

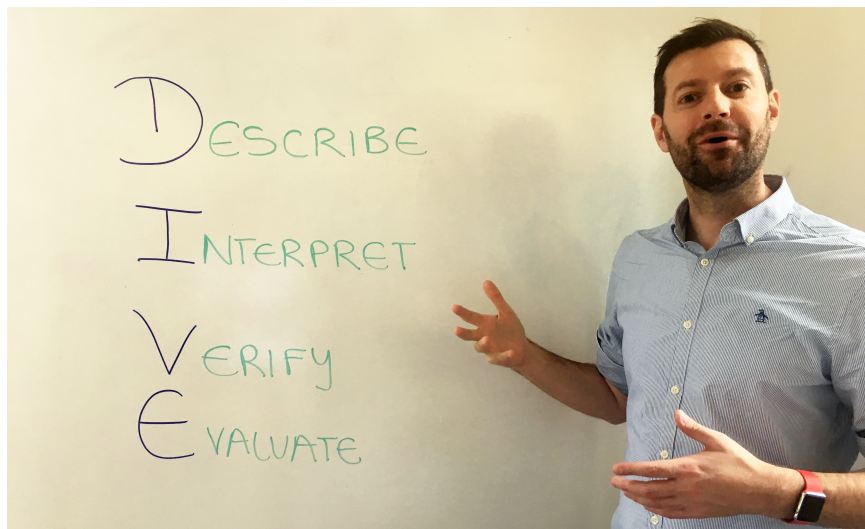
Tools to Suspend Judgment

Have you ever found yourself in a new cultural setting thinking, “This situation feels strange,” or “I’m not sure how to read what’s going on right now?” The **Description, Interpretation, Verification, Evaluation** (D.I.V.E.) or **Observation, Description, Interpretation, Suspension of Evaluation** (O.D.I.S) models are practical tools we can use when confronted with unfamiliar intercultural situations or in any other unclear or ambiguous circumstances. These models can help us **shift our frame of reference, foster curiosity, suspend judgment, and possibly respond more effectively and appropriately during an intercultural interaction.** Within AFS, the D.I.V.E. tool is especially useful to support our exchange students and host families to cope with intercultural interactions that may involve a misunderstanding, miscommunication, and/or confusion.

DESCRIPTION, INTERPRETATION, VERIFICATION, EVALUATION (D.I.V.E.) MODEL

ORIGINS

Janet Bennett, executive director of the Intercultural Communication Institute, and Milton Bennett, founding director of the Intercultural Development Research Institute created the **Description, Interpretation, and Evaluation** (D.I.E.) model in the 1970s while working in a group of intercultural workshop facilitators at the University of Minnesota. Their goal was to teach participants how to suspend judgment while interacting across cultures. Since then, the D.I.E. model has become one of the most widely used intercultural exercises worldwide.



AFS has adapted the D.I.E. model by adding a fourth step: “V” for “Verification”. In ambiguous situations that our students, host families or volunteers can encounter, it is helpful to verify one’s own point of view with someone who knows the culture better. We call these people, **cultural informants.** *Verification* allows us to assess the accuracy of our interpretations before we evaluate.

THE FOUR STEPS OF D.I.V.E.

The D.I.V.E. model has four steps and there are key questions that need to be answered in each step. To practice using this model, you can start by selecting any ambiguous image, critical incident (a misunderstanding or dispute that highlights different cultural assumptions and values), video or object.

Step 1 – Description. With this first step, the goal is to describe the image, critical incident, video or object through observable facts, focusing on the behavior of people involved and the material environment in which their behavior takes place. The key questions for the **Description** include:

- What do I see?
- What are the elements that I can observe in this situation?

Describe what you see in concrete terms and try to be as objective as possible, sticking to only observable facts.

For example, let's look at the sample critical incident in the green box. For this step the support volunteer can get the student to describe exactly what happened. The host student might then say something like, "I came home from school at 2:30 p.m., the lock on my diary was broken and the diary was open, I asked my host mother what happened and she said she had opened it." In reality, the student might need some more guidance to respond by just describing the facts and not jumping to conclusions.

An exchange student calls her support volunteer and says that she wants to change host families because, according to the student, her host family invaded her privacy and she thinks that this is offensive and unacceptable behavior.

Step 2 – Interpretation. Here, the goal is to focus on the various interpretations or explanations as to what might be going on in the situation. Now you are moving from objective descriptions to subjective interpretations. The key questions are:

- What do I think is going on?
- What are some interpretations as to what is happening?
- What are my assumptions about what I described?

Try to find at least three possible interpretations that might explain what is happening. This helps you learn to shift perspectives and develop intercultural competence.

Returning to the sample critical incident, in this step the support volunteer could ask the student why she thinks her host mother did that. Perhaps the student's first response might be something like, "Because she's snoopy!" This, after all, might be the natural response. The support volunteer could then encourage the student to think of different interpretations beyond her first reactions. Perhaps the host mom was just curious about her life, or maybe

she broke it by accident while she was cleaning? Or maybe the most mom was worried about her, thought that she is at risk and wanted to make sure that all was fine? Getting the student to think about multiple interpretations will help her shift her frame of reference and suspend judgment.



