



2019

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Recommended Citation

Larson, Lotta and Goodson, Lori (2019) "Kristin Ziemke: Digital Learning Can Turn Students into Agents of Change Around the Globe," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 45: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2201>

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Kristin Ziemke: Digital Learning Can Turn Students into Agents of Change Around the Globe

Lotta Larson and Lori Goodson

This *Educational Considerations* issue, with its theme of “Teaching and Learning in a Global Community,” highlights education in an ever increasingly connected world—and how we get our students prepared to not only survive, but thrive in such an expanding environment. As we considered this topic, one of the individuals who came to mind almost instantly was Kristin Ziemke (<https://www.kristinziemke.com/>)—an educator who has done so much to create bridges in this global community and helped lead us all on our digital journey.

Ziemke, a longtime kindergarten and first-grade teacher, is an educator in Chicago schools for the [Big Shoulders Fund](#), where she serves as Learning Innovation Specialist. Having received various awards during her teaching career, she has been recognized for her own innovative efforts, making her kindergarten classroom one-to-one with iPads—at a time when no app store even existed to provide teachers digital tool options.

She opened the digital doors for her students, and Apple officials would visit to see what new developments were taking place in her classroom with their devices.

Much has happened since then, in the digital world and in Ziemke’s teaching world, as well. The author of two books, [Amplify: Digital Teaching and Learning in the K-6 Classroom](#) and [Connecting Comprehension and Technology](#), she now travels around the globe sharing her insights into implementation of technology into the curriculum in a way that is impactful—a word that arises throughout conversations with her. Technology just as a fun approach is meaningless; it needs to have impact on students’ learning. She’s also broadening her own

perspective by seeing technology in action globally—ideas that she brings back to her own classroom and her own research.

She is quick to point out that, while she has been involved in a variety of projects regarding technology, she has many more stops to make along her own digital journey.

“My passion right now is looking at next practices for learners,” she said, “how we can use mobile devices and digital tools to connect back to what we know about best practice teaching.”

That branches into topics “under that umbrella of strategic reading inquiry and looking at how we can bring student agency into all of that,” she said. “So I think those are kind of my hot spots for right now. But I like to talk about everything literacy and curiosity.”

Much of that talk finds its roots in her experiences in Chicago Public Schools.

“We had this great little pocket of people at our little Chicago public elementary school, 700 students, 2 of every classroom,” Ziemke said. “It really is awesome. I feel so lucky.”

“Being in Chicago was so incredible because you have access to so many things,” she said. “I was in a school with an incredible principal who was literacy minded, and many years ago they found out students were doing worse the longer they spent at our school. So they peeled back all of the curriculum—it was deemed a failing school—and started with grassroots, daily read-alouds for K-8, and daily independent reading for K-8, and then nightly library checkout.

“So for years, those were the three things the school focused on,” she said. “And then we started to do better. And then the school added, ‘Let’s read some professional books.’ We read a little Ellin Keene, we read a little Nancy Atwell, we used some (Harvey) Smokey Daniels in there, and we became more and more proficient across the years. And by the end of this principal’s tenure there, we were one of the best schools in Illinois, not just in Chicago, because of these strong reading practices.

The vertical articulation regarding literacy, spiraling in depth and breadth across the curriculum, was critical to the school’s success.

“... on this learning journey, we had been influenced so heavily by Stephanie Harvey’s and Smokey Daniels’ work that Smokey read a publication that had mentioned our school and what we were doing with inquiry work. So he came to visit, and he brought Steph to visit and they decided to write their book, *Comprehension and Collaboration*, at our school. We were so excited to have the expertise of those two in our building. It was that moment in time when I needed that push in practice, so when Stephanie Harvey is sitting on your rug with your first graders and says, ‘Kristin, do it again, only this time, say this,’ that was exactly the feedback I needed. Steph and Smokey [said], ‘You guys are doing such important work. You need to go to conferences and start speaking about this.’

It grew from there. In 2011 she received iPads to use in her classroom, which began her Apple device journey at a time when few educators were traveling on that road with her.

