

# THE TRANSATLANTIC ORIENTATION EXCHANGE PROJECT

## **Annette Gisevius**

Intercultural Learning  
AFS Interkulturelle Begegnungen e.V.  
Annette.Gisevius@afs.org

## **Robin A. Weber**

Manager of Intercultural Education and Quality  
AFS-USA  
Robin.Weber@afs.org

## **ABSTRACT:**

The **Transatlantic Orientation Exchange/Multiplikatoren-schulung im transatlantischen Austausch** is a collaboration between volunteers and staff in both the U.S. and German AFS organizations. The goal of the project is to increase the level of intercultural learning of German and U.S. secondary education exchange participants and their host families. Germany and the US are amongst the largest country groups in mutual exchanges within the network: every year around 450 American families host a student from Germany and around 100 German families welcome somebody from the USA. The project was conceived due in part to a paradigm shift within AFS in which participants and host family members are now viewed as equal partners in the intercultural learning process. The materials presented in this paper were developed in a dialogue process between the work groups in both countries, who met virtually and in person multiple times over the course of the project. This construct allowed for group members to engage in a parallel process of intercultural learning and discovery as they identified and applied to their own experience the concepts that would be useful to host families and participants in their respective countries.

## **Rationale for the Project**

The 2005 Educational Results Study, conducted by Mitchell R. Hammer in cooperation with AFS, identified two areas where AFS should focus its attention to improve the intercultural education value of its programs.

- The majority of the AFS students come through the program minimizing cultural differences and view other cultures mostly through the ways in which those cultures are similar to their own.
- A sizeable number of the participants return home feeling cynical about their own culture and romanticizing the host culture.

As a result of these findings, AFS has identified several key steps for improving the intercultural learning outcomes of the program, one of the most important being to improve the quality of the host family orientation which takes place prior to the arrival of the participant. The attitudes of the host families towards other cultures play an important role in the relationship between the students and the family: Living together in an intercultural setting should mean more than “showing the student the ‘American /German way of life’” – it should include a mutual learning process.

Other studies have shown that host families undergo major changes in their perception of other cultures. After the exchange year they are more able to attribute situations, which they might find strange, to cultural differences than to personal behaviour. Good preparation of host families supports the mutual learning process and is therefore a keystone in the intercultural experience.

For this reason the goal of the project was to:

- Improve host family orientation in order to develop greater intercultural competence among host family members, who in turn will be better equipped to facilitate intercultural learning for participants.

The project resulted in two handbooks for host families and two collections of intercultural exercises that could be used during the in-person host family orientations. At the same time, as a result of their participation in the work groups, volunteers and staff in the two countries underwent an intercultural learning experience similar to that of participants and their host families.

This project was made possible by the generous support of the Transatlantic Program of the Federal Republic of Germany, funded by the European Recovery Program (ERP) of the Federal Ministry of Economy and Technology (BMW).

## **Structure of the Work**

The project took place in 2007-2008. Before both groups started work a comprehensive survey was conducted among host families in the USA and Germany. Families that had hosted in the previous 3 years were asked about cultural differences that they had observed with their German/US-American student and how their perception of their own and their student’s culture had changed as a result of the hosting experience. The main areas of cultural differences identified were: Communication (direct – indirect communication styles, politeness, and taboo subjects), family life (table manners, leisure activities, extracurricular activities) and relationships (student-teacher, parent-child and peer relationships). These topics were chosen for a comprehensive literature and web research.

In March 2007 six volunteers in the USA and six in Germany were selected for the project. In each country one staff person organized the project. In preparation of the first international meeting of both groups, pairs of volunteers were formed in each country to prepare short presentations of cultural differences between the USA and Germany.

The first international meeting (8 days in Germany) consisted of team building activities, presentations on cultural differences, learning styles, recent research on students exchange and other related topics. In intensive discussions, topics were identified that later became part of the handbooks or were included in the intercultural exercises. Accompanied by a constant exchange via a web-based platform, conference calls and emails, both groups worked on the handbooks and prepared their first national meetings at the end of 2007. The second international meeting in the USA was used to fine-tune the texts in both handbooks and to continue developing the exercises. During summer/fall 2008 the first training of trainers took place and several regional and national meetings in each country were used to promote and present the project outcomes. In fall 2008 a second survey was conducted with current host families in both countries that had received the handbooks. At the final meetings in October 2008 the feedback from the host families was integrated in the handbooks, the exercises were finalized and the project was evaluated.