AFS volunteers and staff working through the steps of D.I.V.E. during an intercultural training workshop

Step 3 – Verification. Now is the time to verify with a cultural informant, someone who is from that culture, or someone who might understand the situation better. A cultural informant might be able to provide trustworthy information or more context as to what is happening. AFS volunteers or staff members, especially in the area of participant support, are often the cultural informants for the AFS students, sending or hosting families.

It is important to remember that sometimes we cannot verify with an actual person (or even verify at all) because we simply do not have access to the right people or resources. Also, the informant we do have access to might, in fact, give us wrong information! (We *are* all human, after all.) So be prepared that your cultural informant might not know why something is happening or even if they think they know, they still might be wrong.

In the sample critical incident, the host student could verify with her host siblings, classmates, AFS support volunteer, etc. to see if what the mother did was “typical” behavior in that culture. For the sake of example, let’s say she verifies with her host sister and she says that her mom does stuff like that because she is a curious and caring person.

Step 4 - Evaluation. The fourth and last step of this model is to evaluate the interpretations: decide whether or not each interpretation is good (positive) or bad (negative), acceptable or unacceptable. The key question here is:

- *What do I feel (positive or negative) about what I think is going on?*

It's important to connect the evaluation to the interpretation and to come up with both a positive and negative evaluation. The more we force ourselves to think of both the positive and negative side of our interpretations, the more we practice shifting perspectives, or cultural lenses, and the easier it is to suspend judgment.

Returning to the example, the host student could tell the support volunteer why the host mother's behavior might be a good or bad thing. Perhaps it is good because this shows that the host mother cares about her and that she is taking her role as a host mother seriously. Maybe it is negative because the host student values personal privacy and reading someone else's diary violates her values. The student may have expected her host mom to ask her questions if she was curious, not to read her diary. It might be difficult for the student to think of both the positive and negative side, but doing so might help her suspend judgment.

The support volunteer could then encourage the student and host mother to have an open conversation about the incident.. The two could explore ways that they can get to know and trust each other in a way that makes both sides feel like their values and concerns are respected.

AN ALTERNATIVE: THE O.D.I.S METHOD

Another variation of the original D.I.E. model to help us not fall into the trap of making automatic judgments is an **O.D.I.S. (observe-describe-interpret-suspend evaluation) analysis**. Originated by Stella Ting-Toomey, Professor of Human Communication Studies at California State University, Fullerton in USA, this mindful observation analysis allows us to:

1. Observe an interaction, especially the verbal and non-verbal communication.
2. Describe what is going on in the interaction (e.g., "He does not maintain eye contact with me when speaking to me.").
3. Generate multiple interpretations to "make sense" of the behavior (e.g. "Maybe from his cultural framework, avoiding eye contact is what people do to show respect; but from my cultural point of view, this is considered disrespectful").
4. Respect the differences and suspend an evaluation, or engage in an open-ended evaluation by acknowledging how this unfamiliar behavior makes us feel (e.g. "I understand that eye contact avoidance may be a cultural habit of this person, or perhaps it is a personal trait, no matter what, I still don't like it because I feel uncomfortable when it happens.").

In the end, using the O.D.I.S. analysis allows us to have an honest, reflective dialogue with ourselves and helps us become more aware of our automatic reactions and motions.

SUSPENDING JUDGMENT IN AFS

In the AFS context, the D.I.V.E. model is ingrained in our programs and curricula, since students, host families, volunteers and staff are taught to use the four steps of D.I.V.E. and why it's a valuable tool in intercultural settings. We encourage our support volunteers to use D.I.V.E. with our students and host families when they are in a confusing or unusual situation, or even when there is a conflict at school or home. Students are also encouraged to use D.I.V.E. on their own before, during and after their AFS experience to analyze any "strange" occurrences.

When confronted with all the cultural (and not to mention personal or situational) differences, it is helpful to have practical coping strategies and tools to deal with them. The D.I.V.E. and O.D.I.S. models are tools that can help us in such situations. Often when encountering new cultures, we tend to be quick to judge and do not take the time to mindfully observe. In fact, it is in our human nature to want to classify things when we see them and we frequently cannot control our subconscious, gut reactions. D.I.V.E. and O.D.I.S., however, can help us slow down and separate the facts from possible explanations, and our judgment of these explanations. These models can help us be more effective and appropriate in intercultural situations.



TOOLS TO SUSPEND JUDGMENT...

- ✓ The four D.I.V.E. steps are: Description, Interpretation, Verification and Evaluation.
- ✓ The four O.D.I.S. steps are: Observe, Describe, Interpret and Suspend evaluation.
- ✓ The D.I.V.E. and O.D.I.S. models can help us not jump to conclusions and suspend judgment in intercultural situations.
- ✓ These models can help us be more effective and appropriate in intercultural interactions.

LEARN MORE...

- ✓ **Bennett, J. M. (Ed.).** (2015). *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- ✓ **Nam, K-A; Condon, J.** *The DIE is cast: The continuing evolution of intercultural communication's favorite classroom exercise*, International Journal of Intercultural Relations, v. 34, n. 1, 2010, p. 81-87
- ✓ **Ting-Toomey, S.** (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. New York, NY: Gilford Press.



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