“It was so early, and as a result, we had a lot of people from Apple coming through (asking), ‘What do you need? What would make this iPad better?’ There literally wasn’t an app store. It’s crazy to think about that now. We were doing some early practices and getting a ton of feedback on that. And the way we approached it was, ‘What makes sense for readers, and what makes sense for developing writers?’ We started with that, and we then expanded the program; my classroom was one of the very first to go one-to-one with iPads, so it was first grade one-to-one. We partnered with Apple on this and kept going back to our work with Steph and Smoke.

“At that time, just about everybody wanted to know about technology, even though they thought it was a fad—you know, like it was going to go away,” she said. “But I feel like we got to develop some of the foundational practices in regard to pedagogy and devices. It wasn’t about the tech; it was still about the thinking—but how can we use these as additional tools in thinking. And so it just kind of grew, and my fifth-grade teacher went one-to-one at the same time with iPads, and so she and I started writing our books together.”

Digital approaches are essential for teaching and learning in a global community so our students become educator for success in a global community, she said.

“I think access is the key,” Ziemke said. “Before, we knew our classroom, the library books in our classroom, the people in our cities. Now we can know the world. I think that’s the big next step. And how do we use these tools as empathy machines? I don’t think we’ve done our due diligence in teaching kids how to use them appropriately. We’ve handed them over with the absence of instruction.

“In the environment they’ve grown up in, they know how to use them for entertainment or to play, but they don’t know how to use them for thinking, and that’s the bridge that we need to build as educators,” she said. “Way back in 2012, I started blogging with a group of teachers—my friend Kristin Wydeen???? of Ontario started a global blogging team. So my (first-grade) class was blogging with kids in Detroit and kids in Vancouver and kids in Ontario.

“That was probably the most important thing I’d ever done,” she said. “The first semester was mentoring on a class blog and class Twitter account, and then the second semester, we turned it over to the kids, where they’d see each other’s blogs. But it really led to so many great questions about life and region and ecosystem and ‘what is your school like?’—all those things that, especially first graders, wouldn’t have had access to. ... What I saw was the kids did not care what I thought of their reading or what I thought about their writing. Instead, they were thinking, ‘What is my audience looking for? What will give me a lot of feedback? What will make my piece even better?’ It was at that time that I started to see how opening these little doors was the perfect way to raise a generation that knew something differently. When kids have an audience beyond this person (the teacher), they start to think differently. And it’s never been easier to get them an audience. So why aren’t we doing more of that? Why is science fair the only place kids get an audience? So I think there needs to be a push with that. I think people are still concerned about privacy and safety and all of those things.

“As our world becomes more and more global, every type of work that exists in the future will be interconnected in some way,” she said. “So not only do you have to work as a member of a

collaborative team, which we know is huge, but you also have to be able to work with people you never meet or people who come from a completely different cultural experience than you.

“Our kids, they are the decision makers moving forward, and they are going to make decisions about us, so I hope we’re setting them up so they’re flexible in thought so they can adapt and adopt to whatever learning conditions they find themselves in,” Ziemke said. “And the global piece, in my dream world, will be that we find much more commonalities than we find differences. So building on those blocks at a young age is a great starting point.”

Teacher education programs are emphasizing the use of technology to keep up with the growing needs of classroom teachers, but there are still some gaps that can greatly affect our students.

“This is something that I worry about all the time,” she said. “I know some teacher education programs are making gains with that. I also speak with lots of teacher education programs, and I’m like, ‘Tell me what your digital learning course looks like.’ And I hear, ‘We don’t have that course. We try to embed it with what we’re doing.’ That is startling, but then one of the university directors said, ‘Kristin, think about it. We only have three reading methods courses, we only have two math courses. Where are we going to fit that in?’ And it is a real problem.

“But I think it’s so important to understanding where we are now in education and where we need to be,” she said. “I think a lot of the success in using mobile devices will depend on our just-graduated or rising teacher educators because we need to have a foundation of what this looks like and what this sounds like. Of course, university students know how to use devices to communicate and as tools of entertainment, but they haven’t quite seen that bridge where it’s really impactful for education.”

“My typical response would be immerse them—do it just as you’re going to do it in science,” she said. “But the issue I’m seeing all over the place, not just in university settings, is the people who are educating have never taught in an environment where kids are doing it. So the learning curve is completely different. To see it from a student view on an application is totally different from seeing it from an adult view. And that’s a problem. I don’t know exactly what the solution is, but I’m seeing it in elementary schools, as well, where administrators have never taught in a classroom with a digital tool, coaches have not taught, even literacy coaches. They are great with the literacy stuff, but just thinking about what the angle is on digital...it’s not their fault. They just haven’t had that same experience.”



