

Aalto Future-led Learning Esa Saarinen 2

Length of recording: 00:31:00

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

[music 00:00:06]

Riikka Evans [00:00:06]: This is the second of two episodes featuring professor emeritus and senior adviser at Aalto University, Esa Saarinen. Do listen to the first episode as well. Future-led Learning is now a part of the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing project, aiming to share information about and tools for maintaining your own and your community's competence in self-care, inclusivity and equity. Please see more at radicalwellbeing.aalto.fi. My name is Riikka Evans, and this is Future-led Learning. Welcome aboard.

Announcement [00:00:42]: Future-led Learning. By Aalto University.

Riikka Evans [00:00:46]: ...because I'm thinking from the wellbeing perspective, that we have all these surveys, that we have conducted with the purpose of finding out how our students are doing right now. Oftentimes what we find from there is students, who have emotional troubles or have learning disabilities, how would we support their learning process in this manner, that you've just described?

Esa Saarinen [00:01:15]: I think the fundamental aspect is basically the principle: nobody should be left alone. So, it's the communal side of us, as human beings, that steps in on a number of levels. So, if I think about my own department, the department of industrial engineering and management, I think it has been such a fantastic place to me, a person, to be at. Of course it's a relatively small department, and on the one hand also the student intake is fairly small, so in a sense it's comprehensible in human terms. I think being a part of something, that is comprehensible in human terms is beneficial for one to feel sufficient warmth from that environment vis-à-vis oneself. Warmth being something, that may come as a result of feeling of respect one gets from others, some kind of acknowledgment, sort of positive class, that you get from others, that people are delighted, that you are part of whatever something is. So, working too much in too big numbers for one thing is not beneficial, but economies of scale easily start to take the upper hand, when it comes to running institutions. So, that kind of vicinity aspects, kind of neighborhood aspects, the experience one gets from something, that ultimately can't be that big, is essential. It's also

thinking about the spaces in which we operate from the point of view: What's the feel one gets of the space vis-à-vis oneself, as an accepted, respected individual human being, and do I feel connectivity to the other people in the same space? So, this, I think, is one perspective, another perspective is perhaps a more individually tuned perspective, that ultimately we each have some responsibility vis-à-vis of everybody else. So, because in any given situation, of course there is only some finite number of other human beings with whom we are in that space, whether that's a queue in a cafeteria or on the way to the metro, or you opening the door and somebody coming in your direction through that same door. What happens there in that ordinary mundane everyday situation in a time span of, let's say, three seconds, is something where you can give to those people, that you meet, something that strengthens all of us. It's kind of a micro perspective on the macro perspective, that I'm here talking about. And again, it's something, that to me has been such a surprise over the years, as to how disorienting or misleading the surface can be regarding what people in fact are, or what their aspirations on a deeper level in fact are. I hope this doesn't sound too dramatic, but this is actually how it came about, after my murder attempt, when I was in the ambulance. The whole thing took place outside Dipoli. So, I'm in the ambulance, and I've just been stabbed to the stomach completely unexpectedly, but also I've been saved on the one hand by Jaakko Korhonen. I mean, you couldn't have had a more professional bodyguard than he was. Although of course he had never engaged in such activity, but the way he was there in the situation was so efficient and so reassuring, and there were two other students that came to our rescue as well. Then there were all those people inside Dipoli, who attended me when I walked in wounded. Then there was this entire system, that brought in the two ambulances that came in, and the police officers that came. It's just amazing to me, that when I was there in the ambulance, and we left the Dipoli building with the sirens on, I remember this thought that, "How is it possible, that I haven't noticed, that there are so many good people?" Quite clearly my thoughts have been somehow hypnotised by various kinds of surface defects. Surface defects, it's pintapuute, I would say in Finnish, it's obvious I was thinking in Finnish there. And, because there are all kinds of things, you know, you go to the coffee machine, but the kind of coffee you would want to have for some reason you can't get, and it could be two persons there before you... I mean, when was it that you downloaded something and it came quickly enough? There are so many things regarding which, in the course of any day, you feel that the world isn't functioning your way. But, other people are the ones, that you sort of perceive to be there as obstacles so easily, even our loved ones. So, the surface defect concept to me really hits true as a result of the murder attempt. Since then, when I just think about those people that came to my rescue in the Dipoli, the open space there as you enter through the doors... I wouldn't have thought, that those people would have cared for me so much, as it turned out instantly, is the case. So, it's this kind of something, that you can't tell on the basis of what the person seems to be, that there's something good that is hiding, that since then has been to me some kind of, at least, encouragement, to think what would happen if the something that is good in fact in the people, that is hiding, would more often come out? And is it possible, that that meant, that each of us could contribute to that effect? If one asks it this way, I think the answer is obvious, of course we could make it more probable to come out. It's, as it were, thinking