### **The Products – Country-Specific Handbooks**

One difference that influenced the format and contents of the handbook produced in each country was the dominant cognitive style of each culture. In Germany the thought pattern is generally very detail oriented and thorough. Facts and figures and other concrete sources of information are highly regarded, as is an understanding of the historical (or otherwise) context of a given situation. This generally results in a lengthier and tangential discussion or treatment of many topics and their interrelated nature. In contrast, in the USA the dominant thought pattern represents more of a linear process, characterized by speed and efficiency and a greater reliance on experiential learning and a more task-oriented outlook. In terms of problem solving this translates to a dynamic in which the Germans tend to focus more on fully understanding a problem before formulating a solution while the U.S. Americans tend to dwell less on the reasons behind the problem and place more emphasis on finding the solution, in as timely a manner as possible.

As a result of this difference, The U.S. handbook begins with a 17-question quiz designed to pique the interest of the reader and encourage him or her to seek out more information about the topics covered. It was also designed to appeal to the U.S. sense of competition and quest for self awareness. The quiz is followed by a section in which the concepts of culture, generalizations and stereotypes are defined and subsequent sections outline various cultural differences between the USA and Germany, beginning with the topics of *Holidays and Travel* and becoming increasingly complex.

In contrast, the quiz in the beginning of the German handbook consists of only four questions and is directly followed by a section explaining several U.S. values, including but not limited to efficiency, self determination, and patriotism. This is followed by an introduction to intercultural learning and sections on various other cultural differences. The German handbook begins with the most complex background information and ends with the less complex topics – the exact opposite of the structure of the U.S. handbook.

### **In-person Orientation Activities**

The activities created by each country group were similar in their experiential methodology, however, cultural differences were also at play here, in addition to differences due to such practical

matters as group size and cost. "Sense of Space," an activity created by a German group member, compares the population density and of each country and the subsequent impact on each culture by having a representative number of individuals perform a series of simple tasks within a representative amount of space. While very experiential in nature, it was based on a statistical comparison of one aspect of the two countries. Another German activity conveyed the importance of being willing to adapt and change one's perspective and was accomplished through manipulating a form to create a multifaceted object. The key to solving this puzzle was the relationship of the facets to each other. A third German activity with a similar objective included a large word written in color, which when viewed through a different colored lens, revealed a different text altogether.

These activities all achieve their primary goal through highlighting the relationships between objects, ideas or situations. From a logistical standpoint, they all required a substantial amount of materials and preparation, which due to smaller group numbers (2-20 in Germany verses up to about 100 in the USA) and numbers of events (less than 100 in Germany and 200-300 in the USA), were more feasible in Germany than in the USA.

The activities created by U.S. group members required fewer materials, featured role plays or "what would you do" type situations and relied on a willingness of participants to relate the content more directly to their own context and to share their reactions with others. One U.S. activity demonstrated communication styles through role plays involving participants and host family members. A second activity compared ways of dealing with conflict to various animals and asked host family members to identify which animal they felt reflected their style of conflict resolution. A third activity presented brief case studies and asked host parents to discuss how they would handle each one. These activities highlight the relationship of the content to the self and rely on a willingness of host family members to voice their reaction to the content.

The primary difference between the activities in the two countries lies in the relationship to self verses relationship to others. This corresponds with the notion that the U.S. is a highly individualist culture, while Germany is less so. It also conforms with the U.S. quest for self-awareness and willingness to share one's feelings with relative strangers, a further example of which is the U.S. tradition of "small talk." (The origin and existence of small talk in the USA was covered in the handbook for German host parents, as was the German practice of "complaining" in the handbook for U.S. host families. While different in content, both complaining and small talk share a common purpose - to find or express commonality with others.)

### **The Training Plans**

The AFS partner in Germany has a well established cycle of regional and national in-person trainings into which related trainings were easily inserted. At the time of the launch of the materials, the AFS partner in the USA was in a period of transition relative to its volunteer and staff structure. Therefore, while several in-person trainings took place across the country, the U.S. partner relied more heavily on long distance methods of training and distribution such as email, telephonic trainings, and a Wiki site which featured the materials.

### **The Group Process – Parallels in Intercultural Learning**

The two, approximately week-long, international meetings, the first in Germany and the second in the USA, provided group members a living laboratory to observe, experience and discuss the key cultural differences that were identified through the preceding survey to former host families and literature review. These meetings were a crucial element of the success of the project by all accounts and made it special to those involved. This environment in which group members could

witness theory come alive in the form of their interaction with group members from across the Atlantic, and in which regional differences among same country group members became apparent, was the perfect foil for the intercultural learning process. While all members of the group had experience with the other culture ranging from some to a substantial amount, they found that by experiencing it and discussing it at the same time, they reached even greater levels of understanding. This is in keeping with the knowledge that guided intervention is needed to increase intercultural competence.

