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DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVE TEXT: ED TECH AND MISINFORMATION CHALLENGES IN SCHOOLS

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEYLA AKINCILAR,
PRODUCT DESIGNER, *GOALBOOK*

TARA LOCKHART AND LEYLA AKINCILAR

A former urban teacher and principal now working in educational design and technology discusses designing curricula for equitable and differentiated learning, including: how the information landscape – particularly issues of (lack of) representation – shapes decision-making, specific anti-bias efforts, and the challenges teachers face in helping students discern the quality of information in digital landscapes.

Tara Lockhart: Welcome Leyla Akincilar. We're excited to talk with someone in the world of education technology, which is connected to, but also outside of, academia. Can we start by hearing about your history in education?

Leyla Akincilar: Of course. Right before coming to Goalbook, I taught 7th and 8th grade English at KIPP Bayview Academy, in San Francisco, for eight years. KIPP is a system of free, public charter schools committed to teaching diverse students. I also served as assistant principal there for three years. Prior to that, I taught middle school English for four years in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). In both roles, I did quite a bit of curricular design and at KIPP there was an emphasis on individualized instruction geared toward helping all students succeed. So that background in curricular work led me to Goalbook.

Lockhart: Yes, tell us about Goalbook and your role there now.

Akincilar: I've worked at Goalbook for the last five years. My role began as the ELA (English Language Arts) content manager, which included leading a team of part-time content contributors, from a variety of educational backgrounds and expertise, around the country. My role has since evolved to product designer. As a designer, I follow the design thinking process to identify a user pain point, conduct user research, and then design solutions that are reflected in our product. The coolest part

of this role is that through the user research process, I speak to hundreds of educators across the country so I can truly empathize with their challenges. This has been particularly interesting during distance learning. I was inspired—at times moved to tears—by how quickly teachers adapted and how worried they were about their students' well-being.

A bit more about Goalbook. Goalbook is both a software platform for teachers and a professional development program. We offer two tools. Our primary tool is Toolkit, which supports the creation and implementation of standard-aligned, compliant IEP (individualized education plan) goals for students with learning disabilities or other health impairments. Our content is supported by the UDL (Universal Design for Learning) framework. This approach provides more equitable access to learning in a variety of subjects and domains. Toolkit provides research-based resources and strategies to support instructional objectives for students pre-K-12 in seventeen different subject areas.

Our other tool is called Pathways, which provides Common Core aligned assessments, resources, and strategies to support instructional needs for general and special educators. Again, one of our primary goals is helping teachers understand the standards and what they can look like through the practice stages and at mastery; this understanding then helps them teach to all students and where those students are in their learning instead of “teaching to the middle.” Our focus is on demystifying the standards teachers are asked to work towards, and in deepening teachers' repertoire of instructional strategies. We believe in continuous professional development for teachers, and provide resources both online and through in-person development sessions.

In both parts of Goalbook, our central goals are improving instructional practice, supporting standards-based assessment, and differentiating instruction. We partner with over 600 districts across 45 states.

Tara Lockhart: Yes, can you tell us more about the work you're doing to gather meaningful content for use in the schools and how that work has been impacted by misinformation?

Akincilar: Of course. One dimension of our work is finding and curating searchable practice passages that teachers can use with their students. Often my team is editing those passages to be under 500 words so that they are more flexible for in-class use. As we're editing, we need to be mindful of not unintentionally falling into misinforming via the editing process: have we shifted the meaning of the passage? We are very attentive to the issue of misinformation on the content production/editing side.

In terms of managing people, this can sometimes be a challenge. The assumption is that we've hired people with some content and interpretive expertise, who understand enough about any given passage that they aren't decontextualizing or omitting too much. Of course, this isn't always the case, and all of us will sometimes err too far in one direction, so we need to be attuned to that in an

ongoing way. I'd say the biggest danger is working with people who haven't necessarily questioned their own biases, so they are not as open or as aware of how their selection or editing practices might be misrepresenting a text or forwarding only a certain set of values.¹

Lockhart: This is probably a somewhat familiar conundrum to many writing teachers who are always thinking about text selection and contextualizing, right?

Akincilar: Definitely. I draw on my own teaching background all the time. In terms of managing others doing this work, though, I'm also working at the more systemic level. For example, if I have a team member who finds a source or passage that's problematic in some way, it's my responsibility to add to or adjust our overall guidelines for selecting/reviewing passages to ensure greater quality moving forward. A big issue in our work is decontextualization. Particularly when we're working with historical, or even contemporary, passages that are highly charged, we have a responsibility to ensure that we are not misinforming student-readers or creating unintended negative consequences. This awareness guides me in terms of managing my team; it helps us create responsible excerpts, as well as additional materials that teachers can use to re-contextualize information.

Lockhart: How do those systemic changes you implement then impact the curricula and support you're providing to teachers?

Akincilar: That's a good question. A key tradeoff, or balance, that we strive to strike is between the teaching or support side and the technology side. In terms of the example I just shared, providing robust passages that have an anti-bias orientation and are contextualized through both how we've excerpted and through supporting teaching documents needs to be balanced with how we use software to make those passages searchable, so teachers can find what will work best for their particular class, a particular standard, etc. My team focuses on the content side of that equation. We are finding or creating material that is high interest and aligned to the standards, while simultaneously paying attention to the length of the passage, the lexile levels, how well it can stand alone and be understood (i.e., not misrepresent the larger work), and whether or not it requires outside knowledge. This last factor of outside knowledge, or sometimes idiomatic language, is important as we anticipate a range of learners, including English Language Learners. Then we make this content available through search functionality.