about life itself in particular kind of terms, that will make it more probable, that such better life emerges.

[music 00:10:16]

Announcement [00:10:25]: Future-led Learning.

Esa Saarinen [00:10:27]: In the next table, the person who is looking for a place to sit down for lunch, there could be one seat, that is vacant in your table. Why couldn't you signal with your eyes for the person looking for the place to sit down that, "Yes, this place is vacant." I think it's just ordinary civility, but it's the kind of civility I believed, that is hidden in us very often, because we believe, that in fact we already are more generous to others, kinder, friendlier, than what we get. So, it's kind of internal balancing act, that says, that the others don't really deserve more than I already give, because in fact I'm giving out more than I actually get myself back. But, what we do get back, I believe, is often coloured by what I would call surface defects on the one hand and on the other hand by the certain human clumsiness. I mean, people don't necessarily know how to show kindness, for instance. There could be all kinds of reasons why people hold back their better angels - using the Lincoln term again - but maybe we could sort of help each other out in that respect.

Riikka Evans [00:12:04]: Choose to be good, choose to be kind.

Esa Saarinen [00:12:08]: Yeah. Choose to be kind.

Riikka Evans [00:12:09]: Sounds like you're talking about hope.

Esa Saarinen [00:12:11]: But to me choosing to be kind means, basically, choosing to be more of what you in fact are. For this reason I think it's such a beneficial thing to engage in the question, why really? In a context where the context doesn't push you to some particular directions or conclusions regarding what you're supposed to be nor push you on the basis of some kind of delivered outcome. So, it's one thing to think about oneself as, let's say, engineer in some particular field or as a master of business arts and an expert in capital markets. So, you might think about a certain professional outcome, that is in the offing, let's say, in four years' time, but the real question concerns, what are you going to be as a human being along with whatever you are professionally? That question, what are you going to be in human terms, is something, that I would say by far in most cases would end up pretty much in similar conclusions as to what happens to the next person. I mean, people

want to be kind to one another, people want to care about one another, people don't want to be egotistical, if given the choice of really thinking about life, but most of the time we don't get the chance to do so. So, this is, I think, a part of the explanation for the popularity of the Philosophy and Systems Thinking lectures over the years. I remember a lot of people came there repeatedly. It's clear, that the reason for somebody coming repeatedly to Philosophy and Systems Thinking course wouldn't be, that he or she would expect Esa to have something totally new for me to sort of internalise. It's much more like him or her coming there or maybe listening to the podcast, maybe, listening to it, as it were, looking as a video format, so the person in the sense meets himself or herself, and engages in a kind of internal reflection. The internal reflection by the context isn't pushing him or her to some particular direction, for which reason, what Lincoln called "better angels" of his or her nature, maybe have a chance to sort of come out from the margins again. And, maybe the person finds in himself or herself something, that for whatever reason has hidden from other people, but also from the person herself.

[music 00:15:23]

Riikka Evans [00:15:27]: But wouldn't you say, that that requires people to recognise their vulnerability?

