

Elena Aguilar:

Hello and welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm Elena Aguilar.

Hi, friends. Today you get to hear the third part of our miniseries on coaching resistance, and today I've got a demonstration of coaching a resistant teacher for you. So in this episode, the first 15 minutes or so is an authentic role-play. And then the second 15 minutes is me pulling back the curtain on what I was thinking, what I was doing as a coach, and I do that in conversation with the person who I was role-playing with. So you get to hear both the role-play and the debrief. I want you to know that the teacher in this role-play, Mike, is a former teacher and a former administrator who was unfamiliar with transformational coaching. So this role-play to me felt a lot more authentic than sometimes the ones that I do with folks who are really familiar with this model because really this was really new to him.

And also this isn't someone who is a coach. All right, I really am grateful to Mike for role-playing that conversation with me. I think you're going to get a lot out of it. Specifically actually I think you are going to get an insight into how you don't need to hold someone accountable for not following through on things that they said they were going to do, which is what in this scenario with Mike, he said he was going to integrate some literacy strategies and several months into the school year and into our coaching, he had not. So I think you will hear how you don't need to hold someone accountable and really what to do instead, and how to coach someone in a way that you are deeply honoring their need for autonomy and doing so in a way that acknowledges the fear that is present for them, but doesn't let the fear interfere.

So if you listened to the first and the second parts of this mini-series in which I describe what resistance is, and I talked a lot about core human needs, in this episode, you're going to hear how I incorporate that knowledge into a coaching conversation. Now, if you haven't heard those other episodes, you might want to hear those first, or you might just want to hear this one and then go back and listen to episodes 147 and 148, the previous two. Okay, before we jump into the episode, I do want to extend a great big thank you to our listener with the username LW707, who left the review, "Love me some Elena. A. I've learned so much from Elena over the years. That's it. Short and sweet." Thank you so much listener with the username, LW707. Thank you so much for that love and for taking the time to rate and review the podcast.

And for any of you listening who might be thinking, yeah, I keep meaning to do that. I could be thought about doing that. Just do it now. It just takes like 90 seconds and it really helps. I read them. I feel so energized by your feedback and it's just a great way to support the show. So let's get into this show.

Okay, so I'm going to set up this scenario first. Mike is a teacher in his fifth year of teaching and he teaches eighth grade U S history. And I'm an instructional coach working with teachers in our school around integrating literacy practices and particularly in the content areas. And so it is December of our first year working together, and I've been coaching Mike since late August and attempting to get him to integrate strategies like front loading vocabulary and using small group instruction, discussion protocols. And so far I haven't seen Mike implement any of these strategies or very minimally. And so in this conversation, I want to explore what's going on. Okay.

All right, Mike, I'm glad that we could meet today. And even though we're not able to meet in person, because I know there's a lot going on and you need to be at home, I'm really glad that you were able to carve out this time for us to meet. So before we jump into the topics on our agenda for today, I just wanted to check in first and see if there's anything else on your mind that you want to make sure we talk about in our time together.

Mike:

No, not really. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Elena Aguilar:

Okay, great. So we will just jump into the agenda that we set at the end of our last session. And the first thing on that agenda is to check in on the strategy that you were going to be producing to your students around annotating text. And you were going to model it, you were going to give them some symbols to use for annotating the text that they're reading. And so that was the agreement that we'd made last week, and I wanted to start there and see how that went.

Mike:

I haven't really had a chance to use the annotation specifically. I've done a little bit with sort of note-taking in some of the primary sources we're using, but I haven't used the specific template that you and I looked at for annotation.

Elena Aguilar:

So I'm curious about that decision just because last week it seems like a template that you felt would work, and so I'm curious about what came up for you in making that decision not to use it.

Mike:

Yeah, I mean, when I was thinking about where we're at and the work we needed to get done this week as we're really making this last push before break, I felt like we had these primary documents that we were going to be using, and I really wanted the students to be able to engage with them in an authentic way, and the more I looked at sort of the annotation, the sort of less authentic that felt to me and more like, I don't know, prescriptive and rote. And I think that's probably why I didn't use it to be honest as I'm even kind of processing this out loud, but it just didn't feel sort of an authentic way to engage with the historical material.