Group members in both countries identified key cultural difference similar to those identified by host families which included communication style, table manners and food. Group members also identified differences in cognitive style which were not noted by host families.

### **Communication Style**

The primary difference in communication style was each culture's placement on the continuum of direct vs. indirect communication. U.S. group members felt that they were already quite direct in their mode of communication, however, several incidents proved otherwise relative to the very direct, German style of communication. This dynamic was at play when it came to giving and receiving feedback:

*When I received feedback on my draft topics from my German partner, I had to mindfully receive the comments that were very strong and seemingly critical by my U.S. standards.*

U.S. Group Member

*I realized that in Germany we have less awareness of political correctness. And sometimes we really had to "read between the lines" to understand the US-Americans' critiques as they would be too polite to tell us straight ahead.*

German Group Member

Compliments are generally more common in the U.S., as is praise and showing appreciation verbally. A German group member commented:

*I realized how often in a conversation small details were mentioned, always in a very nice way, like: "He has such a nice smile." ... "You have a nice shirt." So after a while I thought that I might be perceived as being cold and not nice because we are not used to make such a lot of small and nice compliments. I enjoyed this a lot but also found it quite exhausting to communicate in such a way.*

German Group Member

This difference was addressed in the handbook for German host families as it is also an area that can be problematic for U.S. students hosted in Germany. They miss the praise and affirmation given to them by their peers, parents and teachers and this lack of praise can make them feel uncared for, and unsure of themselves, as if they might be doing something "wrong."

Also indicative of this difference was the use of the phrase "Would you like..." In an effort to be polite by perceived U.S. standards, the German group leader asked the U.S. group leader if she "would like to do" various tasks during the first international meeting. In the U.S. this phrase is commonly understood as a request, not a true question. As a result, the U.S. group leader felt slightly burdened by fulfilling so many "requests," while the German group leader felt somewhat irritated that the U.S. group leader was saying "Yes" to all of her "questions!" This discrepancy in intent versus impact was discovered during the second international meeting and both groups had a good laugh over the misunderstanding!

## **Table Manners and Food**

There were obvious differences between the USA and Germany regarding the proper way to hold utensils and the placement of hands and arms relative to the table, as well as portion size and the kinds of food eaten at each meal. In addition to these easily identifiable behaviors, group members noticed another, deeper level of difference - dining in the social context.

A German colleague recounts the story of her experience with her U.S. host family whom she visited in Texas after our second international meeting:

*In regard to eating habits I was very astonished on my first evening in the family. As some relatives had also come for a visit, a huge dinner was announced, and our friends made a big effort on cooking a nice meal. But we didn't sit down at the table, everybody just took a plate and food and sat or stood somewhere, eating and talking. I guess in every German family the table(s) would have been set and nicely decorated - that's quite essential for having a nice dinner.*

German Group Member

Conversely, the U.S. group members were pleasantly surprised by the wine and cheese party which took place one evening during the meeting in Germany.

*The table had been set with candles and we sat around it talking, eating, drinking, telling jokes and even singing songs! Everyone was involved in the conversation, not like in the U.S. where people often mingle and stand or sit in clumps.*

U.S. Group Member

## Cognitive Style

*Our German approach to our theme was to gather as much information as we could, put it in a grid to structure it (with our number systems 1.1 and so on) and then to see if and how this information could be helpful to host families, while the US-American's structure had this last aspect as the general headline.*

German Group Member

This dynamic was reflected in the group discussion and work styles, as well as the content of the handbooks as previously described. When separated by country group, the U.S. group would generally finish a task more quickly than the German group and with a lower level of detail. They were very task-oriented and identified goals and objectives as a first step to almost every task, while the German group, while also goal oriented, had some difficulty translating the word “objective” and differentiating between “goals” and “objectives.”

