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Episode: 39. About storytelling and educational development with Alkyoni Baglatzi, hosted by Tomi Kauppinen

Podcast guest: Alkyoni Baglatzi

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Transcription notes:

Narrator 1: N1

Host: Tomi (Tomi Kauppinen)

Episode guest: Alkyoni (Alkyoni Baglatzi)

Transcript

[Outro music]

N1: Alto University podcast.

Tomi: This is Cloud Reachers and I'm Tommi Kauppinen. And today I have a pleasure to have a guest, Alkyoni Baglatzi. How are you doing? Where are you now?

Alkyoni: Hello, Tommi. Good morning, and thank you very much for inviting me here to have this nice talk. I'm Alkyoni Baglatzi, and I'm currently in Athens in Greece.

Tomi: Great. Hey Alkyoni, can you share something about yourself and your background?

Alkyoni: Yes, of course. I have a technical background with a diploma in serving engineering from the National Technical University of Athens and the Master's engineer for math from the University of Mensa. And after having worked for the private and public sector and the big organizations like the World Plan, I have currently founded with Afra Liga here in Athens, spotlight on innovation and nonprofit organization based in Greece. We are focusing on the development of innovative learning activities and various forms of action. And location and geospatial information plays a very important role in our work. So our philosophy mainly is to bring together ideas, methods, and people from different disciplines and serving as their meeting point. We want to create innovation and we like to have this differences we see in each other. Because we have different backgrounds, I'm more from the engineering part and my colleague is more from the human sciences and communication background, bring them together and create something new with all the different people we bring in it.

Tomi: Wow. Now let's have a deep dive into everything that you say <laugh>. In this episode I would like to have discussion about, especially about your experience and perspectives working with schools. You mentioned you are working already with them, but how do you see the different aspects about

community building and the role of spatiality, the spatial information in all of this? So so let, let's start with the question. Like how do you see the world now, especially what educators and students wish and expect to learn and how?

Alkyoni: Yeah, very interesting question, Tommi. So, in the framework of our activities, and on the occasion hundred years from the minor Asia catastrophe, we implemented the map competition project here in Greece, where we asked students and educators from primary and secondary schools to search for stories or refugees of the past within their families or in their broader environment, and use geospatial storytelling to narrate the stories with the eight of digital maps. So what we did was actually combine history, geography, spatial thinking technology, all these aspects create something new. The project was just concluded yesterday. And we are very, very impressed and happy because the journey we started with two people, me and my co-founder, and an idea, has now grown to a learning community with 36 schools, 52 teachers and 375 students throughout Greece.

Alkyoni: Through this journey students and teachers have come to realize the importance of location and spatiality something we already believe in, very much, particularly me because of my background. And it is so nice to see that all those students and educators see how much spatiality is within everything they do. And of course to see how location can function as an integrator of the information. So, while collecting all the material and needing to put it on a map, somehow this constructed and gave a certain form to their stories. And although at the beginning, spatial thinking and all these maps and geography and history may have seen a bit disjoint. And in that aspect, we would like to thank all the teachers and the students who were bravely following this idea. Although it may have seemed a bit strange at the beginning.

Alkyoni: The end result and the map competition have proven that these different fields can be combined. And by combining them you create something very innovative and new. And now seeing students and educators already using spatial storytelling and all the elements they learned within these map competition in their other activities and lessons, it really strengthens our belief of the importance of geospatial information in schools and in general. So for us, a very new experience, a very nice experience, a strong experience. And of course now seeing all these educators and students asking for more, so more maps, more location, more more visualization to exploit further the potential of space is very rewarding for us.

Tomi: Can you give some examples of what kind of stories the teachers were telling with maps?

Alkyoni: So the idea was to trace the stories of your refugees of the past from the Asian minor catastrophe. So they went back to their grandfather's, grandmothers, and maybe even further back and depicted in their stories, the roots from minor Asia to Greece. So this is a big historical moment, let's say, in a very dark part of the Greek history. And within these stories they went back to trace this route, to trace the experience, to talk about the feelings and the all all these things that happened back then. And with the help of the maps and all the other material they found, for example photographs, all

photographs from from their family, family archives or jewelry they brought about, or carpets, in many, many things they told the truth, they tell the truth about their stories.

