Video conferencing in Teaching Cross-cultural Competences

Markéta Denksteinová and Stellan Sundh

Abstract: International communication in business requires adequate skills in English. For this purpose, the global community requires a working force who can not only use the English language for reception of information but also for oral and written production. It is thus vital for educational institutions to prepare students efficiently and possibly more than ever, for fast and reliable oral communication with the help of Skype or video conferences. At the same time the curricula of higher education are filled with what the students need in many other respects to be able to succeed in their future career. Studies of language can therefore be challenged by other courses and activities, all necessary to have at hand in a more complex and demanding working environment. Motivation is central in students' learning and therefore it is crucial to create conditions for learning languages that students experience as both relevant and authentic-like.

In 2014 some 120 students at Pardubice University and Uppsala University, Campus Gotland worked together in communication in English by using video conferences. In these video conferencing seminars the students' oral skills were in focus. The Czech and Swedish students were of different faculties/disciplines but mostly in the first or second year of their studies. The purpose was to highlight issues of international business and intercultural communication and in this way develop the students' language competence in authentic communication and interaction between non-native speakers of English. The authors will discuss some e-struments (Moodle, Facebook groups, shared Google docs and presentations, Google drive) used in VC seminars for improving effective language learning and for achieving desired progress in the students' communicative and cros-cultural competences. The instruments discussed are related to raising the students' learner autonomy through video conferencing techniques in the everyday learning-teaching process. The experience of the students also reflects the intercultural challenges seen through the students' different approaches towards both set and selected topics for VC sessions and focuses on the shift from the teacher-centred to a more learner-centred approach. The seminars were evaluated both in terms of questionnaires and with discussions in groups.

Key words: oral communication, English, non-native production, university students, video conferences

Abstrakt: Mezinárodní obchodní komunikace vyžaduje adekvátní dovednosti komunikace v anglickém jazyce. Za tímto účelem vyžaduje globální společnost pracovní sílu, která je nejen schopna používat angličtinu pro přijímání informací, ale také k vlastnímu ústnímu a psanému projevu. Je tedy životní nutností vzdělávacích institucí připravit studenty efektivně a možná více než jindy, na rychlou a spolehlivou komunikaci prostřednictvím Skypu či videokonferencí. Na druhou stranu kurikula vyšších vzdělávacích institucí jsou naplněna dalšími požadavky na studenta pro úspěšné začlenění do pracovního prostředí. Motivace jak pak klíčová pro samotné učení studentů a proto je nezbytné vytvářet takové podmínky pro studium jazyků, které by

navozovaly dojem autentičnosti a byly relevantní studijnímu zaměření v co nejvyšší možné míře.

V roce 2014 pracovalo zhruba 120 studentů Univerzity Uppsala a Univerzity Pardubice na společném projektu prostřednictvím videokonferencí. Videokonferenční semináře se zaměřily především na ústní projev studentů. Jednalo se o švédské a české studenty prvních Google drive), které studenti používali během videokonferenčních seminářů. Diskutované nástroje jsou spojeny se snahou o zvýšení studentovy studijní autonomie v každodenním procesu učení. Tato zkušenost studentům umožnila porovnat interkulturní rozdílnost v přístupu k řešení daných otázek a problémů a pomohla též posunout ohnisko výukového procesu více ke studentovi. Semináře byly hodnoceny závěrečným dotazníkem a diskuzemi v jednotlivých skupinách.

1 Introduction

When Tim Berners-Lee first set out to create the World Wide Web in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he had no real intention of changing the way that the world interacts with information and individuals. His goal was simply to give the multinational scientists that he was working with at CERN, a physics laboratory in Geneva, Switzerland, an opportunity to easily communicate regardless of the types of operating systems and computers that they were using in their home countries. It was not long, however, before he realized that these inventions had the potential to break down the kinds of barriers like geographic borders, time and place, and cultural misunderstandings that have always kept the world separated. As he imagined in a 2005 interview: 'I'd like to see the World Wide Web building links between families in different countries... to allow us to browse people's websites in different languages so you can see how they live in different countries.' (Berners-Lee, 2005). Technology thus gives preconditions for an awareness of, respect for and reconciliation of cultural differences (Trompenaars and Hampden Turner, 1997).

