

Reinventing the Bicycle Wheel

I bought a bike within a week and half of living in Florence. In fact, I knew before I landed that I would get one; not only was it a practical way of getting around, but it was also a clear assertion that I was more than a visitor here. I hoped to “expand my cultural horizons,” “become a worldly citizen,” and “explore Italian culture,” but when I used these phrases in my application, I did not grasp the weight of their meaning. Though I was consistently told that studying abroad would be a life-changing experience, that idea seemed far-fetched and dramatic. Now, at the end of my semester in Florence, I understand this concept of cultural exploration and it is through this understanding that I have been undeniably changed.

Before coming abroad, I defined myself by my context: a middle-class suburban family, a liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, and more generally, American culture. When I came to Italy, I was removed from this framework, and I found myself with little intrinsic connection to the places, people, or culture around me. Developing a relationship with Florence was like most relationships, requiring work and a continued commitment to transcending language and cultural barriers. When I needed to find a *supermercato*, I studied a map of Florence, hopped on my bike, and hobbled down the cobblestone streets. When I could not locate the *supermercato*, I asked someone in Italian. When I finally found the *supermercato*, I pulled out my Italian-English dictionary to make sure I was buying the right shampoo. Everything required an extra step, but each failure and success was another block in my foundation. Unlike at home, I had to ask questions, inquire for justification, and intentionally construct everything I knew about Florence and Italian culture. Through this process, I have built a meaningful relationship with this city.

Granted, building this new framework was challenging. Life in Italy was filled with oddities that disagreed with everything I knew before: not exchanging greetings on the sidewalk, using *avere* instead of *essere*, writing the day before the month, and eating cookies for breakfast. Slowly, I began to sift through my own cultural norms. Why is it that most Americans smile at each other, even when they are complete strangers and may be having a bad day? In the U.S., a smile is often feigned, whereas in Italy its

relative infrequency marks it with sincerity. Or, when I say I “am” cold, do I really mean I *am* the essence of something cold? Maybe the Italian way is better – I “have” cold. Also, does it really make sense to place the month before the day? Sometimes, you just need to know what date it is, and the month itself is less important. And cookies for breakfast, well, who could argue with that?

For me, studying abroad is more than just getting on a plane for eight hours and landing in another country. It is a process of questioning and deconstructing the social norms that I have always known, and thereby defining myself within this new context. As a result, I have learned where my socially constructed world ends and my inner self begins. In my opinion, personal growth occurs when you can separate the external from the internal; studying abroad provides a perfect medium for this revelation. While establishing a relationship with Florence, learning the language, and deciphering cultural norms, I am also learning the aspects of myself that are consistent across cultural boundaries. With these personal discoveries, and an enhanced understanding of how to connect with a foreign world, I am slowly reinventing myself as the “worldly citizen” that I once wrote about. Through studying abroad and disconnecting myself from my previous cultural framework, I have not only learned the intricacies of Italian life, but I have also developed the skills and understanding to interact with any other culture I encounter. Purchasing a used *bicicletta* from a local bike vendor was my first step in truly understanding how life-changing cultural exploration occurs. Once you know how to ride the bike, you can get anywhere.