

INSTRUCTIONAL NOTE

Resurrecting the I-Search: Engaging Students in Meaningful Scholarship

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The intersection of the call for civic engagement and the call for student scholars at the center of writing pedagogy, along with the daunting challenge of introducing beginning students to the demands and rewards of academic writing, is an ideal location for a revival of Ken Macrorie's I-Search paper.

Over the years of teaching, I've been more and more interested in making course content and goals relevant to the real, lived experiences of students. Since I teach composition at a two-year college where students come from disparate backgrounds and bring disparate academic goals, this can be a challenge. But based on this interest and spurred by an article on community-based research in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College (TETYC)* in September of 2005 as well as a move in composition to encourage student-scholarship, I have put into practice a new, old kind of research paper, Ken Macrorie's "I-Search." The I-Search, I've found, can be fashioned to engage authentic student scholarship that begins at the point where the world and students' lives intersect.

In "The Research Paper as an Act of Citizenship: Possibilities and Pragmatisms," Tim N. Taylor, of St. Louis Community College, describes his practice of having students "craft research essays that exemplify civic engagement" (50). By focusing on a local problem and addressing both an academic and a nonacademic audience—a person or group who can effect change—students experience, in Taylor's words, a "greater ownership of the classroom" and the material (51).

Taylor's students have addressed issues such as globalization and the local economy by encouraging a food vendor to serve fair-trade, organically grown coffee. Another student, a parent, persuaded her local school district to serve more nutritious lunches (52–54). Taylor concludes that this practice—of linking research (via both print and nonprint sources, including interviews) to an outside audience—is an act of citizenship that has its roots in ancient rhetoric (the "good man speaking well" of Quintillion) and in one of American education's professed purposes, via John Dewey: a "true working democracy" by helping students become "critical citizens" (qtd. in Taylor 58).

Similarly, Ting Man Tsao, in "The Immense Possibilities of Narrating 'I':

Developing Student Voice through a Career Research Project," describes his practice of having students craft a "well-staged career research paper" that helps "students develop their academic voice while integrating personal experiences with researched sources" (84). His assignment helps students confront what he describes as "the overwhelming nature of some of the discourses that students [have] to negotiate," such as the "authoritative source" (85). His students develop toward "inquisitive citizens who are both questioning and discovering their 'dialogical' connections with the larger professional, social, and political discourses" (89).

Unlike Ting Man Tsao's students at LaGuardia Community College, most of my students, I believe—while often fitting the category of first-generation, working-class college students—feel alienated, less culturally and more through training, from their own educations. Nearly all are graduates of local public high schools or are completing their high school education and many report a feeling of being stifled—from writing "only what the teacher wants," to completing a senior project that feels like "jumping through hoops," to completing meaningless exercises like memorizing the "24 helping verbs in English." I don't mean to demonize public high school teachers—far from it—but rather to describe the sense of powerlessness many students report or suggest in choosing their own educational and life paths.

I should admit up front, however, that another part of my motivation has come from the kind of low-key debate we're having on my campus with regards to students conducting research in their classes: How much can we expect students to learn? What kind of interaction with professional texts can we expect students to have? What kind of authoritative voice can we require students to adopt? How well can and should students read, make sense of, and report academic source materials? It has been my hope that our debate will throw doubt on the efficacy of the traditional research paper in introductory courses and lead us to consider something more useful to students where they are now.

Current debates in composition—a revitalized student-centered approach that begins from the position of student knowledge or students as scholars—dovetail with this perspective. Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz, in "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year," argue that "freshmen are invited into their education by writing" (127), and more importantly for my purposes, that "weaker writers often speak with even greater passion about the role of writing in helping them make the transition to college, in giving them the confidence to 'speak back to the world'" (129). The term "weaker" in the Sommers and Saltz quotation reminds me of David Bartholomae's definition in "Inventing the University": weaker writers have greater difficulty taking on "the role—the voice, the person—of an authority whose authority is rooted in scholarship, analysis, or research" (16). Taking these two ideas together, we can see that what many student writers need to become better writers is to be "active and engaged" (Bartholomae 18), not "outside" the discourse of the academy. At a recent Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) session, Nancy Sommers reported that a critical factor in determining writing quality was a student's mastery of the discipline—the

material and the rhetoric (“The Call of Research”). The traditional research paper, rarely encouraging active and engaged scholarship but more often requiring a kind of false position of authority among writers (cf. Bartholomae), may too easily work against what beginning student writers need most.

