

Future-led Learning podcast: Esa Saarinen 1

Length of recording: 00:31:21

Announcement [00:00:00]: Aalto University podcast.

Riikka Evans [00:00:06]: And another question, is it okay, that I call you Esa?

Esa Saarinen [00:00:09]: Yeah, of course.

Riikka Evans [00:00:11]: Good. Okay. So, I'll just start chatting. Good.

[music 00:00:17]

Riikka Evans [00:00:24]: Last summer philosopher Esa Saarinen retired from Aalto University after lecturing as a professor for 19 years. He was a very popular teacher and he leaves an impressive legacy. But what is his teaching philosophy? I had the chance to talk with the professor emeritus at the Aalto University School of Business. This is the first of two episodes. This episode of Future-led Learning marks the beginning of the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing project. Please see more at radicalwellbeing.aalto.fi. My name is Riikka Evans, and this is Future-led Learning. Welcome aboard.

Announcement [00:01:11]: Future-led Learning. By Aalto University.

Riikka Evans [00:01:16]: Hello, Esa.

Esa Saarinen [00:01:17]: Hello.

Riikka Evans [00:01:17]: And welcome.

Esa Saarinen [00:01:18]: Thank you.

Riikka Evans [00:01:19]: It is such an honor to have you here. To be able to interview you for this podcast is truly an honor for me, so welcome.

Esa Saarinen [00:01:29]: Thank you very much, it's great to be here back at the campus. I haven't been here for quite some time, and it's... one already feels the energy.

Riikka Evans [00:01:39]: I'm sure. What kind of emotions did it bring to you?

Esa Saarinen [00:01:43]: Well, one of the feelings, before corona, came back to me, which is this feeling of a neighbourhood in a warm sense, in which you see people in the midst of their lives, and it sort of ignites your imagination as to what's going on in their lives. Many people greet me, and when I approach somebody, I sort of look at the person thinking what's going to happen. So, I'm ready to greet the person, although it could be I don't remember the person. Of course, in most cases I don't really remember people that well, generally. So many people have been to my lectures and might know me for some other source, so quite often people sort of nod their head or there's some eye contact, which I think is great. It's that kind of sense of a neighbourhood, which creates a basis for feeling safe and therefore for free-willing thoughts to start to go upward.

Riikka Evans [00:02:57]: You have just retired as a professor, and you are now an emeritus professor.

Esa Saarinen [00:03:03]: Yes.

Riikka Evans [00:03:04]: How does that feel?

Esa Saarinen [00:03:05]: It feels great. I didn't really expect it to be so good. Particularly outside the university I encounter this, that when people hear I'm emeritus professor, they don't really know what it means, but they feel, that it means something that somehow suits in their view of me. And, it sounds like some kind of independent professor of some kind of distinction. [laughter 00:03:40]

Riikka Evans [00:03:40]: [laughter 00:03:40]

Esa Saarinen [00:03:41]: And, I think a philosopher actually should feel, that he/she is independent, and still there is the academic university rationality civilisation connection.

Riikka Evans [00:03:58]: So, what are you up to now? What are you going to do now, after you're no longer teaching actively at the university? So, what kind of projects do you have?

Esa Saarinen [00:04:09]: Well, some projects that I already did have before retirement continue, also some of the supervisions, some of the work with some of my PhD students continue. Also other lines of research particularly related to my own, well, style of lecturing or my style of philosophy is something I continue very intensely particularly with Jaakko Korhonen, the chief life-saving officer of the Aalto university as Eloranta once dubbed him. So, with Jaakko we continue to work regarding the more scientific aspects of my lecturing. I also try to write now in ways, that I don't really know yet what the format will be. So, I write in English and I write in Finnish, and it's unclear what it's going to be. Some parts of it probably will emerge as articles, but there could be other formats as well. And in addition to that, I do lecture virtually and also - when sufficiently interesting calls come - physically, because I love the lecturing situation. I believe it's a platform of art, which I enjoy so much to take and to try to make something out of.

Riikka Evans [00:06:14]: That sounds wonderful. Platform of art.

