

Using the Ladder of Inference

[Demonstration]: Episode 258

Elena: If you've ever worked with a client who made sweeping generalizations about students or colleagues, or who interpreted a situation in a way that seemed biased or overly rigid, or who kept repeating a behavior that clearly wasn't serving them or their students, then this episode is for you.

Hello friends. Welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm your host Elena Aguilar, and in each podcast episode you'll hear me demonstrate how you can lead conversations that build connection and spark change. Today I'm sharing a live coaching demonstration featuring a tool that is as practical as it is transformational.

This is the ladder of inference.

You'll hear what it sounds like to help a client climb down the ladder of inference. We'll explore how to slow their thinking, examine assumptions, and open up new perspectives. Before we begin, I encourage you to engage with the Ladder of Inference skill session that is in the Coach Learning Library, and that session walks you through when to use the ladder.

What coaching questions align with each rung. How to address bias and identity safety, and what to do when clients resist exploring alternative interpretations. It also includes a video recording of this coaching demonstration and a debrief conversation where I pull back the curtain on my coaching moves.

Okay, here's what you need to know about this role play demonstration. I will be coaching Antoinette, who will be channeling a middle school math teacher. Antoinette is working with the same students that she taught last year as she made the decision to loop with the class. Antoinette and I have worked together for the past two years, and we have a positive relationship.

So the conversation that you're about to hear takes place after my first observation in her classroom this year, and after Antoinette has received the diagnostic data for her class, like most of the role plays in this podcast, we jump right into the conversation after the beginning part in which we would have had some connection time.

So you're not gonna hear that today, and since you're not gonna hear that, I have created a free resource for you that walks you through how to lead that portion of your



conversations. And in the show notes, you will find a link to that resource. Okay, let's jump into this conversation.

Elena [coach]: All right, Antoinette, I'm so glad to hear that you had a good lunch today and I love hearing your pride in that fact. And I am going to just move us right into talking about the observation that I did today. We had just a really brief moment to debrief after class ended, and I was glad to hear you were feeling good about it.

I wanna jump straight into one of the observations I made and to hear how you understand this observation. Does that sound okay if we just jump into it?

Antoinette [client]: Sure.

Elena [coach]: Okay, so one of the things that really stood out to me when I was in your class today was that the students that you've identified as higher performing, we've talked about them, they were doing independent work again, and they weren't being disruptive at any time.

But I also noticed a number of indicators that we've talked about as a school of disengagement during that time, you were working with the students who are struggling and we've talked about that. So I'm curious what that observation brings up for you.

Antoinette [client]: I think you know that. I got a chance to loop with the kids this year, which I was really excited about. And one of the things that I was most excited about is just that so many of my students who are like designated as lower performing are they, I just really wanted to loop with them to try to close that gap a little bit.

And this year I've been doing a lot of. Guided, like work with them and small group work with them. And data from our, like most recent assessments is really promising. And so I'm just very excited to be, I. In a place where they're making so much progress. And I know that the, my students who are designated as higher performing, I know that they're often doing more independent work, but I'm a little bit less concerned about them 'cause they're just starting off at a higher point.

And even if there's a bit of disengagement, like they're that they're still where I would anticipate they would be.

Elena [coach]: Tell me if I'm hearing this correctly. I feel like what I'm hearing is you're not really concerned about your higher performing students

and you're just wanting to focus on the students who are struggling.



Antoinette [client]: It's not that I like, don't care about them.

But yeah, I think that just from their starting place, they less at risk of moving into high school with the big gap and without the foundations that they're needing to be able to enter in for algebra one. and for the. Other students, that gap is still just really big.

So I am dedicating quite a bit of energy to closing that. And so much of what I'm covering with those students, the higher performing students already have set some of those foundations. I do have some extension work that they work on, but , they're able to do it independently. I do whole group instruction sometimes, but when we move into small group time, I'm definitely prioritizing my lower, my students who are designated as lower performing.

Elena [coach]: Yeah, I know you care about your students so much and so I definitely wanna be clear. I do hear that. I am wanting to try something with you and just to see where it gets us in terms of. Understanding what's going on in your classroom and your choices. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with your choices, I'm just thinking that there's a way we can dig deeper, and that is through a questioning process that I wanna try guiding you through right now.

