

I am used to being an insider. I'm comfortable with my friends, family and people I work with. I am usually confident in what I know and do. Being an insider makes me feel very confident because I belong. However, there have been times when I didn't belong and those times have taught me more about myself than other experiences have. Being comfortable and confident is great but the times I felt unsure of myself really made me examine who I was.

One time I remember being an outsider was when I lived in Italy for a semester in college. I didn't have much experience at all with the language, but I undertook the study abroad courses as a new adventure. I was really excited to travel and to be in a foreign land. However, I didn't realize how foreign I would end up feeling! I had never even studied Italian. But I felt confident about my intelligence and travel skills – I knew I could handle things just fine.

I was not prepared to feel stupid in Italy. But I felt stupid. Not knowing much of the language was a huge barrier to getting anything I needed. I couldn't order food, ask where the bathroom was or even tell people what I needed. I slowly learned more of the language as I took my classes, but people looked at me like I was an idiot! I felt ashamed that I couldn't speak fluently and quickly. I knew deep down that it was only a matter of time before I learned more Italian, but in the meantime, my Italian homework worksheets would take me hours to finish. It was exhausting trying to be understood every day. I would use gestures and facial expressions as much as I could. I bought fabric softener instead of laundry detergent because I couldn't read the label. I washed my clothes without detergent for two months before I figured that one out.

The feeling of being an outsider is an uneasy one. I learned to make do with what I knew and I had to get by with minimal understanding. Sometimes I just had to accept that things were unclear and I was unsure if the train I was on was even going to the right place. Eventually, I adjusted and became more confident in my language skills, but I learned what it must be like for immigrants in America to come and be bombarded with English when they don't speak that language. I learned how not to judge others who cannot speak English because they are probably really smart in their own language! I also learned that part of my identity is based on my confidence and without it, life can be hard.

Traveling in college was the best experience for me even though I remained an outsider until the end of the semester. I am American and I will never be Italian. I'm proud of who I am but also proud of what I learned from this experience.