

Future-led Learning 11: Pirjo Kääriäinen

Riikka Evans[00:00:01]: Aalto University podcast.

Riikka Evans[00:00:11]: Pirjo Kääriäinen works as a professor at Aalto University's School of Arts, Design and Architecture and collaborates closely with the School of Chemical Engineering. Since 2011, she has been facilitating interdisciplinary CHEMARTS collaboration together with Professor Tapani Vuorinen. CHEMARTS aims to inspire students and researchers to explore bio-based materials together and to create new material concepts for the future. Before her career in academia, Pirjo worked for 18 years for Scandinavian textile industry and commerce, and gained experience also as an entrepreneur and consultant for creative industries. Her background is originally in textile design. Her professional interests are bio-based materials, interdisciplinary collaboration, design for sustainable materials, experimental design and future textiles. This is Future-led Learning podcast. My name is Riikka Evans. Welcome aboard.

Speaker 2 [00:01:17]: Future-led Learning by Aalto University.

Riikka Evans[00:01:19]: Hei Pirjo. Welcome to Future-led Learning podcast.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:01:23]: Hi Riikka. Thank you.

Riikka Evans[00:01:25]: We're talking about inclusive learning environments today. Before we dive into them, I would like to know how do you see learning and your own role as a teacher and facilitator? What is your teaching philosophy?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:01:38]: I see my role more as a facilitator than teacher in most cases. My teaching philosophy is very learner- or learning-centered at the moment. It's also based on learning by doing due to the courses where I'm involved in. So, the idea is that the students learn by working either with materials or with the concepts or the topics. We really try to enhance students to find the relevant information by themselves, of course sharing the channels and the references and sharing information that we have. One important thing, by the way, that I'm saying and I noticed myself that I started to say we and that refers to co-teaching. So, I'm mainly teaching together with other teachers having different backgrounds or different expertise. In fact, all the courses I'm involved with are somehow co-taught.

Riikka Evans[00:02:39]: Which leads to my second question. What are you currently doing in Aalto? What kind of courses are you teaching?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:02:45]: I'm involved in running these CHEMARTS courses. We have a CHEMARTS minor and several courses that form the minor. We also have nowadays an international summer school related to these bio-based materials. But of course I'm currently the head of education at the Department of Design at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture. So, I'm also involved in running our joint studies. So, for example, this intro course for all our new master's students every autumn during the orientation week.

Riikka Evans[00:03:20]: Hey, good that you mentioned that. So, I've heard that you worked really hard to create an inclusive learning environment in the said master's studies course. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:03:31]: Yes, of course. It was during the Covid time that I jumped into this role. So, I started, I needed to very quickly learn myself how to cope with these 120 students and new students online. But I also have a very nice small teaching team there consisting of a doctoral candidate and then a master's student who helped me. Together we managed to set up an intensive week because it was only for one week. We only had one week of time. We tried to learn from the past what my colleague had done earlier and also to figure out what would be interesting from the students' point of view to hear in the beginning of their master's studies. So, what are the things that they really need to know? Of course, there's the general orientation week and activities organized by the university, but what would be the key topics for our master design students? So, we started from 2020 and we figured out, for example, that the topic of EDI, equality, diversity and inclusion, it started to come up. So, there started to be questions related to them and comments related to those topics. Then we thought that 2021 when we made the second edition and asked from students online, we decided OK, let's bring in the topic even though we're not experts. None of the teaching team is an expert on the topic. So, let's organize a 1,5 hour session just to open up this field. So, to kind of offer the students an opportunity maybe to comment on something and at least to recognize that these topics can be discussed openly at the university. Luckily, we found, of course, at that time that Aalto University has already the experts working with the field. So, we managed to get them on board and also from AYY we got a very nice student representative to help us. So, we organized a very short panel type of discussion online to open up these topics a little topic. Then we also asked from students anonymously. We asked what kind of things make them feel included and safe and seen, for example. And then on the other hand, what kind of topics, what kind of everyday actions make them feel somehow targeted or excluded or unseen or so. So, we got super interesting comments from the students. It was such a short time that we only had time to discuss for maybe half an hour. But we all felt very strongly after the session even though it was online it went directly to the heart, all of our hearts to understand that there are so

