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# ***The Impact of Cross-cultural Differences on Feedback Behavior***

## ***A Comparative Study in a Technological Setting***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Giving and receiving feedback is an essential part of a learning cycle for any learning organization in general, and its students in particular. As human communication is highly influenced by culture, the purpose of this study is to find out how and to which extent the socio-cultural socialization of the stakeholders at hand affects their patterns in feedback giving.

Data was collected from written feedback given in the form of informal performance evaluation that student groups from Universities of Applied Sciences of Laurea, Finland and Upper Austria gave to each other after pre-scheduled online presentations that were delivered to each other within traditional learning settings (Communication classes in Finland and General English classes in Austria). The open-ended feedback questionnaires were collected after two different online sessions in May and December 2013. The feedback was then assembled in a list of themes categorized by the activity or factor to be evaluated (work process, in-class performance, content of the presentations and technology used to transmit them). In a second step a set of codes was developed. After repeatedly reading through the interview transcripts, three analytical frames emerged that were further assessed and analyzed through the mutually exclusive categories (see Berger 2011, pp 209 - 216) of positivity, neutrality or negativity of the feedback.

The content analysis suggests a number of relevant differences in the feedback given by the Finnish and Austrian students. These results support the ethnographic observations made by the lecturers and are also in line with findings in previous literature (Berry and al. 2010; Chhokar, Broadbeck and House, 2007; Salo-Lee 1998; House 2006). It appeared that the Finnish students were somehow reluctant towards providing personal feedback to their counterparts, being most careful to remain on a surface content level whereas the Austrians seemed to be more at ease and better able to give personal feedback while at the same time not shying away from offering largely low-context and even negative feedback, if applicable.

Keywords: Culture; Feedback, Online Performance, Technological Transmission

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### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the influence of different cultures on feedback behavior. The ultimate goal is to better grasp underlying styles and focus points of feedback of the investigated countries and thus gain a more thorough understanding of possible differences in giving feedback in intercultural settings. This will help people become aware of their own taken-for-granted cultural assumptions of feedback.

According to Hattie (1992, 9) providing feedback is the single most effective way of enhancing performance in an educational setting. As such, feedback is nourishment also for any developing organization. Feedback, especially a critical one, should be regarded a gift (Barlow & Moller 2008). Researchers and practitioners agree on the importance of feedback as a practice helping an individual to improve her or his performance. Therefore, it is most vital that future employees learn the importance of giving and soliciting for constructive feedback early on in their often global careers.

The students of Laurea University of Applied Sciences and UAS Upper Austria have been carrying out interactive online presentations as part of their cultural and technological learning. These mutual online presentations with the partnering universities in Finland and Austria were initiated by two lecturers in Fall 2011 and it became soon evident that student groups from both universities would greatly benefit from having more feedback on their presentations.

Feedback is based on human communication. It thus seems very likely that giving and receiving feedback is influenced by the cultural identities and communication styles of the persons involved in the feedback process. As internationalization of education is actively pursued at both universities, it seemed to be worthwhile to uncover how the presentations were perceived by the respective student group from the other nationality (Finland and Austria).

The present study reports on findings that identified the extent to which cultural socialization accounts for the focus, content and style of feedback and on how cultural background affected the willingness to give feedback. The data was collected during May and December 2013 after three different online presentation sessions at UAS Laurea Leppävaara, Finland and UAS Upper Austria, Hagenberg.

## **2 THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON FEEDBACK**

Culture does have an influence on language and behavior (Scollon, Scollon, and Jones 2012; Gudykunst 2002). Both authors who have been frequently visiting and teaching student groups in different countries and running joint online presentations to promote intercultural student cooperation and learning noticed a number of differences in communication patterns in general, and the way students were giving to and receiving feedback from each other, in particular.

Below we will discuss the concept of feedback, culture and the communication styles in Finland and Austria. Later, we will try to find out how culture impacts the way students communicate written feedback.