“I’m lucky I get to go to schools all over,” she said, “which completely informs what I do, and I can bring it back to my school in Chicago. But what I see is that many places are doing the more traditional work, and then putting a layer of technology on top, and saying, ‘Did it. We did technology integration.’ I’ve come to hate the term “integration” because it’s become like an afterthought. It should be more technology immersion, or we just shouldn’t even talk about it as technology because it’s only technology for us old people who didn’t grow up with it. For our kids, it’s just life.”

“I hate the term ‘digital natives’ for the same reason because I think that language puts us in boxes, and that’s what we’ve tried to get out of to be more inclusive. Nobody’s calling me a ‘toaster native’ because I grew up with a toaster. It’s hilarious when we look back at it...but that’s we’re doing—holding onto those terms. We’re so slow in education at times to change our language or change our practices. And I think language is so important. I get frustrated in the same way that we’re still talking about 21st Century learners. It’s 2019, people. Twenty percent of your century is over.”

“I do think...we try to compartmentalize everything into something that we know, but that ends up building a lot of barriers for us,” Ziemke said. “And then when we look in the content areas...if we’re talking literacy and we can’t even figure out proper device use in the classroom, then there’s no way we’re getting to the depth of digital literacy.”

Yet, teacher education programs are getting many things right about technology.

“I think we’re instilling a love in the profession,” she said. “I see new teachers just so very passionate about what they do. There are a lot of job choices these days, and for people to be picking education and to be so excited about it, is wonderful.

“I think we are doing a good job of teaching them to be more flexible in the classroom,” she said. “I’m seeing a lot of workshop practice coming out of teacher education programs, a lot of small-group instruction coming out of programs, and I’m seeing teachers who recognize that there is a wide population of students and that chances are those students are going to need different methods. So there’s that awareness for, ‘Yes, I’m going to have to differentiate.’”

Technology, she said, is key to helping our students widen their own perspectives of the world, no matter their own rural or urban or suburban setting.

“The challenges of urban education are the same exact challenges of rural education,” she said. “It’s different in how it plays out, but at the root, it’s challenges for resources, challenges for enrichment, challenges for time with teachers, challenges for knowing something beyond yourself. So I see a lot of parallels between that.

“In this day and age, I think it’s important for every single learner to start taking a look at the rest of the world. One big thing I’m writing about now is using devices as listening tools. We have not done a good job of listening to the other side of the story. And I think really and truly listening comprehension has been put on the back burner for a very long time. That’s something we’re going to have to spend specific time teaching. If you look at podcasts and information

coming through a digital auditory method, that's only going to increase. I know as an adult how many times I've listened to Audible in the car, and I'm having to go back, back, back, back because I zoned out a little bit. So we haven't done that close listening practice we have done with close reading.

“I really think we've been distracted by what technology can do in many school settings. First of all, I've seen people making the choice for technology because it looks good. It's like, 'If we have technology, then our families think we're doing really innovative work.' But we haven't supported the teacher development to use it well. So I think we need to press pause on all of the things. There are too many things, and we're getting distracted about that. We really need to get back to a place where we're using technology to, first, help kids tell their stories; second, hear the stories of others, and third, in hearing the stories of others, be inspired to take action upon issues.”

“Our kids are powerful agents, even if they're six or seven or eight,” Ziemke said. “And we need to help them see that the world is much bigger than this classroom or this school or this town. And even in little, tiny ways, they can have an impact. That agency piece is huge.”

“First, we have to get them to care—about people, about learning, whatever the topic is,” she said. “Then they'll keep researching and keep thinking about it. That's the piece that really does change them—to know that this is happening today, it's not something that happened long ago. I was in a fifth-grade classroom in Portland last year, and they were reading Laurie Halse Anderson's book *Chains*. They were reading about enslaved people in the American Revolution, and then we pulled some non-fiction articles that talked about long ago, but also enslaved people today, and, specifically, kids. We did a reading frenzy with multiple texts, and then kids reflected on it. The big piece was they were so blown over that it exists today. We think this (topic) is a long-ago thing, but then kids were taking action, like what could they do? Make public service announcement. Reach out. Raise awareness to those sorts of things. And that opens the door to connect every aspect of history a teacher would want to study because there's examples of that happening today, and now we know about it.