And let's just see where this takes us. So I want you to think about. You're higher performing students. And

what I'm hearing is that you have seen their data that indicates that they're higher performing, you have given them independent work, and they do By themselves. They're not disruptive. Are there any other data points, anything else that you have seen this group of students do or heard them do or experienced that might be on this level of data or fact that informs the decisions you're making about them?

Antoinette [client]: Yeah I have their exit tickets from our lessons that are completed and meeting, like expectation. A lot of the data that I have is just like indicators of work completion tied to the lesson outcomes and being able to see yes, they've met the lesson objective. They're good.

Elena [coach]: Great. Okay, great. Now I want to see if you can name the meaning that you've made from those data points. So you've seen exit tickets, you've seen that they are able to complete the work, they've met the outcomes. You've seen that they're not disruptive, meaning we've talked about that, that they're quiet, they don't talk to other students.



And the meaning that you've made I'll share one meaning it sounds like, and then I want to see if you hear other meanings, but one of the meanings that you've made is. They don't need your attention in the way that your lower performing students do.

Antoinette [client]: Yeah, that feels accurate.

Elena [coach]: Okay. Are there any other meanings that you've made from this data?

Antoinette [client]: I mean When you say that, I'm thinking about like the data for them, but also then the data for lower students, which like the meaning I'm making then is those students do need my attention and aren't right now of like independently. Meeting the objectives, like they still need quite a bit of guidance and support.

Elena [coach]: Okay, so

I think one of the other data points that we've talked about that I wanna bring into our conversation is that the higher performing students are demonstrating that they are working independently. Their exit tickets are indicating that they've met the outcomes for the lesson.

We've also been seeing some data that indicates that they've plateaued since the middle of last year.

Antoinette [client]: Yeah.

Elena [coach]: And we're seeing that your lower performance students are making growth and your higher performance students are plateauing. And so I'm curious what meaning you make from that data.

Antoinette [client]: I mean, I love seeing the growth lower performing students, and I'm thinking back to last year, which is like one of the reasons why I chose to loop with them is that many of my students who are in the lower performing group, I was able to work with them and some of them were able to move into a different band.

There's a couple of students I'm thinking about that actually. Would have been in my like small groups last year that are not this year. And I feel really good about the foundations that they were able to set and also just like that big jump and leap that they were able to make. I think I. I do have a big focus just on closing that gap. It's like what's very present for me. I think especially now as we're looking ahead to eighth grade promotion ceremony and thinking about next year, like I really just wanna make sure that kids are set up for success. But I don't know that I've, I feel like I'm doing a little bit



of grappling right now about what that plateau really means. I love that my students are making growth and. Especially for some students who did make growth. I'm thinking about those couple of students who have moved up and now have plateaued because they haven't been working with me in more small groups and just what does it mean for students when they don't have access to some of the small group like instruction to be able to like. Just continue on a growth trajectory.

Elena [coach]: Tell me if you feel like this isn't accurate, but the assumption you're making is that it's the small group time with you that is critical for them to make growth. I.

Antoinette [client]: I. Yeah, one of the reasons why I'm seeing so many of those jumps is 'cause it's like I'm able to give more individualized feedback for things. I'm able to identify like trends really quickly. Students are able to engage in a little bit more like collaborative thinking. And so there's just really beautiful learning that's happening in those spaces.

And even as I'm saying this, I'm thinking about yeah, the. Students who are high performing are working independently. I've tried doing like partner work during those times, but it's just, it's too disruptive and then doesn't allow for me to like then focus on the small group stuff. So they really are working pretty independently. But yeah, that facilitated really robust like collaborative work and quick feedback. Has been just like essential to being able to see some of the improvements and like closing of the

Elena [coach]: Mm.

so

the belief you're holding is . In order to close a gap, students have to have small group time with me. I hear another belief that when they are working collaboratively and they're not in a small group with you, it's too disruptive and that doesn't work.

Are there any other beliefs that you feel like you might be holding based on the assumptions that you've drawn?

Antoinette [client]: I mean, I hear some beliefs in my head right now that I'm a little bit embarrassed about. Maybe that feel like things that I'm like, yeah. I think I'm operating from some of these beliefs, like there's, I do really think a lot of times, like the higher performing kids are just gonna be, they'll be fine.