### **2.1 Feedback**

Hattie and Timperley (2007, 81) conceptualize feedback as "information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding." Russel (1998, 25) defines feedback as letting the persons know what they have done that has reached the standard so that they can reproduce the behavior and what they have done that has not reached the standard. Especially critical feedback is essential for detecting blind spots and possibilities for further development.

There are several related concepts such as criticism, performance appraisal, evaluation or instruction. As a difference to criticism - which always includes a negative or correctional aspect as the word already embodies - feedback can consist also purely of positive content aspects such as encouragement or praise. Performance appraisal or evaluation is often used for formal assessment of one's performance at work in general, without relating specifically to a certain task or process. An instruction and a feedback can be sometimes intertwined but the clear distinction of these concepts becomes evident when considered as different ends on a continuum (Hattie and Timperley 2007, 82).

Each feedback situation is different depending on the context, participants and purpose of the feedback giving. According to Meister and Hildebrandt (2013) the following factors have an influence on the feedback: Setting of the feedback (individual or collective feedback; formal or informal feedback; relational closeness or distance of the actors), the feedback process (face-to-face or mediated; positive or negative aspects first; explicit or implicit feedback), the driving forces for the feedback (individual or organizational development; positive enhancement or negative correction) and equality or hierarchical power difference of the actors. Additionally, further factors such as openness or anonymity and spoken or written format of the feedback may be relevant variables of feedback styles and content. It is similarly likely that national, organizational or contextual feedback cultures have an effect on the feedback. As such, we feel that there may also be other variables affecting feedback which have yet not been identified.

Feedback, as we define it in this paper, is informal performance evaluation in writing that is provided by an individual student to the partnering team and is primarily concerned with their online presentation performance. The feedback can include positive, neutral or critical content. The focus of this paper is only on the feedback giving, not on receiving it or on how effective it can be considered.

There is much literature and research on how to give feedback in an ideal way mostly derived from a managerial perspective and frequently based on Western management ideologies. Feedback behavior in educational contexts has been mostly discussed from the instructors' points of view and their way of giving feedback on students or pupils. Intercultural feedback practices and cultural feedback styles, however, have been studied less.

### **2.2 Culture as predictor of feedback style**

As culture has, among other personal or group characteristics, an impact on the way and style of communicating it is all the more logical that it also influences the way how feedback is communicated. Culture has been defined in numerous ways largely depending on the disciplinary community it is applied to. Most conceptualizations of culture suggest that culture is shared (not about individual behavior), learned (derived from the social environment) and about groups (a collective phenomenon about shared values and meanings) (Hoecklin 1995, 24-25). Scollon and al. (2012, 3) define

culture as “a way of dividing people up into groups according to some feature of these people which helps us to understand something about them and how they are different from or similar to other people.”

Cultural classifications, mostly emphasizing the difference, have been under severe criticism recently. Holden (2002, 23) states that classic concepts of culture are often used to reinforce culture as a differentiating factor “separating one group of human beings from another”. Also Holliday (2011) strongly criticizes the so called neo-essentialist approaches where culture, particularly national ones, is being seen as a monolithic and static force. Bennett (2013) asserts that the traditional cross-cultural theories essentialise culture, i.e. objectify it when culture is actually about a process where people are the products and producers of culture at the same time. Therefore, ranking or measuring culture is claimed to be highly ineffective.

However difficult it may seem to cluster cultural behavior, we will still try to reflect on the cultural socialization of the people at hand and shed light on how their cultural background affects feedback. For lay people not familiar with cultural studies, the person’s nationality is predominantly identified with culture and hence relevant for their intercultural encounters. This was evident also in this research case where students were addressing each other as “the Austrians” or “the Finns”. Our intention as instructors and learning facilitators is to help future professionals become aware of different communication - including feedback - styles and, by doing so, to build on this cultural knowledge to negotiate meaning both effectively and in a culturally sensitive way. Culture should thus not be seen as a too scholarly concept nor as an obstacle or annoyance but rather as a tool to enlarge perception, achieve tolerance and improve performance once the underlying patterns of perception are comprehensively grasped.