One key concern is keeping the knowledge and abilities gap from growing even more, considering some students today have greater access to the latest in technology than others.

“I do a lot of work in under-resourced communities, and I see this on a daily basis,” Ziemke said. “I'm encouraged that those gaps are closing; we know more homes have devices; we know more teens have devices. But what I worry about almost more than that digital component of it is that I see kids who need the best instruction getting the lowest quality instruction, whether it be like, 'This curriculum isn't working after 15 months, so let's get a new program.' Or the drill and kill stuff. That, I think, is the most detrimental to the knowledge gap we see because there's not that choice, which we know works with kids. There's not that caring piece that we know with kids. It's very adult centered, rather than child centered. I can understand the pressure for test scores and that we need to get kids ready for proficiency, but I think there are many different ways we can do that. So that's my first concern.

“I think with the digital piece, as well, kids just don’t have access to Internet at home,” she said. “What are we doing about it as a community? It can’t just be the school trying to figure out where they can put hot spots. It has to be a community effort, not just for kids, but for everybody. Access to information—current information—is not available if you can’t get online. So I wish so much that there was more attention on this; I think all the issues between bandwidth and Internet blocking—it’s a societal detriment that no one is talking about.”

On a global scale, it’s important we become more mindful of what is happening globally. Most Americans, let alone US teachers, don’t know what access is like worldwide and how that can be a challenge to information and change. Attending a conference in Singapore helped bring that message home.

“...I was so nervous about going to Singapore and I was thinking, ‘What can Kristin Ziemke from Chicago share with people who have access to everything?’ The school we were in as 2-1—every kid had an iPad and a MacBook. I was surprised at the type of support they needed and wanted. One, I think they’re almost over resourced, so they weren’t thinking innovatively about how they can use the devices beyond their intended purpose. They were like, ‘We use a laptop to make Google slides and to make documents’—not thinking outside the box, just using the tool as a tool. Sometimes less is more, because you have to think about and build in collaboration. You have to be productive with it. And I think that was something people really appreciated and benefited from—just how can you use these in different ways? It doesn’t have to be every kid on the device every single second of the day.

“I think the narrative we hear in the states is we have to be more like Singapore, we’ve got to keep up with Asia. If we’re not at school ‘xyz,’ we can’t keep up with Asia. So they made me understand it’s all about the narrative that you hear. Both sides are hearing different things, and probably being manipulated in some way to think those things.”

A recent professional visit to Korean schools added to her insight on education based on that country’s perspective.

“Korean students spend so much time studying,” she said. “I had the opportunity to work with K-12, so that’s always enlightening. High school students get to school at 7:30, they have a 10-hour school day, then they all go to tutoring until 9 p.m. Then they go home and do another four or five hours of homework. Teens are coming into school with only four, maybe five hours’ sleep at best, and we know the data on sleep and teens. Then they’re just doing it all over again. They’re doing this to get into a good American university. We still have the best universities in the world. So that signals that we ARE doing something right in education.”

Yet, she found the school officials seeking more than just ways to improve their students’ knowledge level. They want more support on helping their students think critically and solve problems.

“People talk about rising China, and that is a thing,” she said. “But, on the flip side of it, I’m not too worried. They still don’t know how to create things independently. Unless you have that ability.

“And that’s where I worry about U.S. schools because we see that getting pushed out of the curriculum, like the arts, the sciences—the making—all of that is getting pushed out. And that is our No. 1 asset. If we can teach kids to think, we’re going to be OK. But we’re just teaching them to be good test takers. It’s all coming from the test-making community and the publishing community. And we know all of the back end of what goes on with that and the deal making. I see it, too, as a mental health crisis for our kids. We’re seeing that everywhere, as well. We have not taught the soft skills, the social/emotional skills, and our kids are suffering. If you look at teenagers everywhere, they are suffering. But we don’t have enough time to care about them because we have to give them the content.”

