Future-led Learning 10: Johannes Kaira

Intro [00:00:01]: Aalto University podcast.

Johannes Kaira [00:00:08]: I think there will always be a need for this very sort of traditional education style and that is not going anywhere, but I think this kind of project course style, where the students are not just connecting the dots, they are also placing the dots, is the way we want to teach them.

[music 00:00:31]

Riikka Evans [00:00:37]: Johannes Kaira works as a teacher in the Aalto Ventures Program, which is the entrepreneurship education program at Aalto University, where students in multidisciplinary teams work on hands-on exercises. We discussed with Johannes about teamwork and what it requires as a method from students and teachers. We talked about trust, communication skills and flexibility, and how they contribute to a well-functioning team. This is future-led Learning podcast. My name is Riikka Evans. Welcome aboard.

[music 00:01:12]

Child's voice [00:01:22] Future-led Learning.

Male voice [00:01:24]: By Aalto University.

Riikka Evans [00:01:26]: Hi Johannes, and welcome to Future-led Learning podcast.

Johannes Kaira [00:01:30]: Thank you.

Riikka Evans [00:01:32]: Hey, tell us a little bit about your background and how did you end up teaching teamwork at Aalto University?

Johannes Kaira [00:01:38]: Briefly, I graduated several years ago from Aalto Arts. My education background architecture. I worked in the business for a while, after which I

became an entrepreneur and worked with musical instruments, designing musical instruments for few years. Then that enterprise just went down, and just around the same time I noticed a job ad from Aalto Ventures Program. When I saw it, it just felt like it was basically custom-made for me, because it was for somebody who had been studying at Aalto, who had taken the entrepreneurial courses, which I had, and who had some experience in entrepreneurship. I applied, and now I'm here. I have been here ever since. I have been enjoying it.

Riikka Evans [00:02:34]: What are you doing currently in Aalto?

Johannes Kaira [00:02:35]: I'm running several courses. First of all, the flagship course called Startup Experience, which is AVP flagship course, but I'm also building an entrepreneurial education for Aalto Arts.

Riikka Evans [00:02:49]: Cool! What kind of courses have you taught before Startup Experience?

Johannes Kaira [00:02:53]: The one is this bachelor course called Käyttölähtöinen tuotekehityskurssi, which is a user centric product development course. Then school science and also a routine course called Good Life Engine, which we also run at Ventures Program.

Riikka Evans [00:03:10]: Now, tell us, what is Startup Experience all about? Pitches?

Johannes Kaira [00:03:13]: It's all about product development, problem definition, defining a need, but it's also understanding what the difference between need and demand is. Most importantly, it's about understanding people, understanding customers, potential customers, and really understanding how you can as an entrepreneur serve somebody in a way that it becomes a sustainable business. Obviously, that is a very complicated task to actually create a product that has a need, or create a product that has demand. I think that is the Holy Grail, and I think that is my pitch for it. It's an exploration, it's an adventure, and very experience based.

Riikka Evans [00:04:01]: If I understand correctly, you guys are using teamwork as a teaching method on that course?

Johannes Kaira [00:04:07]: Yes, of course. The teamwork is basically the core of the course. We have built the course around the concept of a startup, which, I guess, you could start alone, but in real life nothing basically ever happens alone. So, the teamwork. If the students learn to run a team, quite often they nail the other things, too.

Riikka Evans [00:04:37]: So, it's essential to have a team and to build one.

Johannes Kaira [00:04:41]: Exactly, yes.

Riikka Evans [00:04:42]: Cool. If we take a closer look at the teamwork as a method, you already touched that a little bit, but could you elaborate more, why should we teach teamwork to our students?

Johannes Kaira [00:04:52]: I think for many reasons. Of course, everyone of us who work in any workplace, we know that likable colleagues are nice, so I think that's one very obvious reason. But then the reason why Aalto wants to have startups, wants to have entrepreneurship, is that we are after new innovations. I believe that a good team is where good innovations can happen or good innovations can be created. I think it's about productivity, it's about innovating, it's about bringing value. Looking from the perspective of a product development course and having seen several teams going through it, I have learned that a good team can recover pretty much from anything. A bad team, a non-functioning team can ruin even a good idea, because the execution doesn't work.

Riikka Evans [00:05:57]: Could you define features of a well-functioning team a little bit closer?

Johannes Kaira [00:06:01]: Yes. Yes, and no. I think the annoying answer is that a good team has a good flow. It's a very vague, but of course you can then break it down. Quite often they have very open communication. There is a lot of flexibility in terms of team members being open to finding a role that serves the team rather than themselves. And sometimes it's really hard to define. A good team usually starts creating good ideas and their execution is really good. And that usually then feeds into the process more, and I think that's a positive cycle that they get into. Often, as I said, they have a good flow, but I think that's more of a result of them being very open communicators, flexible.