Like so many of them are, they're. Just taking care of business. but then that makes me think too of this like belief of maybe it's more of a question of what does it mean about how, like who I believe deserves attention and not deserve attention . When I think about just like quality of classroom experience, who deserves what sort of quality of classroom experience and why? and I think in my mind I always tend to be like, Nope, the ones who have the highest needs, and I'm naming that as like students who are designated as low performing, that's who has the highest needs. So that is where I need to be dedicating the majority of my attention to. But when I'm thinking about just like quality of experience and engagement and classroom that I want to have where everybody able to experience joy in mathematics and then I can see how, might not be the experience for some of my higher performing students because of this. I'm holding this belief of who actually like deserves the small group interaction basically.

Elena [coach]: So

if we had a video camera and it wasn't recording sound, let's say it was just recording the imagery, the camera is panning your room, and it's seeing that the higher performing students are working. They're quiet. They seem to be focused. They're on task, and then the conclusion you're drawing is they will be fine.

And you're also looking at the data. From the work with the lower performing students in small groups and saying that is leading to this, which is leading to this, and they're making growth. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with your perceptions or decisions.

Antoinette [client]: Yeah.

Elena [coach]: And so the conclusion that you're coming to is I have to keep pulling them for small group time because that's the only way they'll make growth.

Antoinette [client]: Yeah. Yeah. I think like the data's definitely informing that, but even thinking about like the camera piece that you're talking about, I'm like, yeah, if there were a camera to record the classroom outside of like the whole group instruction time. If it were to look at the small group table, it would see students collaborating with one another. You would be able to physically see people interacting. There's often like laughing in those times or like high fives happening when kids like, solve a problem that is really hard and , I think I'm just zooming out on that camera and thinking through like the difference in just again, like quality of classroom experience and thinking about how much of the input that I'm giving really does help those small groups. But a lot of it really is like the energy and the collaboration and that's when I think about the classroom culture that I've tried to build. The small group space is one that I'm like, yeah, that's like a highlight of what I want kids to be experiencing and what I think is



actually like necessary for kids to be able to grow. And so when I think about beliefs, I'm also like, I don't know, is it a belief of like time? Like I don't have time to be able to create that experience for higher performing students Or you mentioned like I've tried them work independently, like in pairs and that doesn't work.

But is it a time thing or is it a. Like, I actually create an experience where everybody gets to engage in a little bit of the differentiated instruction or is there a way for me to just be like more creative about how I think about that? But I do often think yeah, they're gonna be fine.

They started off hi, and I'm really focused on the other, but i'm a little embarrassed to say that, like I just haven't put much thought into what my higher performing students are experiencing on like a day in, day out basis.

Elena [coach]: Well, I hear. Some honest and vulnerable awareness of acknowledging what they might be experiencing just from that sort of emotional affective place, and perhaps some interest in exploring that and shifting their experience.

Antoinette [client]: Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm definitely like open to, as I mentioned, just is there a way for me to get more creative about how to create. The experiences that I believe are necessary for kids to make growth for everybody. And how can I also apply that? Thinking to my higher performing students, I haven't thought too much about the plateau.

I've been in a eh they're fine. They're like close to where they need to be. So even if they're making a little bit of growth, like that's all they need to make. But I also don't want that to be like limiting them in any way. And I'm thinking about what's possible for them if they are getting some of the small group experience and like the collaborative learning too.

Elena [coach]: Okay, stop there and we will record the debrief for the coach Learning Library.

Elena: welcome back, friends. I hope that conversation sparked something for you. As you heard, this framework can help clients begin to make their thinking visible. It provides a structure to unpack observations, to surface assumptions and beliefs, and to examine interpretations. Ultimately, this framework helps us to help a client shift conclusions and take new actions.



It is especially helpful when clients are stuck in unhelpful patterns or when they're struggling to make meaning of something that feels emotionally charged. This is an advanced tool, and I talk about that quite a bit in the debrief. That's in the coach Learning Library. It works best when it is used, when there's trust in a relationship, when the coach is practicing at emotional attunement, and when you and your client have a shared understanding of why you're engaging in belief exploration.

So again, to go deeper, check out the Ladder of Inference skill session in the coach Learning Library. And in that skill session, you are going to find a printable guide to the ladder sample coaching questions, demo transcripts and reflection prompts. And you'll also find a skill session for other advanced tools like exploring beliefs and core human needs frameworks, so you can choose the approach that best fits your client or blend the approaches.

And again, check out the show notes to learn more.

And don't forget, this episode is part of our weekly podcast, so subscribe and then you will not miss a future episode. .

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Take care and be well, everyone.

