Kirsti Lonka

Promoting flourishing and elevated thought – Reflections on E. Saarinen's pedagogy

rofessor Esa Saarinen is known as an excellent teacher and brilliant lecturer. This is not necessarily due, however, to his technical teaching skills or phenomenal power points. What is the secret of Esa Saarinen as a pedagogue? In this article I will try to reveal some aspects of the power of his sessions. In the first place, I was supposed to write a scientific paper, but telling a story of our collaboration, spiced up with some empirical data, is probably a more appealing way of approaching the work of this fascinating persona. I am going to use his acronym "E. Saarinen" all the way through the text. Professor E. Saarinen has always had the habit of addressing himself in the third person by using this nickname, and simultaneously, self-ironically distancing himself as if he were a character in his stories.

Even though written form is not the favourite form of expression of practical philosophers (Saarinen and Slotte 2003), E. Saarinen has recently elaborated on his pedagogical thinking and the essence of life-philosophical lecturing from various perspectives, such as philosophy for managers (Saarinen 2008a), Socratic philosophy (2008b), mindfulness (Saarinen and Lehti forthcoming), and Good Work (Saarinen 2012). There is no need to repeat these ideas, since they are expressed eloquently. My intention, instead, is to bridge E. Saarinen's ideas of pedagogy and the development of my own thinking in the field of educational psychology. Both have developed towards the ideas of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). In the end, I am going to present current research on university student learning during engaging lectures.

Pedagogical dialogues: our early encounters

I still have vivid memories of my first encounters with the character named E. Saarinen, before I knew him as a person. Already in mid-1980s, we were both obliged to monitor the Faculty of Arts examinations in the Great Lecture Hall. I sat in the corner reading a book, while E. Saarinen collected the examination papers. The female students were especially thrilled, since at that time, E. Saarinen was already a famous media personality. He took each paper, paid attention to the examinee and seemed to manage making the simple act of receiving an examination paper to be an elevating moment of interaction in the lives of these young people.

Later, in the early 1990's we met in the context of a faculty development session, where I was training the Faculty of Arts personnel to apply modern learning theories while designing entrance examinations. I must say that E. Saarinen was not very enthusiastic about my lecture in the beginning. He obviously found empirical psychology a rather boring topic, and did not see very much

added value in it. E. Saarinen did gradually begin to wake up, when I started talking about the latest trends in educational psychology. At that time, constructivist ideas of learning were increasingly popular, and they obviously made some sense from the point of view of a pragmatist philosopher. For instance, Bruner's ideas of meaningful learning appealed to my critical audience (e.g. Bruner 1986; 1996). E. Saarinen was fully awake by the time I started criticising the questions he had constructed for those applying into the Department of Philosophy.

Later we started discussions and shared some ideas of learning. I showed E.Saarinen a slide that I had constructed on the basis of Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993), who presented six qualitatively different categories of learning (see also Lonka 1997, p. 15). This electrified the philosopher immediately. We discovered that while talking about learning, we had been talking about different things. Traditional views of learning were not interesting from the point of view of E. Saarinen's philosophy. From his point of view, the two lowest categories were mere nonsense. When I had been talking about "learning", he apparently thought that I was referring to such trivialities. In the first category by Marton et al. (1993) , learning was seen as *a quantitative increase in knowledge*. The emphasis was on adding new facts and information into memory. Knowledge was acquired from external sources and the student played a passive role in the learning process. In the second category, learning was seen as *memorizing*, and the aim was to acquire knowledge from books, and then to be able to reproduce it in the same form. The third category presented by Marton et al. (1993), where learning was seen as *application,* started to raise some interest in our star philosopher. According to this view, students acquire knowledge, principles, and ideas that can be used and applied when necessary. Even though this category still remains at a reproduction level, it probably started to ring a pragmatist bell in E. Saarinen's mind. Applicability played an important part in this conception.

The remaining three categories mainly saw learning as seeking meaning: In the fourth category, learning was seen as *an activity aimed at understanding* or getting insight into complex wholes. In the fifth category, learning was seen as *an* interpretative process aiming at better understanding reality, *to see something in a new and different way*. This view made even more sense, since it involved a change and development of the previous ways of thinking. It was appealing, since one of E. Saarinen's main goals in his philosophy lectures was to help people see things in a new light. The highest, sixth category further expanded the previous ones. It started to ring the bell big time. This conception of learning involved *a personal change.* This added an existential layer to learning, when the learner changed as a person as a result of the learning process. E. Saarinen was thrilled about the idea that modern learning theories actually said something about personal change and human growth. We had found a common tune in pedagogy.