Consequently, we believe that many so-called neo-essentialist cross-cultural scientists (Hall, Hofstede, Trompenaars, Hampton-Turner, Lewis) and the cultural dimensions and standards they have identified have laid the foundation stones for understanding and describing culturally influenced communication styles that are often connected with specific geographical borders. Without them, we claim, differences in cross-cultural communication, however obvious they may seem, might be much more difficult to grasp and result in misperceptions, misinterpretations and misevaluations.

Since the students’ intercultural encounters were relatively short-timed (consisting of a few pre-tasks such as Skype meetings, Facebook chats or e-mails before the actual presentation session), it is very likely that they did not yet manage to engage in creating a “third culture” (Bardhan 2011) but rather see each other as representatives of a whole group (Finns, Austrians or students of the partner university).

Communicating feedback is by nature evaluative and feelings can be easily hurt. Therefore, it is important to address every feedback, be it positive or negative, in a constructive and polite form. The challenge is that politeness expressed by a person from a different culture is usually judged by one’s own cultural framework and politeness criteria.

In this context, we drew on two theories of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978; Scollon and al. 2012) which, in our view, are highly useful. Brown and Levinson classify politeness into positive, negative and indirect politeness. In positive politeness respect and consideration is demonstrated by creating sense of community, closeness and warmth. Putting the person in the center, encouragement, involvement and similar behavior are typical in positive politeness cultures. Talkativeness and small talk are considered part of positive politeness. By contrast, negative politeness builds on respecting the other’s privacy, leaving him/her alone and creating distance. Also impersonality, carefulness and pessimism are typical of negative politeness strategies. Indirect politeness includes flexibility and possibility to withdraw from the situation. Implying, irony, downplaying, over-emphasizing and general vagueness or generalizations are all characteristics of indirect politeness. Scollon and al. (2012, 53-56) solidarity, deference and hierarchical face systems present a complementary approach politeness strategies and overlap to a large extent with the positive, negative and indirect politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson.

### **2.3 Cultural communication style**

Each person has his or her unique communication style, composed of verbal and non-verbal factors that are influenced by the interplay of the communicators, the context and situation and the topic being communicated. Intercultural communication is characterized by the fact that messages cannot be interpreted by the same discourse standards and therefore it is more crucial to pay attention on how the message can be interpreted than what has been communicated (Scollon and al., 2012; Salo-Lee 1996, 6-35).

The anthropologist and pioneer of intercultural communication studies Edward Hall introduced the notions of low-context and high-context communication cultures, which, still today, prove to be valuable concepts. In so-called low-context communication systems, people translate a large part of the meaning into explicit code (Hall 1976, 91). As such, “the spoken word carries most of the meaning” (Stori 1999, 92) and these cultures favor directness where little meaning is encoded into words. High context communication cultures, on the other hand, use the code in such ways that “a large part of the meaning lies in the physical context, which includes facial expressions, tone of voice and gestures” (Hall 1976, 91). Consequently, the message itself carries only restricted information and is conveyed implicitly. The

nonverbal and cultural aspects of what is not said become most crucial requiring the interlocutors “to read between the lines” and to decode the message correctly. The way people perceive the world around them is “culturally determined” (Gibson 2000, 20) which explains why situations are often experienced and interpreted in different ways. The same holds true for giving and receiving feedback and without comprehensive knowledge of how to translate specific behavior into one’s own cultural framework, a number of sensitive issues might arise which, if not addressed appropriately, result in misconceptions.

