

Podcast series: Leading for Interdisciplinary Creativity

IDBM programme at Aalto University

Episode 10

Length: 34:49 min

Guests: Mix of previous episodes.

Host: Irina Viippola

Irina: [00:00:00] Design, doing mindset, creative culture, innovating, failing, interdisciplinary teamwork, and change Makers

Aalto University podcast.

Irina: This is leading for interdisciplinary creativity and I am your host, Irina Viippola

In this Aalto University's podcast series, we have been discussing about leading for creativity, interdisciplinary teamwork, future of design intensive business, and many more areas. When I agreed to create this podcast series to celebrate IDBM programme's 30 years of existence, little did I know how much time and effort it would require from me.

I thought it would be easy to come up with relevant themes and questions and just go with the flow depending on the guest. I was quite wrong. It [00:01:00] took a lot of time and effort, and my learning curve was steep. IDBM programme covers such a vast area of topics and perspectives and themes that it's impossible to touch upon all of them in a way that allows the listeners to follow all of the episodes.

At certain point, I realized it's not possible to please all the intended target audiences. The episodes went quite deep into expertise areas of which I was not aware of, let alone able to create meaningful follow-up questions. I wandered into areas outside of my comfort zone and felt utterly stupid at times, but I also learned new things, and some of the discussions left me reflecting the topics we discussed for several days. During the interviews, my mind sometimes froze and I lost the track of what we were talking about.

The questions came out wrong in this wrong place, but the guests just kept going on without any hesitation. [00:02:00] I have to give full credit to them. I could also edit out some of the worst bloopers. It was really a pleasure to meet all the guests. Some of them I did not know beforehand, and it was fruitful to hear their thoughts and different opinions.

It might interest you how we ended up with the guests that we ended up with. During the process of planning the podcast series, there were several people involved. Peter McGrory and Nuria Solsona from the Department of Design, Hanne Savolainen and Ville Eloranta from the IDBM programme, and Jasmin El-Hardy from the IDBM club.

Our aim was to find guests that wouldn't only highlight the different aspects of the program, but also bring forward topical issues related to creative business and development. We didn't want to make a historical review of the program, but rather look to the future. Markku Salimäki and Peter McGrory were self-evident guests [00:03:00] as they have been connected to the program.

From the early days. Without Markku, the programme wouldn't exist as it is, and Peter has left an unforgettable impression on hundreds of IDBM students. I personally remember it being a huge victory when I started to understand his Irish accent.

Markku: We have known each other. Like how many? 35, 30 years? Pretty

Peter: much.

Yeah,

Markku: yeah, yeah. 35 years. So it's always been so that I only get catch like one, say one third of your, what is,

Peter: even myself? I only catch what? What did you still say? You were saying something, it sounded fluent, but actually what were you saying?

Irina: Elina Hiltunen and is a great example of an IDBMer that that thinks out of the box and has been able to combine skills and knowledge from different disciplines in future forecasting that is paramount.

She was also the first assistant of the program and sold many industry project with her [00:04:00] fearless attitude. According to Markku, she called Jorma Ollila, the CEO of Nokia at that time to sell a project. Jorma was not available,

but the technical director was, and Elina managed to sell an IDBM industry project for Nokia.

Elina: Well, I think that people think it's quite weird topic, but that's actually what I've been doing many times. I've been researching weird things, and that was like my first PHD thesis also, because that was about weak signals. And weak signals are weird.

Irina: Krista, Markus and Arni were the star team of the first IDBM batch from 1995, and then when they went on to establish a growth company of that era, a startup that went, went bankrupt.

In the end, I [00:05:00] anticipated to hear fun stories and have a lot of laughter, and I was not wrong in that matter. I think this episode was the one where I laughed the most.

Markus: It's amazing that if you are like, uh, have a lot of energy and if you are a bit naive, so it, it can take you pretty far.

Arni: Exactly. Yeah, exactly. in hindsight, maybe a bit too far,

Irina: I heard Maija speaking at Aalto alumni event and as she was proudly bringing out her IDBM background, I knew she would be the perfect guest for our podcast. When I contacted Maija, she proposed that we take along Lotta with whom they have a secret club. The closet designers.

