



Writ 101 Writing Seminar I Sample Student Essay

Foraging For Personal Identities Through The World Around Us

Our world is constantly changing and with it so are we. Whether we realize it or not, the people, the places, and the things around us have a great deal of influence on who we are and who we become. John Berger and Barbara Mellix do an excellent job of identifying how our identities can be persuaded within the constructs of the continuously changing world around us. Through his piece, “Ways of seeing”, John Berger articulates the idea of sight and how what we see and what we know are constantly bringing us to try and understand the relationship between ourselves and the world. Barbara Mellix also provides insight into how the world helps us develop by describing her memoir about language and writing. She writes about her life and the difficulty of understanding which dialects were correct to use in which environments, and then introduces her journey into writing and how she was able to identify her own writing style through the teachings of others and the knowledge she obtains through every step in her life. Both authors write to express their own insights so that we may find our own areas of expansion, meaning finding a more extensive version of ourselves through the teachings we can pick up from the world around us. John Berger and Barbara Mellix identify the complexity of merely being understood and understanding the world around us, without having fear of expansion and assimilation. Whether it be through actual sight or dialects of language, the power of knowledge and exploration of our surroundings create strong personal identities.

Determining where we stand in the world can oftentimes be one of the most daunting processes each individual has to go through. Primarily, this can be so difficult because our individuality is constantly changing in relation to our surroundings. Berger develops his idea of sight pertaining to the knowledge of the world around us. He states, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are”(Berger 9). To know and to see are often thought of as two very different concepts; however these two concepts actually support each other hand and hand. We can only form an understanding of what we are seeing if we already have an understanding of the things we are looking at. We have the knowledge to make inferences and develop storylines for everything we see on a daily basis. Berger’s reason for articulating that our “vision is constantly active” is to help us understand that we are only as complete as our insights into our societies. Development occurs between ourselves and every little event that occurs to or around us, and our developing understanding of how or why things happen provides a larger capability to form a secure identity.

To support his claim about the relativity between ourselves and the world around us, Berger introduces an excellent example: “Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights”(Berger 10). The example of looking at a photograph is the perfect example to support the concept that we have to already have a grasp on the background information of a situation. It can add dimension to the situation and grants a larger scale of appreciation to learn from an experience or even a photograph. As a result, this inherently matures our own character development and leads, even if just a little bit, into a new understanding of who we may be or

could be in this great big world around us. Mellix also develops a similar idea of growing due to the reflection in ourselves or from reflecting on the world around us. She develops a similar thought that Berger identifies in his work, about curiosity leading to our own improvement on the basis of what we find around us. At the end of her memoir, Mellix describes how her own linguistic and writing journey has helped her find her own path, “Improving upon my previous experiences with writing, I was beginning to think and feel in the language I used, to find my own voices in it, to sense that how one speaks influences how one means”(Mellix 266). Mellix is directly showing how she was able to reflect on the entirety of her life and find where she could fit her own voice into the teachings she had been told throughout her writing career. She learned how other people like her to write, then found how she could “think and feel in the language” she used for writing. When she says “to sense that how one speaks influences how one means”, I think this means she was able to identify the different variations of dialect in which she found herself transferring to and from for different environments, allowing her to find her own version of both of them. Mellix found her voice that made her capable of getting everything she wanted to say exactly how she wanted to say it out. The knowledge she gained from prior experiences influenced her ability to find herself through her language. This directly correlates with Berger and his writing about using the things around us that we can see and learn from to transform ourselves into better, more knowledgeable versions of ourselves.

Similarly to our vision of how the world around us can introduce new insights into where we stand in the world, communication, specifically language, poses as a large source of discovery and innovation into ourselves. Mellix further articulates this point by explaining how growing up certain dialects, specifically standard English, made her feel odd before she knew how to reclaim the dialect into her own version, “We felt foolish, embarrassed, somehow

diminished because we were ashamed to be our real selves. We were reserved, shy in the presence of those who owned and/or spoke the language”(Mellix 260). This shows how language can affect a person's persona. When she says they felt “foolish, embarrassed, somehow diminished” all because of the dialect of language they felt they needed to speak in that moment clearly demonstrates how the interactions we are faced with everyday can alter our identities so easily. She was having to speak standard English, which wasn't the dialect at the time that she was all too comfortable with. That provides evidence of assimilation having to be made and thus the corresponding character development following. Mellix later realizes that even in situations such as the one above, that made her somewhat uncomfortable, all led to a growth not only linguistically but also personally for the way she found her own voice within a dialect she ever felt was her own. She then reflects about her time in college and the way she viewed standard english through writing, “Not until years later, as a college student, did I begin to understand our ambivalence towards English, our scorn of it, our need to master it, to own and be owned by it—an ambivalence that extended to the public classroom”(Mellix 261). This continues to articulate the importance language holds on individuals and the way they develop. She begins to acknowledge that she has a distinct apprehension towards this language and she begins to ponder how she could find herself through something she desires so greatly to “master”. Mellix clearly underwent a lot of linguistic barriers that allowed her to flourish into her own person, while still keeping in mind the knowledge she had obtained from so many other events in her life.

John Berger and Brabara Mellix both develop such strong arguments for how identities are formed through the experiences of the world around us. While Berger focuses primarily on the act of visually seeing experiences, I believe he would agree with Mellix that language carries a very strong hold on those experiences that can lead to new and improved development of

oneself. Both authors write to inform us that there should be no fear when wanting to expand our knowledge or take our acquired knowledge and experiences and alter them to fit into the molds we are creating for ourselves. No one should fear the act of assimilation or should fear venturing away from the normality everyone else may follow. We should want to use every aspect of life, whether it be our own or the lives of others we may observe, to better ourselves and continuously grow through life. There should be no stagnant point in life, there will always be more knowledge to obtain and more aspects of ourselves, we can ameliorate.