Scollon and Jones’ (2012) cultural discourse approach where, among other concepts, different face systems can pose additional challenges for intercultural understanding and perception of politeness is an interesting approach supporting our study of feedback communication. Admittedly, there are many other typologies or dimensions for classifying cultural communication styles. Although not based on extensive scientific research but covering both the Finnish and Austrian cultures, one suitable one in this context is the Lewis model (2006) which categorizes cultures roughly into linear-active, multi-active or reactive cultures, depending on their orientation towards tasks, social relations or respect in listening.

### **2.3.1 Finnish communication style**

Lewis claims that Finns typically (2005, 71) belong to a rather reactive communication culture with strong focus on listening before replying but holding also some characteristics from linear-active cultures concentrating on one thing at a time and being task-oriented planners. The importance on listening and high comfort with quietness has also been documented by Berry and al. (2010).

Although most Western cultures, including Finland, are often characterized as low-context cultures, compared with most central European cultures Finnish communication patterns involve a high degree of indirect communication cues. Both indirectness and succinctness relate to the fact that Finns are still a fairly homogeneous people (therefore sharing more commonly similar interpretations on phenomena and not needing to elaborate matters as much as more diverse people) and respect the intelligence and knowledge of the reader or listener (and thus assume that not everything needs to be explained in details). Finns are often considered impolite because of their relatively matter-of-fact and succinct communication style. Finns also tend to maximize distance with the social me that is submitted to interaction. Therefore, there is a general tendency to focus on formal or general topics. Personal or contradictory topics are avoided (Salo-Lee 1996, 27-38). This is in line with the use of negative or indirect politeness strategies as Finns can typically be observed being fairly high-context communicators in sensitive situations especially when interacting with strangers or less familiar people.

The American intercultural communication researcher Donald Carbaugh (1995, 55) listed a number of characteristics of the Finnish communication patterns which confirm the above characterizations and may become prominent also in feedback communication:

- do not talk about self-evidences
- express issues that are worth being noticed by everybody
- try to maintain harmony; avoid contradictory or questionable issues
- be committed to what you say
- what you say forms the basis for the following communication situation.

### **2.3.2 Austrian communication style**

Communication is one of the functions considered highly important for Austrians (Szabo and Reber 2007, 138), a statement in line with Zander (1997) and Vroom-Yetton (1973) who identified communicative patterns among Austrians that stress interest in personal communication and a wish for frequent exchange between e.g. employers and employees to talk things over mainly in group constellations which is also reflected in the Austrian proverb “*durch das Reden kommen die Leute zusammen*”. Translated literally, this means that talking brings people together pointing to a certain consensus-orientation in the hope that conflicts might be resolved when being discussed on a more personal level. Still, this communicative frame shall not disguise that Austria together with Germany and Switzerland belongs to a linear-active culture where task-orientation, planning and scheduling are on high priority scale (Lewis 2006). However, while Germans strive to be objective, direct and credible, Austrians tend to emphasize relationship and avoid conflict (Brück 2002).

As to Finland the Lewis model of culture identified a rather reactive mindset in terms of silence and avoidance of open discord. As such, the more linear-active communicative style of Austrians with their “tendency to be blunt and disagree openly rather than going for politeness and diplomacy” (Lewis 2006, 223) contrasts starkly with the Finnish reactive approach where courtesy and a careful reaction to the interlocutors are more highly appreciated. However, it was found

that when Finns work with a Germanic culture, in our case with Austrians, a pronounced focus on engineering and hard facts (Fellman 2001) seems to represent a common denominator between two rather different culturally shaped people.

### **3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

Laurea University of Applied Sciences and UAS Upper Austria held three different online presentation sessions with in 2013. The sessions provided a good opportunity to study the feedback patterns of the students involved. The research was conducted on the written feedback which the students submitted in an open comment form after the sessions. The written feedback format was mainly selected for practical reasons, as it seemed to be better suited for both the time constraints of the researchers and students.