Not many know that these startup professionals have background in design and not business.

Maija: So we have this, uh. This kind of like a little, little, uh, how to say, like a, like a, uh, thought that we have been nurturing that, that if there would [00:06:00] be this kind of like a club of, of, uh, designers who never sort of, who don't always reveal that they're actually designers, that they're kind, like, you're just like, when people are asking what's your background?

You just say, oh, business, business background and then innovation. Innovation, innovation. Yes. That's, yeah, exactly.

Irina: Are you closet to designers?

Maija: Designers, closet. Closet designers. So kind of like, only when somebody's really, really, really scratching the surface, you're like, okay.

Okay. I'm a designer.

Irina: Laura and Adi were proposed by Hanne as they had met during their IDBM studies, and both of them had made a really good impression on Hanne. And Hanne was right. The two were extremely competent and a joy to interview. Laura was the only one of all my guests who took a selfie of us and posted it on social media.

Thanks for that, Laura. Good exposure to our podcast.

Laura: Even kind of the industry project, I'd say that majority of my work nowadays is, is like a [00:07:00] continuous industry project. So similar initiatives, so multi-stakeholder engagement in global environments and where, where you have different types of expertise and, and you need to facilitate that complexity, stretch your own, uh, thinking and, and, and kind of reflect your, on your own capabilities and strengths and weaknesses and, and kind of.

Make sure that the team succeed, uh, succeeds within the initiative. So definitely I think, uh, kind of, uh, a first experience in, in that, uh, one of the first experiences in, in that type of way of working

Irina: Tua was proposed by Ville as he wanted to bring forward the long lasting romance between IDBM and Design Factory or whatever that means, and Tua proposed Satu to be her interview partner.

Satu has her own podcast series at Aalto, so I was a little bit nervous what she would think of our production as we are not really professionals. [00:08:00] And in this episode, recording Satu's mike stopped transmitting. This was the only case when we had to change equipment and rerecord one question. In the end, the episode turned out fine.

Satu: I think also, uh, acknowledging that creativity is not something that only happens in, in like well-planned, uh, workshops or formal meetings, but it's actually something that can happen in these more, more fleeting moments in everyday and everyday interaction.

Irina: Salu's role was to speak about what it is like to teach in the IDBM programme, and he surely did that.

I was inspired by his teaching methods. I know Salu from the early two thousands when we were in a common research project developing probes, user study method with the help of mobile phones. Sounds ancient. He already then

went boldly into unknown territories. I remember that, and that mindset still prevails.

Salu: I would consider this is a major [00:09:00] contribution, not only to. Kind of diary analysis, but, uh, theoretically, uh, in, in that university pedagogy as well, because this combines, uh, experiences from the design school, from the engineering school, and from the business.

Irina: The second year, IDBM students, Virva and Kairan are known to be outspoken and ready to jump into challenging situations.

So Hanne proposed them as the ones representing the current state of the program. I was impressed how they were so fluent with their thoughts and words. The work life really needs these kinds of people who can be both analytical and productive.

Kairan: Learning Empathy was something, uh, that I did not expect to learn, uh, at the IDBM programme.

I, I didn't expect that to be a soft skill. I would like, uh, that would be spoken about quite a lot by the professors throughout the year. And I think that's very important for designers to have this, uh, empathy in order to relate to problems and, uh, really [00:10:00] get into, uh, the crevices of problems.

Virva: 100% agree with the combination of, uh, hard skills, with soft skills.

Like you can do amazing things that are completely wrong if you don't understand who you are building the solutions for. Or even if you build a great solution that exactly answers the problem that you're trying to solve, but you don't communicate it, right? Mm-hmm.

Irina: That was our impressive guest lineup.

Not bad, right?

You might be wondering what we've achieved with this podcast series. Did we reach our goals, raising awareness of the program among prospective students and partner companies, and strengthening the alumni network? Time will tell. I guess the good news is that these episodes don't expire. I'm sure people can listen to them for years to come.

To summarize the series, I started by looking for common threats across [00:11:00] the episodes. I even asked the AI, the AI assistant to analyze the transcripts, but that wasn't very helpful. The AI struggled with spoken language in text form, and the summary wasn't a summary at all. After a few rounds of prompts, I decided it wasn't worth the effort.

