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## **PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS FROM FINLAND**

Using Positive Phenomena for Powerful Learning

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### **Positive Phenomena Tie Complex Learning Together**

Your students have a learning goal: they need to learn how to sell products on the market. How do you, as their teacher, help them to reach their goal? Will you give them lessons about marketing, product information, and selling? How about inventory control, customer service, and business ethics? Might you consider giving them assignments concerning budgeting or product placement? How do you support them with these assignments? Do you encourage them to find more information about how to sell products from the internet? You might also ask your students to interview sales professionals, who market many types of products, such as fashion, cosmetics, electronics, dog accessories, and ICT devices, to name a few. How do you ensure that your students have the skills and knowledge to sell products in the real world?

I am sure as a teacher you have used many teaching methods just mentioned. I am also certain that you have experienced the pros and cons of each of these methods. Why wouldn't you use all these methods and more? But have you ever considered the phenomenon-based approach?

### **An Example of Using Positive Phenomena in a Successful Way**

Phenomenon-based learning has been used in Finnish Mercuria Business College for years. In fact, from the hundreds of instructional approaches that are promoted in the education and training literature, phenomenon-based learning has been a consistently high-end success among students. As one student asked, "Why couldn't school always be like this?" Every year a five-day Christmas Market is planned, organized, and evaluated with a group of students who want to learn about selling in a more practical way.

In phenomenon-based learning, students have an active role and a lot of freedom. Responsibility for their own learning is allocated to them in a strong way. The role of a teacher or teacher team is to support learning by coaching and facilitation. It is crucial to allow students to plan, implement the plans with their peers, make mistakes, plan again, fail, and maybe try again and again. Unlike much of education, failure is accepted as part of the learning process. Over the

years, phenomenon-based learning has proved to be a unique way of learning, where students are highly motivated. It actually turns out that they learn much more than in a traditional classroom: in addition to subject areas, they learn cooperation, communication, teamwork, responsibility, and problem-solving, to name a few vital 21st-century skills.

What does it require from a teacher to teach by using phenomenon-based learning? I provide some tips and advice for you to get started next.

### **Cooperate Within Your School**

It is always helpful if your principal supports pedagogical experiments. Given that, I suggest you arrange a meeting with him or her first. Think also about how you might form teams of teachers and how you could encourage them to teach using a phenomenon-based approach as a team. You likely will also need help from your school administration to adjust schedules with the teacher team, both for planning and for the actual learning process. In addition, you might need more classrooms, alternative spaces for learning, and other materials and resources. Clearly, this phase might require extensive amounts of time and many intense discussions.

### **Plan in Advance With Other Teachers**

Phenomenon-based learning requires cooperation with other teachers. It means that the preparation must be done well in advance; it is not possible to plan everything in a short burst of gusto the night before you initiate such an activity. Working in a teacher team is different from working as an individual teacher, and it might take some time to learn to work as a team—but believe me, it is worth it!

In the process, you learn an amazing amount from your colleagues and gain a deep respect for the foresight, determination, and skills that they each bring. In Mercuria Business College, teachers who have this experience of working as a team say that they would never go back to traditional teaching. In a teacher team, one plus one is more than two, and each individual teacher gets support from the team. It is also rewarding to reflect on the teaching process and the results together.

### **Collaborate With Your Students**

The starting point for phenomenon-based learning is student-centered orientation. Teachers cooperate with students, and they make a concerted effort to avoid intervening too much in the learning process. Social competence, empathy, and the ability to understand another position are more vital than teacher expertise for a particular subject area.

### **Create a Safe Atmosphere to Learn**

It is the responsibility of a teacher or teacher team to create a safe learning environment where the participants feel a sense of belongingness and psychological comfort. In a safe learning environment, the atmosphere is relaxed, and the students feel free to ponder on their options and try out different ways of learning without the fear of failure. When this happens, the learning can be really fun! In this environment, mistakes, setbacks, and failures are accepted and even encouraged. In fact, sometimes the failure is the most fruitful learning experience. Reflecting on failures with the student team and their teacher can enhance and, at times, even transform the resulting learning.

### **Coach Your Students**

Coaching is a method where the focus is on helping your students discover their potentials and move forward to the goal. As a coach, you help your students to expand and apply their skills, knowledge, and abilities to the case at hand. In general, a coach does not give straight advice to students, but with the use of open and powerful questions, he or she acts in ways similar to Socrates did over two millennia ago with the hope to empower students to find the answers themselves. If your students are used to getting advice from a teacher, they might be confused in this new situation, where a teacher deliberately avoids giving them answers—or might not even have answers! When you as a teacher are in a role of a coach, you often are exposed to situations when you don't know, and because you don't know, you are more cautious when lending advice to your students. All you can do is to encourage them to find answers with your support.

### **Be Positive!**

Positive psychology and positive pedagogy are cornerstones for phenomenon-based learning. In Finland, positive psychology is widely used in elementary schools, and it is expected to produce both learning and high welfare for both students and teachers. The meaning of school is not only to increase the level of knowledge, but also to help students to grow to be good citizens who are aware of their strengths and talents as well as the importance of pursuing their passions.

This pursuit of passions and interests is a prerequisite for a rapidly changing future working life. We in Finland really believe in such authentic and real-world pedagogical methods; in fact, the recently renewed high school core curriculum in Finland includes a minimum one six-week course based on phenomena.

I will now pose a final question: what does it mean for a teacher to be positive? There are attributes that are connected to a profession of a teacher: being kind and tactful, giving feedback and recognition, and—the most important—supporting the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of students. Keep in mind that they can do just that with phenomenon-based learning.

### Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever experienced phenomenon-based learning? If so, what was the activity and what happened? Why do you think teachers in Finland find it powerful?
2. What would be the phenomena and topics you would like to teach and why?
3. How would you teach using a phenomenon-based learning approach? Is there anything innovative that you would try to do? Would there be any cautions or hesitancy on your part?
4. How would you encourage your colleagues to work with phenomenon-based teaching? And when should you start to talk about your idea with school management and colleagues?
5. How will you find a suitable mentor for phenomenon-based learning?