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Can arts, business and sustainability go together? Implementing a communications course on cultural sustainability for business students

This article describes the creation and implementation of a communications course based on cultural sustainability at Hanken School of Economics. Created in 2021, “Cultural Sustainability and Communication” is intended to expand the English business communication course pool. Several guests from the field of culture are invited to lecture on their expertise during the seven-week course. Cultural sustainability awareness, contact with stakeholders and communication strategies are at the heart of the course. It aims to increase cultural awareness during university studies and inspire the students to be players of change in the cultural scene.

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Introduction

When discussing sustainability, the focus tends to be traditionally on the three pillars: economic, ecological and social; the fourth pillar, cultural sustainability, is hardly recognized. Business schools, such as Hanken School of Economics, offer numerous courses related to sustainability and intercultural communication. However, the latter often

center on developing skills to conduct business successfully in other countries or among different nationalities. A communications course that recognizes culture *per se* and its influence in business, and vice versa, was a welcome addition to the course pool.

What is cultural sustainability all about and why it matters

In “Culture in Sustainability – Defining Cultural Sustainability in Education” (<https://sciendo.com/article/10.1515/dcse-2016-0016>), Laine (2016) from the University of Helsinki describes how cultural sustainability is viewed within the Finnish curriculum. The research involved the collection of experts’ conceptions of the term. They worked on formulating a definition of culturally sustainable education, outlining its curriculum contents for school age children (including models, measurements, practices, etc) and citing values connected with it.

According to the research, (Laine, 2016, p. 64) *culturally sustainable education*

- *is made possible and developed through micro-, median- and macro-level contacts*
- *takes into account culture on the local, national and global levels*
- *includes creativity, cultural customs, cultural heritage and an awareness of history, cultural landscapes, interaction between generations, internationality, locality as well as multiculturalism and diversity in education*
- *supports the identity process of the pupil*
- *protects and enables the realization of cultural rights*
- *utilizes the instrumental value of culture and recognizes the value of culture in the cultural change toward sustainability.*

Although the focus of Laine is primarily on school age children, the themes and topics are relevant for tertiary education students as well. It provides an excellent basis for understanding culture as part of daily existence, culture as multifaceted and open to change, and finally, culture as a driving force in business and sustainability. Cultural topics can serve as interesting subjects for written and oral corporate communication assignments.

Laine commends at the end of her article:

Pursuing a sustainable way of living is about broadening the whole educational system's way of thinking, about a new school culture. Without acknowledging the cultural perspective, the pursuit of sustainability fails. Culturally sustainable education considers culture in a broad and diverse way. Thus, an educational institution cannot achieve a good level of CS by taking into consideration only one aspect of CS and disregarding others. Nor can a school achieve a good level of sustainability by only acknowledging one aspect of sustainability. Defining cultural sustainability is pivotal so that education can reach a future-orientated vision of CS that supports the wellbeing of the pupil and society. (Laine, 2016, p. 65)

Cultural sustainability and creativity

Dr John Clammer, professor of sociology at the United Nations University in Tokyo, has published widely on culture and development. His writings and Oivo's [interview \(https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/creating-development-developing-creativity-how-and-why-art-can-transform-societies\)](https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/creating-development-developing-creativity-how-and-why-art-can-transform-societies) (2015) on him highlight culture as a key factor in the sustainable development of any society.

In this interview, Dr Clammer mentions UNESCO's idea of "creative industries" in which artistic activities such as music, film, arts, should be fostered and considered for their economic and social value. Additionally, Dr Clammer reminds us that the economic aspect of creative industries for development is incomplete without valuing "the intrinsic significance of the arts and for the fact that life is very impoverished without the arts."

Comparatively, [Sir Ken Robinson's TED Talk \(https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity?language=en\)](https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity?language=en) (Robinson, 2006) and his book "Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative" challenged the educational system that concentrated on standardization of methods and assessment and efficiency. Robinson (Robinson, 2006, p. 286) concludes:

In the interests of the industrial economies, we have subjected generations of people to narrow forms of education that have marginalized some of their most important talents and qualities. In pursuit of higher levels of efficiency and productivity in our organizations we have overlooked the essentially human factors on which creativity and innovation naturally depend... To realize our true creative potential – in our organizations, in our schools and in our communities – we need to think differently about ourselves and to act differently towards each other. We must learn to be creative.

Both these authors served as inspiration for understanding the need for societal development that considers culture at the heart of human progress. Humanities in general and arts in particular remind us that we aspire to be *homo sapiens*, not simply *homo economicus* nor *homo technologicus*.

How can a course that fosters creativity be meaningful to business students?

At our Centre for Business Languages and Communication, we are constantly encouraged to create new courses that would enhance the acquired business communication skills which are introduced in the first year of studies at Hanken.

For improving business communication skills, older students are offered elective courses related to employability or team skills, to mention a few. “Cultural Sustainability and Communication” falls into this category. The course is designed to have 20 students: half of them exchange students and the other half Finnish students. The rationale for this is to ensure natural intercultural exchange. The key elements in the course are audience-centered, purpose-driven communication, cultural content and sustainability.

The content related to culture and sustainability is addressed by experts from the field (gallerist, museum curator, artists, senior advisers of cultural foundations) who are invited as guest lecturers. Furthermore, visiting galleries and having a guided tour in a museum are included in the course plan and provide eye-opening experiences. Students’ feedback is often very generous and insightful. They manifest positive stimulation from each meeting:

The gallery visit was interesting and full of beautiful art! Also it was interesting to listen to the expert from Finnish cultural foundation and especially hear his points of views of how art should be funded.

