



Becoming a Cultural Detective on a High School Exchange Program

By Carolyn Rehn
Senior Organizational Development and Learning Specialist
AFS-USA Intercultural Programs

How does an independently-minded host family in Michigan with children who are used to making their own decisions, including going out on their own, adapt to living with a host daughter from Egypt whose parents are not only protective, but insist upon devotion to family-oriented activities?

What happens when the Egyptian daughter feels neglected and unloved based upon her interpretation of her American host parent's behavior? How does the American family communicate to their hosted daughter that allowing freedom is how they empower their children and is also how they demonstrate parental love? How can this host family identify the distinct cultural values that often create misunderstandings and instead resolve potential conflicts and learn to accommodate their unique perspectives?

These are questions that face AFS-USA staff and volunteers on an almost daily basis in the process of providing support to 2500 high school exchange students from over 50 countries who arrive each year to live with U.S. host families. One of the resources we discovered and have used in last three years is *Cultural Detective*[®], a series of tools that develop intercultural competence in organizations and businesses.

After piloting the materials, AFS-USA entered a limited license agreement with Nipporica Associates for usage of the *Cultural Detective* (CD) materials. This license enabled AFS to begin to integrate the CD materials and methodology into its intercultural learning and training. This has allowed the organization to provide valuable, new knowledge and insight to both volunteers and staff. They, in turn, share this information with host families and students at required orientations.

Cultural Detective is a wonderful new resource that we use to help us bring to light and deal with the differences and adjustment issues that happen in a cross-cultural exchange. Using materials most effectively required that we adapt them to our audience of adolescent-aged participants and their host families. As we

tailored case studies to fit our needs, we targeted common issues that exchange students face in adapting to family life in a new country and a new culture.

In the beginning of this article, we referenced a case study that focused on the clash between a busy American host family who values independence and individualism, and an Egyptian exchange student's expectations of parental supervision, direction, permission and involvement in day-to-day activities. This study, along with others we developed, are based upon the organization's 60 years of real life experiences in supporting high school exchange students and host families, By using case studies in experiential trainings delivered to our adult volunteers and staff and with the CD methodology, we were better able to compare and contrast different cultural values and explore ways to widen communication channels between host families and hosted students, especially when value differences were creating significant misunderstandings and tension.

We also piloted an application with a group of outbound students who were preparing to depart on a summer program to Ghana. Again, materials were adapted to our specific needs. Teen-oriented "value strips" were created; students then used them to discuss what the positive aspects of the values were, as well as the possible negative perceptions that might be experienced by another culture. As students read and discussed a case study that focused on the Ghanaian value of respect for elders and hierarchy, they could better understand the importance of paying respect to elders. A small change such as greeting elders first upon arrival was significant to students understanding a new host family's culture and making changes in their behaviors to better adapt. Without learning about this country-specific cultural value, U.S. students who are used to the American egalitarian way of communicating may have offended their hosts without realizing it.

In closing, the students were asked to create skits which helped scenarios come alive, provoked dialogue and discussion and deepened the experience beyond that which would have been accomplished by a straightforward problem-solving activity. For example we had students act out a misunderstanding around free time and family obligation that happened between two American and Ghanaian friends. After feedback from the group and looking at the values lenses, the students acted out an alternative scenario. The result was a positive and creative resolution that bridged value differences.

AFS has also used the *Cultural Detective* materials with our State Department funded Youth Exchange and Study Programs (YES). This program specifically



focuses on youth exchanges with countries with a significant Muslim population. Many of our YES student participants are Muslim and come from countries in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Every year, AFS coordinates a State Department funded international conference that involves a number of exchange organizations' partner country representatives, their staff and volunteers who work with YES students and their host families. Partners do presentations during the conference to inform and educate participants about their respective countries. This year, we asked Partner representatives to prepare a presentation exploring one of the values from the CD value lens for their country. The presentations deepened the participants' understanding of the cultural norms and behaviors in ways that were both informative and entertaining.

Another example of how AFS has used the *Cultural Detective* materials in these international conferences was to better train participants in how to build bridges across complex cultural differences using the values wheels. We developed a "critical incident" that was based on real life examples of how students with disabilities, their host families, and their schools deal with specific challenges, and are able to maximize the positive aspects of the exchange experience.

One case study was built around the story of a deaf student from Malaysia placed in an American family whose host father worked in deaf education. The participant group being trained were each given the values lenses for Malaysia, USA, and Deaf Culture. The group processing the case study included Malaysians, Americans, and several deaf representatives from both cultures. The discussion was not only fascinating but led to some specific actions to create better preparation and follow-up for students and families in both countries.

Our goal in the intercultural programming at AFS USA is to integrate the CD materials more thoroughly into our orientations and trainings with staff and volunteers. We plan to create additional case studies that are based upon the real life experiences of students and host families. We hope that the *Cultural Detective* authors will create a package for all of the countries in the AFS Network in which we host or send to which would enable us to make more culture-specific information available to participants and their host families. This will give them a head start to building new bridges of cross-cultural understanding and could be built into our orientations more thoroughly.

Overall, we have found *Cultural Detective* to be an important addition to our intercultural learning toolbox. The materials are accessible and relevant to our



particular issues in international exchange and intercultural learning. Our primary challenges have been in adapting the business-oriented case studies to reflect youth development and family and school life, and finding the time and resources to put the materials to broader use throughout our organization. Based on the positive feedback received from volunteers, staff and program participants, we hope to be able to invest more in developing and expanding the use of *Cultural Detective* materials within the AFS network, both here and abroad.