

My Year Abroad in Germany, and How it Changed Me

I still remember the first day I arrived in Germany. It was a cloudy August morning, and the rain made streaks on the window of the airplane as we descended through a cloud. I left the plane to find myself in the Dusseldorf Airport, surrounded by a buzzing crowd of people. To the side of the gate, my host family stood together with a handmade sign, welcoming me to my new home. On that day I couldn't even imagine what it would be like to leave after a year abroad. When that day came, I realized that the person who left for Germany a year ago was different from the person who came back. It was an eventful year, and I learned more from it than I could have ever imagined. Exchange changed me for the better in so many ways that I am still just beginning to understand. It was so fundamentally different from any other experience I have had, and so exceptionally challenging and rewarding that it had no less than a great influence on my life.

I found that as a result of my exchange, I have become more confident and assertive. During my exchange I came to understand just how important being confident is. Many experiences I had involved a lot of stress, discomfort and awkwardness. This was to be expected of course; adjusting to a new culture is by no means a smooth and easy process. However, these experiences gave me a lot of perspective and allowed me to see a more big picture view of myself. I realized that no one really cares if you make mistakes, or if you feel unwell, or if you feel awkward. People have a lot of things on their mind, and I found that I often overestimated how much people actually care about my mistakes. I also realized that if I wasn't confident, I wouldn't be able to get the things I wanted. To build relationships, I needed to be confident and assertive. I wouldn't have been able to make friends if I wasn't willing to take initiative. I also needed to speak up and ask for things I needed, and tell people when there were things that I didn't like. Before my exchange, I was reluctant to start a conversation with a stranger. Beyond that, I was often uncomfortable trying new things. Because of my exchange, I am now much more comfortable facing new situations.

Another reason why I became more confident was because I became much better at identifying and learning from my mistakes. When I first got to Germany, I was making cultural mistakes at a mile a minute. From greeting new people to holding silverware, I was pretty much bound to be making some sort of cultural mistake every minute of the day. I was often called out on my mistakes by my host family and friends. Even when I wasn't being called out, I realized my mistakes all the time. In the beginning, this bothered me a lot. It continued to bother me up until I realized that I was the only one who was bothered by my mistakes, and no one else really cared. With this realization, I was able to learn from my mistakes without looking at them negatively. I embraced myself and my mistakes, and learned from every one of them instead of worrying what other people were thinking. This was a great skill to have, because it made me much more confident in my decisions. I knew that if I thought through every decision I made, I could confidently make the decision and know that if it was the wrong one, I would learn from that decision and treasure what I learned without feeling bothered by my mistake.

During my exchange, I also had a great perspective on what my life was like before exchange. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on the things I enjoyed most, the things I missed, and the things I didn't miss. I realized how much I enjoy computer science and programming, and how passionate I am about robotics and artificial intelligence. I realized how much I enjoy to build and program intelligent machines, and that this was something I would be happy doing for the rest of my life. Thus coming out of exchange, I had a very solid idea of not only what I want

to study in the University, but also what I want to pursue as a career. I found that I developed a deeper commitment to my interest in programming, as well as a deeper understanding of my strengths and weaknesses and how they apply to my goals. This all came from the perspective and reflection that I experienced during my year abroad.

My exchange amounted to many things that I never expected. I experienced a new culture, learned a new language, gained valuable life skills, perspective, and learned to profit from my mistakes. At times it was challenging, and at times it was so easy it simply felt natural. I am sure that I will never forget what I learned during my year abroad, because it changed me for the better in so many ways that I will always treasure.