For many tech savvy teachers, using digital tools to give students opportunities to learn with, rather than simply about, the world is slowly becoming a reality. They are pairing students with digital partners or recognized experts in different countries to learn together. While there are a range of products and services available that can make this kind of cross-border learning possible, video conferencing applications are one of the most popular because they usually require just a webcam and internet connection to create a real-time interact between connected classrooms. These opportunities are highly motivating for students of any age.

The work being done with video conferencing in education is as diverse as the teachers who have embraced synchronous learning opportunities as a way to break down the walls of their schools. Thus students of the University of Pardubice in Czech Republic and Uppsala University in Sweden, had the opportunity to explore the world in a one-month-long experimental teaching-learning process using video conferencing technology during their autumn term 2014. The aim of these video conferencing modules was not only to explore the world and cultural identities of

the other nation, but also to cross the limits and borders of the language competence of each individual participating in these modules to get the message across. As Geert Hofstede claims in his book *Exploring Cultures*: "Some say we are living in a global village... but our global village has many disparate quarters." (Hofstede, 2002). In addition to exploring the world and other cultures, the video conference seminars could make the students aware of their own cultural identity in a global perspective. This self-awareness becomes the result of insights into intercultural communication starting as a journey into the foreign culture, in this case Czech or Swedish culture, and ending as a journey into their own culture (Adler 1975; Martin and Nakayama, 2008:16).

2 Participants of the VC modules

Studies of language can be challenged by other courses and activities, all necessary to have at hand in a more complex and demanding working environment. Motivation is central in students' learning and therefore it is crucial to create conditions for learning languages that students experience as both relevant and authentic-like. Virtual international teams in business are becoming more and more common to overcome for instance geographic distances, and this new way of working in international contexts put new demands on the participants (Browaeys and Price 2011: 331). It goes without saying that authentic communication in the most frequently used language for international communication with the help of modern technology is relevant and motivating for students, not only at universities with students who have an international career in mind, but for students in many disciplines and at all levels.

During autumn term 2014 some 120 students at Pardubice University and Uppsala University, Campus Gotland worked together in communication in English by using video conferences. In these video conferencing seminars the students' oral skills were in focus. Written preparations were carried out in teams, both national and mixed, when scripts, power-point presentations or other visual materials were worked out in advance. Czech students were all first or second year Bachelor programme students of three different fields: Business and Administration, Electrical Engineering and Informatics. Swedish students were all first year students of the Bachelor programme of Business Administration at Uppsala University, Campus Gotland.

Even though the study fields were not compatible, it did not cause any obstacle in the videoconferencing module itself. As described above, the main focus was on the student's ability to communicate and be aware of certain cross-cultural issues being part of those modules. Figure 1 and 2, based on the feedback questionnaire responses of 75 out of 120 participating students, show that respondents were balanced not

only by nationalities, but also by gender. Both had a relevant and significant impact on the way communication was processed.
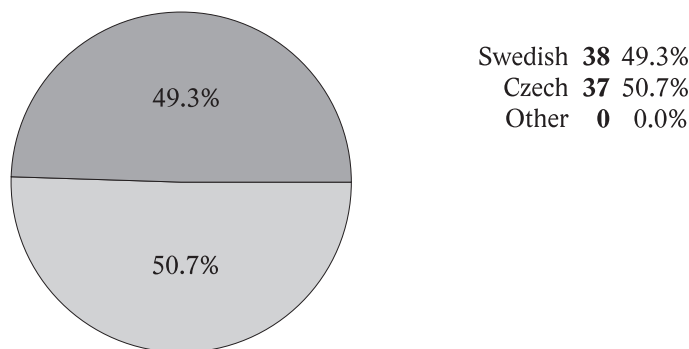

