Example 4

Growing in Literacy

Language has always been a big part of my life, especially since I come from a foreign country. Going into a new country that speaks a tongue you do not can be challenging. The feelings of loss of self and identity can be felt potently, especially when no one else can understand what you say , and you become the outsider for the first time. Thankfully, I had my love of reading and writing to get me through the times in which I felt the most isolated in this new country; through the words on the pages I was able to keep a part of the person I was in my world. Reading and writing has gotten me through many difficult experiences in my childhood, and it continues to be a necessity as I get older.

At times, I have flashbacks of Cameroon; what it looked like, and how I felt in the warmth of the orange sand around my bare feet as I watched my father and uncles climb the cacao trees in the backyard to break off some cacao fruit for us children on the weekends. My siblings and I would relish at the taste of the sweet, slimy and tangy fruit as the juices permeated throughout our tongues. Our grandmother would then collect the cacao beans to make chocolate treats with, and we would sit on the front steps of the house just watching her as she worked to turn the beans into powder. Those are the times in my childhood in which I felt that I truly knew who I was because life was so simple.

In that simplicity were languages that I never learned to speak; I would listen as my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles chattered away, all laughing at jokes I could not yet understand, in a language I could not speak. There were always three languages being spoken in my home: French, the only one I knew, English, which my father and two oldest siblings were fluent in, and one of the many languages of my country, which my parents spoke. Despite not being able to understand the latter, I still found comfort in it because at that age I associated the language with the voices of those I loved, and the only place in the world I knew. To me, those were the languages that spoke to who I was as a person, and connected me to my roots. As a result, I felt momentarily lost when my family moved to the United States, and the same languages were no longer around me.

I had heard English before several times, but I had never been so fully immersed in it before. English was the language the cartoon characters sometimes spoke on television, and those were the cartoons I tended to not have any interest in because I could not make sense of the words. English, at that time, was like Spanish; the two were one in the same for me. Just as I only heard English on television, Spanish was also exclusively something the characters in the telenovelas spoke. None of these languages were real to me because they did not fit into the world I could comprehend at the age of three, but the two eventually became more prominent in my world; these languages confused me. They were unfamiliar languages that I had tried to escape, but could not. I had to find a way to retain my identity amidst, what I felt were literary invasions.

Consequently, I began to cling more to books I had never been interested in before, begging for my mother to read them to me so that I could retain even a small portion of the world I knew; so every night she did until I could read well on my own. These books helped me retain memories of the orange sand that always got my church clothes dirty, the heat of the sun on my bare skin, the market places we'd go through every Sunday after church, and the sounds of my grandmother’s laughter as she entertained me in my hide and seek escapades. All of these memories were kept alive by books, but I also made new memories as I became acquainted with new characters, and more complex synopses.

I began to crave the stories, and the images the painted for me of different worlds, cultures and peoples. I wanted to learn more, so I kept reading more. As I read more, my writing skills in both French and English began to improve; I even began to come up with stories of my own which garnered attention from my teachers. I was obsessed with the worlds that words could create, and put into perspective even as my own was becoming a distant memory. Worlds were like magic to me; they could come in an array of languages, and still retain their meaning. Language did not change the exigency of a cry for help, or the joy felt from a happy moment. Words could evolve and change to match any culture, as well as appeal to any. These changing, and evolving words that still managed to convey the same emotions were what kept me intact in my changing world. They taught me to adapt, and learn to love a new world even if it was difficult.

Reading and writing in French helped me keep in touch with the memories of my early childhood; comparatively, reading and writing in English helped me to become the me that I am today with even more memories.

Reflection Paper

This is a literary narrative that tells the story of how I learned to love reading and writing in both of the languages that I am familiar with in order to retain elements of the past, and build new memories. I wanted to write this particular narrative because it truly quantifies the reasons as to why I feel passionate about literacy; since the strongest drive for me to continue to read and write is the desire for understanding. I want to be able to understand others, as well as have others understand me. Since words speak to and for all languages, it is easier to feel connected to characters in foreign lands through the pages of a book. The emotions in stories can be more vivid than ones in movies or those in person since reading affords you the luxury of interpreting these emotions in your own way and at your own pace; as a result, you can take your time basking in these emotions, and what they mean to the character, the dynamic of the story and to yourself.

In writing this particular narrative, I want to paint a clear picture of myself as a child, scared and confused in a new environment. Then I want to contrast the negative feelings I felt before I became intrigued with reading with the positive feelings I began to feel as I immersed myself more in literature. I also wanted to write in a language that is both formal enough for a professor to read, and relatable enough for my peers to understand since these are the audiences that I am appealing to. This particular experience is dear to me, and I hope that I am capable of adequately putting into words the thoughts and emotions that coursed through my body in these moments.

This narrative has allowed me to explore a different genre of writing that I had not encountered before. The language of the narrative is more personal than that of an essay, and it is meant to create a connection between the writer and the audience. I can definitely imagine myself feeling comfortable reading this particular narrative in front of my peers.

Outline

1. Background
2. My childhood in Cameroon
3. I only spoke French, while my oldest siblings and father spoke English, and my parents both spoke one of the Cameroonian languages.
4. These languages made me feel comfortable.
5. These languages kept me connected to my roots.
6. My experience with English and Spanish before the move.
7. I only associated English and Spanish with television.
8. The languages did not register as concrete and real much like the characters they were spoken by.
9. I avoided them because they felt unfamiliar, and did not fit into my world.
10. The move to the United States
11. I felt as if my world had been uplifted
12. The environment and languages were different
13. I could no longer understand when people spoke to me.
14. I felt lost in a different world with people who were unfamiliar, and not comforting.
15. How I learned to love reading and writing
16. Reading and writing became solaces for me.
17. I could freely express myself in the languages I knew.
18. I became comfortable with my new environment