Esa Saarinen [00:06:17]: Of course I'm a university guy all my adult life, so the context is one, where the chief belief of something valuable, where it comes from, is reason and our rational faculties. But, since at least the 80's I've been excited from the situation that starts to emerge, when I'm having a live situation in front of live audience, in which I'm going through some themes of interest with rational line of thought as the main idea, but more and more with the feel of the situation as equally important. So, therefore I suppose my lectures started to - at least in my own mind - form a performative art, almost. Well actually, that's how I just thought about it. I hope it doesn't sound arrogant from the point of view of quote-on-quote real artists. But anyway, there are aspects to the situation of a lecture - the way I think about it - that relate to, for instance, the connectivity to the audience, and how people in the audience receive whatever I try to present, and also how they experience the situation. So, thought as something, that takes place also through the realm of emotions, affect sensibilities, kind of multi-dimensional thinking of some kind, is what I try to facilitate in the lecture context. So, when thinking about it from the meta level and try to conceptualise as to what it is, I find art as a very useful metaphor. Many of my good friends are professionals of theatre and of performing art. Like Jorma Uotinen for instance, the choreographer and dancer, has been my good friend since the 80's, and some others have led me to think about the delivery as only part of what's important in the situation. Therefore some more holistic way of thinking about the lecture situation has started to intrigue me, but it's also something that throws me back. I want to get back to that platform of expression and that platform of exploration also, that's how I feel about it. I always feel very excited, when I manage to go through some theme in some, I feel, fresh way or I'm able to bring back to the old tune some new nuances. So, for instance in the Philosophy and

Systems Thinking course, where I had the same team for several years, and of course Jaakko Korhonen was there really for quite some time and Jaakko was the chief assistant. I wanted to surprise them with some line of thought, that might seem to be pretty much like what I had been presenting, let's say, five times previously, but still, I wanted to bring in something, that would be, there and then, exciting and bring the present moment to be part of the lecture experience.

Riikka Evans [00:10:34]: So, you mentioned, that you have a long career here. You started 20 years ago before Aalto at the Helsinki School of Technology, is that correct?

Esa Saarinen [00:10:46]: Yes. Helsinki University Of Technology.

Riikka Evans [00:10:48]: Helsinki University, yes. I'm so young, that I cannot remember the correct way.

Esa Saarinen [00:10:50]: That's right. 2001 or 2002, maybe. It's in Otaniemi, it was an engineering school.

Riikka Evans [00:11:01]: Yeah. If you think of back then and you think now, how would you describe the sort of development of the learning culture in the engineering schools?

Esa Saarinen [00:11:14]: The difference isn't that huge, as far as I'm concerned. It could be, that I have some kind of nostalgia in the way I

perceive things, but Helsinki University of Technology had a pretty great culture in terms of going towards what works. So, the kind of engineering mindset, I thought, had considerable place also in the pedagogical landscape. Of course, I didn't study there, so probably like in any institution, where individuals ultimately are the ones, that give the form to whatever takes place, the variation is pretty huge, but all in all, I thought, that it was excitement in whatever you were doing and whatever you wanted to teach about. That was and still is a cornerstone. The technologies, that have come to play a part in our teaching since those days, of course, have changed, and there all kinds of ways to make teaching more exciting. But ultimately, I think it's the excitement of the teacher himself or herself, that is a critical element along with the desire to connect with whoever is present. So, to me technologies really are not that significant, it's just kind of... human, the toolman, vis-à-vis oneself, and the subject matter on the one hand, and then, on the other hand, vis-à-vis the people that are present, be those students or colleagues or whoever they might be. It's also belief in

that kind of more majestic, grand, more - in my terms - upscale thinking regarding what university should be, that at least I experienced was there in Otaniemi in 2002 and that's what I feel there is in Otaniemi today through Aalto. At the same time given, that my own field... if it's a field. Philosophy, which really isn't a topic, that you could approach very fruitfully, as an expert, as a kind of sector of something, but it's something, I think, that connects us. I feel very much at home in Aalto, because of Aalto's explicit desire to make people move not only vertically but also horizontally, and not only mentally but also socially. But, I actually did feel already at the time of Helsinki University of Technology in Otaniemi, when I started in the early 2000's, that both of those elements were there in place.