Riikka Evans [00:06:58]: Probably also creating trust.

Johannes Kaira [00:07:00]: Yes, of course. That is actually a huge thing. Quite often the students are running very tight schedules and they have tons of work here, so when they form a team, especially in our case, where the workload in the course is quite significant and the work is something that many students had not done before. It's very different from the other courses that are running in the university. I think trust and the ability to commit for the project, for the course and for the team is essential. Otherwise, obviously, if you don't feel that the team is really, you know, if your input for the team doesn't bring anything back, then you start prioritising, and you probably might think, okay, maybe I just do the bare minimum here and just focus on something else. So, of course, the trust and the feeling that when you put something in, when you give something, this team will also give something back and the commitment level is equal.

Riikka Evans [00:08:15]: Absolutely. Can we break it down, like you said? What does it require from the students to actually participate the teamwork and be successful in teamwork?

Johannes Kaira [00:08:26]: As I said, one thing is obviously flexibility. I'm still talking from our perspective and from what I have seen over the years. One thing is that we want to create a team that enables everybody to contribute to the teamwork and to the innovation process and all the elements. So, when everyone is flexible and ready to modify their role in a way that it gives room for others, but also supports others, then we have something strong. Probably we all have been in a team where there is somebody, you know, I know how to do this, let's just follow my steps. That's probably one of the best ways to kill the motivation for others. I think flexibility is a key thing. Then communication, being able to talk about things. This is difficult to define whether this is a teamwork skill or whether it is an individual skill that you can communicate your thoughts, you can really get your point across. Usually, again, tight schedules create a situation where they have to get results in very short periods of time. Especially, when we are pushing them to areas where they are all slightly uncomfortable and maybe everyone is a little bit of lost, every idea becomes, you know, they are very complex, abstract ideas that you need to communicate. Again, when we are talking about trust, one key element in trust is that you know what is going on and you know what other people are thinking and where are they going. Even if you didn't agree with them at the moment but you have a clear understanding that, okay, this how this person thinks and this is the logic behind it, it makes it way easier for you to then for example be flexible, if you know that, okay, I see where this guy is coming from, and okay, maybe I can be a little bit flexible here. If the communication fails, then everyone just becomes quite protective and, like, okay, I don't know where this is heading, so maybe I will try to slow it down. So, yes, I think flexibility, trust, communication. These are the ones. Then I think there are, of course, other factors beside that. I have been talking about the flow, but I think the flow is, there can be individuals who just have a certain character and

they can create a certain atmosphere. I think those are more random. You may have a person like that in a team, and then you get this extra fun, but I don't think that is necessary. It is something that is nice to have as an extra. I don't really regard that as a teamwork skill, in a way I think communication or flexibility.

Riikka Evans [00:11:44]: What kind of emotional skills do the students need?

Johannes Kaira [00:11:49]: I think, again, this kind of revolves around the topic of flexibility.

Riikka Evans [00:11:54]: Let me continue. Can they be practiced?

Johannes Kaira [00:11:56]: I think everything can be practiced. Maybe your hype is something you can't change, but I think everything else we can pretty much change, one way or the other. At least we can try. What was the previous question?

Riikka Evans [00:12:16]: The question was, when you are facilitating teamwork, what kind of emotional skills does it require from the students, and how do you facilitate them?

Johannes Kaira [00:12:25]: Oh, yes. That is a good question. I think one thing, as I was saying, comes back to this flexibility issue. One very important is understanding your emotions and understanding why you are experiencing certain emotions, and then being able to maybe step away from those emotions, at least for a second to evaluate the situation. Am I failing this because I should do something about this, or am I failing this because I'm just in a new place, new situation? Is this a weird, nervous, or scary situation? I think understanding where your emotions come from and understanding other people's emotions and where they come from. I think empathy is very important here. Then of course, I think, very basic emotion control skills. Sometimes, especially under pressure, we all are not as good communicators under pressure, we are not as polite, or maybe we can't phrase our sentences that well anymore. That then causes fear, frustration, anything in the other members. If everybody can understand their own emotions and feelings and also understand that, okay, this person is probably not mean because they don't like me, it's probably just this situation. That can take you far. We actually had a psychologist in on a course, and they talked about the concept called psychological flexibility, which is basically understanding the source of your emotions and then being kind to yourself. Emotional skills, I would not just put them as teamwork skills. I think that the basic emotional skills that you would need to get through life in general are the ones that help you in teamwork.

