

Future-led Learning podcast

Kiia Beilinson

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One of the concrete actions in Aalto University's current strategy is focusing on holistic wellbeing. One point of this is understanding diversity and inclusion as essential parts of the wellbeing of our community. What does inclusion in higher education teaching mean in practice? Let's find out. My colleague, Aalto pedagogical specialist Sara Rönkkönen interviewed freelancer, Kiia Beilinson, who teaches at Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, and has extensive experience with this topic from in and outside of the academia. My name is Riikka Evans, and this is Future-led Learning. Welcome aboard.

So warmly welcome Kiia Beilinson. To all the future at learning podcast. Kiia, you are a freelancer in the design arts and cultural field, teaching at all the university at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture more precisely in the Department of Media in Visual Communication Design. And in addition, you are a co founder of Myös, which is a volunteer based, nonprofit cultural organization, and collective that focuses on promoting equality, accessibility, and safer spaces in electronic music and club culture. Would you like to tell us more about your own background?

Thank you, Sara. Yeah, so I've studied graphic design as a bachelor and visual communication design as a Master's student in Aalto between 2011 and 2021. So I just recently graduated.

Congratulations.

Thank you. I wrote my MA thesis called A White Preset, which is in Finnish, Valkoinen oletusasetus. It's about whiteness and structural racism in visual communication design in Finland. And I started teaching in all the last year, substituting my professor Arja Karhumaa in a bachelor course called Critical Reading Circle. And now we have planned and facilitated a course at UWAS, the university wide art studies, together with Miia Laine called Decolonizer

Studies? And yeah, I took the pedagogical course, because I wanted to learn more about teaching, I guess.

Yeah, that was the last time we met again, on this pedagogical course. And you had some like amazing viewpoints. And you taught us all during that course a lot about safer spaces in teaching and about inclusion and and that's what we're talking about here today. And you said safer instead of safe spaces, and a terminological question maybe, could you tell tell us more about that? And and why safer, why not safe?

Sure. So safe space is a term that dates back to the 1960's United States. So the time of women's movement, and it refers to providing a space for people belonging to a particular group. So this could be feminists groups, or LGBTQI+ or racialized people. And this safe space was kind of used for positive exclusion, to provide these spaces to converse and interact free from these societal prejudice and oppression and violence. So like, for people who face discrimination in a societal level, it's taking capacity from learning because you, like constantly have to deal with the possibility of oppression or verbal violence or whatever while you're studying. So you can't really fully focus on what you're doing, because you still have to be like in this state of distress. So, these safe spaces kind of gave the space for people belonging to a particular group to come together and discuss whatever they wanted to discuss free from these structures. So when we use the term safer space, we take into account that different people may need different things to feel safe, so it's impossible to provide public spaces that would cover everyone's personal needs equally at all times. But we can strive for that. And safer space is an active space again, striving to cover some basic needs and constantly work towards the wellbeing and safety of all. And this wording also recognizes that we all fail at times, but we can still learn from our mistakes and from each other, to create these safer spaces for all of us together as a shared responsibility.

I have to confess that... I'd like to say that yes, I know a lot about the topic. But actually, there's a lot to learn already when it comes to the concepts and terminology. Inclusion, inclusiveness, equality, equity. I don't even know if I pronounced that right. But how do you understand the terms? And how do how would you define them? Or separate them? What should we know?

It's true, like the vocabulary is kind of emerging. And I feel like I've learned so many new words, within the last five years following the discourse, but

inclusion is this active verb that needs to be challenged? So there's always like, inclusion? For whom and by whom, on what basis? And who gets to decide who gets included? Or who is taken into consideration when talking about inclusion? And how are these like norms and personal bias affecting Teaching and Learning in Higher Education is the curriculum inclusive is their diverse representation in staff, as well as in the student body? Are the classrooms and teaching accessible in all aspects, such as physical, social, economical, or mental? And the difference with the ideas of equality and equity: to build up equality, we need to practice equity. Equality is the goal. And then we need to kind of level things up for reaching equal states, because we are not equal in this society at the moment.