Our discussions deepened as we found common ground in Jerome Bruner's writings. Especially Bruner's (1986) idea of narrative and paradigmatic forms of thinking were appealing to E. Saarinen, since using narratives and metaphors was his favorite form of instruction. The profound insight was that students are not only intellectual creatures, but have their emotional lives as well – it is more important to engage the learners than to tell them how things are (Saarinen 2008a). Bruner (1986) referred to two different modes of thinking: paradigmatic versus narrative. The former refers to scientific, analytical thinking, asking *"What are the true answers?",* whereas the lat-

ter inquires: *"What makes a good story?".* The narrative approach may become a disposition of learning which is more crucial than the concepts we are actually trying to teach. That is, our implicit theory of learning expresses itself in our action, and may be contrary to the explicit, official story we think we are telling (Lonka 1997).

Recently, Saarinen (2012) and Saarinen and Lehti (forthcoming) have explicated and elaborated the aims of E. Saarinen's lecturers. My intention is not to repeat these reflections, however, they beautifully remind me of my own experiences when attending E. Saarinen's captivating lectures. He emphasizes the experience as the key: the specific content covered by the lecturer is not in the focus (Saarinen and Lehti forthcoming). Rather, the narratives and lively examples, everyday language and emotionally touching stories encourage the participants to freely reflect on their own life philosophy.

The Courage to Think Project 1996-1998

The next crucial trigger for our collaboration was when Rector of the University of Helsinki, Risto Ihamuotila, gave a speech in early 1990s. Ihamuotila started the academic year by stating that all university students should learn thinking skills. After posing this challenge, Ihamuotila invited a group of people into his office to reflect on how to respond. I was invited, too, probably because of my active role in developing and researching university pedagogy at that time. With a group of philosophers, we continued discussions about new kinds of university courses. The Rector appointed a group to plan new courses, consisting of Ilpo Halonen, Pekka Himanen, Ilkka Niiniluoto, E. Saarinen and me. I was the only psychologist in the group and sometimes felt a bit overwhelmed. On the other hand, I had been collaborating with the Department of Philosophy for several years in the context of the Cognitive Science program. I had also studied applied cognitive science and philosophy of mind at the University of Toronto in 1988-1989. This helped me to stay in tune with this extremely stimulating group of philosophers.

As a part of the Courage to Think project, E. Saarinen and I conducted a course called "The Philosophy and Psychology of Success," which was a new pedagogical innovation. E. Saarinen invented the name of the course, and I must say that I found this title quite daring at first. The course was a 42-hour series consisting of student-activating three hour dialogue lectures which took place weekly from January to May in the University of Helsinki Main Festival Hall during spring terms from 1996 to 1998 (Lonka 1998; Saarinen and Lonka 2000). The Main Festival Hall is a beautiful, historical and elevating space, in the form of an amphitheater (Lonka 1997). Entering it already lifts the spirits of the participants. E. Saarinen wanted us to welcome all the participants by shaking hands at the door.

"The Philosophy and Psychology of Success" (6 ECTS) was open to all students at the University of Helsinki and consequently, there were about 500 students at different phases of studying (i.e., undergraduate and postgraduate students) from many different faculties. In addition, around 200-300 people from outside the university were auditing each lecture. The contents included applications of constructivist theories of learning, process-writing, study and thinking skills, revisions of thought systems, mental training techniques, career planning, and tools for personal

change. The very core of this course was E. Saarinen's philosophy of human flourishing. I must say that he was ahead of his time, since we knew hardly anything about positive psychology at that time. It was not until a decade later that we learned about Seligman (2003, 2012). The whole approach aimed at helping the participants see the potential in themselves, instead of staring at their limitations and problems.

I had been intensively working on student-activating methods (Lonka and Ahola 1995). In the beginning, I had to persuade E. Saarinen to engage in such activities. Obviously, he was so dazzling in rhetoric that he did not feel a specific need to attract his audience in such ways. Later, E. Saarinen articulated the more profound reasons why he had been reluctant to my ideas: His approach to lecturing was quite different from mine, since his life-philosophical lecturing aimed at explicitly rejecting all threat elements that usually portrayed academic lectures (Saarinen and Lehti forthcoming). E. Saarinen wanted the participants to have the degrees of freedom to entertain any interpretation they wanted in their minds. Opening their thoughts for public discussion would compromise this. At the time of our lecture series, I did not see this quite as clearly.

