had children – three Stanley-educated girls with whom Amy loves to spend time – she worked as a literacy consultant for the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC). In 2002, Amy returned to Stanley as the K-5 Spanish teacher, and after several years began coaching work with the 3-4-5 teachers in Writing and Writer’s Workshop.

“I view my professional learning,” says Amy, “as a constant process and one I will never finish. I am very proud of how I have taken my passion for teaching reading and writing and, over many years, have continued to deepen my professional understanding. As new research about learning surfaces, it forces me to integrate that new knowledge into what I already know about teaching and learning.

“If I had to choose one word that represents Stanley to me it would be ‘Community.’ I have been a part of this community for many years and my children are a part of this community as well. As a result, I have students who are friends of my daughters and I have taught their siblings. In addition, my peers, for whom I have great respect, are the teachers of my children. So, for me, the Stanley community is a cornerstone of both my professional and my family life.”