many fears, uncertainties and worries related to these topics that at least to me, personally, it was an eye-opening moment to understand that, OK, we need to do something for this also as a teaching community. That's why for the next edition we did this autumn 22, again, this part was online but we changed the course so that we also had three Monday afternoons where students were in a classroom with us and we decided to have three topics there that we discussed during those joint sessions. One of those topics was again equality, diversity, inclusion.

Riikka Evans[00:07:21]: How was it received? What kind of feedback did you get from the students?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:07:26]: From this year, we got very good feedback again. We really noticed that it's important for the students. For example, if I'm looking now at all the feedback report in fact that the open discussion about these topics was maybe the most important thing. It seems to be that we have plenty of students who are coming to Finland and Aalto University for the first time in their life. Of course, we also have the students who have gone through our bachelor studies. So, in the moment when they start their master's, we have those two different groups. And also the question of inclusion, how to make these open up the Aalto University for everyone. Some of them already know. Open up a little bit of Finland for those who need that. And then also to open up to everyone that these topics are important for us all as a community. Not only to try to explain what's what but more like offer an open platform for them to start to think or to somehow at least recognize that yes, OK, these topics aren't forbidden. These aren't hidden somewhere under the surface. We can really discuss these things.

Riikka Evans[00:08:48]: Can you give us examples? What kinds of topics are there?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:08:51]: One of the things we have noticed is that this gender neutrality is quite important to many of the students. It might sound and of course in Finland we only have, in Finnish language we only have one word describing several genders. But this kind of gender neutrality, it's something that's very important for many of our students. So, we need to figure out how to find ways to, how to learn, how to deal with that, let's put it that way. It's not easy for me at the moment, so I'm trying to learn. Another thing maybe more related to inclusivity, as I already mentioned the question of that we have people with very different backgrounds and knowledge of the community and university. How to build up the bridges between these different groups? There I think it would be important to highlight also for the students that they have a responsibility as part of the community. So, all these topics are not something that we as the staff or teachers can bring in. It's more about how to give space for the students to recognize and start to interact and maybe work together. As I referred to in the beginning with my teaching philosophy I see myself more as a

facilitator also in this case, so not being an expert myself, not at all. I'm really in the beginning of understanding and learning about these EDI topics. Some of them are really difficult for me. But how to open up the space and encourage the students to work when they feel that it's needed?

Riikka Evans[00:10:41]: That's very well put. How to create the space for it and also accept that this kind of conversation needs to happen?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:10:51]: One of the topics when we made this kind of an inquiry for the students, one of the topics was also about being asked what people think themselves and really about listening what different kinds of people with different backgrounds have to say. And how to make sure that all people have something, some space to say the things that they feel, that they want to bring up.

Riikka Evans[00:11:21]: So, you mentioned that you see yourself more as a facilitator of learning. But how would you see what's our responsibility as a teacher regarding inclusive learning experience and what's our role there?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:11:37]: I think it's really important not to belittle this field. The world is changing and it's something that we all need to learn a little bit, at least to recognize this phenomena and recognize these topics and the importance of those topics to our students. So, our role, thinking of the community, as I've a couple of times maybe already said that this idea of having this kind of community of learners. It's really about listening, seeing and feeling what kind of things are moving around.

Riikka Evans[00:12:20]: What if we, for example, see that there's a diversity related problem within our student community or something. How can we intervene or help in that situation?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:12:35]: I think that respectful listening would be the best option. Of course, now Aalto University has also these systems of what you can do, for example, if there are some kinds of problems, if there's harassment or some serious topics related to diversity, inclusion or so. But what we can do all in our everyday work, of course, we try to be as respectful towards the students and our peers as possible and trying to listen, being interested in why they're thinking in a different way than we are. Of course, we don't need to, we might not accept everything or we might not have the same opinion but still somehow to pass the feeling of respect is super important. That, I think, is something that

we all can do. But this is the same thing for students that they need to understand that as well. They have to have the respect as well to each other but also to the staff.

