

# Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters



## Module 2

### Activity 3: Stories of encounter

#### A new American member of staff at a French High School

Mayken is the American assistant for the academic year in our high school in France. She arrived in France early October 2009, coming over from the US (Oregon). I was introduced to her in the staff room where I was having a coffee, at break, and I was supposed to show her around. I offered her a coffee, a nice cup of coffee would always warm up the atmosphere if that was necessary. This was a good idea because from then onwards, we got used to having a coffee together every time we met.

What surprised me is the way she behaved, the way she talked to me and all the questions she asked, as if everything was obvious and simple. Mayken was feeling at ease, and wanted to settle everything as soon as possible. She was eager to find a flat to share with other students, right in town. Mayken wanted to live in the city centre and walk to work. She wanted to be totally independent and free to do what she wanted.

As usual my colleagues were quite formal in their behaviour, whereas Mayken was just natural, friendly, happy to be with us, but didn't want any help as far as accommodation was concerned. My colleagues and I were surprised to meet such a happy young girl who behaved in a very casual and friendly way. We were not used to it. We had the impression we were not at work. This was something completely new. Usually students coming overseas looked lost and asked for help. They liked to be looked after, not this time at all. Over the year Mayken and colleagues communicated with smiles, invitations were given for an evening meal at different homes. I invited Mayken and some close friends and colleagues to celebrate thanksgiving - a tradition for Americans which Mayken would have missed this year because she was not at home. I wanted her to feel at home with us.

I was right to behave the way the person in front of me wanted me to be. I just sympathized very quickly, just by reacting in much the same way as the person I was introduced to. The point is to adapt oneself to the situation and the best way is to feel empathy and just give what is expected from you. I spoke in a very colloquial way, which was unusual in such a situation and in such a place. Not only did I change my language, but I also changed my behaviour and later on my way of thinking. It taught me something: to be as simple as you can in any situation. Be true and things will go on smoothly.