Riikka Evans [00:14:55]: Many times we think, that there should be some big changes, but yeah, thinking at it from that perspective I do agree with you. And it's like, how do we connect with our students as teachers.

Esa Saarinen [00:15:08]: Yes, I mean, there is so much talk about change, that my own inclination more and more is to try to figure out what hasn't changed. I would say, well, we, as human beings, we are pretty much as we were 20 years ago. It's in some fundamentals. But, it could be, that the fundamentals which were the same 20 years ago and 2000 years ago, might become marginalised as a result of something, that ultimately is pretty superficial. It's just surface phenomena, that might catch our attention with the result, that we lose sight of what truly counts. So, to me it's that what truly counts kind of thought or kind of orientation, maybe, that I tried to maybe safeguard to some extent or somehow bring back to the lecture halls. From my point of view, in the lecture halls, what was at stake was human growth, and the growth in our rational faculties was basically just an instrument to that effect, so the channel, as it were. But, human growth was supposed to be what we here serve and that really hasn't changed. It's the fact, that if one feels, for instance, acceptive as a human being, it's more likely that the person is ready mentally to engage in some wild line of thought, some possibility, and also push himself or herself far with whatever is at stake. So, that kind of warmth to me is part of the individual level strive and also of the mental cognitive intellectual strive. And the fact that is the case, to me, is nothing really rocket science, it's just of acknowledging, that this is what a human being is like. A human being in a lecture room is going to be more attentive, if he or she feels somehow accepted, if he or she has been greeted, let's say, as he or she entered the space. It's not a good idea to create feelings of inferiority in human beings, as a general rule, I would say. So, to the extent, that we can be encouraging to one another, I think is good. That's not to playact as something unrealistic or represent some kind of ideological positive thinking. It's just, I think, general civility basically. I mean, why not be friendly? Why not look at people kindly? What is there to lose? Because there are always these aspects in people, that might not be there immediately to perceive. It could be the person himself/herself hasn't noticed the fact, that he or she has these seeds of something beautiful that could start to flourish, if the situation would be suitable and if there would be enough sun and suitable amount of rain coming in, so the spring would start to emerge. That kind of thinking

is how I think, but me thinking that, from my point of view isn't some kind of, "This is a great philosophy, everybody should now listen very carefully." I think that basically everybody thinks the same way. It's said, that we often don't have the time to reflect as to what do we really think regarding, particularly, our own thinking and regarding the broader themes of life. So, my aim has been to try to create - at least in the context of one lecture series - at our university a context, where people would engage in such reflections.

Announcement [00:19:50]: Future-led Learning.

Riikka Evans [00:19:53]: You said, that better thinking leads to better life, which leads us to the sort of teaching philosophy level. How do you see learning and teaching? Because, learning is not always easy and learning doesn't always feel nice, sometimes learning is also painful. So, how do we really support that process, when we want to support the thinking of thinking? How do you see that?

Esa Saarinen [00:20:23]: Well, first of all, I think it's important to point out, that I'm not an expert of learning or teaching or pedagogy in the sense, that I would know what kind of research has been conducted and what kind of insights have resulted. Whatever I might know or believe I know regarding learning or teaching, is really based on just my own experience. But I don't really know how generic the conclusions, that on the base of my experience, are in the offing. But, if I do turn to my own experience, I would say, that a key point in learning and a key point therefore in teaching, is the way the individual, who is engaged in potential learning, places himself or herself in her life. So, it's kind of an overall attitude, overall motivation, overall atmosphere in his or her life, that I think is really the fundamental operating system as opposed to various applications, programs, that might then run on that operating system. But the operating system is deeply human in its logic, meaning that it's sensitive to all kinds of highly contingent initial parameters. So, from that point of view, I think it's so important somehow to try to make the overall contexts of learning and teaching to be one, that supports what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature". I think it's really not only a beautiful metaphor, but I think it's quite an apt metaphor, because to me at least, the metaphor of an angel versus something that is extremely quick, but it's also something that you really don't know intellectually; why they operate the way they operate. Except that they somehow operate from the point of view of something good. So, it could be that somebody is carrying burden from his or her past, that is just awful and beyond comprehension, but you don't know about it. Therefore, it could be, that the person hasn't really encountered a situation of acceptance of the kind that, somebody's way of looking at him or her just somehow reinforces. It's this kind of non-linear possibilities for growth in learning and teaching, that I believe are part and parcel of the operating system of us as human beings. At least taking to account, meaning that, if we take too straightforward approach, it's likely to diminish the returns. Let me say it this way, earlier this year I was talking with Bengt Holmström, and Bengt Holmström had met with