So I listened to the episodes again properly and searched for reoccurring themes that I personally found interesting, and I'm glad I did as some of the discussions were much more entertaining than I remembered.

Let's move along and go into the common themes I found especially interesting: design, doing mindset, creative culture, Innovating, failing interdisciplinary teamwork and change makers.

Design Doing mindset. As a designer, focusing on the physicality of solutions. And as someone who loves handcrafting and prototyping, I especially enjoyed the discussion on the importance of a design Doing mindset, thinking only takes us [00:12:00] so far.

Making requires reflection and decision making. As a part-time professor, I've noticed that many students struggle to get started. The workshops at Aalto are excellent and there's plenty of support. The real barrier is psychological beginning before you know exactly what you're doing or where you're going to doing is often more difficult than you would imagine.

Markus: And when you start, you get something done and then a few rounds of prototypes and then you are actually realizing, okay, this is the problem that we are solving.

Arni: Right. Like learning by doing. Yeah. I don't know if this, I'm thinking is any longer on your list of questions, but, but, but I have some, some sometimes like.

Uh, half seriously said that I would, I would rather talk about this undoing than design thinking.

Tua: In my experience is having different kind of prototypes or boundary objects, shared artifacts makes it so much easier. It's almost like a third language. So whether we're talking about design factory [00:13:00] strategy or a student team talking about a specific product development project, having something tangible that we're working on, whether it's a miro board with Post-Its and process notes, or, or a, a paper prototype or, um.

A 3D printed something. Having that object I think gives a kind of external point of reference

Adi: from the perspective of being like a facilitator of impact and um, creativity in sort of service of that impact design thinking gives people a very sort of rigid, narrow view into what that involves. And one of the most common things you would've heard over the years is Let's do double diamond. Almost like that is the approach and that is the process it without recognizing that even within this very easily portrayed double diamond, there's like a thousand different methods and approaches that could define each aspect of it.

Irina: Creative culture. Creativity came up repeatedly.

How to foster [00:14:00] it in organizations and why it matters. Creativity allows us to think differently and create change while the topic is vast. Some conditions were frequently mentioned, psychological safety, sufficient time, the possibility for idleness, no fear of failing, a positive attitude. And last but not least, hope.

Creativity is about doing the work and investing real effort in the task at hand. It's very much related to the design, doing mindset, and there's no shortcut to a successful solution.

Laura: I think creativity requires, for example, an environment that is kind of safe. Uh, there's a psychological safety for failing, uh, for exploring different kind of, uh, ideas.

Uh. So I think that's the worry for a starting point. If, if that doesn't exist, it's, it's very hard to change the organization to be creative.

Peter: We know we talk about radical creativity, and so what, how does that relate to [00:15:00] what, what makes it radical? Well, radical is relative. Um, as, as such it has to be. Um, but it means that you're doing something that actually is new.

That is something that's novel, something that's meaningful. And of course the idea of collaboration also is we can also, we can talk about deep collaboration and I've listened to some of the previous podcasts and, and the collaboration discussion kind of came up about kind of trust and respect and appreciation and, you know, a lot of things risk taking.

And I think that that's something where deep collaboration really only occurs when. You have a longer time experience. I can't have a deep collaboration with you without knowing you, and likewise you with me.

Lotta: So rather than being this expert who knows, through creativity, you have the opportunity to wonder and ask and and be curious, and that's where the future value lies.

Adi: To be creative, whether it's at an organization or at an individual level, you need [00:16:00] that freedom to explore. And that I think is something that more leadership can encourage or should encourage.

Laura: And if I continue from there, I think this can be directly measured. For example, uh, from the amount of time that the leadership team uses for, uh, I like to use these terms, performance and, and transformation.

So how much focus do you use on and on, uh, observing your past performance and optimizing that rather than do you use from your 60 minute meeting? How much time you discussing about the transformation and innovations and future opportunities?

Irina: Innovating. Many guests were interested in contributing to the discussion on how to boost Finland's competitiveness.