After reading E. Saarinen's more recent work, I also realize in retrospect that our aims were somewhat different. He does not want to *teach philosophy* in the same manner as I intend to teach educational psychology. Instead, he wants the participants "to reconnect with the philosophical contents they in most cases already have" (Saarinen 2008a, p.10). What does apply to both of us, though, is the intention to *help people to see meaning or broaden their thinking* rather than to make them memorize concepts and facts.

The essential feature in E. Saarinen's thinking, as I understand it, is to open "the treasure chest." He is not assuming that people are lacking something they should acquire (e.g. concepts and contents), but rather, that they at some level already know the essentials for a richer life (Saarinen 2012). It follows that the task of the lecturer is to help the participants to gain access to their existing potentials, which they cannot quite name or recognize.

During our joint dialogue lectures, I was stubborn in my "student-activating" efforts, and we sometimes asked the participants on our dialogue lectures to write minute papers, discuss the topic or a central question. After this, they were asked to read out loud what they had written to a group of 2 to 4 students. The small group then reflected on what they already knew about the topic and what more they needed to know. Finally, each group presented their summaries and questions to the whole group of participants.

In addition to our lectures the students were encouraged to discuss (in small groups, on an Internet discussion list, and in their journals) what they had learned, what more they would like to know, and what puzzled them about the domain or what was problematic in their own learning. We then read their Internet comments or at least samples of them. In the beginning of the next session, the comments were discussed and feedback given. Also, the idea was to take the comments into account in future instruction and clarify those points that were unclear or hard to understand.

Most of the time, we lectured and also carried out a dialogue with each other. I lectured in a more traditional way, using overheads and explaining terms. I remember once E. Saarinen telling me: "Stop acting like a teacher! You always start becoming boring when you go to the overhead

projector!" I was a bit puzzled and asked what he meant. "You should be more fun, more like the person you really are. Why don't you tell jokes the way you normally do with me?" I reminded the dear philosopher that it is quite difficult to act in the same way as we do in our personal encounters when there were 800 people in the audience. E. Saarinen replied: "Why would it be any different? Just let your personality shine". This was a turning point for me as a university teacher. During the last fifteen years, I have started to understand what my philosopher friend really meant. Gradually, I developed my own personal style of lecturing, quite different from his. But the essence in my work ever since has been to be totally open in front of big audiences, not speaking *at* the people, but instead, *addressing* them with my own personal style. This has helped me to develop both as a person and as a pedagogue. I am still enormously grateful for this piece of advice.

Since the students continuously engaged in various activities and gradually learned to share their learning process with the others, they were increasingly prone to participate in discussions in the large hall. We did not plan beforehand a very tight schedule for the lectures. Even though we always had a plan, we reminded ourselves to be aware of what the central issues were and tried to focus on the students' perspective. We also had special guests visiting our lectures (mainly E. Saarinen's contacts), for instance, Kirsti Paakkanen, Jorma Uotinen and M.A. Numminen.

The participants of our courses reported that this was the first time ever they had managed to make new friends during mass lectures. Some groups continued to meet after the course was over. The student-activating methods that we introduced later gave basis for developing the innovation called "energy discussions". In E. Saarinen's own pedagogy it is important to let the participants talk about the issues of interest, but he does not find it necessary to collect the ideas or make them overt to discussion. During his courses, people can feel safe and focus on their own processes instead of sharing their ideas with a large group of people (Saarinen and Lehti forthcoming).

Assessment is an essential part of an activating lecture, because students' learning is known to be regulated by expectations regarding the exam (e.g. Lindblom-Ylänne and Lonka 2001). Students were encouraged to keep journals during the whole term. The idea was that writing helps students to be more reflective on their own learning (Tynjälä, Mason and Lonka 2001). The assessment was based on these journals, of which students provided a 3-5 page portfolio by the end of the course. We collected, read and graded the journals two weeks before the final session. This was a major effort, since we had more than 450 papers to grade. The final session, dubbed *Grande Finale*, was heavily based on reading the students' portfolios out loud. We read samples of the portfolios and commented on them, building a synthesis of the learning process and the contents of the course (Lonka 1998). It was wonderful to read the essays and see how the participants were flourishing. The portfolios were full of stories about their mental growth and personal change. They surprised us over and over again.