Elena Aguilar:

Okay. That's really helpful to hear. And I know how passionate you are about history and giving our students access to history. So I want to dig into this a little bit more because over the last few months we've talked about a number of different strategies for giving kids more access to the academic literacy. We've talked about front loading vocabulary and other strategies. And I guess I haven't seen you try those strategies. And so I'm hearing this that you felt like there was a conflict with giving kids access to history. But yeah, I just want to dig into that a little bit more. So I'm curious what comes to your mind when I say that?

Mike:

Yeah, I mean, I think, to be honest, I've talked to you a little bit about the work I've been doing with other social studies teachers and trying to present a more decolonized curriculum to our students this year, and really trying to engage in authentic and meaningful ways with primary texts with voices that aren't typically elevated. And I think some of the strategies that we've talked about are really traditional, and technical vocabulary is important. There's a place for that for sure. But what I don't want to do is replicate the very typical cycle of here's the vocab, here's the dates, here's the names. Memorize. Those will be on the quiz. And so I guess I probably have been kind of bristling at some of that. And frankly, I

have my kids for 46 minutes a day. I don't have time to dedicate half my lesson to literacy strategies when there's so much content we need to cover between now and June.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah. Yeah. Thank you for that honesty and for sharing a little bit more about how you're thinking about these decisions. And I'm hearing you're making a decision that's prioritizing giving students a real different experience of history than they might have had or they might have elsewhere. One of the reasons why we're exploring these literacy strategies is that especially because we have such high numbers of students who are English learners, and we've noticed that students struggle to access the primary sources that you're giving them or the other content that's so powerful because of the language barrier, the reading, and then you've made comments about students writing and that they really struggle to express their thoughts. So it seems like there's this tension, there's a conflict between wanting to give students the history content. And then I guess what I'm curious is, are you seeing that they're getting it? Are you seeing that they are able to access the primary sources and they are able to communicate their analysis and their reflections through writing?

Mike:

That's a good question. I would say yes and no. I'm happy with the progress we're making in class, working with primary documents, and it's still taking a lot of scaffolding to engage with some of the primary materials in class, but the kids can get there. I mean, if we give them the right supports and the right hooks, they can absolutely get there and engage with it. I am totally still frustrated with their writing. I'm really kind of at a loss there. I frankly don't know how kids are allowed to get to eighth grade without sort of basic fundamentals of writing. And so I think that part has been really hard because the analysis that I see them, I can see their brains doing in talking with them, doesn't translate to the page. And so that continues to be very frustrating for me, but the kids can absolutely engage with the material.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah, that's great. I mean, you're giving them really powerful material, and I hear your frustration about their writing. So I guess I'm just curious, what do you think is the solution? How do we give them the writing skills they need?

Mike:

That's a good question. I mean, I think the real solution is that they can't get to eighth grade with the level of writing deficits that they currently have. And I think the place for that at the English class, I mean obviously writing is part of history, but my role is more around [inaudible 00:10:37] and evaluation and criticism and argumentation. Like the mechanics and conventions of how to use the English language need to happen in English class. And I don't have the time to do that in my class. And so frankly, I don't think I know what the answers are within my four walls for where they're writing currently is.

Elena Aguilar:

This is definitely a systemic and structural issue that needs to be addressed. And I wonder what we can do for the kids that you have in your classroom right now today. There's what should happen or should have happened, but then there's what do we do about the kids now? How do we meet their needs?

Mike:

I mean, that's a good question. You have answers, I'm all ears on it. But I guess what I'm currently trying to do is to give the kids ways to demonstrate the level of analysis and thinking that they can do in addition to writing. And I don't know, with the writing, trying to get them to get their ideas on paper. And frankly, I'm kind of punting on all of the editing and grammar work that I just don't think we have time for in our class.

