

How to Create Finnish-Inspired Learning Environments

By Janet English

1. **Self-Preparation:** To teach in a Finnish style you need to learn directly from the Finns. You can find these lessons [HERE](#).
2. **Student/Parent/Administrative/Legislative Preparation:** Depending on your country's cultural approach to education, the Finnish approach to teaching and learning will need to be shared and discussed among stakeholders so that everyone understands how this approach is designed to optimize learning for every child.
3. **Determine Student Learning Goals:** Determine with your colleagues what all students need to know and be able to do for each Standard. Group the Standards together that should be taught together and make units. Complete this task for each unit. Units are approximately 6-7 weeks long.
4. **Intentional Design of Activities:** [HERE](#) is my checklist for how I build units.
5. **Unit Design and Implementation:**
 - a. **Unit Building:** Build a scaffolded approach to teach the content in your first unit along with the resources that will be needed for it to be successful. What needs to be taught first, second, third, etc.
 - b. **Teaching the Unit:** As you and your students proceed through the unit, be flexible about how you reach your target and the supports you will use to ensure success. Include time to respond to questions that students will be asking and practice flexibility by providing choices for students to allow them to pursue their interests. If allowing student choice to pursue individual interests seems difficult due to time constraints, be sure to cancel out time spent on activities that are meaningless, including fill-in-the-blank activities, end of the chapter questions that don't deepen students' learning, crossword puzzles, or multiple-choice tests that don't ask students to produce anything with what they have learned. Keep the learning target in sharp focus, while embracing the flexibility and the multitudes of ways in which students can achieve success.
 - c. **Daily Struggles:** Students need to be continually assured that the only way their problem solving abilities will increase will be to struggle to solve problems that they've never solved before. Include in the daily lesson planning the opportunities for students to do something new with what they've learned. These struggles should be designed to be a little bit

harder than students are used to solving. The answers to these problems should be within reach so that when students are successful, they are motivated to work on the next level of difficulty.

- d. **Revisiting the Concepts:** Include many opportunities for students to revisit the content so that the slower learners have multiple opportunities to work with the content and the higher learners have multiple opportunities to solve interesting problems.

6. Create a learning environment where all students can succeed.

- a. **Time:** Deep learning takes time. Take away arbitrary deadlines for learning. Accept that students learn at different rates and that some students need more time and practice than others. This discrepancy in learning speed is normal because no two children are alike - they come to class with different abilities, different experiences, and different interests - and they leave your class with different skills, knowledge, and experience. It's okay to give students many opportunities to learn along with plenty of time to learn the material. This compassionate approach does not take away rigor - in fact, it supports rigor and proficiency for all.
- b. **Pace:** Integrate into the unit a pace that supports different rates of learning. Get rid of punishments for students who learn slower than your pacing guide. Treat formative assessments as practice for the Three-Level Challenges at the end of the unit and don't punish children for not learning fast enough. Give children time to learn, time to practice, and time to fail. Short-term "failure" will help students learn the right way to think about a concept and an improved idea for how to solve problems.
- c. **Support:** Support every assignment with your expertise as a pedagogical leader. Never leave students alone in their struggles. Guide them and support them, but don't give them the answers. If you scaffold your units and lessons appropriately, their success should be within reach if they are provided with the time and support they need to learn. A student's achievement for overcoming struggle and achieving success is a strong motivator for their continued success.
- d. **Choice:** Give students a choice to work on topics that interest them! If the topic is ecosystems, for example, let students choose the ecosystem they're interested in, whether it be the desert, the coral reefs, or the rainforest. What matters is that students are learning and students are interested in what they're learning about.
- e. **Leave something out every day:** Students need to produce something with what they've learned on a daily basis. What are the experiments students can design? What can students figure out for themselves? When do students work alone and when do they work in groups? How can students continually be responsible for their own learning? By creating environments that put the responsibility on students to produce something, they will have more ownership.
- f. **If students are used to earning points for little achievements, integrate success (through points) into your unit design.** American education has

trained students that earning points is imperative for achievement. In long-term units where deep learning takes time, ensure that points can be earned along the way to help students transition toward the understanding that deep learning is the key to high achievement - not just earning points.

g. Encourage the love of learning as opposed to the love of earning points.