Right now, the economy in Finland and beyond feels at a standstill. Too often we cut costs. Instead of creating new value, we bury our heads in the sand and wait for better times. But doing so slowly [00:17:00] erodes the welfare state we've built. Investing in research and development can create new ways to sustain a society that offers wellbeing and safety for us all to create meaningful innovations, you need three things.

Time, money, and talent. It sounds obvious, but many organizations try to manage with only one or two of these. You also need a bit of luck being in the right place at the right time with the right product or service. Find the right people, give them time and resources, and then keep your fingers crossed.

Markus: Doing something that has been done before, just in a bit different form. Yeah. On and then doing something totally new. Yeah. That from a product design and a product development point of view, those are totally two different. Exactly. Totally. It, it's like a, it's not even 10 times more difficult than time consuming and risk, but, but 100, 1000 times depending [00:18:00] on the, yeah.

On the object, of course. Mm-hmm.

Krista: Big companies and the industry, industrial companies in Finland, they seem to have more of this aim to, to store the value in a way and, and, and, uh, give it to a way to the shareholders instead of, uh, investing exactly to the future growth. And, and this is absolutely the kind, like the opposite of what these young entrepreneurs are doing today.

And, and, and what. I believe we were also, uh, doing early days,

Arni: or I hope nobody feels offended, but there is somehow like. I think within Finnish companies, there is this winter war mentality that we just somehow putting very little effort always end up with something fantastic. And I think that comes down to the, what you're saying, that it's, it's really, if you want to achieve something, if you want to be good, you need to invest time, time and money and, and talent.

And there is no shortcut there.

Markus: There's no shortcut.

Arni: This is not even

Markus: creativity.

Arni: Not even creativity.

Krista: Innovation.

Arni: Innovation or, I [00:19:00] mean

Markus: repeating them. Ai.

Arni: AI might be a silver bullet. We dunno.

Markus: That's why we are so excited about AI because we think that it could be something that does work for us.

Arni: Exactly.

Maija: But now when everything is so optimized, it's kind of like that's, that's maybe a little bit answering to your question, but what else is needed? It is like some freedom, like some, some free space, unknown parts, some curiosity, something that is not written in the script yet. So. It's, it's, it's very exciting when you start thinking about that.

That's really like the common nominator between like, like art and design and science. It's like, okay, we are just going to areas where nobody has been before. We can't guarantee the result, so we just need to explore. And then that's sort of like this optimization and ultimate focus efficiency. That's the biggest enemy.

Like of course it's needed, but we just have to admit that that is the, that is the ultimate enemy. For, for the real, real, uh, innovation. [00:20:00] Actually,

Adi: it's also very crucial right now when the global economy feels a bit shaky and fuel prices are going up and there's always like AI compute needs more resources.

So with all these sort of factors, it, there's a trend where more and more leadership is starting to sort of get more conservative, I would say. Where they're more looking at mitigating risk rather than looking at opportunity. And maybe that requires a slight sort of rethink that, okay, like, yes, we need to lower our risk.

Yes, we need to make sure that we don't take a hit from all these sort of outside factors. But then there's also opportunity there to innovate and it really matters what leadership incentivizes inside of all of this. If they're incentivizing survival rather than sort of exploration, then you [00:21:00] can feel a bit stifled

Irina: failing.

Why do we so often fail to create or develop something new? Many guests gave the same simple tip for increasing your chances of success. Ask for help. It sounds easy, but it's often neglected. During my 12 years in one company, I noticed that many new managers were reluctant to ask about or learn from what had already been tried.

They preferred to make the same mistakes again and again. It was puzzling and wasteful. Why not ask help from the more experienced people?

Satu: That creative lies in, in, for example, help seeking, help giving behaviors. And how do we then, uh, foster the kind of culture that does not think that help seeking is something that kind of.

Communicates that your ignorance or you're not professional, not enough, but it's actually actually something that you [00:22:00] are encouraged to do in order to get the best possible outcome with the complex, complex challenges that you have at your table.

Maija: Hmm. Then of course, the question is that what actually even is a failure, because, you know, these are my, one of my favorite sayings that like the only way to really fail.

To refuse from help, because there's always someone who is able to come. If you just think about like whatever you, you, whatever stupid things you did, you usually just did it all by yourself, you know? Like there would've been someone who would've had all the answers for you. Yes. But you were just like, oh no, I don't, I don't, I'm too busy, or I'm too proud, I'm too this or that.