Swedish	**38**	49.3%
Czech	**37**	50.7%
Other	**0**	0.0%

Fig. 1: *National proportion of students answering the questionnaire*

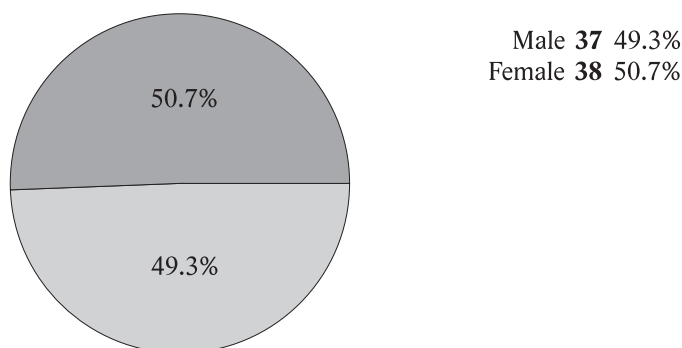| Male	**37**	49.3%
Female	**38**	50.7%

Fig. 2: *Gender proportion of students answering the questionnaire*

The questionnaire does not reflect the proportion of males to females on each side, but even though on the Czech side there were mostly males, the Swedes balanced the proportion of students' gender among the students participating in the video conferences. This aspect would be definitely further monitored and elaborated in the next video conferencing sessions during autumn term 2015, because it plays a significant role in the face to face communication. The Hofstede dimensions were questioned among many others and these dimensions in the Czech and Swedish perspectives can be seen in Figure 3 below:

The figures above show that the masculinity/femininity index is very low in Sweden whereas it is quite high in the Czech Republic, which is to be interpreted that the described masculine values are dominant in the Czech Republic whereas the described feminine values are more frequent in Sweden.
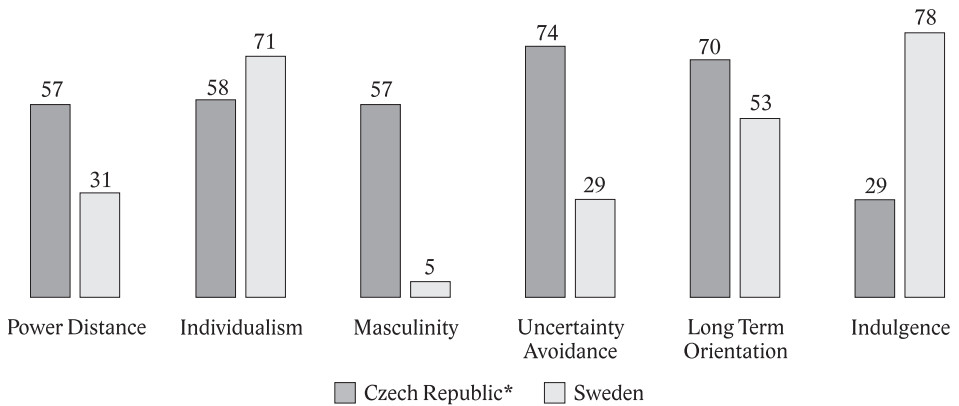
Fig. 3: *Hofstede cultural dimensions comparison*

One of the tasks the students were asked to fulfil within the third VC session was to identify the differences when comparing two critical incidents. These critical incidents were taken from study material (Baltic Sea Regional Cross-Cultural Material Development Project 2010) which was worked out in accordance with ideas of intercultural interactions (Cushner and Brislin, 1986). The first critical incident *Help the Lady* dealt with the idea of being polite as a student in a university context and dealing with such tasks as helping a female lecturer. The discussions immediately led to students sharing expectations and experiences of gentleman behaviour. The outcomes were very surprising for both sides and practically copied the cultural differences of the Hofstede's scale. Where the mostly male Czech group were ready to show their masculinity, the Swedes were rather talking about equality and power of making their own decisions even when asking for help. In this way the students became aware of the issue of gender equality and women's employment, which can be a visible trait of a cultural difference between Swedish and Czech values (cf. for instance, the employment rate of women as a percent of the population aged 15–64 in the year 2000: Sweden: 71 %; the Czech Republic 56.8 % Guirdham 2005: 15). This critical incident also carried the themes of power distance as the woman being helped appeared to be a teacher carrying her stuff. Hence the power distance appeared to be almost the same on both sides. Even the students' experiences of the teachers were not similar. As Hofstede says: "As only a small part of gender role differentiation is biologically determined, the stability of gender role patterns is almost entirely a matter of socialization. Socialization means that both girls and boys learn their place in society, and once they have learnt it, the majority of them want it that way." (Hofstede, 2002: 298)

