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## MULTISENSORY SPACE: YOUR STORY, MY STORY, OUR STORY

**O**ur world is made of shared stories, and Multisensory Space, an open learning environment, was also inspired by such a story. In this article, we discuss how this method came to be, its past and present, its core ideas and how it can be applied with different client groups and for different purposes.

### The Past and the Present

One of my good friends, a young man from Somalia, came to me one day with a cup of sand.

*“Look, feel this sand.... so soft and white sand we have there on the beaches of Mogadishu.”*

Although it was a rainy and cold day, one could see how my friend travelled in his mind to Somalia, feeling the warm sand, remembering the good old days. From that point, an idea started to grow: to create a possibility to travel back in memories through all senses, providing a safe and pleasant atmosphere for encounters, for sharing memories and life experiences.

The first multisensory event “Welcome to South America”, with such real sand, took place in Heureka in 2008, and already a year before, both Finnish and international students were engaged in the Multisensory Method as part of their project works.



**Picture 1:** The first multisensory event “Welcome to South America” took place in Heureka in 2008. The group that organized the event consisted of students from different study programs, exchange students and immigrants from South America.

In 2009-2010, the method was further developed in a project called Encounters in Multisensory Space, which was granted partial funding from the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals. The multisensory space was built in Laurea Tikkurila and Laurea Hyvinkää. Also the first version of the movable space was introduced.

In September 2011, the project With All Senses – Developing Open Learning Environments was launched to continue the development and promotion of the method. Laurea University of Applied Sciences coordinated the project with such national partners as the Provincial Museum of Lapland, Heinolan kansalaisopisto (Heinola Adult Education), Hämeen Kylät ry, City of Vantaa, the Päivälehti Museum and Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. The project was funded by the European Social Fund, and it ended in March 2015.

With All Senses promoted the creation of multisensory learning environments for different target groups. It focused on cultural heritage that is reflected in the memories of a person or a group in a purpose-built experiential environment. The multisensory environment of the project was used for collecting local memories and history, for promoting multiculturalism, and as an inspirational learning environment. The final result was a model which could be applied in open multisensory learning environments in different contexts and utilized in the activities of different organizations, such as learning institutions, libraries and museums.

Presently the method is further developed in a project called Building Skills and Communities Together (2017 - 2019). Volunteers and students are the key actors in the project, organizing activities with the help and support of the project’s experts. The

volunteers and student groups will organize different activities where immigrants and natives work together. The aim is to learn Finnish language and get acquainted with the Finnish society, to make the cultural diversity visible, and to promote the sense of community and inclusion. Project workshops are client-oriented, as the workshop participants decide the theme of their own workshop. Multisensory is also used when studying the Finnish language. Different senses and experiences will make learning attractive also for those who are not accustomed to traditional language teaching. The use of photographs, sounds and artefacts also make the encounters easier when there is no common language. Through different activities, the workshops are suitable for different target groups.

### Multisensory Space as a Method

So what is this Multisensory Multisensory Space method (called Aistien-menetelmä in Finnish)? As mentioned above, it met the need for creating a place where individuals from different cultures could meet and share their memories. The first steps to systematically develop this method were taken at Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and today the method is used in different ways.

The Multisensory Space is an easily modified space where all the senses are activated by different elements. The space can be used as an inspirational learning environment but also as a meeting point for people. The space and the multisensory materials provoke thoughts and memories, which inspires visitors to engage in a dialogue. A visitor can relax in a pleasant atmosphere, return to his or her past, or explore



**Picture 2:** Building the spaces and sharing the memories can promote welfare and happiness with different target groups.

a completely different world. The space promotes well-being in different ways. For example, one can organize activities that support the culture of the aging and second-generation immigrants.

The Multisensory Space can also be used as a learning environment that provides inspiration and experiences to students in the space. The building process empowers the individuals connected to the process and serves as a means for learning. When all the senses are activated, the learning process is enhanced. Because the Multisensory Space is an easily modified space, it can be used when teaching different subjects. For example, teaching a foreign language in an environment that is close to authentic motivates and inspires discussion. The building of the space makes abstract matters more concrete and easier to process.

As a method, the Multisensory Space promotes wellbeing and empowerment, and it can be studied in the light of sociocultural empowerment. It serves well in social services as a working method. It supports discussions of individual or group identity and may help to address the roots and values of an individual or a group. The completed space is also an inspiring place for reminiscence work. Especially customers and clients in different institutions and hospitals could be empowered by using the method.

The Multisensory Space can also be used as a tool for social influence and sharing information. It works well when initiating a discussion on society and promoting a sense of togetherness and encounters between individuals and communities. The mobile version of the Multisensory Space makes the space easy to use in public places. The method can also be used in community development to plan the future. Local people can get involved in the planning, for example by making different visions of the future visible.



**Picture 3:** Revisiting for a moment the landscape you love...Taiwanese exchange students built a Taiwanese Multisensory Space.

## Student Activities

Each year, there have been about 100 students working with the method. They have connected their project work with various studies and with their practice and theses. Most of them have been students in the Social Services program. The space has especially been a place where international students can cooperate with Finnish students and with working life partners.

Below are some recent examples of Multisensory Space projects.

- In spring 2016, four students from Social Service program made their practice in the project. They organized different events as a group, such as a refugee space and the space under the sea, and they also arranged different activities and happenings for Encounters in Vantaa.
- For several years, there has been an active cooperation with the Vantaa education centre. Social Services students and the students attending the integration course have worked together as a small group and created the spaces together.
- International School of Vantaa has been one of the long-term cooperation partners as well. Students from different age groups have visited the Multisensory Space for multicultural and wellness-related teachings and workshops.
- Exchange students have also created their cultural spaces and shared them with Finnish Laurea students, thus providing multicultural information for the Finnish students and inspiring them to go abroad for exchange. Similarly, the Multisensory Space has served as a method of informing exchange students about Finnish culture and language.
- Multisensory Space has worked as a home base for Wellness at Work studies where students have created a relaxation space for both students and staff.
- The Red Cross has adopted the Multisensory Space method as one of its good practices and has widely used the multisensory tents in refugee affairs especially for educational purposes.

## Conclusion

So what is so special about the Multisensory Space method?

All in all, as an open learning environment, the space is all about experiences, creativity and inspiration, both yours and mine and our shared ones. It allows students and visitors to make their own learning visible and tangible by using all of the senses. Also, the multisensory approach supports all types of learners and focuses on each individual's strengths in their learning process. It is a very creative environment to teach, for example, languages, history or geography—making the topics visual, oral, kinaesthetic and so on. It is also strongly supports teaching information retrieval and digital communication. Even when there is almost no shared language,

the space still makes communication possible by allowing different types of activities for shared understanding. It facilitates language learning and interactive communication and getting to know one another.

The space can also be built in public locations. In this way, it promotes citizen activity in communities and makes it possible for people to create their own spaces that are visible for the whole community. It makes different phenomena more tangible, real and interactive. In addition, it promotes networking between different operators.

And finally, it can be used to promote a school where all cultures can meet on equal terms and where students and teachers can learn from each other about different cultures, thus promoting equality and peace in the community.

How would you use the Multisensory Space in your work, with your own clients and customers?

**For more information, please see:**

[www.laurea.fi/en/projects/with-all-senses](http://www.laurea.fi/en/projects/with-all-senses)

[www.aistienmenetelma.net](http://www.aistienmenetelma.net)