The initial data collection was gathered after the online presentations in April 2013 with two different study unit groups. It became soon evident that a control data collection was needed as the student groups in April 2013 were somewhat different in terms of both their fields of study and the share of gender. This way the impact of other subcultural factors was minimized and the national cultures affecting feedback giving were brought more to the fore.

Two of the sessions were held in April 2013 once during morning and once during afternoon classes between 2 + 2 student groups. Both Finnish April groups consisted of Finnish second year Business Information Technology students studying for their bachelor degree in addition to a few exchange students in both groups, and both Austrian cohorts consisted of third year students taking a Bachelor's degree in Communication and Knowledge Media. The data for the April sessions was compiled into one document. Given the different majors in education, a further session was held with groups that draw on a more similar academic background in December. As such, additional research data could be gathered and cross-compared with the overall findings of all groups that should help to exclude factors such as differences in professional orientation and gender. In the December sessions the Finnish students were again second year students of Business Information Technology (see Table 1) whereas the Austrian ones were first year students taking a degree in Secure Information Systems. To enhance comparability, exchange students were not taken into consideration in the evaluation procedure of the feedback.

#### **3.1 Research objectives**

The purpose of the research was to find out how feedback styles differ between two national culture groups, namely Austria and Finland. The main research questions in this exploratory study are:

1. What are the focus points of feedback of the Finnish and Austrian students?
2. What kind of behavior (process), performance or message content is predominantly foregrounded by the respondents?
3. Are there any cultural differences in giving feedback, specifically in terms of style or core points of the feedback?

Since the key focus of this study is the feedback given after the online student presentations - not the actual process of preparing or delivering the presentations, nor the actual wording or writing style of the written communication, the researchers sought to uncover possible differences both in terms of attentional focus and importance attached to content and delivery mode. Based on extensive teaching experience with multicultural groups and drawing on the vast literature in this research field, both authors assumed that Finnish students might be less reluctant to give detailed feedback and that their responses would be most likely be filled with facts and processes and less oriented towards assessing the performance or the individuals. Austrian students, on the other hand, were expected to express rather direct feedback, both on a positive and negative note, but as such, not shying away from confronting their counterparts with personal criticism and a good deal of deficit-orientation.

#### **3.2 Research data and methodology**

Research data collection was done in two stages. In both cases the stakeholders were Finnish and Austrian UAS students who gave written feedback on each other's online presentations after their performances carried out in class. The student groups had been initially instructed to liaise with a designated peer team in order to get to know each other

beforehand and to find common ground for their presentation topics. The aim was to increase the intercultural contact and to customize the presentations to the interests of the target groups. The compositions of the student groups are shown in detail in Table 1.

Since all Laurea study units included exchange students, the language of instruction was English throughout the course. As to Hagenberg, the April groups were also exclusively taught in English in this class as the course content was communicative English. The December groups, by contrast, were taught in German only and had a one-off experience of communicating in English during the cross-cultural experiment given that the common language for the presentations was English.

**Table 1:** Data collection groups in both universities

	Study field	Study year	Study unit	Student groups	Number of students <sup>1</sup>	Students who gave feedback
<b>Sessions 1 and 2 / April 2013</b>						
Laurea Leppävaara	Bachelor in Business Administration, Business Information Technology	Second year students	A0198 Organizational communication	6 + 6 teams of 3-5 students	Group 1: 18 (16 male; 2 female) Group 2: 16 (all male)	20
UAS Upper Austria, Hagenberg	Bachelor in Communication and Knowledge Media	Third year students	KWM360 Communicative English	5 + 5 teams of 2-4 students	Group 1: 15 (3 male, 12 female) Group 2: 14 (4 male, 10 female)	29
<b>Session 3 / December 2013</b>						
Laurea Leppävaara	Bachelor in Business Administration, Business Information Technology	Second year students	A0198 Organizational communication	6 teams of 4-5 students	22 (14 male; 8 female)	18
UAS Upper Austria, Hagenberg	Bachelor in Secure Information Systems	First year	KPO – Communication, Presentation & Organisation	6 teams of 5-6 students	34 (31 male, 3 female)	31