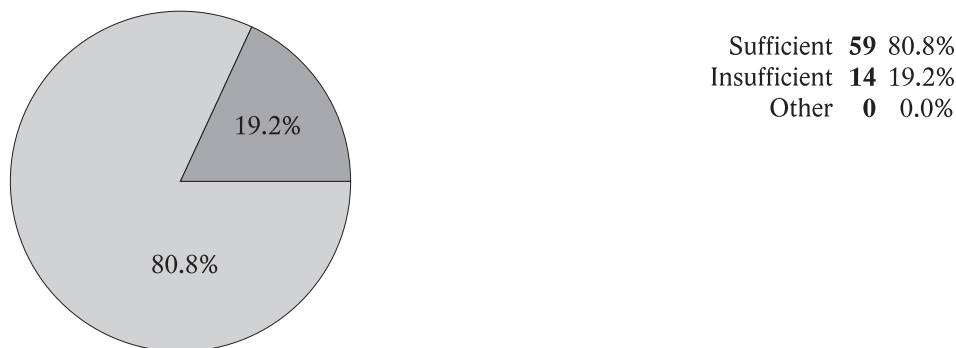| Hofstede Traits of Masculinity/Femininity		
http://foxhugh.com/multicultural/hofsete-index/hofstede-masculinity-femininity-exercise/		
	High Masculine	**Low Masculine (Feminine)**
1) Family and School	1) Traditional family structure 2) Girls cry, boys don't, boys fight, girls don't 3) Failing is a disaster	1) Flexible family structure 2) Both boys and girls cry, neither fight 3) Failing is a minor accident
2) Politics and Economics	1) Economic growth high priority 2) Conflict solved through force	1) Environment protection high priority 2) Conflict solved through negotiation
3) Religion	1) Most important in life 2) Only men can be priests	1) Less important in life 2) Both men and women as priests
4) Social Norms	1) Ego oriented 2) Money and things are important 3) Live in order to work	1) Relationship oriented 2) Quality of life and people are important 3) Work in order to live
5) Work	1) Larger gender wage gap 2) Fewer women in management 3) Preference for higher pay	1) Smaller gender wage gap 2) More women in management 3) Preference for fewer working hours

Fig. 4: *Hofstede Masculinity/Femininity*

3   Cross-cultural competences on their way

La Ray Barna has elaborated on the distinction between observation and interpretation in cross-cultural communication. He claims that there are four areas of practice that constitute potential barriers. First he identifies the barrier in language difference. (Barna, 1992) Language is much more than learning new vocabulary and grammar. It includes cultural competence: knowing what to say and how, when, where, and why to say it. Secondly, Barna identifies the area of nonverbal communication such as gestures, posture and other ways we show what we feel and think without speaking. Our culture has taught us to communicate through unspoken messages that are so automatic that we rarely even think about them. Thirdly, stereotypes are a major barrier of communicating across cultures. We try to fit people into patterns based on our previous experience. We see what we want to or expect to see and we see the characteristics on the basis of there being similarities on one single dimension (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001). These barriers of stereotypes could be both of a negative kind, when two cultures are contrasted on the basis of a single dimension, or of a positive kind when the mistake in terms of a solidarity fallacy leads to the conclusion that there is commonality across many cultural similarities. A fourth barrier is our tendency to evaluate behaviour from the other culture as good or bad and, to make judgement based on our cultural bias.

The last fifth barrier is the high level of stress that typically accompanies intercultural interactions. As Hofstede puts it, there are certain strategies you can apply to overcome these barriers. Ways to decrease the language barrier are: a) learn the language, b) find someone who can speak the language as an interpreter and c) ask for

clarification if you are not sure what someone says (Hofstede, 2002). As English has been used as a lingua franca for the purpose of video conferencing communication, we found that the most important aspect in the communication was to ensure that the speakers on both sides were at about the same level of English according to the CEFR scales. Even though both original ESP courses were on B2 CEFR level, some of the Swedish students appeared to be on a higher level when using and applying English as a main means of communication. This observation is in line with the findings on the rating of NNS accents of English as a Lingua Franca when Swedish and German accents are rated quite high in comparison with other accents (Jenkins, 2007: 163) (The Czech accent is not investigated in this study). Despite the national accents and difficulties with meaning of some stereotypical notions of language, the students were able to express themselves and to get the message across, as was also shown in the feedback questionnaire responses based on the VC modules (see Figure 5.).