Riikka Evans [00:14:43]: What does it require from the teachers perspective, then, when you are facilitating these? We talked about what does it require from the students, but then if you think of yourself as a teacher: what is your role?

Johannes Kaira [00:14:56]: As a teacher, I often try to take the role of a coach rather than an adviser. I try to lead with questions rather than advice or commands. I think teamwork from teacher's perspective requires an ability see the chemistry, ability to spot certain dynamics, and preferably in the very early stage. I was telling an example which happens quite often than there is one team member that becomes quite dominant in the team. To be able to spot that early on and softly guide them away from this one person running the team and involving the rest of the team, without putting down this one person, but giving also this person a feeling that, hey, you are still an important member of the team, but just... shut up for a minute. That is a very simple example, but generally I would say that the ability to spot these dynamics early on, because there will be a point after which it's really hard to recover the team dynamics after you have lost it. Especially these short courses, where sometimes students, if the teamwork doesn't work and you are already halfway through the course and they already see the finish line, they already go, okay, we will just plough through this, I don't care anymore. We don't want anyone to be in that situation. That's again bad marketing for teamwork if we give them the experience that, oh, it just sucked, and nothing really came out of it. Obviously, they are not very excited about teamwork after that. I think it's about being present, listening to them, understanding the verbal communication but also the non-verbal. I think that's it. Then of course courage. If you see an issue, if you see a conflict, they expect you to be the authority there, and in a way, you are, because you have made the setup for them. That I think applies in work life too. I think sometimes we go behind saying, hey, you are all grown-ups, why didn't you just sort out your own issues. And this is what happens I think in companies too, that the management, when there is an issue, people are slightly afraid of stepping in. Often, it's, oh yea, you will sort it out yourself. Quite often what happens is that we say that teamwork is important, and we tell it to the students, but then in reality, we fill the lessons, our teaching sessions are… just like, sure and whatever, we will just fill them up. Then we leave them, now you figure out the teamwork on your own time. And as I said, often the schedules are really difficult. If they have a team of five members. Have you ever tried scheduling a meeting for five people?

Riikka Evans [00:18:25]: That's tough.

Johannes Kaira [00:18:26]: Yea. So, then they will end up in a situation that they try to figure out the teamwork on their own, and they may have to do that, like, at Sunday night from eight to ten, or something like that. So, we can all think how we feel. Are you the best version of yourself during those times? And then there is no one to support them to go through this very difficult teamwork, and then there is the pressure of the course. This is something that we have actually now changed and started to experience that we have

increased the time where the teams are basically just working with us in the classroom. We don't have any topic for the session. We just want them to be there, and then we circle within the teams, and we are like, how are you doing, just tell us how things are going. That's what they need.

Riikka Evans [00:19:19]: Oh, that sounds so wonderful. Yes. We should have more that kind of courses here at the university, too, where we just allow them to work there, and we are there to support them.

Johannes Kaira [00:19:31]: We should. I think one of the problems is that it is not very scalable way to teach. It is very resource-consuming, but I think it is worth it, definitely. Especially in courses like this, where they are really exploring new territories and new roles. We make them all do things that they haven't done before. We make them think in ways they may have not been thinking before. So, we are pushing them to the limits in many ways. That is why we think that it is really important that we are there to then make sure that they have what they need to be able to go through that journey.

Child's voice [00:20:10] Future-led Learning.

Male voice [00:20:12]: By Aalto University.

Riikka Evans [00:20:15]: You have already mentioned some of the challenges that you come across when running teamwork-based courses, but how do you recognise if a team needs support from the teacher? You said that you need to be present, and you need to early on spot certain personalities and stuff like that, but what else is there?

Johannes Kaira [00:20:32]: I think the easiest metric is obviously the team's output. I don't really know what the best word is to describe it. You kind of feel that whatever they are producing, it's lacking something. For example, they don't take risks in innovation, they don't go crazy, they are very conservative and want to play it safe. I think that is one sign of the team not really being able to get the full potential out of them. Then of course very basic, just reading the body language. How they sit around the table, how their internal discussion works, and one good thing is just to randomly ask people to explain something about their project and their ideation process or whatever they are going through at the moment, and comparing if they are answering the same anwer. Quite often we realise that, hey, this team, they haven't really been talking to each other until now. It's these little cues you can pick here and there. I don't think there is anything magical. They are very straightforward things. You can pretty much see how they sit together. That tells a lot.

Riikka Evans [00:21:52]: Yes. And it is probably also important that the threshold to reach out to the coach or teacher is very low, so that it is easy to come towards you and say, hey, can we talk.