<sup>1</sup> Student numbers do not include any exchange students

The teachers had organized similar sessions on previous occasions. The process was described in more detail by the first author in her article Internationalization-at-Home Opportunities for ICT Students in Finland and Austria 2013. (see Chydenius, 2013). The data was collected drawing on eight open ended questions for the purposes of evaluating the online presentation sessions as follows:

- Please give a short feedback to your peer team in Hagenberg / Laurea: (avoid generalizations and provide two suggestions for improvement)
- Evaluate shortly your own team's performance
- Describe your preparation activities for the presentations
- How useful did you find the online presentation session?
- What is your opinion about the presentation topics in general?
- How did this experimental setting improve your intercultural skills, if at all?
- What were the main learning outcomes for you from this online presentation session?
- How could this kind of learning model be developed?

The students were asked to fill in the questionnaire within about a week after the presentations and return it digitally. They were also told that their feedback, specifically the one concerning the first question, was to be sent to their peers' attention in the partner university. The research at hand focuses on the responses of the first question only. The students were informed that their responses to this question would be sent to their peer groups.

### 3.3 Analysis of the results

The research material was analyzed by using both quantitative and qualitative criteria following the content analysis process laid out by A. Berger (2011, 205-218). The data was organized in a matrix in accordance to the focus of the feedback (process, performance or presenters, content, technology) and in line with the tone of the feedback (positive, neutral, critical). On the basis of a content analysis the findings were assessed and recurrent patterns identified. The main unit of analysis was one thought entity such as "It was a good dynamic presentation". One sentence may, however, have included two or more entities of thought, for example, "The PowerPoint presentations was good but I think that it would have been nice if you've speaked little more loudly" [sic]. In this case, the first thought entity was categorized under "content / positive" and the second entity of thought under "performance/ critical". Given the complexity of the task and the challenge to identify the relevant forms of feedback along the lines of positive, neutral or critical, the authors tried to interpret the actual meaning of the feedback content by going through the whole questionnaire to find additional support for the interpretation. Also, knowing the students personally may have given hints to the actual meaning. If these means were still insufficient to make a clear assessment, the feedback comment was categorized as neutral. To provide an example: "Technical support harmonized" was interpreted as neutral feedback on technology.

The actual wording of the feedback has not received much importance. As one of the above examples reveals, at times, feedback was communicated in poor grammar and restricted word power. What mattered for the research though was predominantly the meaning behind the words, the thought entity of the feedback. In the following, the feedback is analyzed according to the focus types (process, performance or presenters, content, technology).

#### 3.3.1. *Feedback on Process*

There were some distinct differences concerning the feedback on the process. After both sessions (April and December) the Austrian students turned out to be much more critical. In view of the fact that all student groups faced similar challenges as to contacting each other via a chosen channel like email, Facebook or Skype, it was particularly striking how Austrian students blamed the Finns for not being active enough in interacting with them and discussing the topics (table 2).

One Austrian April group was clearly disappointed by the reluctance of some Finnish groups, as these quotes show: "Guys didn't want to become Facebook friends" or "still none interested in the presentations". Finns, on the other hand, directed their disappointment rather towards their own process activity, uttering statements such as: "could have met at school to practice the presentation".

In December even greater challenges were to be found right from the beginning. At the outset of the experience, here again, students were asked to contact their peer groups. This time, the Finns compiled a contact list (which was handwritten by each student) scanned it and sent it to Austria. Some of the handwritten details, however, turned out to be unclear or illegible, thus presenting a real issue for the Austrians. The Finnish students, on the other hand, were not provided with any contact information as it was believed that one list would be sufficient. As a result, the Austrian students seemed highly frustrated with the slow contacting process as reflected by 17 critical mentions such as: "The communication between the Finns and us could be improved. The Finns were responding very, very slowly" or "Had trouble contacting our peer team, first wrong address, and then answer only when the conference was starting." The Finnish students encountered similar problems (as observed by their instructor) but gave only one critical and general feedback on it: "Communication doesn't work well". The other critical feedback in this focus area was directed again towards their own behavior "- - difficult to find time for testing".



