

THE AFS LEARNING APPROACH FOR HOST FAMILIES



LEARNING AS A JOURNEY OF CHANGE

AFS believes that intercultural challenges and learning moments are inevitable parts of our everyday lives. Our Host Family Intercultural Learning Journey prepares you and your family members to engage effectively across cultural and other differences, both at home with the host student and in the world at large. Through our programmes and other offerings, we help family members:

- Learn first-hand about the impact of culture on values and the decisions that they make.
- Gain the ability to better see yourselves through the eyes of others.
- Challenge assumptions.
- Broaden your views on cultural stereotypes and global issues.
- Begin to understand how to shift perspectives effectively, appropriately and authentically.

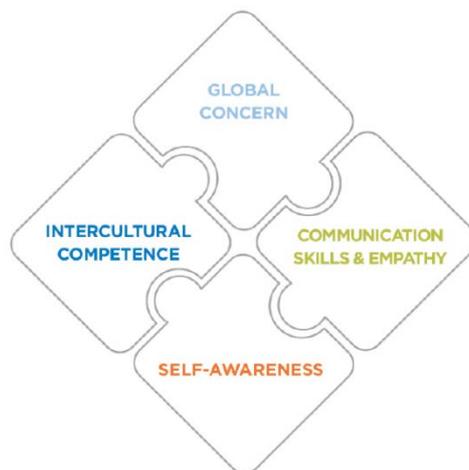
This Learning Journey has evolved out of AFS's commitment to make the best use of our experience, research and best practices in the area of intercultural development gained since the AFS Exchange Programme was launched in 1946.

OUR APPROACH

Host families play a double role in AFS programmes – you are both learners and co-facilitators of intercultural learning for hosted AFS students. However, no matter how important the immersion experience is, simply hosting a student is not enough to develop the practical and highly coveted intercultural skills and understanding needed to become active global citizens and support your hosted student's integration and learning experience.

That's why we provide support, encouragement and skills training to make your experiences meaningful intercultural learning opportunities – for you, your family, and the students that you host.

AFS LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR HOST FAMILIES



We have four main objectives that relate to your learning as a host of an exchange student:

Self-Awareness

- To better understand yourselves as individuals, as a family and the influence of your own cultural background(s).
- To become more aware of the influence of cultural backgrounds on perception, behaviour, values and attitudes.
- To accept and appreciate the changes that your family experience when hosting a student, and to view such changes as learning opportunities.

Communication Skills and Empathy

- To learn how to become thoughtful active listeners and respond with respect for the other person.
- To be aware, able to recognise and interpret non-verbal communication signals.
- To listen, be mindful of the needs of other people, and consider different perspectives when approaching problems and everyday situations.
- To develop a deeper concern for and sensitivity to others.
- To expand the capacity and willingness of all family members to perceive and respond to the values, feelings, and realities of others.

Intercultural Competence

- To appreciate diversity and to engage, display respect for and accept people with diverse backgrounds, attitudes, opinions, lifestyles and values.
- To overcome ethnocentric worldviews when interacting with new people, social situations and cultural norms.
- To develop strategies for coping with cultural differences.
- To understand that strong and lasting relationships, friendships and family bonds are strengthened when all individuals embrace cultural differences, as well as similarities.

Global Concern

- To become interested and concerned about global affairs, and aware of the impact that our choices have on other people.
- To become a volunteer committed to making positive change in local, national and/or global communities.

The first stage of becoming interculturally competent is understanding what culture is. This will be addressed at various times during different interactions with AFS. Today, we will provide an introduction and an opportunity to start thinking about culture in a structured way.

MAKING CULTURE TANGIBLE

One would think that everyone knows what the word "culture" means. It's a word that is used in everyday conversation and we don't wonder much about its meaning. But what if you have to explain to someone what culture means? It's not that easy...

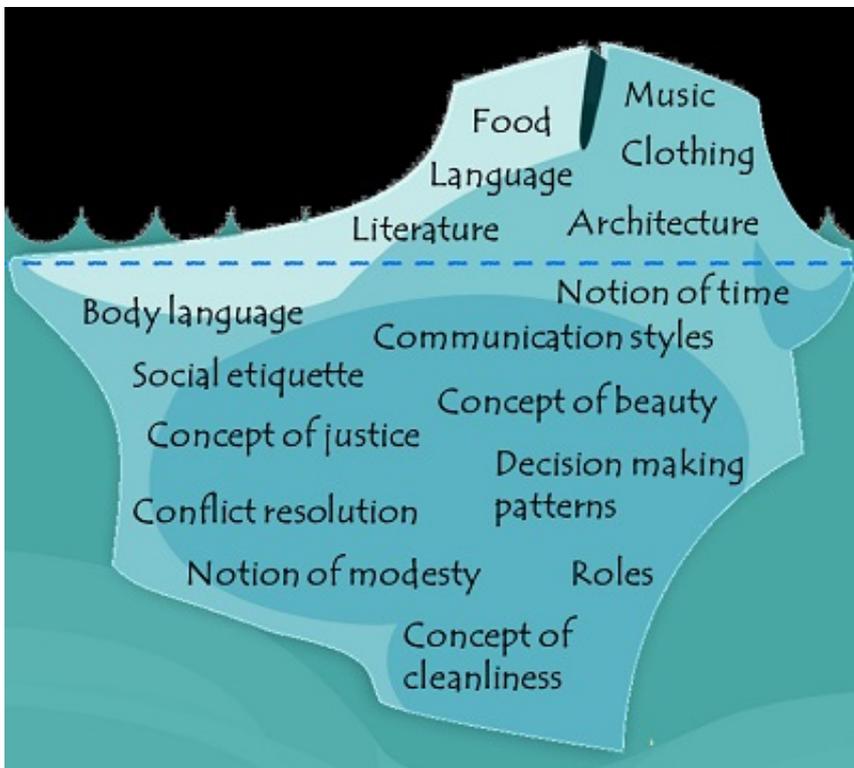
Think about various definitions, what works best for you? Perhaps write down a few points that summarise what culture is – remember, there are no wrong answers.