Johannes Kaira [00:22:05]: Yes. I think, unless there is something horribly wrong with the team, usually they don't recognise, well, I don't know, maybe they do recogise the issues with the teamwork, but usually they come to us when they have a problem with the project itself.

Riikka Evans [00:22:24]: Oh, that's right.

Johannes Kaira [00:22:26]: Then we may be able to track it down that, hey, maybe it's because you are not talking to each other, for example. Of course, there could be other reasons, too. Sometimes even good teams get stuck, but that is usually where we start noticing that the output is lacking something.

Riikka Evans [00:22:45]: How do you build into the course how do they themselves, while working in a team, reflect these experiences? Not just the substance, the outcome, and the product of the teamwork, but do you have some sort of tool there that you help them to see how I am evolving as a teamplayer?

Johannes Kaira [00:23:10]: Oh, sure. Yes. We have a very simple, for example, during this iteration of the course we are asking to do a reflection video, where they basically describe how their role has involved as a team member and what is their contribution. Basically, to make them to have a moment and think about what they do in a team. Very simple. You might as well have that in a written form, but we prefer videos.

Riikka Evans [00:23:39]: I like it. I actually was just going to say that it sounds awesome that you have chosen video as a form.

Johannes Kaira [00:23:45]: These days it seems to be quite natural form for many students to deliver anything.

Riikka Evans [00:23:52]: So, if we think of Aalto University, our community, we are very diverse. We have different cultural backgrounds. How do you consider that in the teamwork assignments?

Johannes Kaira [00:24:05]: Yes. It's a huge factor. Of course, we have to be sensitive about it. We have to understand that there are differences in cultures. You have to understand both sides of the coin. You have to understand that maybe, let's take an example, the way to talk to women varies in different countries. We obviously have to understand that there are certain ways how we behave here, but then understand the other cultures. Where they come from, that is a norm for them. They are not acting in a certain way because they want to be rude, but they are behaving the way they have been brought up. Kind of balance between these, because we can't just go and say, hey, your culture is wrong, or anything like that. But then of course also have to, again, this kind of soft guidance that, hey, maybe you want to reconsider how you... I'm not saying that this particular example would be a problem. This is just an easy example to understand. Usually there are more, this is a funny story actually, on one course iteration we had a pitch trainer, who had a very own style, which was very rough. That was dividing opinions, because somewhere during the course we had to tell our trainer to tone it down a little, like, hey, we like your rough style, but maybe it's a little too rough for this environment. But then, after the course was over, we got 50 feedbacks from the students, and depending on their cultural background, some of the students were, like, yea yea, that was totally out of line what you had here, and then the other half was like, what did you do to our trainer, because it was so good in the beginning when he was really hard, and then you did something and that was not fun anymore. So, there is also an approach to for example pressure, that some are more sensitive to it and more like, hey, we don't like this, and some are like, hey, more of this, we really want to go through this grill and enjoy it. That was just a kind of fun example to realise that that is a cultural thing.

Riikka Evans [00:26:43]: I suppose that comes also to what kind of impact we want to have on other people and reflect on that. Sometimes, if the circumstances are right, that kind of style might work. Then in other circumstances, like you said, you have to be empathetic and compassionate for other people. You have to learn to read the situation. Can I do this? Then if I notice that, okay, this is causing a lot of awkwardness or even turmoil, then maybe I need to pull back a little bit. Maybe that's also something that the students need to reflect.

Johannes Kaira [00:27:20]: Sure, sure. As I said, it's always balancing. But then of course, I think we all have to remember that we are representing Finland, we are representing our culture and our way of doing things, and the students who come here, I think partially they come here also to learn the culture, the working culture, and the culture in general. So, in a way, we should not be too flexible, because we also have to proud of our way of doing things, at least of the good ways or the good parts. I think that is definitely something that,

you know, another very practical example is that for example in our course, one very big part of the Startup Experience is that the students have to define the problem that they are solving. In many countries, they come from a sort of a teaching background, where there's a teacher who has all the answers, and as a student you just fill in the blanks and go, was it right, okay, that was right or that was wrong. When we then tell them that, okay, now we don't give you any questions, you create the questions yourself, that can be really difficult for some students to understand. I think that is just the school culture and the educational culture where they come from. Again, this is an example where we can then provide them this, hey, this is how we innovate here, and maybe this is something you can then take home with you when you go back.

Riikka Evans [00:29:06]: If we think of the current time, we have big global issues, like inclusion and climate change, and stuff like that. How do you consider those questions in teamwork? Let's say someone has climate anxiety and they have hard time verbalising that this is what the root cause is. How do you help them with these emotional troubles in the teamwork, if it actually has a major impact or even a small impact into the teamwork? Have you come across with this kind of thing?