Elena Aguilar:

Can I ask a question here? It's sort of clarifying.

Mike:

Sure.

Elena Aguilar:

Do you think it is the grammar and the punctuation that's most important when it comes to their writing?

Mike:

Is it most important? I think it is the thing that is most preventing their success right now. I don't know if it's the most important thing about writing period, but I think right now they struggle with basic conventions and they struggle with organizational coherence. It's not some really basic revision stuff or small editing. It's really starting from the ground of what does it mean to write multiple sentences and paragraphs together. So I guess I don't know that it's the most important, but to me that is right now the biggest barrier to their written communication.

Elena Aguilar:

And that definitely is a huge part of effectively communicating your ideas. And lots of people do judge and evaluate based on those kinds of aspects of writing. I'm just thinking back to your commitment to giving your students a decolonized curriculum. And if there's parallels when we talk about writing and there's punctuation and grammar, which is part of writing, but we could also talk about just the communication of ideas and expressing opinions and those aspects.

Mike:

That's part of what I mean when I say I'm trying to think of other ways aside from formal writing to assess their thinking and their analysis, because it's easy for me to say the current conventions and ways of communication are grounded in white supremacist culture, and at the same time, my kids are going to leave my school and they're going to need to know how to communicate in writing. So I don't think it's right to just sort of ignore that. I think we have to pay attention to their writing skills and conventions and be very transparent about the ways that power and language intersect. But I guess I just don't feel like I have the space or frankly, the expertise, to develop the writing tools for most of our kids, which is where they've got English class, they've got ESL teachers that feels like where that lives, but I'm still struggling.

Elena Aguilar:

This is a struggle. This really is a dilemma. There's not really a solution, which is really sad. I think I'm just wanting to acknowledge, I hear your commitment to your kids and there's some elements here that are

really frustrating and sad and outside of a conversation about front loading vocabulary using graphic organizers.

Mike:

Yeah, I guess I wish I had time for it. All right. I mean, if I had 90 minute classes, if I felt like I had time to, sure. Let's give me some other stuff to throw in there. I think I feel the crunch of time. I'm very anxious about how much we need to do and how little time there is to do it. Whenever there's some back to school special meeting, they stick that in social studies class. So I guess it's not that I don't see the need, but I just feel maxed out in terms of what I can provide. And I don't know. I guess I'd ask you, do you think that if there isn't time for everything, do you think that the vocabulary work and the small group discussion, do you feel like that will be better for kids and their engagement with history and civics and economics this year than not?

Elena Aguilar:

I think I see our students wanting to get deeper into the curriculum that you're offering them and wanting to share their reflections and not having the tools.

Mike:

Yeah, I agree with that.

Elena Aguilar:

And I hear you on the lack of time, and I hear your fear and anxiety about having to make all these decisions with, there's a whole lot of things that you're having to weigh. And I do wonder what would happen if we used some of the literacy strategies, the ones that we've selected. There's so much research into how effective they are. So these are not vocabulary strategies which give kids 12 words a week and have them memorize them. These are strategies to have them learn transferrable vocabulary terms. So looking at prefixes and suffixes and roots of words. And when we think about U S history and some of the language they're encountering, just immediately what comes to my mind is sort of the role that Greek and Latin plays in some of the historical documents and how that can be transferred into science and into math. So it's using strategies that are useful in other areas and that might give them ways to either access the content more deeply or to remember it or process it.

So I hear you on the challenge with time, and I wonder, you make a lot of really thoughtful decisions about what to teach and how to teach it with a real commitment to students learning and critical thinking. And I wonder if we could draw on those decision-making skills that you have into thinking about these literacy strategies.

Mike:

I mean, why not throw an algebra one while we're at it, right? Let's just, let's knock it all out in social studies. I hear you. I mean, I do think there's obviously clear connections between their ability to access language and their ability to access this content. There's clear connections there, and I guess every time I start looking at these literacy tools, I start getting stressed out about just, I guess part of my frustration with the past several years, even decades of education, is that kids have been cheated out of social studies and civics instruction in favor of cramming this kind of stuff on them. I don't mean this to be pejorative, these tools are probably good, but just that we now have a world where people don't have

the basic understanding of what has come before them and why things are the way they are. And I am committed to making sure that is not my kid's experience.