**Table 2:** Feedback on the process

	Laurea April	Hagenberg April	Laurea December	Hagenberg December
Positive	2	6	0	2
Neutral	-	3	0	4
Critical	3	11	2	17

### 3.3.2. Feedback on Performance / Presenters

The feedback concerning the actual performance i.e. the delivery and the presentation behavior of the participants also indicate some pronounced differences in communicating feedback (table 3). While positive comments were relatively varied, yet general by both nationalities (entertaining or natural way of presenting, good way of opening the presentation, not requiring any notes, etc.), there were more differences in the critical performance feedback. The Finns expressed dissatisfaction about more general circumstances like bad voice quality (“Wish you had spoken a bit more loudly), difficult terms or use of time (“Could have been shorter”) while Austrians were rather critical in all sessions, also towards some individual performances where they were even providing some advice such as “Be more active, motivated”, “Take care of body language”; “Try not to read as much from your cheat-sheets.”, “Some ate a chewing gum during the presentation. This was a little bit distracting.” or “One of the Laurea team mates had a mobile phone instead of a file card - that doesn't look good and should be avoided in the future.”

**Table 3:** Feedback on the performance / presenters

	Laurea April	Hagenberg April	Laurea December	Hagenberg December
Positive	7	5	5	5
Neutral	3	2	0	2
Critical	3	18	10	13

### 3.3.3. Feedback on Content

Feedback on content was predominantly positive and concerned similarly the topic and its coverage (“The presentation was really interesting”, “The topic was quite good”) and hence no major differences in feedback focus points became apparent. This may be explained by the fact that topics were previously agreed upon and it would therefore have been odd to criticize them afterwards. (Table 4.)

The only case where critical content feedback exceeded the positive one was provided by one April Austrian group where a number of comments criticized the content of the slides: “Better organization of slides”, “Use more pictures” or “Have less text”. This, in turn, may be due to the major of the course involved, as the April Austrian students were taking a degree in communication and knowledge media and thus paying more attention to the visual communication of the slides.

**Table 4:** Feedback on the content

	Laurea April	Hagenberg April	Laurea December	Hagenberg December
Positive	10	6	8	10
Neutral	0	6	3	1
Critical	2	12	4	5

### 3.3.4. Feedback on Technology

In the light of some technical issues especially with the audio transmission in the April sessions, it is hardly surprising that both Finnish and Austrian students provided some critical comments which also included lightning and direction of the camera (Table 5).

**Table 5:** Feedback on the Technology

	Laurea April	Hagenberg April	Laurea December	Hagenberg December
Positive	0	1	2	0
Neutral	0	3	1	1
Critical	11	6	1	1

### 3.3.5. Giving Feedback

Since feedback giving was part of the course assignment, it is difficult to measure the willingness of giving feedback in either group. What can be said, however, is that the Finnish groups in April were much more reluctant in giving feedback (20 out of 34 students), compared to the Austrian April students who, in unison, submitted their feedbacks. By comparison, in the December sessions 18 out of 22 Finnish students returned the feedback forms compared to the Austrians where 31 out of 34 students returned the assignment.

## 4 DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

In an attempt to explore cross-cultural feedback behavior, the study could identify some distinct differences between the Finnish and Austrian students, especially in regard of focus points and tone. Both Finnish and Austrian groups gave fairly similar positive feedback in quantity and quality. Nor were there any different feedback patterns visible in their neutral comments. What was striking, though were major differences in the critical feedback provided. The Finnish students directed their most critical feedback towards technical issues only while the Austrian students gave abundant and critical feedback on the process activity and presentation performance or presenters.