We also collected some empirical data of the course. I demonstrated that there was a relationship between students' epistemologies (conceptions of knowledge and learning) and the quality of their portfolios (Lonka 1998): students' perceptions of our course differed clearly according to their conceptions of learning. Those who believed that their task was to store information, found our innovations less useful, attended the course less often and wrote portfolios of less high quality. In contrast, those students who were in the process of active knowledge construction, were

more likely to attend the sessions, gave more positive feedback and handed in portfolios of higher quality (Lonka 1998). We collected systematic feedback of the course, and it was very positive in general. Even after all these years, we get stopped on various occasions by people wanting to share the impact the course had in their lives. We saved the portfolios and those 1500 papers from the years 1996-1998 are full of touching stories.

We also started co-authoring a book in order to summarize our experiences of our courses. I actively participated in Paphos Seminars twice with my family, and the writing process was boosted by these powerful experiences. The synthesis of our collaboration was a book published in Finnish called "Transformations" (Muodonmuutos, Saarinen and Lonka 2000). It was later translated in Estonian (Muutumised). The essence of this book was the possibility and potential for personal change, an important aspect in E. Saarinen's pedagogical thinking (Saarinen 2008b).

After this, our professional collaboration was interrupted for several years, even though we remained friends. I had started my work in the field of medical education already in 1996. In 2001, I became Professor of Medical Education in Karolinska Institutet in Sweden (2001-2005), and E.Saarinen started as a Professor of Applied Philosophy in Helsinki University of Technology. I moved back to Finland in 2005 after I became Professor of Educational Psychology in the University of Helsinki.

The miracle of Auditorium A

After coming back to Finland, our contact was quite sporadic. We were both busy in our own universities. I knew, however, of fresh pedagogical innovations in Otaniemi and how E. Saarinen was developing new theories of systems intelligence in collaboration with Professor Raimo Hämäläinen and some promising young scholars. For instance, Frank Martela actively attended our educational psychology seminars and Sebastian Slotte was involved in editing E. Saarinen's 50-year anniversary book (Lonka 2003).

Since 2001, E. Saarinen has held a mass lecture series at Helsinki University of Technology (now part of Aalto University). Saarinen and Lehti (forthcoming) describe the course in the following way:

> The course is entitled 'Philosophy and Systems Thinking', but little theory is presented. Instead, numerous stories and anecdotes, personal reflections, and selected video clips in interplay with conceptual lines of thought are employed to create a space for free thought…From the very beginning, the lecturer makes clear that the aim is not to teach academic theories but rather to create a context in which the participant could engage in *the thinking of her own thinking* with insight and sustained focus, accompanied by the possibility *to experience the significance of those thoughts* from the point of view of her everyday life. …the participants are invited to the lecture hall as wholesome human beings with an abundant internal world and with a rich cognitive and affective endowment. In other words, the participants are welcomed as agents capable of attention, metacognitive insight, thinking of their own thinking, and as adept observers of human reality. With personal agency as the engine and thinking as the instrument, the aim is to reach personal insights on how to live one's life.

> In the course of the twelve years of its history, many students have decided on retaking the course, often repeatedly… It is not uncommon for a student to ask friends, parents or other loved-ones to join in for a session or two, and indeed the lectures have become something of an event at the campus. The course format and contents have remained essentially unchanged. The annual enrollment has increased from the initial 100 to around 600 students…

Saarinen and Lehti (forthcoming) also describe the formal and informal feedback, where the participants point out three features of their Auditorium A lecture experience: (i) the atmosphere is heightened and uplifting; (ii) associations that emerge are rich, even when already familiar themes and examples are discussed; (iii) the moment-to-moment experience is intense, flow-like and often involves emotional elements.

The evaluation took place in the form of reflection essays, where the participants were asked to freely reflect on processes in their personal lives, observing micro-changes and other significant experiences that may have been inspired or illuminated by the course. Most indulge in remarkably personal self-observation and many report impressive personal change. (Saarinen and Lehti forthcoming.)