Esa Saarinen [00:15:34]: Yes, I think vulnerability is absolutely one of the fundamentals here. This has been to me personally a big lesson. There's a number of aspects to it. One way to think about it is that, when one develops as a speaker, as a lecturer, something that people feel as charisma, the temptation is to go with the charisma, because of the fact, that you can hide your vulnerabilities behind the charisma. I think, while it's tempting, it's not the right way. It's because ultimately, also the deeper elements in a potential lecture are in the offing, if people in the audience feel that you're serious, that you are honest with whatever you're there trying to present. There are all kinds of tricks an experienced speaker can engage in, and sort of make people feel activated or amused or whatever it could be, but the real point is to create that moment to be one where people in the audience as a part of the lecture or maybe seminar, where their curiosity, their aspirations, that relate to pushing them to understand more, also all kinds of more constructive aspects of building oneself and helping others to build themselves, are activated. But, I believe all that doesn't happen, if one is not, as the facilitator of the situation or as a lecturer in the situation, if it's a lecture, if you're not honest with whatever you are. You need to sort of step beyond the facade and step beyond the temptations, that relate to all kinds of role-takings and stuff like that, and it's such a tremendous relief also to be able to connect with something deeper within yourself, and also realising with necessary humility the fact, that there's only so much you know and only so much you understand. Even though you might have pushed yourself for decades to understand the something, you just gradually start to understand how much you don't understand. Therefore how much we need one another, and how important it is to

keep also the momentum going and the strive operating within us, it's sort of like the passion of life, which, I think, calls for vulnerability for that person to be truly genuine.

Riikka Evans [00:19:22]: Esa, you mentioned in the beginning, that you haven't researched pedagogy or that it's not your field, but here you are describing the very essence of pedagogy and learning. When we have pedagogical trainings and when we, can you say, teach or mentor our teachers, that's exactly what we try and tell to them. So you are at the very core of it.

Esa Saarinen [00:19:51]: Yeah, well, I'm not boasting with this or making a point with it, but the fact is, that I'm suspicious of pedagogical training myself.

Riikka Evans [00:20:05]: Okay?

Esa Saarinen [00:20:06]: And, I never took any pedagogical training. But that's not to say, that people shouldn't take pedagogical trainings, I think it's very important for people to find various ways, that help them to challenge themselves in their processes forward. But, I believe in my case it probably was a good thing, that I never really took any pedagogical trainings. Some good friends of mine, like Kirsti Lonka, were class figures in the science of pedagogy. I've talked with Kirsti a lot over the years, but I believe it still is good, that I haven't really known that much, as to what something should be according to some pedagogical theory, however great. This is my case. Maybe it's the artist in me, that might have become somewhat reluctant to take the risks, that the artist in me in fact has taken. When we started with Philosophy and Systems Thinking, this practice of naming each lecture with kind of symbolic titles, that didn't quite clearly indicate the quote-unquote content of that lecture. I would say, this probably was, somewhat unusual, I mean, this is a university lecture series. So, in that sense you could say, if you have a university lecture series, you can expect an individual lecture - if it has a title - to have a title, that tells what the content is of that lecture, but my titles could be for instance "Lady Gaga and Mrs. Askola". And, Lady Gaga, okay, that's a popular culture figure, is Esa going to analyse Lady Gaga? Mrs. Askola, who might be Mrs. Askola? I would have these titles, that to me were very exciting, I felt like it's an album, and it's kind of a performance, where it somehow indicates something, sort of a direction in some sense. Also of course I might have in some cases titles, that would say like... I think I had one title, that said something like "Five lessons from Tarantino". So, maybe somebody would think, okay, Tarantino, so maybe Esa is using Tarantino in some way in this lecture. And, of course that in fact was a case, I did use Tarantino, but it still wasn't a lecture about Tarantino. So, that kind of way of doing a lecture wasn't from any text book, it wasn't on the basis of some kind of general format. I'm not suggesting, that anybody should adapt the practice. It's just, I was excited and my team was excited, and the fact that we were excited, I think helped for something to happen there.