My English language competence was _____ for the VC communication:

Sufficient	**59**	80.8%
Insufficient	**14**	19.2%
Other	**0**	0.0%

In the end I found myself during the VC sessions:

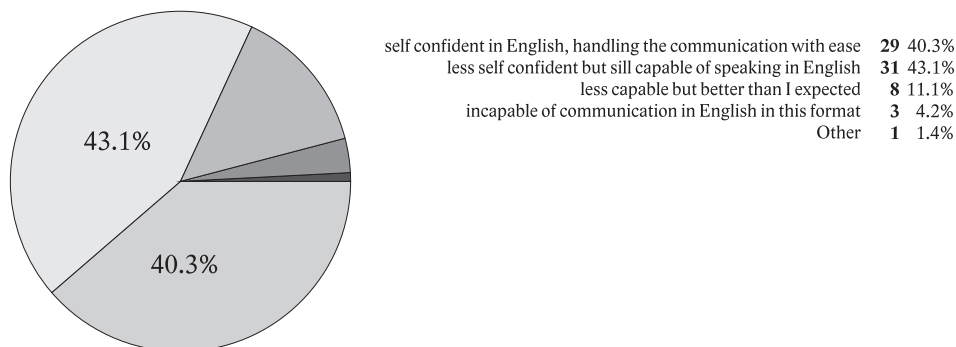|		
self confident in English, handling the communication with ease	**29**	40.3%
less self confident but sill capable of speaking in English	**31**	43.1%
less capable but better than I expected	**8**	11.1%
incapable of communication in English in this format	**3**	4.2%
Other	**1**	1.4%

Fig. 5: *English competence*

Looking at ways to cross the nonverbal communication barrier is not within the scope of our study, so we leave these out and concentrate on the steps overcoming the third barrier. According to Hofstede we should a) make every effort to increase awareness of our own preconceptions and cultural stereotypes that we encounter, b) learn about the other culture, and c) reinterpret their behaviour from their cultural perspective, adapting our own stereotypes to fit our own new experiences (Hofstede, 2002). Evaluation has been called the third stage of how we attribute meaning. Ways to decrease the tendency to evaluate are maintaining appropriate distance, recognizing that you cannot change a culture (or yourself) overnight and not judging someone from another culture until you have first come to know them and their cultural values.

The students were given space for their own cross-cultural investigation within two video conferencing sessions. The students' answers in the feedback questionnaire gave evidence of what had been obvious: namely that the students' awareness of other cultural values increased. Following the concept of the ten strategies for cross--cultural communication (see Figure 6.), the students were shown a totally new perspective.

Fig. 6: *Figure 6. Ten Strategies for Effective Cross-Cultural Communication*

As can be seen in Figure 7 above, the students appreciated the critical incidents and the cross-cultural issues more than the presentations and comparisons of university
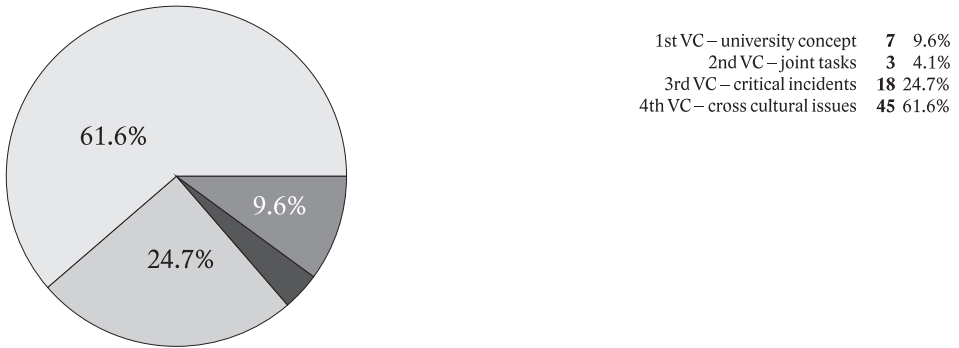
Which VC session did you like the best?

1st VC – university concept	**7**	9.6%
2nd VC – joint tasks	**3**	4.1%
3rd VC – critical incidents	**18**	24.7%
4th VC – cross cultural issues	**45**	61.6%

Fig. 7: *The students' evaluations of the four videoconferencing sessions*

life, business and working life in the two countries. The third and fourth video conferences made it possible to find out cultural differences and discuss them without any student mobility. Since this was the purpose of the video-conferences, it is worth looking more in detail at these actual identified results.