I am open though to the idea that there are ways to be thoughtful about incorporating these tools into the work I'm already doing. And I guess I'm thinking that I've maybe been thinking about them as two disjointed and separate things and wondering how I can analyze the tools themselves and think about where they actually make sense with the lessons we're diving into.

Elena Aguilar:

That's really what I'd love to see you do is to go through that process and evaluate them and see where you could incorporate them and where, from my experience and understanding with these, you may need to do a lesson where you introduce the strategy and you model it and you have kids practice, and then there's a little bit of gradual release. But pretty quickly, a lot of these strategies are ones that students can use independently. And so it's not becoming an English teacher, just pulling on some of these resources and strategies that, again, we're trying to use them across the school. So the more kids use them in their content classes and the more familiar they become and the less you need to sort of teach them how to do it.

Mike:

Yeah. Yeah, that's true. And I do need to do a better job of trying to connect with the English Department to see what they have already taught, so that, I mean it'd be ideal for me if they did like you just described, that model lesson of how the tool works. I would love to have stuff that they've already taught that I can just put into place so that I'm not losing a day of social studies content. And I mean, we've talked about this before. The scheduling's not ideal. We never have shared planning time. I understand the reasons for that. It's fine, but it's just made it hard to collaborate, and I think I need to put it back on my list to try and do that.

Elena Aguilar:

That seems like a clear next step. I'm curious, let's say you pick out four of these strategies. I mean, there's only seven that we're introducing this year. So let's say you pick out four and you start integrating them in starting in January for the rest of the year. What might be the best possible outcome and what might be the biggest fear in terms of thinking about integrating these in?

Mike:

Well, the biggest fear is that there's four of these things, and they each collectively take three days of instruction, and I lose 12 days and we don't get to the unit on 1850 that I really want to get to. And we're all really frustrated and the kids' literacy skills aren't approved. So that's the fear. And to be honest, I think the more likely. I guess on the plus side, let's see. If I connect with the English teachers and I get clearer about how they're teaching them and using them, then those tools in theory should help. They shouldn't just help with their English class. They should help kids be able to access my content and be more successful there. Also, make me probably a more collaborative team player and give the kids skills that they can apply not just in English, but across curricular areas.

Elena Aguilar:

So the hope or the possibility is that could actually help kids.

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Mike:

Yes.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah.

Mike:

Yes.

Elena Aguilar:

So I appreciate hearing the fears and hearing those first. And I wonder about just picking one strategy to try in January and see how that goes. So not looking at losing 12 days, but just picking one to start with in January.

Mike:

Yeah.

Elena Aguilar:

How does that sound?

Mike:

Yes, I need to do a little more thinking about which one I think will be most aligned with the work we're doing, but I can do that.

Elena Aguilar:

We can do that together right now.

Mike:

Sure.

Elena Aguilar:

Okay. So we'll stop our role play right there.

Mike:

Okay.

Elena Aguilar:

Since that's what we're going to do next, and I would love for you to share just what did that feel like? What did you learn about somebody who's resistant by being that teacher?

Mike:

This kind of coaching was new for me, so I think it was new and interesting. It felt like I still had autonomy in the discussion. I never felt dictated to or like I was being told what needed to happen. It

was clearly a direction that you wanted me to go. You wanted me to use the tools, but also sort of allowing me to think through things and ultimately really decide whether I'm going to or not. And I think asking questions that eventually get down to kids was what would've been motivating for me anyway. And that with all the other bureaucratic frustrations and structural things, at the end of the day for this teacher, definitely felt like I was grounded in what was best for kids, even though I sort of disagreed with the ways that was manifesting in the school.