Johannes Kaira [00:29:43]: Well, in a way, yes. Maybe that is something that is more easily seen in individual students. In teams, individuals don't express those emotions as strongly. But what we use a lot as a tool in Startup Experience but also in another courses, is a lot of discussion. Make the teams not necessarily even to work together but to talk to each other. Throw them topics and tell them, hey, peel this like an onion and see what you find. I think this is again when we go back to creating trust. It all starts with you understanding why this person is thinking the way they are, and then helps you to trust that person because you understand the logic behind it. These discussions where we make them discuss about values and also just to explain each other why you think this thing happens, it usually shows a lot about how they think, and these things may come out, but when they discuss that without pressure, when it's more getting to know each other, you may already discover a lot about, okay, there's this kind of anxiety. When we maybe establish common words that we use or whatever. Discussion can help in many ways. I think the secret weapon is just to make them talk to each other. They will figure it out.

Riikka Evans [00:31:14]: Talking about this sort of global phenomenon that we have, how has covid-19 and its influence on working practices affected our teaching, especially related to teamwork? If you elaborate a little bit more about that?

Johannes Kaira [00:31:27]: Anyone remembers what it was like to work remotely. That, obviously, wasn't the best time for teamwork. At the same time, we tried to learn to use the digital tools the best way possible to support the teamwork in those circumstances. I think

actually there were some benefits to that too. For example, plain logistics. If we are in a classroom with hundred students, and we want to divide them into groups, with Zoom, as much as I hate it, you can do that in one second, whereas in a physical classroom it's five to ten minutes when they go around. It breaks down for a moment when the re-organise themselves. Those little technical things, we learned to use them in a way that it made the situation at least less unbearable. I think the biggest lesson for us was that we put way more emphasis on the teamwork, because we knew, we were all struggling, and we were all isolated. I think before covid, as I mentioned, we used to have a lot of lectures, we filled up the sessions pushing content to the students, loading them up, dumping info on them. During covid, we realised that doesn't work in an online environment as nicely as when you have them in a classroom. It basically changed the way we were teaching. Less talking, way more discussion, way more interaction. I think that this is something that now when you bring it back to the real world, the physical environment, it has really made the courses so much better and so much more dynamic. I wouldn't want to live that again, but I think it was a really good learning experience for us, in terms of how to develop our teaching into more team-based way and more dynamic and more towards discussion.

Riikka Evans [00:33:50]: That's true. If we look at the teamwork skills a little bit closer, how are the required teamwork skills evolving currently?

Johannes Kaira [00:34:00]: I think they pretty much go with the other work life skills. It's more about creativity. Technology is taking away traditional jobs. In this school, there are tons of students who are going to have to figure out new ways to work in the future. I think that is also teamwork, being creative. I just heard an interesting perspective to the future where if we think about AI taking all of our work, what is left? And the thing that is left is humanity and being human. That is same as teamwork, basically, understanding humans and feeling with humans. We don't really know. This is a prediction that this is something that will happen. It's just way more emphasis on that, because the teams maybe become less executional teams. Right now, you could have a teamwork where, yea, you have to do this, and then you just write a code for couple of months and then you have your product. It's a very straightforward project. I think that basically just requires a few delegation skills. If that goes away, then it's all about being creative, being human. It puts way more emphasis on a teamwork. I don't think the skills themselves are evolving, but I think they just become more important.

Riikka Evans [00:35:44]: That is a good way to put it. If we look at the higher education world, how does this show in our teaching? Where should it go? How should we develop our teaching if we think of that kind of future perspective?

Johannes Kaira [00:36:00]: At least what we are trying to do in our courses is to really make them understand what it is like to be lost, what it is like to have no answers, and how to build something from that. This is the situation where many of our students will end up at some point in their lives, and I think this is where, at least personally, I would take the teaching. Training them to be in that place where you don't have any answers, but you have people around you, and how do you use that resource to get the answers you need. Maybe some people call this radical creativity. It may have different words. That's where I see it's going. I think there will always be a need for this very sort of traditional education style and that is not going anywhere, but I think this kind of project course style, where the students are not just connecting the dots, they are also placing the dots, is the way we want to teach them.

Riikka Evans [00:37:22]: Wow. That is very well put. And do you know what? That's a very good place to end this. Johannes, thank you so much for joining Future-led Learning podcast. It was wonderful to have you.

Johannes Kaira [00:37:33]: Thanks for having me. I enjoyed it.

Riikka Evans [00:37:35]: Definitely.

[music 00:37:37]

Outro [00:37:44]: Aalto University podcast.

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