Also among the participants, they found it exciting, so they found excitement within themselves.

[music 00:23:53]

Announcement [00:24:03]: Future-led Learning.

Esa Saarinen [00:24:05]: So, what are the ways, in which something then becomes something, that touches people? There could be all kinds of routes to that, but in my personal case, I'm pretty confident, that had I been more aware of how things should be, maybe I wouldn't have been able to do what I then did do. Also repeating the same overall title. Philosophy and Systems Thinking, it was Raimo Hämmäläinen, who suggested the title, because my first department was the Systems Analysis Laboratory, it was Raimo, that had the idea of getting me, a philosopher, to, what was at that time, an engineering school. There wasn't any philosophy professorate. But Raimo got the idea, that it's... I remember him saying, "Esa, you might have a too restricted view regarding us engineers, but equally us systems engineers. Because, it's [?? 00:25:19] of being an engineer, this kind of desire to represent wholes, make models of wholes. Very often we use mathematical methods to describe the wholes, which is what you would do, but you still aim at understanding and representing wholes. Secondly, our aim is to represent those wholes with the idea of improving the whole, just this kind of orientation towards betterment. It's [?? 00:25:57] being an engineer. But, this is what you are also trying to do. It seems to me, that it's very natural for you to be at an engineering university." And I thought, that's true. When you frame the case in those terms, I think this is very natural. But, that kind of orientation, on the one hand, through representation of something complex of course requires a lot of intellectual effort. And, given the fact, that there are all kinds of already established ways of representing particular kinds of wholes, it's useful to know how it has been done previously. So, it's a great idea to engage in where is methodologies, various ways of representing things, that are complex. When one is young, one can learn very complex things. Just push yourself to learn and you can learn it, which I think is great, because you then open up your brain, and you get all kinds of new tracks there in your mind, that you might then be able to use later on, even if you didn't use the exact content. So, that kind of orientation, that on the one hand wants to represent things using your intellect, but at the same time does that from the point of view of actually improving things, brings the kind of attitude in life, more generally, is fundamental. Because when you start to improve things, then you realise, that you are going to need other people in that process. Also you're going to need to understand something beyond whatever that fragment of the whole is, that is your favourite whole. Therefore it's also a call for humbleness and a call for connectivity, a call for continuous deepening of your overall perspectives. I'm sorry, I don't remember, what your initial question was. But, when I think about my own philosophy, it's one where orientation, that Raimo described, actually is pretty fundamental there in my own effort as well.

Riikka Evans [00:28:34]: So, we've had a very interesting conversation about teaching philosophy, and the role and meaning of community around people, and how to support learning. I thank you so very much for your time, and on behalf of the entire Aalto community I would like to say thank you for coming to this podcast. It was such an honour.

Esa Saarinen [00:29:00]: Thank you very much, it's such a great privilege to be part of the Aalto community, and I look forward to many years, indeed, decades to come. I think it was Kirsti Lonka, my good friend from University of Helsinki, who said, that Jerome Bruner, who we both admire so much, that Jerome Bruner was at the age of 90 upset, because, was it, NYU, that offered him only five years more, given that he was just 90. So, I think it's one of the great aspects of university, that it really doesn't make the claims on one's age as maybe some other areas of life do. It's very important, that different generations also meet and communicate with one another, enrich one another at the university. It's such a privilege to be part of Aalto.

Announcement [00:30:06]: Future-led Learning.

[music 00:30:08]

Announcement [00:30:13]: Thank you for listening to the Future-led Learning podcast with Esa Saarinen, professor emeritus at Aalto University. This was the second part of the discussion between Esa and Riikka Evans, please listen to the first episode as well. The Future-led Learning podcast is produced by me, Sakari Heiskanen, and it includes music by Saagertson. The series is part of the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing project at Aalto University. Find out more at radicalwellbeing.aalto.fi.

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Announcement [00:30:52]: Aalto University podcast.

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