Tomi: Wow, it sounds amazing. First of all, it sounds that you have you have achieved to create a very engaged community of teachers. And you mentioned some things like, like feelings and, and also across the importance of looking at these stories and, and communicating these stories. But can you share the listeners more of your secrets? How have you managed to create such an engaged community of teachers?

Alkyoni: Yeah. I think as it happens with all relationships, and this is something we experience in our case. First, you need to gain the trust. And since this happens and others see how you work, the community is gradually built. In our case, the building elements, of course, where the hard work continues to support and the regular communication. And this project started in, let's say December, 2021 and finished now . Over more than two months, we had regular seminars in order to train the educators and the students on the service. We used Esri as story maps, and we were constantly available for them to solve questions, to provide support, and to take away the fear of the technology, let's say. Because we always kept the stories in the, in the middle of all the whole action. And the technology was there to support us. And this is something I think all of them appreciated, at least from their feedback. So all participants realize that they have someone to count on. And we, since the very beginning have been very committed to the goal. And all others on board started being committed on this goal. And at the end, the goal was common. And I think this was a thing that built this community so strongly and hearing now that they want to learn more strengthens this community step-by-step.

Tomi: Wow. So trust, feelings, commitment to the goal, - sounds very good. I totally agree because I was just thinking about my own experience and it totally makes sense. And also you mentioned the continuous seminars, regular seminars. Were there some changes during the seminars? So how did you figure out what people want to learn or what they want to know when you started? And was it very different from the last seminars you had?

Alkyoni: Well, I think at the beginning no one had any idea of the journey they were starting with us. Of course we had a very clear idea of how we wanted to structure all the learning part and the learning material. And I think what we did was to present it in a way we would like to see if we were in their position. So having experience from the learning aspects we structured it in a way we would like to have it taught to us. And I think it was very smoothly. So at the beginning, they didn't know anything with no expectation. Gradually this was built and I believe that all teachers and educators just enjoyed it, how it was structured.

Tomi: I really like that that you were trying to feel like how, or think like how you would yourself like to learn it. Just absolutely love it. That's empathy. Kind of next level of empathy. I would like to hear more about your thoughts on storytelling. So a few questions come to my mind. So what in your view can we achieve by using storytelling? And also perhaps as a follow up, I already now kind of what are the main

elements of storytelling and how can it connect information? How does it work to basically tell the story and so that we understand something?

Alkyoni: Yeah. Excellent question. Excellent thought, actually. We see stories everywhere and we see storytelling around us more and more. And for sure, there is no better way to convey a message than a story, particularly, and we saw this in our case when the story is experiential and personal as well, all the stories in the map competition which combined what we, we discussed about earlier, the historian information and the personal memories, and of course the geo aspects. Combining all this. Looking now at these 96 stories that were submitted to the competition, the big asset I think of the stories is the truth they convey. And I think truth is what differentiate creates one story from the other. And yeah, I would like to see more stories and more geo stories because geo is a very important aspects in all stories, because most of the things we do around us have to do with space. So I want to see more, and we want to see more, and we will continue working on geo stories in the future.

Tomi: You mentioned the truth. So really checking that all the facts are as, I mean, objectively true, so based on research science, of course, as well as possible.

Alkyoni: Well I don't know if it's only this part of the truth, but the personal truth, like the perspective someone gives from his view on the story. Because sometimes, you know, it's not about objectivity or subjectivity, but about showing the different contexts, the different perspectives. And I think this is very, very valuable for all of us.

Tomi: Absolutely. Yeah. So, because then, it's it's certainly different viewpoints and and different arguments. And then basically it's for the watchers or listeners to create the kind of the final story, if you like connecting to her previous experiences and and knowledge. Yeah, I like that.

Alkyoni: And sorry to interrupt you to, but one more thing. In order to create the story, you have to go through a journey. And this is what we, we saw a lot in this map competition where students and educators went out, visited people took interviews. So a lot of people that supported this creation of the story, because it's not about one person writing the story, but listening in order to write the story. So this aspect also supports all this importance of the story, because in order to write one story, imagine how many people you have visited.