some 20 other people, because of the fact that certain Bob Wilson had received a Nobel Prize in Economics. Now, this certain Bob Wilson got the Nobel Prize quite late in his life, but Bengt and these other people that met, were very delighted and excited and pleased of the fact, that Bob Wilson had got the prize, because they had been former students of Bob Wilson and respected him tremendously. So, apparently there were a bunch of Nobelists and a bunch of other people, that were not worthy and prominent in other respects, that were former students of Bob Wilson, who had now received the prize. And Bengt said, that we were talking regarding the theme: What did Bob do in the context of his teaching? And with some laughter, Bengt said that we all agree, that we didn't really know what he did. The overall impression these decades after the fact, was that you would meet with Bob, and he would talk about something, and you didn't really know why do we talk about the something we talk about. At the end he would say that, "Here's an article you might want to read", without pointing out why should I read it or what's particularly important in the article. It's unclear as to what really the point was, but apparently there was a point, given that this X number of Nobelists among the students and these other people have been able to pick up something from the teaching, whatever the teaching was. So, it's that kind of indirect effects of teaching, that to me are so exciting and so fundamental. That's not to disrespect the content-related heart's core of any serious deeds in any field of expertise. Obviously there are some fundamentals, but somehow there is this additional element, that is, I think, even more important. Again, it wouldn't mean, that like in my days, I wouldn't be excited about, say, Plato or Aristotle, I'm tremendously excited about Plato and about Aristotle and all kinds of, content-wise, core aspects of my own field. If it's a field, philosophy. But still, my hope is, that whatever people have picked up from my so-called teaching, is something, that strengthens them intellectually and humanely in their own lives, and that something is not likely to be, I think, a function of how much they got insight into Plato or Aristotle or systems thinking or any nameable theme, per se, from whatever my teaching was. Actually, I'm quite fond of the Bengt Holmström Bob Wilson story, because I sure hope, that my own legacy would be a Bob Wilson legacy. I think it would be really great, if people would meet, let's say, 20 years after I'm dead and talk about Esa's teaching, and they couldn't come up with anything I really said, that somehow would have been the core of whatever they got with them to their paths forward and in their own particular ways of growing as human beings.

[music 00:28:38]

Esa Saarinen [00:28:47]: This, I think, is also what particularly prominently comes through in the feat of art, because the artist, like Jorma Uotinen, when he makes a choreography, doesn't really aim at some particular effect on the audience. You somehow try to do something, that makes people feel about their own lives more deeply, and therefore find ways forward, that nobody would have been able to even think about. That's the non-linear aspect. And again, maybe third covenant, that all of this is not to say, that there wouldn't be important aspects of the field of teaching or learning as a psychological process, that one

shouldn't look into and take seriously. I very much encourage anybody, let's say, young teachers at our university to engage in all kinds of pedagogical possibilities, that are there and are offered in an organized way. In the sense that the fundamental aspect, I think, is, us as human beings, and reaching out towards teaching and learning through that fundamental operating system, at least in my case, has been really the core of whatever I try to do.

Announcement [00:30:28]: Future-led Learning.

[music 00:30:30]

Announcement [00:30:38]: You have been listening to the Future-led Learning podcast with Riikka Evans, and this episode featured Esa Saarinen, professor emeritus at Aalto University. This was the first episode of two. Please listen to the other episode as well. Future-led Learning podcast is a part of the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing project at Aalto University. Please find out more at radicalwellbeing.aalto.fi.

[music 00:31:04]

Announcement [00:31:13]: Aalto University podcast.

[recording ends]