New and old insights right away and after a while

21.1.2022

Finland’s largest digital education and learning event Interactive Technology In education, the ITK conference, was held in Hämeenlinna on 1-3 December 2021. Our Digiskills project team looked especially for ideas related to pedagogy and technology. The programme included more than 100 performances: from these we selected the most meaningful ones for us. What did we found?

Diabolical problems with e-learning

The most rewarding performance was by Akseli Huhtanen, who arrived to Hämeenlinna from Aalto University’s FITech unit. He talked about the diabolical problems of e-learning and offered also solutions to the problems. According to Huhtanen, the problems of e-learning can be summarised in three:

1. weak pass rate, especially for non-compulsory courses,
2. poor learning outcomes and
3. the limited nature of pedagogical creativity.

Shortly: students do not remain active and quit in the middle. According to Huhtanen the phenomenon is noticeable universally; Harvard’s top courses suffer from exactly the same problems.

Solutions available

Working as a part-time teacher, I have the same kind of challenges, so I definitely wanted some tips. Surprisingly, Huhtanen offered quite traditional ways to deal with the problems of e-learning.

First of all, students should be activated throughout the course, but in particular they should be activated at the beginning of the course with some sufficiently challenging task. However, the task should not be too difficult, so that motivation does not disappear right away.

It matters which kind of tasks the online course has. According to Huhtanen, the problem is often that students do not see that tasks matter. In other words, when the learner does not understand how the tasks relate to the subject or to her/him, the motivation to learn decreases. It is also advisable to give the assignments in sufficiently small pieces to maintain the learner’s sense of control. A good task tempts you to learn.

Huhtanen thinks the feedback is the key how to keep the student active from start to finish. Feedback can be personal commentary or can be obtained from other students or through the functionalities of the learning environment. It is also not advisable to leave the assessment at the end of the course, but to evaluate it throughout the course. That is how students know that they are on the right track and stay awake.

Huhtanen also emphasises the importance of the team for performance. Even complex things can be learned in a psychologically safe team, so it is also worth feeding good team spirit in online courses. Often small groups within the course work better, for example, in discussions and when sharing responsibility.

Who supports the teacher?

Who has time for pedagogical creativity when there is so much of everything? Teachers often feel that they are quite alone creating a new, or old, online course. There is no time, know-how or coping, and often the easiest solution is to go with the same formula as always. However, creative pedagogical solutions could inspire students more, and perhaps also feed the teacher's enthusiasm when he sees students activated.

Huhtanen gives the co-development of courses as one of the solutions for supporting the teacher. For a group of people, it's a rewarding activity that not only saves you time and effort, but also strengthens the sense of community on the other hand.

Another helper could be a digital peer-to-peer support channel, where you can ask a friend for a tip on some of the challenges of e-learning. In these golden times of Teams, this is easy to set up.

Competence brings safety

Things are easy to implement if you have expertise. Self-competence is one of the most important things of teacher coping, as up-to-date digital skills reduce stress and bring safety and certainty. In the longer term, skills will also save time and make it easier to set new courses. But of course the teacher doesn´t automatically master all digital tools, or know which pedagogical solutions should be used! There is no shortcut to learning new, but once again: how do we get more time?

"It's a good idea to eat an elephant one piece at a time," they sometimes say. We all know that the same applies to competence: it is worth developing skills systematically and in small steps. We also have to listen to ourselves! We have so much opportunities and options: we have to identify and choose the ones that are best for us. One gets excited about the tests, the other gets excited about the printed book. Someone benefits most from learning groups when someone prefers videos.

The greatest insight

The old cliché, "sometimes you have to go far to see close", still stands. For me, this meant I had to go to Hämeenlinna! I sat in the audience listening to someone presenting a plan for a primary school network, which in a simplified way included the following sections:

- what digital skills students need,
- the capacity of teachers to teach these skills,
- what needs to be done and on what schedule to provide teachers with sufficient capacity,
- what each teacher can do to get the necessary skills to the students.

This is where I, like Arkhimedes, wanted to jump up and exclaim "Heureka!". Because it became clear to me

that that is exactly the case! The same principle applies to many things, but also to digital capability: first you think about what capability consists of, then you map out what skills you already have, and finally you create a plan to make up for the situation. Simple!

Target for spring

Some of the insights came immediately, some matured after few days. Some will mature much later. Fortunately, we don’t have to know everything right away either.

The Digiskills project team has set some goals for spring 2022 in terms of learning new digital skills. We challenge every SeAMK person to pursue new skills and learn together, in a top group!

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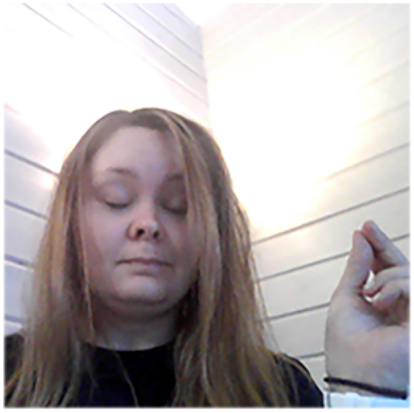

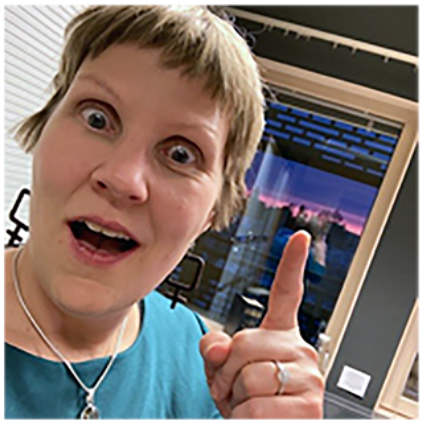

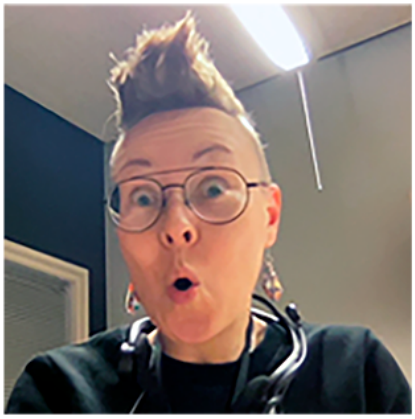

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