Elena Aguilar:

Which I think is the case actually for most teachers. I think most teachers actually are grounded in what's best for kids. It's just that there's a lot of disagreement about what is best for kids. We all just have our own theories.

Mike:

One of the other things that I appreciated was allowing for the space that this is a problem that doesn't have a solution right now. And not trying to debate that away or minimize the frustrations with the amount of content I wanted to cover. Well, also, there really isn't enough time. That's just true. And it sucks. And I thought that was helpful to just sort of leave that there and not try to validate it or say, if we just strategically plan enough, we can make it all fit. It's like, nope, it doesn't fit, and that stinks, and we have to figure out what we do with that.

Elena Aguilar:

And the anger and the frustration about kids being in eighth grade and not being able to write a coherent paragraph is also really valid. It's not right. It's not fair. It shouldn't be that way. It doesn't need to be that way. And so as a coach, I'm really listening for the underlying emotions. And so I heard the anger, I heard sadness, and I heard a lot of fear and fear of not being effective, not being a competent teacher, not you said at the end when I asked you what your hopes and fears were and you started with the fears, losing time, we're all going to be really frustrated. The kids' skills don't improve. We don't get to the unit. That's real. I think in schools, we so often hear fear expressed and people are told that's not true. It doesn't have to be that way. Just creating some space for people to share, this is what I'm worried about. I'm being able to acknowledge. Yeah. And those are real fears.

Mike:

It doesn't represent a failure to have high expectations or beliefs of what's possible to acknowledge the very real challenges and contradictions in the system. I think teachers frequently get told that if they express something, I don't think we can make this work, it's oh well, then you just don't believe in your kids. It's like, well, no, that's not what it is. And I didn't get that in this conversation, which is great.

Elena Aguilar:

Right. And then at the same time, okay, so what are we going to do and what can we start with? What's one step? Really what I was asking you to do, is do more. And that's another hard thing for teachers to hear, for any of us to hear. It's always like, no, you have to actually do more. Now you have to do this as well because what you're doing isn't enough. And so when we're coaching or leading, how do we scaffold that and help people build the confidence that this might initially feel like more, but actually I hear your commitment to students and I hear the core human need of fulfilling a purpose. That's what we're addressing. Here's a strategy that actually might get you a whole lot closer to being able to fulfill the needs of your students and therefore your sense of purpose.

One thing I appreciated in your reflection is that you said you felt like you had autonomy in the conversation, you had agency. And that's one of my commitments in any transformational coaching conversation, is to ensure that people feel like they have a sense of agency. Because so many teachers, so many people feel so disempowered, and even in a conversation, we can give people enough choice points so that they can tap into that sense in themselves because we all need to be more connected to our sense of decision-making and power.

Mike:

It could be a paradigm shift too, because teachers so often come into these conversations expecting to be dictated to or to be condescended to or given very technical feedback that they already knew. So I can imagine it being a real shift to be given that kind of space and agency in a conversation that could throw a teacher off at first.

Elena Aguilar:

And if I was to be taking a whole bunch of steps back and think, all I'm trying to do is get you to use these simple literacy strategies that we talked about. I said, they're not memorizing stuff. This is transferrable literacy skills and back in August, you were nodding your head and you were on board, and it's not that hard, but there's a whole lot more going on that needs to be surfaced and acknowledged.

Mike:

One of the things that I think struck me was I knew coming into this meeting that I had committed to using these literacy tools and also knew that I just straight up hadn't done it. And so I think I was expecting a little bit more to be called to the carpet and have to explain myself. And I think that's part of why I said I felt like I had agency in the conversation, is I never felt like that piece just wasn't there. And I'm sort of wondering if that was intentional and if so, why, if you would've done it differently if I had come in differently. But I really noticed that this wasn't like uh-oh. You said you were going to do X and you didn't do it, you're in trouble.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah. Well, because we ended, our last session was saying we were going to talk about these. That was the sort of setup. And I knew anybody in that situation would feel a little nervous, perhaps get a little defensive, and I know that that's just not a productive, it's not helpful to go down that route. Accountability can be helpful. Sometimes it can also just lead to compliance. We're in such an entrenched power dynamic in our institutions, in our society, and even though I am just an instructional coach, there's still a perception of me having more power, whether that's true or not. And so my suspicion was, and it is with most people, that won't really be pathway towards transformative change or deep commitment to these kinds of strategies. And I really truly actually wanted to understand what's going on. I had some suspicions, but I wanted to understand your decision-making, and I actually really believed that what was blocking you were things that could be addressed and that your commitment to your kids would allow you to recognize how these strategies can be really helpful and useful.