And I think, again, in Finland, there's this general idea of intent that every citizen should have an equal access to higher education, regardless of their gender, or background, or race, class, but it's not as widely acknowledged how these characteristics affect the changes of operating in society, or perceiving higher education as an opportunity to even pursue. So aspiring an academic education or career might not be seen as a realistic alternative for a person with, say, a working class or immigrant background due to multiple reasons, lack of representation and role models being just one of them.

What does it take to build or enhance equity?

The practice of building equity takes into consideration the variety of obstacles that may challenge or prevent individuals from being perceived as equal to the majority. And this, of course, requires research and understanding of the impacts of the variety of discrimination people are facing, due to how they are pursued by society, or how they are differing from the "norm". One example of increasing equity could be using quota and anonymity in the recruitment process, or eliminating structural discrimination, or personal bias from these processes. In any ways we can think of. Of course, language is important. So prioritizing sometimes or vocalizing specific, non-normative qualities and needs in communications, and making that entire process and environment somehow transparent and accessible and available and welcoming at all levels for various minority groups.

If we now thought more about your role as a teacher in in higher education, what specific challenges have you encountered relating to this topic?

Well, I have not been teaching for too long yet. So apart from the challenges emerging from the pandemic situation, I think I've mostly faced challenges as a student so far, but one very apparent lunch for me as an emerging teacher is acknowledging the power dynamics that are present in the classroom at all times. And understanding that being a teacher is a position of power, and that I have the responsibility to work that position in a mindful way. And there's this hierarchy present and I need to facilitate the situation so that the students feel comfortable sharing their ideas with me and the rest of the class. And I think that's like the most important thing in at least in these classes that I'm teaching, which are very much based on conversation and changing ideas. And I think being a teacher is also being a student. So there's there needs to be a will and ways to be able to learn and improve and reflect on your actions and your work.

How about... what sort of, even as a lesson from your teacher role or as a student, what kind of solutions have you found to those challenges?

As I said, I tried to reflect constantly... I don't know, lately, I've been thinking a little bit about imposter syndrome and how it affects sometimes you're working at least in new situations, or something that you don't have so much experience of yet. But I feel it's also a very important tool to kind of help reflect in these situations and keep yourself, not like in a paralyzing way but keep kind of that healthy self criticism there. So you don't get too comfortable with like, how you how you operate in those situations. But personal reflection is very important for me in this work... also acknowledging the power dynamics and the personal advantages that I have or privileges that I have in life and in society, in general.

And there's actually a great illustrated infographic drawn by Sylvia Duckworth that I found on social media, that's called wheel of power/privilege. And that can be a helpful tool to kind of check where you fit in that wheel. So my personal privileges working in Aalto or working in a Finnish educational institution includes such things as being a Finnish citizen, being native to the Finnish language, being able bodied, slim, university educated, coming from a middle class background, having light skin with proximity to whiteness, although I'm also a person of color. And yeah, I've personally taking the habit of starting each course with founding safer space principles for a classroom conversation together with the students. Another good practice to assure self determination for everyone is to ask students to present their names and their preferred pronouns on the introduction round, especially when the teaching is happening in English. And refer to each student as they prefer to be

referred to as, instead of relying on the official registers or assumptions. And I think it's also good to address who the students can contact in case of concerns or conflict. It can be like yourself as a teacher, as well as a reliable, external contact. And I think in all that there are these contacts that can be shared, or it could be a teacher that's in charge of the course, as well.

A lot of preventive work, a lot about communication that you can do beforehand, instead of trying to make things better when kind of the it's already gone to the wrong direction.

Yeah, yeah, I think it's a lot about that, like planning how to build a ground, basically.

Exactly.

Yeah.

What should everybody do? What can I do to learn to be able to reflect more on my own actions every day? Where to find more information?

I can just say the internet. That's the easiest way.

Google it!

But we can definitely start with ourselves and examine how our personal characteristics impact the ways that we are seen and treated in educational spaces and in society at large. And we can practice empathy by imagining how things would be different if we were of different gender or race or ethnicity or class, ability, weight, height, age, health, sexuality background to list a few. So this is also a listening exercise, I guess, to listen to other people's experiences and try and relate. And we can, of course, practice solidarity when we face unfair situations for others, and educate ourselves on the realities faced by people who are not alike us. So, yeah, getting that information or being interested in things that might not be directly from our own perspective, We can learn to see things we share in common with each other, as well as the things that we don't, and learn to appreciate and find

value in those differences that make us unique and hold specific kind of knowledge only available to those with a lived experience.