Tomi: Absolutely. So, this is super interesting because I mean, does it mean that all stories, especially the good stories, are actually not really written by one author, but it's, they are written by the larger community or the world itself in a way. And of course there needs to be one or few persons to interpret all of these signs.

Alkyoni: Yeah, I absolutely agree. And in the map competition we saw it happening. So this is how, how it worked, at least in our case.

Tomi: Yeah. And perhaps that's that's super interesting because I just came to my mind that perhaps that also explains why we connect to some stories more than to other stories, right? So if they already take us in as co-authors, or almost as co-authors, then of course it might resonate better with us.

Alkyoni: Yeah, for sure.

Tomi: Yeah. Hey, what do you think Alkyoni, what do you think the future will look like? I don't know, say in 20 years, 2042. So especially related to learning. So what will people learn at schools or at universities? And also if you take us to the future, then look at people, what kind of skills and attitudes or mindsets people should learn to be ready for 2042? And I don't know, will there be holograms everywhere and artificial intelligence professors and robots running around even more than today? What do you think?

Alkyoni: Well, this is a difficult question, or difficult to answer, because it's difficult to predict the future as things are evolving very rapidly. And the last two, three years have proven that many things can happen. Okay? This is a reality we all face. Of course, robotics, artificial intelligence, stem, digital education, and all these things are a reality, okay? Already now, and students are becoming more and more familiar with this technology. So for sure, digital skills will be very high in the learning agenda. And we as the spotlight on innovation are supporting this digital competences. But we would like to not forget the importance of soft skills. So no matter how all this evolves in the future, how much technology will be in our lives, what we would like to see is really digitalization coming hand in hand with our human aspect. So to see even in 20, 30, 50 years the human-centric approach being in the middle of our activities meaning inclusion, solidarity, respect, diversity, being within all these context of the technologies, which for us should serve our bigger scopes in general.

Tomi: That came to my mind. An interesting question I would like to ask you. Because we were talking a lot about spaceality and geo aspect. But how about time? If we think about like a regular day in 2042 or even today in reality, people use major part of that day with digital tools and gadgets of different kinds, at least in, in many fields and in their regular life, while even walking around with the mobile phone at hand. So how do you see will people want to find more balance suddenly that, okay, well, they need to be the human part as well in the, in the day, so actually meeting people and doing something with them, or will this go even more to the direction of digital where we communicate perhaps with humans, but then there is always some digital tool between the humans, by the way? Like we are not in the same place. You are in Greece, and I'm in Finland. What do you see about the time?

Alkyoni: Well, I think that digital gadgets and things will always be there, but they should serve people, not be the middle of their action. And the trend is, of course, to go more digital. But I hope, and I wish to see that we take time offline, so to really be there when things happen and really decide, make the own decision to differentiate our digital life from our, let's say, human life because we are humans. So some aspects will always be there.

Tomi: Absolutely. Would it mean that we should perhaps need some, well, digital tools that would say that, okay, now, now it's time to, and I think this exists. Like, I think in, in many mobile phones, you can

set up like, okay, max seven hours of phone today, or I don't know. So, but will this be even more mainstream? And it's like, okay, now take a walk, or I don't know. Now meet some people, actual people in the cafeteria.

Alkyoni: I wish that it won't come from the technology or the tool, but from our inner will. I really wish. I don't know maybe we have a podcast in 20 years and looking back we can say how it went.

Tomi: Yeah, let's have it. And by the way, I, I totally agree with you. I mean, while I was saying that that should take this, this digital tool, I was also thinking that perhaps it's better if it comes from our inner wheel, that we are 'okay now enough is enough, now I'll have a walk and I'll actually, you know, invite the friend or two to join me'. Yeah, absolutely. Hey, talking about human life and, and being a human. Can you share some turning point in your life or studies something that made you think differently about life, about studying, about learning about anything?

Alkyoni: Well, I think we would need a whole new podcast for this question. But some key points, I have learned, or let's say keep in mind every day is that every day is a learning day. And there is always the potential every day to think differently and evolve as a person. And as long as you are willing or we are willing to work with ourselves, and as long we are open to change, and the challenges life brings us this will bring us to something new. And we should welcome the new, and the new brings you then a new, new. And this is how things, at least in my life have evolved since since I was a kid.