I was looking for where to draw those two ideas together and help you see this might actually be something that really helps, that is actually helps you fulfill your commitment to your students, to yourself. So there was no point at which I took a confrontational stance because it wasn't necessary. You were reflective, you were processing. When I talk about the power of curiosity and facilitating someone's reflection, this wasn't adversarial. This wasn't me calling you out on not doing what you were

supposed to be doing. I think about it really as, let me sit down next to you and let's talk about how things are going and are you seeing what you want to be seeing for your students? And if not, let's unpack that and acknowledge the frustration and the sadness in not being able to serve your students in the way that you want to. We've just been so socialized and conditioned to call people out, hold people accountable. We just have really weak muscles in using other strategies.

Mike:

And I think that made it more powerful because I think given my sort of anxiety and frustration, I would've been pretty quick to go to an adversarial place if that's where you had taken it and gotten really self-righteous about how much this wasn't my job and how I am not their English teacher, and really doubled down on my resistance. And it felt like by not doing that, it allowed me to stay in a space where I could allow these multiple realities to be true, that in an ideal world, it wouldn't be my job, and we're not in an ideal world, and we need to make sense of that together for our kids.

Elena Aguilar:

I had a mindset of the commitment to partnership, like you're in there every day with them and I'm here to support and see how we can figure this out together. There was one point where I said something like, "for our students" and I did that intentionally. It's also so much responsibility for an individual teacher, but other people who work in a school can be partners and can communicate. I want to support you in the message that teachers get that everything is on their shoulders and all of the failures are their fault and all of that. What if we can shift that a bit to a broader sense of collective and supporting kids learning. I also wanted to acknowledge that there was a point in the conversation, it was towards the end and you said, "I see the need and I feel maxed out." And then you had this long sigh and we're having this conversation without video, so I'm really paying attention to breathing.

Anytime I hear a long sigh as a coach, I'm like, okay, that's good. That's emotional processing. That means more space is opening up ...

Mike:

That's really interesting.

Elena Aguilar:

... I wonder what's going to come next. And then actually what came next was you started talking about feeling really stressed out and talking more about the kids'. Resistance is often a manifestation of fear, and so when I hear someone sighing and then sharing more of their internal thoughts and feelings, I know that that process is what needs to happen in order for us to be able to get to action. Because the fear and the frustration takes energy, and when we're putting energy into that, it's draining us and drawing from where we could be directing energy to support kids. Any final reflections on what that felt like?

Mike:

For a teacher in this kind of scenario it can be easy to assume the resistance is coming from some vicious place, and I think in this scenario it was really resistance on behalf of kids, and sometimes there's just misalignment or there's things we need to work through or there's too much to do. And I appreciated the space to be able to have all that be true and still move forward with what we think is going to be best to help kids in the long term. So I thought it was great.

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Elena Aguilar:

Well, thank you so much, Mike, for participating in this.

All right, friends, thanks for listening. Now, you may have heard me say this in my previous episodes. This month, January, 2023, we are doing a little bit of a drive to get folks to become friends of the show. You can find a link in the show notes. I know you want to stop this right now and not hear me ask you this again, but it is the way. Friends of the show are the way that we keep this podcast ad free and going. And so maybe today might be the day that you will consider clicking on that link and considering a contribution of \$5 a month to keep this show going. Okay. This podcast is produced by Leslie Bickford and Stacy Goodman does the sound engineering. And thank you all for listening.