

Future-led Learning podcast, EPS 8: Petri Suomala on the art of listening

Petri Suomala [00:00:09]: Maybe the most important thing is to try to continuously learn, to listen to each other better and better. So, listening, the art of listening, and not just in a technical sense, but maybe in a profound sense.

Riikka Evans [00:00:35]: The Oasis of Radical Wellbeing gathers know-how about wellbeing from around and outside our community and spreads and curates information about holistic wellbeing as an essential part of the Aalto everyday life. Contemplative practices and a dialogue about wellbeing are needed, both on a personal level, as well as a part of our systemic thinking. This is essential for the sake of inclusivity, equity and diversity in Aalto University. I met online with the vice president of education, Petri Suomala, and had a chance to discuss with him about wellbeing as a strategic, as well as a personal issue. My name is Riikka Evans, and this is Future-led Learning. Welcome aboard.

Jingle [00:01:21]: Future-led Learning, by Aalto University.

., [00:01:26]: So, first of all, welcome to the podcast.

Petri Suomala [00:01:30]: Thanks a lot.

Riikka Evans [00:01:32]: It is very good to have you here. And my first question is, how are you?

Petri Suomala [00:01:39]: I am quite fine, I have to say, I really enjoy the wintertime and all the possibilities that the winter provides. I like skiing actually. I did some skiing this week and, more generally, I am really happy. Having the opportunity to work in Aalto University, I think that is, for me at least, a very meaningful work. It is a privilege to be able to work here.

Riikka Evans [00:02:08]: I definitely agree, and I share that thought with you. So, we have invited you here to talk about Aalto University's learning and teaching culture, but more importantly, also the community of wellbeing. Oasis of Radical Wellbeing is a new project that has recently launched. It is about holistic wellbeing and how we can develop the community wellbeing here. Could you tell our listeners what it is all about?

Petri Suomala [00:02:42]: Thanks, I think there are a lot of different aspects in this. For me, one of the most important things, of course, is that wellbeing is something that we should keep on investing. We have done a lot of work for the wellbeing of our students for several years, but at the same time, we still find there are challenges, and we have things to improve. While doing that, while going forward, the message of the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing is that it is really important to do this together as a community. Not only students' wellbeing, but also the wellbeing of teachers, faculty and staff. It is a kind of a holistic entity. And when going forward, I think we would really need to think about all the different kinds of roles and perspectives we have in this.

Riikka Evans [00:03:45]: Petri, our community is very ambitious and also kind of demanding as an environment to work in. How can we see this from the wellbeing point of view, and how are we?

Petri Suomala [00:04:07]: A very difficult question. I think it is fair to say that, as I pointed out, we have things to do. We have a lot of stress, we have a lot of burnout risk in the community, as we can see from, for instance, the wellbeing surveys for the students. At the same time, on average, I think we are doing fairly okay in many respects. But I think it is very important to acknowledge that we have different groups, individuals in different positions, and we really need to appreciate that, try to avoid polarizztion, some kind of segregation, as much as possible, and understand the important differences that we have in the community. I agree, we are as a community very ambitious, and there are a lot of performance talk around us. So, some kind of selective diligence, I guess, is needed.

Riikka Evans [00:05:33]: I have also thought about this from the point of view of competition and how we make sure that the competition stays fair and healthy. Do you have any ideas about that?

Petri Suomala [00:05:48]: Healthy competition, in that, I think one of the keys, at least maybe personally, is that it is important to acknowledge that you cannot succeed every time, and you cannot succeed in everything. Maybe that is something that I have referred to as a sort of a selective diligence. So, that kind of appreciation of being human with errors, I think it is important. Also, one perspective that, I think, is important is how we show mutual respect, even in the conditions where we compete, sometimes at least seemingly, with each other. So, maybe those are the perspectives to start with as an example.

Riikka Evans [00:07:06]: That is very good point. Compassion and appreciating one another. I like that. So, let's look at the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing a little bit closer. Could you tell our

listeners, what does Radical Wellbeing mean, and how is it different from just a regular wellbeing?

Petri Suomala [00:07:34]: I think that is the important question. Wellbeing is important even without any additional words, but maybe radicalness in that, the combination of radical wellbeing, maybe it is just my personal perspective, but for me, it reminds of the challenge that what we seek is a substantial improvement. We are not just talking about wellbeing superficially, or talking about feeling joyful, but really how to work as a community in a more meaningful way, in a way that more and more individuals feel a mutual respect and feel the meaningfulness, and in that sense, strive towards a substantial and permanent improvement in a way.

Riikka Evans [00:08:49]: Yeah, I agree. If I look at this from our strategy point of view, we have radical creativity, we have entrepreneurial mindset, to name a few of these strategic cross-cutting themes. How do we make sure that the community can see that it is not just on the individual? How can we make sure that we are actually doing it on the structural level?

