

# “Germans don’t smile at us”

## A short look at an intercultural training program for American students in Germany

by Patrick Schmidt

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“In one sentence, give me your first impression of Germany,” I asked my American students on the opening day of class. The most popular answer was surprising in its simplicity: “Germans don’t smile at us when we smile at them.” Thus was the tone set for the three-month course I taught for four years in Köln, in collaboration with AHA International and the University of Oregon.

I like to describe newly-arrived American students as good-hearted, with a sunny-boy eagerness to learn everything about their new surroundings. Yet, as with all students abroad, underneath the optimistic veneer is an ethnocentric mind-set. In addition to being relatively clueless to German ways, they rarely question their own cultural assumptions.

To borrow an image from a fairy tale, they’re like babes in the woods, sticking close together for fear of the big bad wolf and hoping they’ll somehow stumble back to civilization. But it’s exactly this condition that provides an intercultural facilitator the opportunity to thrive.

So, how does one design a program to transform impressionable young adults into cross-cultural navigators? Or, as the course objectives state, to “bring the students to a higher level of understanding of the host culture, their own culture and themselves.”

After a short introduction, I break the ice with an exercise from Robert Kohls’ book *Developing Intercultural Awareness*. A form has to be filled out from right to left, nothing more than that, but it shocks the students into awareness of how fundamentally different cultures can be, triggering disorientation and frustration. Further, it demonstrates that even the most mindless of tasks is culturally conditioned.

Going from the strange to what should be--but isn’t--familiar, the next bump in the road is *Body Ritual among the Nacirema*, a pseudo-anthropological essay by Horace Miner. The author uses complicated academic jargon to describe a supposedly exotic tribe on the North American continent. In fact, it’s a through-the-looking-glass portrait of suburban America (and the name of the tribe is a mirror image as well). Time and time again, I’m amazed that only about a third of the class gets it; the others go on at length about how they’re happy not to live in such an “oppressive” culture.

Right about now, the students’ self-esteem is hitting a new low so it’s the perfect time to introduce the concept of “culture shock”. Although they claim to know the term, very few of them actually understand it. I spend a considerable amount of time explaining the different stages of the phenomenon and how a lack of familiar cues leads to a loss of sense of self.

On the other hand, personal evolution takes place through a series of slow but sure “adjustment phases”. It’s important to spell this out at the beginning because, otherwise, students are often confused about what’s happening around them. Unconscious anxiety may lead them to withdraw into an extreme and irrational defensive mode, something I learned with my first group.

They’d been in Köln for about four weeks when I was asked to give them a look at a different city, nearby Dusseldorf. At the end of our visit, I took them to the oldest restaurant in town so they could try the local beer and have a snack. To my surprise, they were hesitant about ordering food. They waited until I asked for potato soup with sausage, then they all asked for the same thing.

It took me a while to figure out what was going on but, as usual, it was childishly simple behavior. Because dogs are allowed in German restaurants, the students (in their depressed stage of culture shock) had collectively developed the phobia that German food wasn't hygienic. I learned that they'd been eating most of their meals at McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Burger King and Subway! Ever since then, I've made a point of explaining culture shock at the very beginning of the course.

Probably the best feedback I get from my students is the *DIE* (description/interpretation/evaluation) method they use to write a journal analyzing 25 cross-cultural experiences. The process of distinguishing what they perceive, making sense of it, then giving their opinion on it is a powerful tool for self-discovery. With practice, students can move from self-awareness to awareness of "the other", questioning their own ethnocentric perceptions and gradually becoming aware of cultural and personal relativity.

One stunning admission came from an extremely intelligent young woman who talked about early encounters with her host family. On the first evening, she was uncomfortable when the family spent over an hour at the dinner table, doing more talking than eating. On the second evening she quickly finished her meal and excused herself, returning to her room to "do something useful" and "not waste time." What she ended up doing, however, was watch MTV by herself. When she realized she unconsciously put television on a higher level than being with people, it came as a shock. Or, as she put it, "a mind-blowing revelation".

I used her story as the basis for a discussion on American individualism and the idea that "time is money" as opposed to German collectivism and "*Unterhalten*" (discussing things in a cozy setting). These traits form a conceptual framework which helped students comprehend the basic lifestyle they faced in Köln.

"Culture" itself presents an interesting challenge. American emphasis on being unique, on self-realization, leads many students to say "I'm my own person." They imply that culture doesn't play much of a role in their behavior--a ludicrous notion, albeit a popular one. Americans do share attitudes and beliefs, obviously, but most of my students haven't ever given much thought to their common values. And the next assignment is designed to bring that point home...

"Tonight, at supper, ask your host family if the United States has culture." Of course the answer often comes as a total surprise. Germans (and Europeans, for that matter) may well say, "No, you don't have what we think of as culture. Our nation has far more history than yours, which makes us more mature, more refined. You're like undisciplined teenagers, full of energy, but inexperienced and sometimes dangerously naïve."

As the weeks pass, we look at other concepts of intercultural communication, such as Hofstede and Hall's theoretical frameworks and non-verbal signals, as well as Milton Bennett's *Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity*. There are also open-book quizzes to make sure concepts are understood. Finally, my students analyze four case studies and have some fun playing exaggerated American and German roles.

By the end of term, a noticeable transformation can be seen. Students are astonished to find that, almost without being aware of it, they've moved from an ethnocentric outlook to a more nuanced and open approach. They're comfortable with the relativity of values and customs. Best of all, they have the vocabulary to articulate this new sensitivity.

Perhaps the best proof of the subtle change in outlook came during a farewell dinner. A popular language teacher made a speech encouraging them to continue learning German and ended on a somewhat ironic note. "As you now know, we Germans can and do smile."

My students' faces lit up with the glow of intercultural maturity.

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