And...Korea has the highest suicide rate in the world,” she said. “I have a friend who is vice president for international studies at a major university here in Chicago, and they have study abroad programs all over the world. She says the biggest crisis they’re having at an elite university system is depression and suicide. Kids have put this pressure on themselves to get into these universities, and then they’re struggling and don’t know what to do. And that’s a problem. You see it on every single level.”

Yet some countries’ students seem to be thriving.

“Conversely, when I went to Iceland, we got to tour four different schools prior to the conference. You walk in, and it’s so calm. Kids are doing the most age-appropriate things that I’ve seen. We walked in, and first grade was in wood shop and there were saws and clamps, and you don’t know where the teacher is. I was like, ‘Where’s the teacher?’ and someone says, ‘Not hovering over them.’ But every week they have wood shop. Every week they have cooking. Every week they have sewing. Every week they have pottery. So it’s like this kaleidoscopic approach. I know it’s different, too, just because of size—when you have a small, relatively homogeneous population, you can do some things differently. But we’ve got to put that excuse aside and be like, so we can’t do everything that’s happening in Denmark or Sweden, but what can we do?”

Australia, with its extensive diversity and, most recently, welcoming many refugees, yet they stand by their educational values.

“Australia...they’re going back to their core believes: ‘This is who we are, even when....’ And I think the United States has lost sight of that. And I think the frustrating part—we know what works, but we’re not doing it. And we’re not doing it because of corporations and lobbyists, and that’s just not good enough for our kids.”

Across the globe, Ziemke said she is seeing various trends linked to educational technology.

“I am seeing people who are saying, ‘OK, we’ve done a bunch of the things, but what really matters for kid learning?’ So I’m seeing people be more discerning with what they’re doing on devices with kids. For a while, it was just like, ‘Let’s fly a drone around the gym,’ which is cool, but you have to have a purpose behind it. People were on this race to find the next ‘thing,’ instead of thinking deeply about things.

“I think people are leaning toward finding those open-ended, creative based tools you can use in any subject. You can use iMovie in every single subject—something like that. I’m seeing a new trend to people worrying about consumption beyond screen time. For so long, it was create, create, create...kids have to be creating. I agree with that—they do, but they also have to have purposeful consumption in order to have what we’re calling in our writing, those ‘mentor tech’ examples. Just like you have to have a mentor text, you have to have a mentor tech to know the possibility of what you can create or the quality. And you have to consume many different things at the same time—print, digital—and marinate it to understand what you’re reading and thinking about online in order to apply it in your own life. So I see this little bubble, ‘We said consumption was bad, but what about consuming to really learn?’ I think we have skipped over that in many ways. So there’s a swing back to that.”

Ziemke is also seeing an increase in the use of video, which she sees as especially positive.

“It’s one of the huge affordances of mobile devices,” she said. “But I am seeing them not have the bridge to use video as a tool for thinking. We’re framing it up in our writing that we approach video with many of the same strategies we use to approach reading. You view with a wide-awake mind. You pause and take notes on a clipboard—what are you learning, what are you wondering? You turn and talk with a think partner during that video. And at the end of the video, you probably have to go back and reread again because it has so much content in one minute of video. We read informational texts many times, but do we allow kids to read video many times?”

“With specifics to digital reading, I think there needs to be so much more education on that. What we do know is that the majority of teachers have not received any professional development in anything digital reading. So we’re talking about it from the pre-service place, but we’ve got millions of people out there who don’t even know about this piece. So that’s something schools and districts and organizations really have to get louder about that because it’s every day.

“I’m a little scared that people haven’t even realized there is digital reading and that they need professional development on it. People are applying print strategies, which is a good start, but being so stringent on it that it’s detrimental. You’re telling them things that are actually hurting them.

The key for all of this, as we navigate using digital devices to link all of our students into the global community. Being aware of our students’ needs is critical to their success.

“We’re making too many assumptions and we’re not doing enough kid watching,” she said. “I think we’re back at classic Yetta Goodman. We have to watch more than we ever have before. I think a huge concern is that teachers still feel like they have to be in control. Not just with digital, but with classrooms in general. I think our huge push, and maybe this comes out of the university system, as well, is that you don’t have to be in charge. The kids are in charge. There needs to be a lot of choice.”