Petri Suomala [00:09:21]: That is a core issue. And how to make sure that really happens, I think, relates to attitude that, indeed, we don't just talk about wellbeing and gather information for individuals, which we do, of course, but we keep on developing also the processes, the very services, individuals and this community needs, and take care of things like decent workload, many concrete things that actually set the foundation for wellbeing. So, it is also that this project, if you wish, Oasis of Radical Wellbeing is not all of the things that are going on, but it is just one piece of the puzzle in which we also have a lot of basic work that is intended to improve the university, its processes, its services, its structures. I think it is very important to talk about this. It is not really that easy to say how all this comes together, but I fully agree, we need to take care of these concrete, fundamental things as we go forward.

Jingle [00:10:50]: Future-led Learning.

Riikka Evans [00:10:52]: You mentioned that we had the survey AllWell? for the students, but as a pedagogical specialist, I get questions, what about teachers. So, could you give us a concrete example, how are we now focusing also on the academics and the staff?

Petri Suomala [00:11:13]: That is the objective of this action, this project, that we will increasingly also keep in mind the teachers and the challenges of the teachers, provide

information, the best research evidence there are in the world, and try to convey that into this community, but also develop the services, like the wellbeing desk, a concept that is part of this Oasis of Radical Wellbeing. So, try to concretely understand what are the needs of teachers and how we can cater them. That is the very essential idea of this project, keep on going with the student side, but also acknowledge that students cannot feel well probably if the teachers are not doing well. And as said, we still have challenges, some of them being very much profound in the structures and processes that I refer to. So, in addition to this project, we have to do a lot in our different processes across the university.

Riikka Evans [00:12:22]: So, are we perhaps looking forward to a survey for the teachers, for example?

Petri Suomala [00:12:27]: Well, I think that is very much a good idea, and probably more information is really needed on the heterogeneousness that probably exists. So, I think that is a very good idea.

Riikka Evans [00:12:42]: Yeah. So, I did a little bit of background research, and I found this amazing video, the interview you had with Kamilah Majied, and you guys were already talking about this. And I was really inspired by that video, I must say. You guys talked about the wellbeing also from the point of view of diversity, equity and inclusion. How would you see the project of Oasis of Radical Wellbeing from this point of view?

Petri Suomala [00:13:15]: Thanks for the question. I think this is one of the concrete steps towards actually acknowledging that, when we talk about wellbeing in a profound way. I think it really deals with equality, diversity and inclusion, keeping in mind that we indeed have a very international, in many respects, diverse university. So, an important part of the work in the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing is to understand that there are different groups of individuals that are in a somewhat or at the very different position than some of the others. And when we are developing our ways of working in this community, I think it is important to think about these things. I think it is very natural to fairly superficially think that the situation of the next person is pretty much the same as my situation, whereas that might not be the case. And a lot of things that we experience are actually based on the fact that, how we profoundly are able to place ourselves in the community actually affects the way that we feel in here. So, I think it is important to increasingly acknowledge diversity issues and build more and more inclusion and equality in all of the processes that we have. It is not easy to fully elaborate, but I think this is really one of the first concrete steps of bringing these things together.

Riikka Evans [00:14:59]: If we think of these questions of diversity and inclusion, oftentimes, especially here in higher education, we run into this thing that we might already be quite privileged. Students have got into a very prestige, good university. Teachers are teaching in a very highly appreciated, high-level university. So, that is already a sort of a position of privilege there. How do we make sure that we support our community in this thought process of recognising, admitting, and also honouring this position and making sure that we don't use that, I would say position of power wrong?

Petri Suomala [00:15:47]: For me, that is the question of continuous process of building consciousness, and a process of reflection that we can practice, both at individual level and as a group or community level. So, every once in a while, I think it is important to stop and think about things as they actually are. Because it is easy to forget, both the good things and sometimes also the bad things. And a continuous process of reflection as a tool, I think it is very important. And as mentioned, of course, that is also individual process, but we can also help each other in voicing out the things that can be appreciated and also things that cannot yet be that much appreciated, and then work to improve them for the future. So, that is very important. What we can do in terms of structures, I think we need to very actively work towards building committees and building groups beyond the usual suspects. Because sometimes, which is very positive, there are enthusiastic individuals who come to different occasions when there are possibilities, whereas at the same time, there might be individuals who are a little bit feeling afraid or are hesitant on joining in. And I think it is a very step-by-step process, that we need to build this true inclusion in a sense that we don't have any invisible barriers joining in and taking an active role in the community.

Riikka Evans [00:17:50]: So, would you say that our goal is to create a safe space to study and teach, and also, of course, research at Aalto University?

Petri Suomala [00:18:00]: Well, definitely, I agree. And Aalto University, as a university, should be a safe space. So, for me, it is important that this is really holistically one safe space.