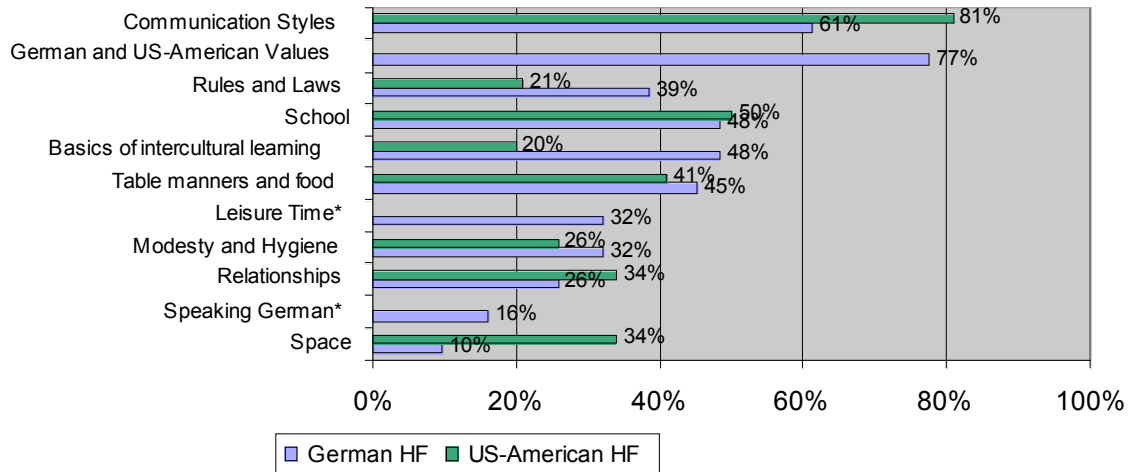
## Evaluation

In fall 2008 host families were asked for feedback - after they had received the handbooks in August and had spent 2-3 months with their students. The feedback focussed on their impression on the usability of the handbooks and the content of the different chapters. In Germany 42% of all families responded to the paper-and-pencil questionnaire, in the USA 27% participated in an online evaluation.

Approximately 90% of host families in both countries had received and read the handbook. The most interesting chapter for families of both cultures was “communication” (82% in the USA and 62% in Germany classified it to be “very interesting”) followed by school (around 50% in both countries) and table manners and food (about 40% in both countries). German families were especially interested in “basics of intercultural learning” (48%), whereas U.S. American families found this less interesting (20%). Very different opinions were also expressed about “space” (35% of the U.S. American families found it very interesting but just 9% of the Germans), and “rules and laws” (interesting for 44% of the Germans but just 21% of the U.S. Americans). The different preferences illustrate well that one’s background has a major influence on what that person considers to be important or interesting.

In general, German families were very positive about all chapters and stated how important they were. The U.S. American families were equally enthusiastic and noted the information on communication style as particularly useful in helping them to understand their participant.

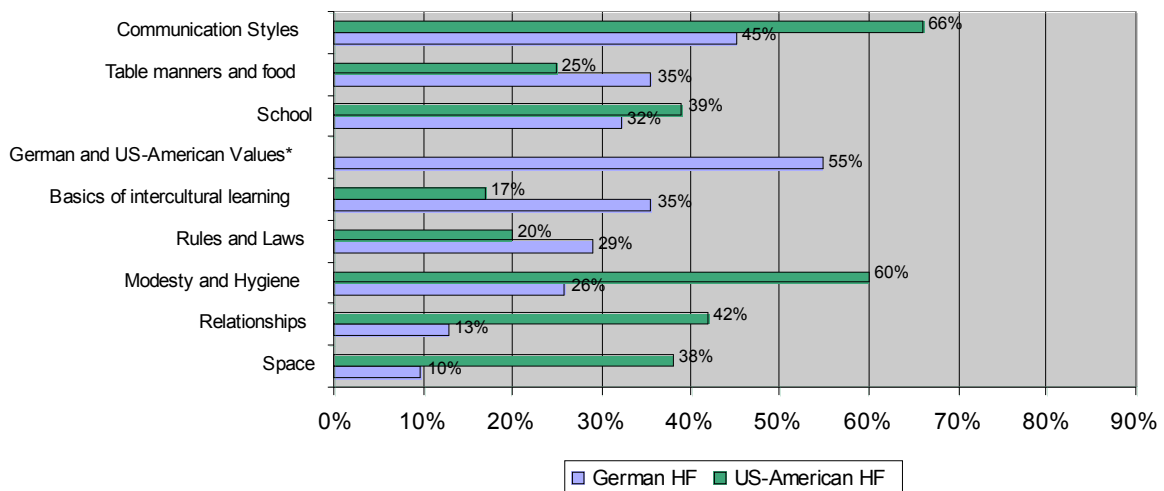
**Fig 1. Most Interesting Topics in the Handbooks**



\*Topic covered in one handbook only.