After 10 years of carrying out these Auditorium A lectures, E. Saarinen and his colleagues decided to systematically collect empirical data on the phenomenon. What was actually the secret of Auditorium A? Would there be evidence for increased optimism, engagement, flow-like experiences and intense affects? We started planning research collaboration, since I was involved in a major research project RYM Indoor Environment (www.indoorenvironment.org) , in which Aalto University was also involved. My task was to look at the design of physical learning spaces from the point of view of learning and motivation.

My own research group had started doing research on university students' well-being and motivation. Litmanen et al. (2012) looked at motivational states and emotions during an inquiry-based project, whereas Lonka and Ketonen (2012) started to look at academic emotions during mass lectures. From E. Saarinen's group, Jaakko Korhonen (2012) was interested in happiness and well-being, whereas Hanna Heiskanen from my group is a psychologist interested in epistemological beliefs and study engagement.

Jaakko Korhonen, Elina Ketonen, Hanna Heiskanen and I joined forces and started to collect systematic data on E. Saarinen's course. We informally labeled our group "The Flourishing Team". Our negotiations of meaning were interesting, since our empirical approach was somewhat alienating from the philosopher's point of view. Once again I was stubborn and tried to argue that behavioral sciences might be able to contribute something meaningful here, even based on pure quantitative methods. Jaakko Korhonen has elaborated on the qualitative analyses of the reflection essays in his own chapter (this edition).

Our research on flow-like experiences, engagement, academic emotions and interest

Our research group started to look at challenge-skill fluctuation. This is very near to what Csikszentmihalyi (1988) called *the flow experience* and proposed that it is important to observe

people in those moments in their lives when they reach peaks of involvement that produce intense feelings of enjoyment and creativity. The universal precondition for flow is the reasonably high *challenge of the task* as well as the feeling that one is capable of facing this very challenging trial. No activity can sustain flow for a long time unless both the challenges and the skills become more complex. Flow therefore makes people look for increasingly complex tasks and encourages them to develop. Flow is an interesting concept, since it combines cognitive challenges with emotional states.

The term *academic emotion* is often defined as emotion experienced in academic settings and related to studying, learning or instruction (Pekrun *et al*., 2002). Such emotions are, for example, enjoyment of learning, pride of success, or test-related anxiety. People often report positive affects, such as engagement and enthusiasm, in relation to flow, whereas more negative affects are reported when there is a mismatch between challenges and competencies (Delle Fave & Massimini, 2005).

In my previous projects funded by Academy of Finland, we had developed new contextual ways of measuring academic emotions. We measured academic emotions, interest, sense of competence and challenge using the Contextually Activated Sampling System (CASS) method (Litmanen *et al*.,2012; Muukkonen *et al*., 2008; Tolvanen *et al*., 2011). Litmanen *et al.* (2012) showed that inquiry-based learning posed higher challenges and produced more intensive emotional states for the students than lecture-based and teacher-centred instruction, since it forced them to work at the upper limits of their competencies.

We were interested in looking at flow-like experiences on mass lectures. Would it be possible to promote flow-like experiences during lectures (Lonka & Ketonen 2012)? Instead of "student-activating lectures", I had started to develop the concept *Engaging Learning Environments* (Lonka 2012). During my own mass lectures we looked at situational academic emotions five days before the examination. We found that in general, the participants were highly engaged and interested. We also noticed that many students experienced high challenge and they could be classified as *anxious* (39 %). *Engaged students* (36 %) also experienced high challenge, but they also felt competent. They spent the most hours in self-study and received the best grades. *Unstressed students* were the least active in self-study and also achieved the lowest grades. Interest, enthusiasm, sense of competence, and the invested self-study time correlated positively with the grade awarded for the course. In this case, it was better to experience challenge than to remain indifferent or unstressed.

Since E. Saarinen's aims for philosophical lecturing are quite different from my own courses (Saarinen and Lehti forthcoming), and they are much less focused on learning outcomes and far less threatening, we expected to find less challenge and more sense of competence during the course. Life-philosophical mindfulness-inducing lecturing is not supposed to be reduced into reachable targets. Further, we wanted to look at the role of *reflection* during the course "Philosophy and Systems Thinking", since Saarinen and Lehti (forthcoming) emphasized the role of better understanding of one's own thinking and the aspiration for clearer reflection.