So sort of kinda like, usually it's that because I kind of think that, you know, like there are wrong, wrong paths for sure. But you know, like, again, just coming back to this uncertainty. We just need to, we just need to cover those paths. Otherwise we wouldn't know.

Markus: And, and, and that would be maybe a message to, to myself, even though I feel like I'm an expert.

I, I know. So there is one, lifetime [00:23:00] is not enough. You have, you have to be kind of a, what is it? Noble. And, uh, humble.

Arni: Humble.

Markus: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. That's right. You need to be humble and accept that you don't know anything about or you don't know everything. And talk to the people who know that, know, and, and, and, and try to dig the information Yeah.

From them and, and, and do it together.

Irina: Interdisciplinary teamwork. IDBM is interdisciplinary by nature. We talked a lot about interdisciplinary teamwork and learning. Innovation and growth are hard to achieve without bringing different disciplines to the same

table. Interdisciplinary teams need adequate resources and the freedom to experiment, then they're far more likely to deliver.

Tua: We talk a lot about the benefits of interdisciplinary collaboration for the project or the outcome, but honestly, from an individual trajectory, also, even from my personal experience, when I'm co-teaching [00:24:00] with others or doing research together with others, it's so much more interesting when you learn from those more diverse perspectives than just kind of focusing in your own area.

So I think just from a personal motivation and kind of. Career meaningfulness perspective, uh, that collaboration has huge benefits.

Arni: Maybe the question would be today that, that, that maybe these three views are not enough. That you need, need Definitely to lot like it, let's say. Yeah. A ai IP Yeah. Uh, sustainability, all sorts of things that I think that it's just, uh, yeah.

The, the cross-disciplinary just has to be bigger and have more dimensions today.

Satu: Also being aware at the beginning that in interdisciplinary settings, there's, uh, the starting point is information as symmetry. So there's like distinct unshared information and knowledge, uh, among the team members. And people are not always aware of that.

The others are not aware of the same issues that I am. It can show, uh, in, in how we [00:25:00] are referring to, uh, the, the vocabulary we are using on, or how we are referring to, to certain, certain things. But, um. Being aware of that and, and research shows that teams have a tendency to keep discussing among things that everybody can attend to and everybody can kind of, uh, yeah, the shared the ground, the shared ground, and, and then maybe having even that this will somehow visually in your mind that how can we then try to divide the space, uh, where we can actually bring in the kind of the knowledge that that is distinct.

Peter: Of course in an industry project, you're kind of, you start and it looks very positive and you're all very happy, and then you realize, come to a frustration, um, which is a natural part of doing something that probably is new. 'cause if it's all happy, happy, happy, then you're probably not doing something or you're just very fortunate, but it's very unlikely you're not really challenging

your assumptions or you're challenging your, your team's members' assumptions.

And I think that's where this kind of [00:26:00] openness and this curiosity, um, and, and, and energy. To pursue something because if you want an easy way, then there's easier ways than than working with people who think very differently from you.

Markku: Bring more knowledge to the decision making process than just through one discipline

Irina: And for collaboration to work well Deep expertise is needed without disciplines, there cannot be interdisciplinarity.

Markku: Everyone should not be like IDBMer. Like we, we need those, those, uh, guys who go deep into their own discipline and, and which is then narrow but deep. And then we need like IDBM type of the T-shaped, like understand, have all own.

Like strong discipline or, or knowledge. And then what then can, can co uh, cooperate with, with like o other, other, like, uh, experts.

Salu: Uh, [00:27:00] I think all the students should possess some special skills regardless of what they're studying, uh, in. Design, you need to have some hard skills. You need to learn to model or you need to learn materials, structures, mechanical design or something.

Uh, in engineering it's, it's different, but, but that's the specialization. You just need to have something that you can actually do so that it, uh, works reliably. That you can deliver functional results.

Virva: Yeah. But like there is a need for experts, but there's also a need for generalists. So some silos are good and uh, we just need to come up with ways to bridge the gaps between them.

Satu: The expertise is not only, uh, like deep knowledge, but it's also how you collaborate and utilize that knowledge with other experts. So that's definitely how you can facilitate the kind of usefulness of, of the expertise that you have learned.