A further distinctive outcome of this comparative research is that Austrian students were in general more inclined to provide critical feedback than their Finnish counterparts. This might be explained by the fact that they had more reasons to be critical about some Finnish process activities or presentation techniques but might also derive from cultural differences in communicating feedback per se. The only case when Finnish students gave more critical feedback was in April where they criticized technical shortcomings in a number of questionnaires. The results of this exploratory research seem in line with some of the characteristics of Finnish and Austrian communication, as described in more detail in the chapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

Some differences in feedback tone and foci may be explained by the fact that the groups were more heterogenic in April

than in December. Firstly, the Austrian April group included many more girls than the peer Finnish teams and secondly, they majored in a non-technological program. In order to exclude these subcultural factors and to minimize bias an additional data collection was mounted in December.

After evaluation of all data it became apparent that overall fewer Finns returned their feedback than Austrian students (altogether 67 % of Finns returned the feedback forms; compared to the Austrians where 100% of the April group and 91,2 % of the December group submitted the forms). Admittedly, there may be a number of reasons for that, not just cultural ones. They may hint either to the (un)willingness of giving feedback, to the belief in the value of feedback or to the (lack of) willingness to communicate something to the peers. But they may also just depend on time constraints or lack of general motivation. For all Finnish groups, the semester was about to end right after the online sessions and, as such the students may have calculated that the missing return would not affect their grades any more.

For the purposes of comparability, the number of students involved should have been the same in Finland and Austria. We further acknowledge that some students might have been much more active or verbose in their feedbacks than others and, as such, the quantities of the feedback are only giving hints for interpretation and are not directly comparable

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The findings seem in line with the hypotheses that Finnish students remain more general in their feedback and avoid giving personal feedback. This is also backed by findings that Finns tend to be using more independent politeness strategies, being more concerned about saving the face of the other party by not getting too detailed or involved (Scollon and Scollon 2011). It also seems that although typically quite direct and low-context in communication, Finns tend to switch to indirect, high-context communication in interpersonal situations where face-threatening encounters are involved. Also the feedback given by Austrian students was supported by findings of previous studies (Fellman 2001) which claim that Austrians typically are low-context communicators not shying away from detailed and even negative feedback.

Further, the outcome of the study is in accordance with a number of observations made by the authors. The students were striving for a professional presentation style which in Finland is typically even more emotionless and using less body-language than other more informal discourse styles. This lack of visible enthusiasm (which does not mean there was no enthusiasm at all) of some Finnish groups during the preparation process and delivery of the presentation was obviously misinterpreted by some Austrian students. Consequently, during a follow-up session one Finnish group was especially offended by the Austrian peer group feedback which stated that “The presentation team is not very motivated in general, maybe it would be better if only one person is in front of the camera if all of them are not so motivated” while they had, in their own minds, put substantial effort in preparing and delivering the presentation. As a result, this cross-cultural incident provided a valuable opportunity for the students to learn about cultural differences and reflect on interpretations of intercultural communication in general. While the Finnish students thought that these kinds of comments were somewhat offending, the Austrian students most probably just followed their typical low-context communication style, only striving to do their peer students a favor by providing detailed and constructive feedback, which in their cultural pattern seems often packed with a good deal of deficit-orientation.

The lack of non-verbal communication may also have been reinforced by the technical transmission of the presentations which does not transmit all verbal or non-verbal subtleties. It thus means that in technically transmitted intercultural encounters one needs to be even more familiar with possible challenges of intercultural communication and feedback giving than in face-to-face communication.

Further studies on different types of feedback encounters are needed to shed more light on different cultural feedback practices. Given that this avenue of research appears to be only little studied, it can be expected that future research will adopt different cross-cultural lenses to uncover the dynamics of cultural feedback behavior.

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