

Supporting the transition to sustainable dining in Finnish schools through gamification and emotional labor

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School dining provides an interesting site for considering interventions in sustainable lifestyles in the Nordic context. In the Finnish comprehensive and high schools nearly one million free lunches are offered daily. School dining has been a long-term target for interventions in healthy and nutritious eating. These interventions have relied heavily upon behavioral approaches and socio-economic factors in healthy eating. Previous studies highlight the importance of childhood in learning healthy eating behaviors. Recently, the new nutrition recommendations suggest increasing the use of vegetables and supply of vegetarian food in school dining. Reducing the amount of meat in our diet is considered good for both health and environment. In our project “Politics, practices and the transformative potential of sustainable diets” we experiment how sustainable eating could be enhanced and integrated to school dining in three Finnish schools (www.sustainablediets.fi).

We have explored the possibilities to support the pupil’s readiness to taste new food ingredients and overcome their prejudice towards vegetarian food by organizing tasting events for pupils aged 13-16. These events have included game-like interactive features: we first invited the pupils to taste four different sources of protein that are promoted as alternatives to meat (roasted faba beans, smoked tofu, roasted lupine tempe and roasted insects); we then introduced a quiz and asked the pupils to put the plates in the right order based on their protein content and CO₂ emissions. We have analyzed the video recordings of the events and discuss the very first insights from this material in terms of emotional labor needed in overcoming prejudices in plant-based eating.

Gamification has been employed and studied as a means for public participation and social learning. It is argued to provide specific features and arenas for social interaction. In our case, the game-like features of the tasting events enabled us to observe emotional labor in social situations in which people encounter new issues and need to face and overcome their prejudice. Our preliminary findings point out that gamification can be used as a tool in social sciences to tease out social interaction and make its emotional component visible. We also compare three different interactive modes employed in the events: tasting (material-physical mode), deliberation (cognitive mode) and gaming (entertaining mode), and discuss the differences and interplay between these in supporting changing eating practices.