Tomi: Excellent. Talking about every day being a day to learn something. So what do you think the Covid 19 pandemic from 2020 to happening still now as of 2022 still in many ways. What has it taught us about the future society and the world? Can we be more prepared, something like this happens in the future? Or how do you think, how do you think, what can we learn?

Alkyoni: Well, I think that first of all, the pandemic prevented, of course, the physical contact and the brought about restrictions. But the technology helped us a lot and gave us the opportunity to reach more people at a larger scale, which is something we experience also in the map competition. And I think the pandemic has brought about and focused a lot on a lot of fears we had. But at the same time, it can be seen also as an opportunity for rethinking the way of our life. So, coming to a question, I think Tommi the one hand to be prepared, I think it's challenging to say about being prepared, about events that are unpredictable, but the experience from this pandemic has shown us that we should appreciate more things we already have or focus on what is important and provide help whenever we can. Because the next day we may be in the position of those who are in need. So are we thinking about this basic values? And I think if everyone does this on a personal level, we're thinking about the personal values, then in a sense if not prepared, we are more, how shall I say more there, more there in, in our reality. And this gives strength. So this makes us stronger as people to overcome any challenges that the future will be.

Tomi: So if I hear right, so it's like like having values, certain values, being kind and, and, and helping others and having kind of a mindset rather than a list of rules 'this is how you get prepared'.

Alkyoni: Yes. Because life doesn't have a manual. As we would've read it. And you know, <laugh>.

Tomi: Yeah. By the way, there is this book 'Life Emmanuel', I highly recommend. Have you read it, by the way?

Alkyoni: No, but now that you're telling it, I will.

Tomi: Okay. I, I'll send you a link to it. It's amazing. And I'll also add it to the podcast comment. I think it's, it's, it's an excellent book. But, but I absolutely agree. I mean, even if there is that book, this life unfortunately doesn't have a manual. Although I don't know, perhaps it's a good thing. Because then we can always learn new things. And it's also a lot of nice surprises. Hey, what did you learn last time, Alkyoni, and when did it happen? Was it online or through a book, or how?

Alkyoni: I think it was something I learned from the journey throughout the map competition. And it's the simple word, take the risk. So if you believe in an idea, no matter how crazy it may sound, or no matter how many people avoid you from doing it, just do it. And at the end you will see it was worth taking the risk and going through this journey, a journey always leads you to something. And in a journey you always learn, even from your worst experience, you'll learn something. And this is your asset for the future. So I think this is something I learned recently.

Tomi: I love that. I absolutely love that. Take the risk and you always, at least you learn something. And if you bring a community with you and they learn something, it was worth it. Right.

Tomi: Final question, Alkyoni. And I'm asking this from all guests. So as you know, the podcast called Cloud Reaches, so kind of reaching out dreams or, or something that is not here. Future cloud also kind of online, somehow bringing new ideas forward. So what do you think who or which can be also organization is a cloud reacher in your mind?

Alkyoni: I think cloud reachers are all those who inspire people. For example, all educators who inspire their students to become little explorers, search for stories, take interviews, design them, maps, create these geo stories for us, they are our cloud reachers, and we see it happening. And what I firmly believe is that we are all potential cloud reachers as long as we laugh and are committed to what we do. And of course, as long as we are willing to bring things one step further. So I think this is my idea of a cloud reacher.

Tomi: I absolutely love that. So it's not just one single person, but it's all who have the courage to, and joy perhaps also to take risks and bring a field forward. I love that. Hey, this was great. And let's have another episode because I think we didn't touch some of the things we could have, but then it would take like a whole podcast series. Let's do that. Thank you so much, Alkyoni, for joining me.

Alkyoni: Thank you for inviting me, Tommi.

Tomi: Thanks. Take care.

Alkyoni: Bye.

Tomi: So this is Cloud Reachers and me, Tommi Kauppinen. I had a guest Alkyoni Baglatzi. Hope you enjoyed it as much as we did. See you. Bye.