Riikka Evans[00:13:42]: So, it's mutual responsibility.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:13:44]: It's mutual responsibility.

Riikka Evans[00:13:47]: It's not just about the rights. It's all about the responsibility of making sure that we're being inclusive towards one another.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:13:54]: Exactly. I really enjoyed for this last session we had in this intro course in September we invited an external expert to talk about these things. It was really nice how the expert brought in the idea of mercy, so also accepting that we're not experts in these topics and we're making mistakes. That's also how we can learn ourselves if we accept that OK, maybe even say it aloud that OK, I might make some mistakes. Hopefully, for example, when you start a class and there are some kinds of discussion related to these topics, you can always admit that you might make mistakes. I have now noticed that it makes you also more like a human as well for students that they feel OK, she's not an expert. Now I said the tender word because I recognize myself as she, so it's OK to use. So, now she said that she might not know all the answers but she's ready to listen to you. I really hope that I can forward the feeling or share the feeling with the students and they would become more active also on the field.

Riikka Evans[00:15:23]: So, it's [mostly? 00:15:23] like mostly but it's learning together. It's a mutual learning path here.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:15:30]: Yeah, that's how I think personally for sure because I'm an not expert on this topic.

Riikka Evans[00:15:35]: Could you tell us more about your work as a head of the education? How would you bring inclusivity into curriculum development?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:15:45]: As the head of education, I'm mainly coordinating, for example, these curricula processes, curricula development processes and talking with the program heads and major heads of everyday activities and trying to get processes to run smoothly. But how to bring in these topics to curricula? I think that's a big question that I'm not sure if

we can bring it or if we should bring it as such like a course or part of a course in the curricula. Of course, it would be interesting. I'm sure we have some students who are interested to learn more or focus more even on these topics. Hopefully, they find some courses, maybe if not in Aalto then maybe outside to focus on. I would more prefer to integrate the thinking and the way to behave and how to talk about these things. Not trying to integrate, not trying to shout aloud in every course, but more like just letting everybody to understand that these topics are here, we're trying to take them forward but it might take sometimes time. One big question is of course we have plenty of students who have specific challenges in learning, for example, in writing. Of course, when we're teaching, for example, in English there might be some students who aren't reading or speaking in their native languages. That already might cause some big challenges and how to deal with it, that's something we need to do more on a systematic level. How to make sure that we can support all the learners somehow. Luckily, there are already good services also at the Aalto University for certain situations. But in everyday classroom activities, it's a good question of how to do it. I don't have answers there but certainly the topic is something that we more and more need to work with. Because what we also hear from the educational system in Finland is that in the earlier stages of education it's increasing, these kinds of challenges with learning. I think that's one of the development areas for us in coming years.

Riikka Evans[00:18:11]: That's absolutely true. Perhaps we could somehow even say that through co-teaching and this idea of co-developing this would be a good avenue reflected together with colleagues. How can we facilitate the learning in a way that includes everyone?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:18:28]: Which is really challenging. But of course we have plenty of, at the Department of Design we still use this kind of learning by doing pedagogy. We have studio pedagogy as well. So, plenty of, especially bachelor students work a lot at the workshops. There are also, if some students aren't that good at in written or oral expression, they might be able to express themselves through their hands-on work. So, I think that's a good way also to balance and at least offer these opportunities for feeling that you've succeeded through different kinds of teaching methods. That's for sure one of the things that we need to consider in a systemic way. So, how we teach in different courses.

Riikka Evans[00:19:23]: So, sort of flexibility.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:19:25]: Yes and maybe to combine different teaching methods in one course. That it's not only about, for example, writing or exams or written exams. So, it might be that there's something else in between or a combination of different kinds of teaching methods.