We've started also creating original content. We began by focusing at the K-2 levels with the specific goal of having more inclusive content. We needed high interest material with a lower range of lexile levels that was also much more diverse; the easiest way, we found, to achieve all of these goals was to create the content ourselves. That's something we are continuing to work on.

Lockhart: That leads us to talk a bit more about the technological side of education practices and information literacies. What are you noticing or working on from your vantage point?

Akincilar: The educational landscape is always a little bit behind in terms of responding to digital changes and technology. One example has been how slowly the Common Core standards have been to really integrate digital literacies and attend to the spread of mis- and disinformation. That has begun to change over the last few years with states like New York and Massachusetts updating their standards this year. Other states—like Texas and Ohio—have been updating, but have not yet focused on emphasizing digital literacies. This needs to happen since students find most of the information they are using in their own reading and research online, if it isn't given to them by a teacher. Right now, there is too much onus on teachers to figure out how to work with students to ascertain the quality of information within digital environments; more of that onus needs to shift both to the standards and to curricular design.²

Specifically, standards need to be fleshed out to help teach students the kinds of high-level discernment now needed to weed out mis- or disinformation. As importantly, since we teach within a context of standardized assessment, those assessments also need to shift for this to happen downstream, as it were. If curricula often work backwards from assessments, assessments have a crucial role to play in terms of emphasizing information and digital information literacy skills. My hope would be that institutions that create high-stakes testing respond to the need to concentrate on digital literacy skills. Since those tests dictate which skills are most critical, then adding those skills to tests will highlight their importance. Teacher induction programs also have a huge role to play; however, within the context of national teacher shortages, particularly in high-poverty areas and now with the pandemic, training along these lines becomes both more crucial and more difficult.

Lockhart: Yes, thinking about how we are bound or shaped by the larger systems of education (like standardized assessment) is so crucial. Along similar lines of attending to larger structures that impact education, I know diversity in education is something you are passionate about, emerging from your experience as an educator within highly diverse, urban schools. What are the implications or connections you see between diversity and inclusion and mis- or disinformation?

Akincilar: I've spearheaded substantial initiatives to create a body of anti-bias literature and resources around that literature that support teachers. Essentially, we are looking for sources we can pull from that can be trusted to be doing this work; are there sources that are reliably fact-checking, as well as checking their own biases and being up front about their interests or perspectives? In creating this body of resources, it also means that we are sifting through our back catalogue and pulling biased sources, as well as looking holistically at what we are missing: which perspectives and positionalities are not adequately represented? Are we regularly checking in about our own biases as a company, as former ELA educators who might be overly biased towards what we enjoyed teaching (or were taught), and as individuals to make sure we are not sedimenting patterns of exclusion or over-representation in our catalogue? I think about this work as proactively working against misinformation in terms of misrepresenting what or who is important and "heard" in our society.

The fact that we have a predominantly white (and predominately female) editorial team makes challenging each other even more important.

Lockhart: Yes, I love that this is work you are specifically championing in terms of both workplace culture and educational resources. What's next as you continue this work? Where would you like to see things heading?

Akincilar: Most of our effort is in professional development, which makes sense to me as a former teacher. The expectations for teachers are so high, and within a shifting landscape (technologically, as well as with COVID19 and more online learning) those expectations can become really overwhelming. Our founder began the company with the idea of supporting students with IEPs—attending to students who had specific educational needs and helping teachers understand and feel like they had the resources to meet those needs. Extending a UDL approach to general education needs to continue to grow, I think.

There's also a lot more work to do in terms of teachers understanding and leveraging how standards are vertically aligned across the grades. In the case of mis- and disinformation, for example, how and when are students introduced to the strategies they need to find, evaluate, and use information, and how do we intentionally build practice and knowledge across the grades to deepen those strategies and their use?

Last, there's so much more education needs to do to further social justice, and it is crucial to make sure educators are part of the solution and not the problem of spreading misinformation. Starting in 2017, our entire product team has engaged in in-house professional development we call "Just and Equitable Classrooms." In these sessions, we each take on topics related to that theme and do a deep dive to share with the team. Our goal is to learn more about how we can take that learning and apply it to different aspects of the product. Some of the key issues we have focused on, which I encourage other educators to continue making progress towards as well, include:

- Using anti-ableist language throughout the curriculum, especially in professional development materials that frame teachers' work and in UDL materials (for example, revising any and all deficit-based language)
- Spreading inclusive language beyond the ELA curriculum, for instance, in math content
- Promoting greater diversity in all texts, especially children's literature

A big part of doing this work is also just diversifying the educational workforce. When I attend job fairs to hire for Goalbook, the demographic is almost entirely 25-30-year-old white women; for some time, our content contributor team did not have a single person of color in the ELA division. That needs to change. We're committed to improving our sourcing to ensure we have a more diverse pool of candidates. At every level, we need to be supporting the widest possible range of people to do this

work, since it impacts our next generation, our workforce, and our larger culture.

Lockhart: Right on, Leyla; I couldn't agree more. Thank you so much for your time and perspective.

Notes

1. Since this interview, and in light of making Goalbook's public commitment to the Black Lives Matter movement, we have returned to the examination of our passage collection. While we've always been tracking representation of protagonists in our collection and striving for diversity, we are in our first phases of a deeper examination of how all our content provides windows and mirrors for students. Interested readers can read our founders' BLM and anti-racist commitment statement here: <https://medium.com/innovative-instruction/a-commitment-to-antiracism-9ecb8d69aa9c>.

2. Since this interview, twenty of the fifty US states have revised their standards, some revising just slightly from Common Core and others taking significantly different approaches.