The results of the video conference seminars were both linguistic, with practice of oral proficiency and authentic communication in English, and cultural, with insights and increased awareness of cultural similarities and differences in Europe. The students learnt that some values were shared and recognized in the discussions. One of these issues was, for instance, views on religious matters and habits; no obvious religious activities were described or showed contrast in comparisons between the two countries. Another issue which did not lead to identified differences was the view on and experiences of politicians and political parties in the two countries.

Evidently it is interesting to identify issues that led to learning experiences for the students. The first issue was discussed due to the fact that one of the critical incidents was about the views on friendship and helping a friend in need of help at a formal examination. In this discussion the students clearly identified differences in attitude when the Czech students regarded it as possible and realistic to help a friend by cheating at an exam, whereas the Swedish students saw it as less plausible to act in such a way. In the follow-up discussions of the video-conference seminars, the Swedish students expressed the view that this was a great learning experience. Possible explanations for this cultural difference could be that Swedish schools work to a great extent with learners' own responsibility in their studies, even at an early age, and that the Czech experience of a totalitarian regime could be an explanation for the students' views on and respect for authorities at exams in the school system.

The second issue where differences were identified was immigration, particularly from Romania and Bulgaria (Romani people). From a Scandinavian perspective, immigration was a highly controversial and current topic in 2014 and Swedish students were thus well acquainted with ideas of tolerance, solidarity and multicultural issues from debates in the media. The Czech students showed a slightly different attitude, perhaps due to the geographical location of the country and its neighbours.

The third issue was gender equality, which in various ways and on several occasions turned up as an issue which could be further discussed and national conditions were compared. This is not surprising since the gender issue is and has been widely discussed in Scandinavian countries for many years and these discussions have had an impact on values and beliefs (cf. the Hofstede variable masculinity and femininity above).

Eventually, the fourth issue was the costs of living across European countries. It was inevitable that the students' comparisons of university life, working conditions and everyday life included financial dimensions at a very concrete level. Their awareness that costs of living, prices, social benefits, salaries and taxation are to be regarded and analysed together and in their cultural context is significant in order to prevent simplified pictures of the other culture and stereotypical ideas.

4   Discussion of results

The experiences from the video conference seminars clearly show that communication and interaction in an authentic and international context were beneficial for the students' motivation and understanding of virtual cooperation in working life. As seen in the results of the questionnaire, these video conferences with authentic communication using English as a lingua franca were new experiences for most of the Swedish and Czech students. What needs to be taken into account in this kind of cooperation is the fact that quite a number of business students are focused on an international career and see the grades in the courses as crucial for reaching interesting positions in international commerce and trade. Since their performances were graded, particularly in the Swedish context, it was important for the Swedish students that they were given the opportunity to 'show off' in their oral proficiency, perhaps in another traditional seminar; particularly if they were high achievers and were aiming for a top grade in this English course. Nevertheless, this way of co-operating internationally with video conferences provides opportunities for including more partners form a range of different contexts and in this way thus strengthens the intercultural results of the communication.

Additionally, modern technology makes it possible to develop interaction and communication, for instance at an individual level with Skype conversations, and consequently this makes it possible to prepare the video conference seminars very efficiently. This pair-wise communication in Skype or other ways is then not controlled

or supervised by the lecturers but provides contexts for real interaction in an informal setting in the phase of preparing for a presentation, which is probably a very common activity in the students' future career in international business. A detail which should be highlighted is the fact that video conference seminars demand great organizational skills from all parties involved, since the outline requires many small groups on both sides and the challenge of anticipating students' absences and drop--outs of the course.

5   Conclusion

The results of the video conferences in this project between a Swedish and a Czech university show that cross-cultural competence can be reached without mobility and thanks to ICT. Language competence is of course a key factor and an adequate level of proficiency in, for instance, English, is necessary and the starting point for developing this awareness of cultural differences and similarities. The findings also suggest that the matching of language proficiency between partners is a factor to consider in the preparations. An additional factor is finding effective ways of organizing the students' preparations of their activities in the video conference seminars, possibly individually and for instance with Skype meetings. A further step in this kind of co-operation would be to include more partners, preferably from culturally diverse regions, and to develop ways to make the students aware of the multicultural characteristics of European societies and the fact that students are very similar in various ways: we share many values and assumptions.

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Bionote

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