I didn't attend the gallery visit that Maria organized, but I did visit it before it with my sister and my three daughters. I was especially inspired by Kim Simonsson's moss people, the kids seemed to me like Ukrainian children after Putin's nuclear war, they even had sunflowers, and it was very touching and chilling at the same time.

Listening to this amazing artists was very motivating from my personal life. "Nothing is impossible is you have faith and believe in your art"



Picture 1. Class of 2024 with Kim Simonsson at Galerie Forsblom

To upgrade business communication skills, students are given written and oral assignments addressed to specific decision makers in the field of culture such as a gallerist, the head of a cultural center, a sustainability officer of an institution to name a few. Additionally, some of the readings mentioned above serve as catalysts for interesting and thought-provoking discussions in class. The underlying idea of the

assignments revolves around RPP (the recognition, preservation and promotion) of cultural aspects of life and society. This was also reflected in the course feedback:

I found it interesting how all of the teams had chosen different perspectives on how to discuss art and furthering the SDGs. I am very grateful to live in Finland, where education and information are widely available and possibilities to influence are high on societal activity.

There are endless ways that culture and sustainability can inspire us, how they can be put together to educate people and to create and reach specific goals. RPP is essential in every steps when it comes to reaching those goals.

Giving and receiving peer feedback, they were all very encouraging and respectful towards each other which I feel made it an excellent space for learning.

Course implementation

The course was piloted in 2021 during the pandemic and for that reason only one exchange student participated. The course was also completely online. Despite this limitation, several artists, a director of sustainable tourism and a well-renowned gallerist collaborated as guest lecturers and evaluators.

There were two written assignments: a persuasive message addressed to the Program Director of the university recommending the addition of a humanities-based course into the curriculum and a poster. The subject of the poster was any work of art, a collection or an artist that students think should be recognized (anew), preserved and recommended as a medium for cultural sustainability. Though the students had very interesting topics, the poster assignment per se was not a successful idea from a business communication perspective; therefore, in the following year the second assignment was changed into an art critique based on a museum collection we visited. However, for the succeeding implementations, the written assignments were both persuasive messages. These assignments are more in line with the business communication focus and serve to really hone students' persuasive skills. For the first assignment, students proposed the creation of culture clubs at the university to the university's Marketing

Manager while the second assignment, addressed to the architect of the school building, offers concrete ideas on how the university premises can become more student friendly.

Regarding the oral assignments, the first was an informative presentation on a specific cultural expression that manifests one of the UNESCO sustainability goals related to culture (Sustainable Development Goals #4.7, 8.3 and 11.4). The second oral assignment was done in collaboration with a stakeholder of their choice (gallerist, artist, institution, etc.). Students needed to recommend something concrete that helps the stakeholder or his/her art or institution become more recognized, preserved and promoted.

Through these assignments students have touched on the powerful role of art in peacemaking, the necessity of conserving the sauna tradition and of supporting the Sami culture, the importance of celebrating the Baltic Sea Day and the viability of culture clubs within the campus grounds, among others. A group of students designed a way to upscale the Instagram account of a local cultural center and another group challenged a well-known gallerist into considering non-fungible token (NFT) artworks along with traditional works of art.

Although the course is only offered once a year, students reflected that they were quite content developing their communication skills, besides:

- discovering unknown yet relatively easy cultural treasures within the city of Helsinki (e.g. home museums)
- listening to public and private decision makers of current and future cultural policies
- engaging with artists and other influencers in the field.
- getting inspired by culture and becoming aware of its relevance in their daily life.
- increasing networking with cultural experts.

Visitors' insights and contribution

Representatives from both the private and public sector as well as the local and international scene in the cultural field have been invited to be guest lecturers on the course. The task of requesting experts to come to lecture was a pleasure simply because they were delighted to talk about their field and their experiences to business students. For them, the invitation was a unique occurrence. For example, Kaj Forsblom's

interesting perspective that the pandemic brought a positive influence to his gallery business was worth noting: *When people were in their homes for a longer time, isolated, they noticed the empty walls. So, they started buying artwork.*

Another collaborator was painter Canal Cheong-Jagerroos who described her path and style as an artist. She has been a guest twice; for the last session, she donated two of her paintings to the university partly for personal reasons and partly for the opportunity to have been a guest on the course.

Future plans

After each course, students share their feedback with the teacher face-to-face. Together, we look into the possibilities of developing the course, for example, from a seven-week to a ten-week course to ensure more time between assignments and additionally more meetings discussing arts and sustainability.

An artist offered to design an art installation at the university premises as part of the course. This was not realized then but is definitely one factor to take into account if the course is extended to ten weeks.

We also think the course can evolve into a series. Since its inception up to the present, the focus has primarily been on visual arts. With the growing number of contacts with artists and the increasing interest among students, we hope that there will be future courses with music and performing arts as the basis for the assignments.

When the course was introduced in 2021, one of the participants was a Hungarian student who defined cultural sustainability succinctly as "making sure we won't have a gray world". I believe there's plenty of room for a similar course in other institutions in Finland and elsewhere.

For anyone interested in knowing more about the course, please check the [Hanken newsletter \(https://www.hanken.fi/en/news/shared-joy-double-joy-cultural-sustainability-and-communications-hanken-fosters-creativity\)](https://www.hanken.fi/en/news/shared-joy-double-joy-cultural-sustainability-and-communications-hanken-fosters-creativity) and a [collaborative podcast \(https://www.hanken.fi/en/about/current-information/blogs-and-pods/sustainability-unwrapped\)](https://www.hanken.fi/en/about/current-information/blogs-and-pods/sustainability-unwrapped) on the topic.

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