Riikka Evans[00:19:43]: I just finished teaching the pedagogical course Supporting Diverse Learning in Higher Education. We have these frameworks such as universal design for learning or self-determination theory which helps us to see that by offering flexibility, by offering multiple ways of doing, not just that one particular written essay or whatnot, it can actually support the sense of belonging for those students who have challenges in particular, for example, in writing. For example, dyslexic people or something. So, audios, video producing different kinds of, I would say products, not just essays but having other kinds of forms there.

Riikka Evans[00:20:29]: I just finished teaching this course at the pedagogical training which is for our faculty, a course called Supporting Diverse Learning in Higher Education. Actually, there we have these frameworks such as the universal design for learning or self-determination theory which could be nice frameworks to look at teaching from a more diverse perspective. How can we offer different kinds of forms of learning, not just the typical, very traditional writing an essay. But also, for example, can you return your final work as an audio recording or as a video. People are now in social media recording a lot of videos. Why not offer them that kind of a tool? Or how can we provide our materials in different forms? Does it always have to be some written article? For example, I like the way that you guys have this panel discussion and you're offering already a different kind of way of learning and you're guys are hands on anyway at your department. I think we have to broaden our mind there. How could we, for example, utilize universal design for learning at our university and offer flexibility?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:21:44]: Yeah, that really makes sense. We're very often in the faculty sometimes quite afraid that how much extra work that will cause on us. So, that's of course one of the worries. But for sure this kind of thinking of giving options, that could be helpful. Of course once these options have been prepared, for example, videos or podcasts or whatever, they're then there and maybe they can be used for several years.

Riikka Evans[00:22:13]: Absolutely.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:22:15]: So, that really makes sense.

Riikka Evans[00:22:16]: That's also when we were discussing that when we're doing curriculum development, we can do the curriculum mapping there and see which courses we can implement this at. Of course we have courses where the learning outcome is that you learn how to write academic texts and then obviously there we're practicing that skill.

But if it's not in the learning outcomes, could we there support the diverse learners by giving some other form of showing that yes, I actually know how to do this?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:22:47]: That's in fact, at the Department of Design, there's a tradition that we've been developing the curricula together for years which can be called curriculum mapping. It has been done or we've embedded that as a way of working when we developed this. So, we really think of a little bit of cumulative learning, how the cumulative learning process goes. Also to avoid, for example, putting sustainability as such, even if it's super important. Also like these ideal topics that are super important. But how to integrate them so that the students don't feel that OK, is this again the same thing? And in the next course it's again these same topics. That's why it's also really important to think of the entity, of the whole package of, for example, the bachelor studies to make sure that these topics are discussed somewhere and are taught and learned somewhere. So yes, I really agree with you on this approach. It's super useful and important.

Riikka Evans[00:23:58]: Yeah. Why is it important that we foster inclusive learning culture and could we somehow reflect it through the sense of belonging in our community? What kinds of thoughts do you have there?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:24:10]: First of all, the sense of belonging is a human need. We all need that. It's really important. Of course, when you have the sense of belonging, you feel seen and being respected and feel that you're part of the community. You have your place in a way. It can be quite abstract but you still have a place to be. I think it's a basic need for us humans. Of course that enables then that maybe it's easier to keep your life balanced. It's easier to feel that you're feeling well. Take care of your well-being, feel that you have support that you need, if you need it. Feel that you're cared for. All those things for sure will have some impact on our work life and also support our studies. So, how to be able to, for example, for students to complete their studies? Be interested in what they're learning and what kind of future they're targeting for etc. I think the sense of belonging is really important. I was quite worried when I was seeing that some of the numbers from this previous research, some of these surveys, they very alarmingly not feeling well.

Riikka Evans[00:25:35]: You're referring to the AllWell? results.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:25:37]: Yes, I was referring to the AllWell? results that the sense of not belonging was that high.

Riikka Evans[00:25:43]: What do you think it might cause to the students?



Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:25:47]: It's much easier to skip the courses or skip the classes if you don't feel that, if you think that nobody's interested if you're there or not and it's not important for you. If you go there you're not seen or you don't feel well. I think it might cause severe problems if we only think now of this studying, not going outside the more private life but if we only think of the studying itself. Maybe I could say that we made this kind of, as I mentioned already, an anonymous inquiry for our new MA students. Maybe I just tell you some comments from what they said.

Riikka Evans[00:26:29]: Absolutely, please do so.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:26:30]: So, everyday actions that make you feel included, safe, seen and respected. Many of them answered, for example, that this session. So, I was referring to this kind of an open platform for people to discuss. Another thing was using tender, neutral language that they mentioned. But for example, a very practical thing of being asked what I think. That's already also important. Or accepting menstruation as a proper medical excuse of absence. So, these kinds of things.

Riikka Evans[00:27:05]: Very fundamental.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:27:06]: Yes, very fundamental and should be there. Or I feel included when someone is genuinely interested in hearing my perspective and having a conversation. Smiling and saying hi or sharing an insight that could be useful for others. Or when I'm smiling for others and they smile back at me, that makes the day a bit better. So, very practical things that we all can do in our everyday life. Then also about giving hugs. Maybe it was also the Covid time that everyone was online. But also about drinking alcohol. That's something that some of the students mentioned that doesn't feel nice when they go to the student parties and almost everyone is drinking alcohol and if they don't want to drink. So, that might be a quite difficult situation for many of them of course.

Riikka Evans[00:28:06]: Interesting.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:28:07]: Yeah, but it's also in the comments. But also like I mentioned already this mercy, being...

Riikka Evans[00:28:16]: Compassionate.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:28:17]: Yes, a little bit compassionate and a little bit flexible also when people are making mistakes. So, for example, when people understand I sometimes mess up with pronouns because I'm not used to using them due to Finnish language even though I'm non-binary myself. These things just happen.

Riikka Evans[00:28:36]: And we're all learning. That's so important to remember. I like those comments. You can tell that they're at the very core of sort of being a human being and wanting to have that moment when someone smiles at you and sees you in the space. And sees you.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:28:52]: Very simple things sometimes.

Riikka Evans[00:28:53]: Very simple things.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:28:55]: One thing I still want to take up from this list is that I finally can notice that I'm not the only dealing with anxiety, mostly because neither English nor Finnish is my first language. So, I get to express myself as I would like to. That's also a very simple thing. That just when you discuss openly and you recognize that yes, I'm not the only one having this thought.

Riikka Evans[00:29:24]: Finding people who you can relate to.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:29:27]: Yeah you recognize that they all are thinking the same way that OK.

Riikka Evans[00:29:31]: And I'm not alone. That's so true, the fear of being alone and then noticing that actually I'm not. So very important.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:29:41]: Very basic things.

Riikka Evans[00:29:42]: Pirjo, could you give us some sort of practical examples from your own experience or if you've used something in the teaching that how could you approach this?

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:29:51]: I can share some things that I learned from the experts that we invited to our intro session. So, there are four basic steps to make the change. So, you need to first recognize things, you need to understand. Then you need to be committed and then just do things. So, action bit by bit, piece by piece to recognize what, for example, unconscious bias or blind spots we have personally. Then try to maybe change them a little bit in the way of our own behavior or in the way of how we talk of things. So, that would be already a great start for when we think of these EDI topics as well.

Riikka Evans[00:30:38]: That sounds wonderful. I suppose inclusion really is that you have to learn yourself but you have to learn also to do it with others. So, it's a dialogue. It's a dialogue with yourself but it's a dialogue with your community. Doing it bit by bit we learn to be more inclusive. This has been an excellent conversation. Thank you, Pirjo, for coming to the podcast and I hope that listeners also do the self-reflection in this conversation of what is EDI and participate as well.

Pirjo Kääriäinen [00:31:13]: Thank you, Riikka, for the invitation for this discussion.

Riikka Evans[00:31:17]: Thanks.

Riikka Evans[00:31:28]: Aalto University podcast.

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