We investigated how students' motivational strategies and epistemologies are related to study engagement during E. Saarinen's course in Auditorium A in 2011 (Heiskanen and Lonka 2012). We could only look at those students who had formally enrolled in the course. The participants

were all engineering students (n = 246). The results in both variable-oriented and person-oriented analyses showed that study engagement was higher in those students who appreciated reflective learning, were optimistic, and did not avoid tasks. Three student profiles were defined based on students' motivational strategies and epistemologies.

These profiles were called *cook-book students*, *theorists* and *reflective professionals*. Students in the latter two groups scored high on reflective learning and optimism and low on task avoidance, whereas so called cook-book students wanted directly applicable practical knowledge and were not interested in reflection or theories. Theorists and reflective professionals experienced stronger study engagement during E. Saarinen's course than did the so-called cook-book students.

With Jaakko Korhonen (see this edition) we collected pre-post measurements. The problem, of course, was the limited number of students who responded both before and after the course. Heiskanen (2012) showed, however, in her Master's thesis that during the course "Philosophy and Systems Thinking" the participants became more optimistic, more willing to reflect and their study engagement increased. Jaakko Korhonen showed that the improvement in terms of well-being was the most significant among those students who were originally the least enthusiastic and felt the least happy (Korhonen 2012). For an educational psychologist, such a result is striking, since overcoming the so-called Matthew Effect – those who are successful at early stages usually reap the benefits also in later stages (Merton 1968) – is difficult in the field of learning. It is usually so that the ones, who are already successful, are likely to gain most in educational interventions.

We also demonstrated that a kind of "relaxed flow" was a typical motivational-emotional state of mind during E. Saarinen's lectures. The results of the 2011 courses are tentative, even though they are interesting. We have collected data on the situational academic emotions more closely in various contexts and courses. We have collected data from Aalto University and University of Helsinki in physics, chemistry and other domains (e.g. Heiskanen et al. 2012). In these settings, also pre-post measurements have been collected in various courses. In the future we shall see, whether the epistemological development and possible changes in terms of well-being vary.

Our current data indicate, however, that it is very difficult to obtain anything similar to the results from Auditorium A. Students are not likely to express such elevated emotions, flow-like motivational states, or increasing engagement in reflection during the other courses.

I have learned a lot from E. Saarinen when it comes to life-philosophical lecturing, the best practices of mindfulness in education, and engaging my own students. I also believe that it is important to look at empirical evidence to back up our claims and assumptions on what are the core effects of such practices.

Conclusive remarks

For me, a good lecture is like a bride. It has "something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue". The old, really basic element in E. Saarinen's case is the Socratic heritage. The new element is the influence of research on positive psychology and systems thinking. Lots have been borrowed from great minds such as Jerome Bruner, Barbara Fredrickson, Howard Gardner, James Hillman and L.S. Vygotsky. The most intriguing element, however, is something

blue. For me it is the almost mystical element in E. Saarinen's work, his almost magical touch on people, something that is very difficult to capture with our empirical measurements. Maybe it is the gift of seeing something in people that they cannot even see in themselves.

I believe that this gift did not come like a divine insight, not even for E. Saarinen. I have also seen him struggling with the evil and the dark side of human nature, times of experiencing amazing expressions of hostility and negativity. The blue element in E. Saarinen is not something superficial. It also has the ingredient of sometimes truly feeling blue. As I understand, positive thinking in E. Saarinen is the result of years and years of hard work. For many of us, it is too easy to be negative and critical. Many people become bitter in the academic world, since it is not always easy to deal with all the harsh and sometimes unfair criticisms. The rarest talent is not to give up your firm intellectual efforts towards elevating reflection, positive thinking, and seeing the best in everybody. My humble guess is that this makes E. Saarinen as an outlier in the field of pedagogy. His resilience is remarkable and his faith in the positive in human beings is endless. E. Saarinen has demonstrated that positive psychology is something that truly works in practice. This is good work, I would claim.

About the author

Dr. Kirsti Lonka is Vice Dean (Societal Relations and PR) of the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences and professor of educational psychology at University of Helsinki, Finland. At the moment, she is working on innovations in higher education and engaging learning environments (ELE). She is a PI of several major research projects going on in these areas. Kirsti Lonka has published numerous refereed articles, conference papers and book chapters. She has also published plenty of text books and popular writings. Her work has been cited for more than 2600 times. In 2012 she was elected both as the Magister Bonus (i.e., Teacher of the Year) and The Communicator of the Year of the University of Helsinki. Twitter @kirstilonka

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