Riikka Evans [00:18:17]: Now, we know that these things are sensitive, and different people have different opinions, and we are at different levels of learning. But how do we motivate our staff and our academics and our students into this work?

Petri Suomala [00:18:35]: The tools that the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing has available are mainly consolidating information that one can find in the world and provide that, channel that to this community, and through that, evoke interest and attention, as said, providing services for individuals. But it also requires that more and more individuals are willing to

take the opportunity and maybe stop for a while and read the texts or read the documents or take part in the events that are being organised. I think it is, again, one step-by-step process where more curious individuals will start, but it is important to maintain the attitude that we are welcoming all of the members of the community to join in. And the collective intelligent discussion is an attraction per se, hopefully, at least. So, that is something that I hope we are creating also with the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing.

Riikka Evans [00:19:58]: If we look at it from the point of view that people might be making still mistakes, we are human beings, we are vulnerable, we are not perfect, how should we take those mistakes? Is there room to make mistakes?

Petri Suomala [00:20:11]: Definitely. There needs to be room to make mistakes. Of course, there are different kinds of mistakes, but what I think is most important is that we are willing to learn. So, what happens after the mistake? So, again, in that occasion, if I noticed that I did something not that well or was really going into a wrong direction, maybe the most important thing is to stop and think what happened, what actually drove me there and try to capture really the root issues that were in that position that I ended up in the result that I ended with. So, post-reflection in those cases, trying to learn, trying to improve. Making mistakes is a given fact, I think, in any human community, but the inclination to learn from those is a sign of a good and constructive one.

Riikka Evans [00:21:17]: So, would you say that we need to practice compassion and also self-compassion?

Petri Suomala [00:21:24]: I think it is very important. And this actually also comes back to the idea that I tried to voice out a bit earlier, that we are not always at our best. Sometimes there are very profound other kinds of conditions that are actually not really connected to the work or colleagues or the processes of Aalto University, which have a big impact on the way that we behave or how we work. I think compassion and understanding regarding those is also important, as we are humans and in a very holistic sense.

Riikka Evans [00:22:07]: During the COVID-19 era, we have noticed that, both our students and also our faculty and staff has felt a little bit distressed. There has been a lot of loneliness and anxiety. How will this Radical Wellbeing and the whole project help those people?

Petri Suomala [00:22:29]: First, I think it is true that past two years have been really, really hard for us, both for the students, for the teachers and for the whole community. I think it is valuable in times like these to join our forces, come together and discuss and reflect with

each other, and try to understand all the connections that we have, and all the drivers, or at least some of the drivers of the wellbeing together. So, in a sense, I think the mere existence of the Oasis is something that is at least intended to be useful, in a sense that we are bringing people together, and in addition to that, hopefully theoretically, rooted understanding, communications and services that the project is able to provide are, of course, useful, if you wish, in technical sense as well, but most important thing, I believe, is that if and when this action is able to bring people together and discuss. I think it is as simple as that.

Riikka Evans [00:23:57]: Petri, we know that you are a very, very busy person, and you might need to go to the next meetings. As a final question, what kind of regards would you like to send to our listeners regarding wellbeing?

Petri Suomala [00:24:11]: First of all, let me take that point that you mentioned. I think I am not that busy that I don't have time to talk about wellbeing, because it is very fundamental. What can I tell? I am very limited myself and not an expert, but my experience is that, maybe the most important thing is to try to continuously learn, to listen to each other better and better. So, listening, the art of listening, and not just in a technical sense, but maybe in a profound sense, listening what the next person is saying, and listening also what she or he is not saying, and what is happening around us, and perhaps not always talk too much. We are eager to talk, and sometimes we are very enthusiastic of our own thoughts, which is fine and great, but I think, at least for me, it is very important to continue to try to improve in listening to each other.

Riikka Evans [00:25:24]: That is excellent. Thank you.

Petri Suomala [00:25:26]: Thanks a lot, Riikka, I enjoyed a lot this discussion. Thanks. Thanks for the great questions.

Riikka Evans [00:25:33]: Thanks for coming.

Jingle [00:25:35]: Future-led Learning.

Speaker 2 [00:25:42]: Thank you for listening to the Future-led Learning podcast. Your host today was Riikka Evans, and her guest was vice-president Petri Suomala. The episode was produced by me, Sakari Heiskanen, and included music by [?? 00:25:55]. The Future-led

Learning podcast is now a part of the Oasis of Radical Wellbeing at Aalto University. Please find us online at [radicalwellbeing.aalto.fi](https://radicalwellbeing.aalto.fi), and on Instagram under [@aaltowellbeing](https://www.instagram.com/aaltowellbeing).

Jingle [00:26:13]: Aalto University podcast.