Irina: Change [00:28:00] makers. In the IDBM programme, we educate people who can lead change.

We aim to provide not only the tools and know-how, but also the mindset. IDBMs get things done. As Salu and Tua noted, students need three skillsets to create new solutions. Specialist skills, reflective skills, and shaping skills. And this applies also to working life.

Salu: We, we invented the name to call this the shaping skills.

Basically it's the ability to provoke change to actually make an impact. And that has been in the kind of tagline of, uh, or slogan of IDBM. Like impact, Uh, there's the IDBM impact event, even, Uh, every year happening. So, um, that kind of, uh, boils down to what I would call like [00:29:00] having learned a particular kind of attitude towards working, like appreciating value in, in a particular way and, and quality.

Uh, in addition to attitude, you need to be able to and have this kind of, uh, uh, initiative taking, uh, I say mindset. That you actually get things running, get things started. Um, you explore, um, in a self-organized manner. And then thirdly, you uh, part of the shaping skills is, um, agency. So you need to actually gain a position where you get things done.

Tua: If I had to hire for one single thing, I would have initiative or proactiveness. It doesn't matter how you call them. 'cause I think everything else you can compensate for. If you do stuff and take the initiative to suggest something, then you'll get feedback. You'll have results. You can always iterate, uh, but it's really hard if you don't take that [00:30:00] first step

Lotta: and I can't help it. I really believe in technology and applying sciences as, as a vehicle of or means of kind of creating this change and improvement. When you can actually commercialize it, when you, when you kind of make it desirable, feasible, uh, and viable enough.

Maija: I also think that, you know, like one thing that people usually don't necessarily recognize is the meaning of this design.

Wh when like utilizing the technology to kind of like, uh, uh, like enable those changes because like technology on its own, it's really nothing. It's like just the carriage without the horse, you know, because it's not brought anywhere. It's just there. It it, it doesn't serve anything. It doesn't, it doesn't deliver anything.

No. It, it's, it's, it's nothing for nobody.

Maija: But then once you kinda like package it somehow that it serves a purpose. It's already designed. [00:31:00]

Kairan: There are so many positive things I could say about the IDBM, but stressing transdisciplinary interactions, what you can get out of them, uh, especially what I've mentioned earlier about learning new ways of doing things from different disciplines, learning new tools, learning from people who are smarter than you in.

Uh, different tasks. Uh, I think this is a great place where you can come to just learn to open up your mind. If you are a very open-minded person and you want to challenge the way, uh, you've been taught to look at things, I think this is a place where they really break down your perspectives and, uh, leave you coming out of the program as a better person, a more critical minded person, and a more optimistic person, I would say.

Irina: IDBM is constantly evolving as the world changes. It offers a safe space to experiment and fail, supported by a stable, rigorous academic backbone and a strong community, [00:32:00] IDBMs know how to think differently, take initiative, and make concrete things happen.

Elina: The facts are leading you to the present.

They're telling about the history, they are telling about the present. But if you need to see the future, you have to use your imagination. So, so this is, I think that Id, if you think about the IDBM, it, it is something that, it's, it's, it's combining the facts and it's combining the imagination. So I think that that is something that, that these, these skills are something that you need when you think about the future

Virva: For anyone Who is a curious person, Curious about different fields, curious about different people, uh, curious about the world and how it works. IDBM is just the right thing.

Irina: I'm grateful to have made a small contribution to telling the IDBM story. IDBM is a programme that embodies the vision of Aalto University by bringing different disciplines together.

It has an important role [00:33:00] in the educational landscape by preparing students as the next generation creative professionals and change makers. 30 years is just the beginning. I wish the program and the community many good years to come. Happy 30th anniversary to us all!

Now it's time to give thanks to the people that have made this podcast series possible. Thank you, Peter McGrory, for starting the brainstorming about the IDBM celebration here and taking me along in the project. Thank you Hanne Savolainen and Ville Eloranta for letting me do this. Thank you Aditya Parekh for sound monitoring, recording and photos.

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Thank you all the wonderful guests. We have been lucky to have you. Last but not least. Thank you everyone who has been listening.