Culture can be said to have two main characteristics:

The first is that culture is **learned**, that is why people have different cultures even though we are all human beings. Not everyone within a culture will be the same, but there will be learned tendencies or patterns of a group that are transferred from one generation to the next; they can also adapt slowly over time.

The second is that culture is **shared**, there are no cultures that contain just one person. The shared characteristics of a culture relate to the values, behaviours, beliefs, attitudes, etc. of a group. Culture allows people within the group to know what to do and what to expect from others. **Different cultures are not right or wrong – they are just different!**

There are different metaphors for culture; getting to know them will help in understanding what culture is all about and lay the groundwork for the rest of what you will learn.



One way of looking at culture is to think of it as an iceberg. The elements may be visible (above the water) which includes behaviours that can be observed, or they may be invisible (below the water) which includes deeper values and beliefs – which may be more difficult to observe or identify.

Also, the visible elements only really begin to make sense when looked at in the context of the invisible elements. This can make it difficult to understand the **intention** behind an action.

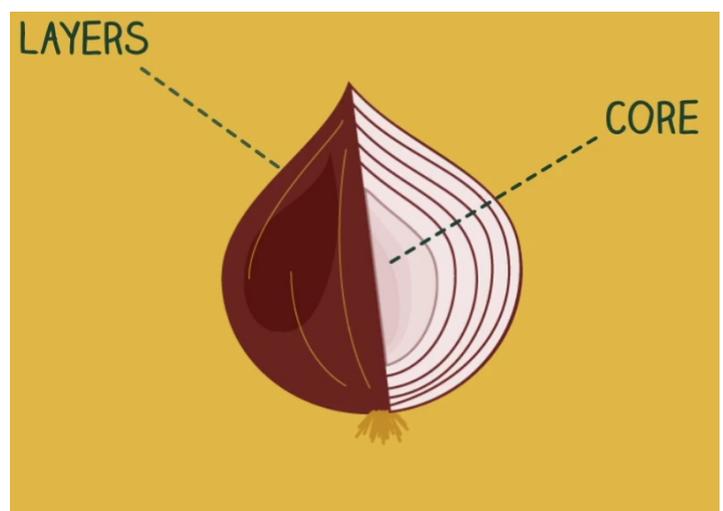
It is the invisible elements that are the most difficult to learn about – but the key to a deeper understanding of a culture.

Another way of looking at culture is the onion; an onion has many different layers before you reach the core.

This relates to how you learn about a culture. The outer layers are what you see first (how people dress, what food they eat etc.) but in order to understand the outer layers, you need to know about the core as well – where you find the values and beliefs.

The difference with this metaphor is that a culture can have many layers (rather than just above the surface or below the surface).

Interacting with the onion may be tough and could make us want to cry!





Finally, there is the tree, which has the visible (the trunk, the branches and the leaves) and the invisible (the roots).

It is the roots of the culture (the values and beliefs) that affect what the branches and leaves will look like.

The tree reminds us that culture is a living and evolving thing – it changes over time (especially the visible parts).

Try to remember these metaphors during your intercultural experience hosting a student. When you are confronted by a different cultural context, try to notice the visible things (or artefacts); but understand that some of these artefacts won't make sense until you get to know the base of the iceberg, the core of the onion, or the roots of the tree.

Remember that a metaphor is just that, a metaphor, it helps us understand a complex issue but don't fall into the trap of reducing everything to what can be explained by the iceberg, the onion, or the tree.

Try applying these metaphors to your own culture. What might be some of the invisible components of your culture? What might be some of the visible components of your culture? This may be difficult to answer, as culture often relates to issues that we take for granted and may not be aware of.

How can knowing these metaphors be beneficial in an intercultural context? Sometimes, it is useful being able to take a step back and think about what values and beliefs lie behind what you are experiencing – it may help you to address the issue. Withholding judgement and seeking to understand are skills that we will be coming back to as you progress in your journey.

We hope that you have enjoyed this first taste of AFS's approach to intercultural learning, and look forward to having more in-depth discussions on this topic when we meet!