And there are a lot of educators and agencies who can help with the equality and equity work on organizational level in Finland, just to mention a few at least: ATAÁ Agency, deidei, Ruskeat tytöt organization Inklusiv are companies doing work on these issues. But I would also like to see more support and resources, meaning time and money and platforms, for the students, and the staff to raise their concerns and have agency in shaping the university for a more inclusive and just future. And I think the essence of higher education as a hub for fostering "civilization" is failing a bit if we fail to address the discriminative structures within it. And to overcome the obstacles that prevent a large group of people to take part in it.

Those were wise words.

I feel like the general idea in Finland as a society, but also in in the education here is that it's kind of "finished" the equality of it. It's free, and it's available for all and that's great, of course, but still, education is also something that is part of the society at large. And the society is affected by structural oppressive discriminative systems such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, ableism, class discrimination, etc. And I feel like, it's great that we talk about the things we've accomplished as a society for equality, but they're still problems. I feel like the strive for equality should be like an active state, where we constantly see where we are still lacking equality, and inclusivity. There's this illusion of equality. And that's why we often fail to recognize the needs of the people who have still not been part of that conversation or discourse. And for a long time, the conversation and struggle for equality has revolved around rather binary gender equality and women's rights, and intersectional feminism, which is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has kind of helped to look at the multitude of intersections that can affect our experiences, and bring challenges and specific needs in navigating the world. And these systems that have been designed for particular kinds of people and bodies.

I kind of would like to end with what you just said. Would you like to add any like podcasts or books or readings that you would still like to recommend?

Yes, what I shared also in pedagogic course, there is a great tool kit called Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Online. There's also research done by Lynn Holly and Sue Steiner called Safe Space: student perspectives on classroom environment, If teachers are interested to find out more about how safer spaces work in classrooms. And within Aalto, I would like to recommend these initiatives that seems super interesting and quite recent. There is one called Crisis Interrogatives, there's also Feminist Futures, who organize hackathons and there's a group called Color of Science that are worth checking out and following their their work here.

You said you said that if teachers are interested, shouldn't or should we be interested and and why and how to also get along those who are maybe not interested in this topic of inclusion in higher education?

Right? I think everyone should be interested in making the classroom as safe as possible mainly because it enhances learning. So when you're in Lynn Holly and Sue Steiner are are saying that the metaphor of the "classroom as a safe space has emerged as a description of a classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes and behaviors". And I keep quoting: "Safety in this sense does not refer to physical safety. Instead, classroom safe space refers to protection from psychological or emotional harm. A safe classroom space is one in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the instructor, the profession or other students. And this does not mean the same as being comfortable. So to grow and learn, students must confront issues that make them uncomfortable and force them to struggle with who they are and what they believe." Yeah, so facilitating safer spaces for learning lightens the stress of social interaction or chance of encountering microaggression amongst students belonging to these "minority groups". And practicing safer space policies also increases understanding and sensitivity to different perspectives, and builds trust among the class to encourage these deeper and more meaningful interactions. And that way, increases the potential of also creativity in learning, I would say.

So basically, if I hear you correctly, we're also talking about more effective learning, more effective teaching, not just something that is something that is nice to do or good to do. But this all comes down to, we're talking about effective learning, which is our ultimate goal.

Yes, that's right. In its essence, this idea of a first basis is really about very basic things, and respect in social interaction, and just addressing and valuing each individual as they are and making room for mistakes and learning. So I guess that's very, the essence of teaching.

Yeah, makes sense. Thank you, Kiia.

Thank you, Sara.

The future led learning podcast is part of Aalto University's Oasis of Radical Wellbeing. This time, your host is Asara Frank, and the episode was produced by me Sakari Heiskanen. It included music by Siddhartha Corsus, and the future led learning theme by Sargon. Thank you for listening.