Asked for “the most helpful topic” the German families chose the same topics. For the U.S. American families it is interesting that other topics receive high recognition: “Modesty and hygiene” (60% found it helpful), and “relationships” (43%).

**Fig. 2 Most Useful Topics in the Handbooks**



\*Topic covered in one handbook only.

Communications styles (direct – indirect communication, small talk patterns, and non-verbal communication) vary a lot between the German and the U.S. culture. The families were also asked about challenges caused by different communication styles. 92% of the U.S. American families and 75% of the Germans stated that the handbook has helped them communicate more effectively with their participant.



The general feedback included two major points: the vast majority of all families found that the handbook was a very useful resource in helping them to adjust to living with and understanding their student. They were also pleased by the quality of the materials. Many families stated that they already knew a lot about the U.S. American or German culture but the tips and background information complemented their knowledge. *“We loved the handbook”* U.S. Host Family. *“It seemed very thorough, (actually a German trait)”* German Host Family.

The feedback of the host families was one way to measure the impact of the materials. The second was to evaluate the support cases and family changes of the students. 450 Germans are hosted in the USA every year. About 10 % change families for personal or cultural reasons. During the first 4 months of the hosting cycle 2008/009 – after the handbook was introduced - the number of cases dropped to 5 %. There were no changes in the conditions and frameworks of the exchanges – therefore the positive drop may be a result of the material. In Germany there were no variances in the number of host family changes during the first 4 months – an overall evaluation at the end of this year will bring a more detailed picture of the impact of the material.

In the USA, greater emphasis was made on a national level to ensure that liaisons to German students and their host families were aware of the handbook and these individuals were encouraged to review and discuss its content with their host families and students. This may account for the difference in host family change rates between the two countries. If this pattern carries through to the end of the program cycle, we will consider this strong evidence of the value of guided intervention in the development of intercultural competence, for both host families and participants.

The surveys and evaluations administered in the U.S. were done via an on-line survey tool, while those done in Germany were administered via paper copies. The rationale for the electronic version in the U.S. was speed, efficiency and lower cost. The rationale for the hard copy versions in Germany was that host families take the paper and pen version more seriously and this seemed a more appropriate method for sharing thoughts on the complex topics at hand. This is further evidence of the difference in cognitive styles between the two cultures.

### **Next steps and Future Projects**

In December, 2008 the project was officially brought to an end in both countries. In 2009 further evaluation will show the impact and suggest possible improvements. Germany will offer several training opportunities for multipliers to spread the material among the volunteers and liaisons. In February 2009 the liaisons will also be asked for their feedback and their experiences with the families using the handbooks. The USA will survey the participant/family liaisons, as well as host families, in the spring of 2009 and promote the materials primarily via distance learning methods. At the end of the 2008-2009 program cycle both countries will review such data as host family change rates, early return rates, and the nature and number of instances of support cases involving challenges related to cultural adjustment and integration into the host family. The development of country-specific material for host families of students from other cultures is envisioned – provided that funding can be secured.

### **References**

ALTHEN, G. (2002) *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States*; Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

ASITIMBAY, D. (2005) *What's Up America? – A Foreigner's Guide to Understanding Americans*; San Diego; Culture Link Press.

DENSLOW, L., TINKHAM, M., WILLER, P. (2004) *U.S. Culture Series: Introduction to American Life*; New York: NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

KIM, E. (2001) *The Yin and Yang of American Culture: A Paradox*; Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

HALL, E. (1990) *Understanding Cultural Differences, Germans, French, and Americans*; Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

NEES, G. (1999) *Germany: Unraveling an Enigma*; Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

SCHROLL-MACHL, S. (2003) *Doing Business with Germans, Their Perception, Our Perception*; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG.

STERN, S. (2000) *These Strange German Ways – and the Whys of the Ways*; Berlin: Atlantik-Brücke e.V.

<http://langlab.uta.edu/german/personal/rings/rings/amgertalk.htm>

## **Biography**

### **Annette Gisevius**

Is the expert on intercultural learning at AFS Germany. She is responsible for developing trainings and materials for students, host families and volunteers on intercultural topics. She also coordinates the research projects of AFS Germany that deal with the impact of study abroad.

### **Robin A. Weber**

Is the Manager of Intercultural Education and Quality for AFS-USA. She is responsible for developing orientation materials and activities for inbound and outbound participants, their host and natural families, and intercultural learning materials for AFS-USA staff and volunteers. She also oversees the customer service evaluation process at AFS-USA.