Lingering at the back of my mind had been an approach to conducting and writing up research that is a radical departure from the norm: Ken Macrorie’s “I-Search” paper. In his books dating from the mid-1980s, Macrorie advocates a kind of research for students that begins from their perspective and encourages them to conduct “real research”: that is, finding out the answer to a question that puzzles them. Instead of students working with the knowledge of authorities “detached from the experience that generated” it, he wants students to “tell stories of [their] quests”:

Contrary to most school research papers, the I-Search comes out of a student’s life and answers a need in it. [. . .] The paper is alive, not borrowedly inert. Writing it, many students for the first time find that writing is a way of thinking, of objectifying an act that has counted for them. As the sentences go down on the page, they become both finished statements and starting points for reflection and evaluation. The passages grow with thought. (v–vi)

Consequently, in my English 102 classes (second-quarter or second-semester composition), I initiated my own version of the I-Search paper. In essence, I ask students to search their lived experience, at this moment, for some question or issue that they really want to know about and that has a real impact on their lives but one that also intersects an academic issue—and here, perhaps, is the “twist” on the I-Search. I ask students not only to address their own issues but also to explore, question, and often respond to what the academic world has to say about that question. In so doing, students take with them their own authority—since the issue is wholly pertinent to their experiences, they seem less likely to cede authority to an argument that does not “work” in relation to their own issue. This establishes a position for them to engage with academic material in a personal way, not unlike the hope Sommers expressed long ago in “I Stand Here Writing”: “Being personal means bringing their judgments and interpretation to bear on what they read and write, learning that they never leave themselves behind even when they write academic essays” (459).

While daunting at first, with a little brainstorming and discussion, nearly all students come up with an issue they truly want to know about. After the initial explanation of the assignment, students work in small groups to brainstorm ideas: “Look around your life,” I ask them. “Find some issue or area of interest where having greater knowledge can impact the way you live or some decision you have to make. It’s best if these issues or interests impact others.” After several minutes, they bring these ideas to the attention of the class and, through dialogue with me and others, they refine those ideas into workable questions such as those below. And when they do, I see lights of enthusiasm go on in their eyes: they feel empowered in their own education, with the potential to shape their own reality rather

than being shaped by it, in a Freirean sense. The variety of topics and questions has been fascinating. Here's a sampling:

- > What are the latest developments in battling bipolar disorder?
- > Is Internet-based game addiction truly "addiction" and what can be done about it if it is?
- > What's the value of reading to young children and can early omission be compensated for?
- > What is the best preparation for getting into medical school and why do the requirements keep changing?
- > How is depression defined and is even a minor criminal act a sign of it?
- > What are the latest treatments for post-traumatic stress syndrome and why is the U.S. military not using them?
- > Why is there so much waste in shipped packages of clothing and what can be done about it?

Occasionally, students arrive at questions that may be too narrow, for example, asking if they will be able to afford to buy a house in our city on a teacher's salary or trying to decide whether to enter a technical program or complete a four-year degree. I work individually with these students to help them see the question in a broader context, such as, in the former, the issues surrounding compensation for public school teachers, including respect and the legislative process—would the student be willing to work in such an environment?—and in the latter, the question of the value of a liberal-arts education versus a technical program in terms of life enhancement, not only employability.

The papers the students produce reflect their thoughts and research processes, in essence, telling their story as they move from ignorance to knowledge. Macrorie's original I-Search included four main sections: "What I already know about my topic," "What I want to find out," "The Search," and "What I learned" (64–65). By contrast, my version of the I-Search has five parts: (1) an introduction to the topic and the student's interest, including what the student wants to find out and what impact the knowledge will have; (2) some preliminary research to discover what resources are available; (3) further research in which students grapple with the sources (including primary sources, such as interviews and observations) by pitting one source against another, by questioning assumptions and claims; and finally (4) conclusions, in which the students sum up the researched knowledge, and (5) recommendations, in which students look ahead to a decision or change of behavior or, even, the need for further research. Students offer a draft to the class of each part as they work, using a class-management system such as Blackboard or Moodle, and comment on the drafts of others. Finally, students revise the drafts with the comments and suggestions from the entire class and from me for a final draft that is graded. I have students use either the Modern Language Association (MLA) or American Psychological Association (APA) style depending on their questions/fields. Students also give an informal five-minute presentation on what they found.

The results have been everywhere from interesting to phenomenal. One student, asking whether parents of older children and teens could have an effect on their children's reading abilities similar to that of reading to infants and toddlers, drastically changed her and her family's attitudes and practices, instituting a "board game night" and a "reading night." One student contacted regional directors of the clothing store she works for in an attempt to launch a recycling program for the packaging waste material she currently throws in the garbage. Several students, like Tsao's students, have redirected, with far greater confidence, their career goals.

Moreover, many have discovered that what they thought was a simple issue is actually complicated and without an easy answer ("how does one define 'addiction'?"). Many have commented that this I-Search—conducted as it was over the course of the quarter and following closely the path of inquiry of a true search—was invaluable in showing the true purpose of research, which is not just to rehash what others have said, but to "re-search" something, often following but also often deviating from the footpaths of experts who have gone before; above all, to follow one's own question. In the words of one student, "This 'I search' has allowed me to 'sit back' and let the data take me to places that I had not considered before and make connections that, maybe, no one has ever made—at least my research has not uncovered them yet." Another wrote, "I began certain that I would reach my expected conclusion. I have not done that, and it is both refreshing and liberating to be led by the work, and not know where it may be heading."

But perhaps an even more interesting result of the I-Search assignment is the sense of civic engagement many students feel. They often realize that an issue which they thought idiosyncratically theirs—such as video-game addiction or shifting expectations for premedical training or the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder in the military—was actually part of a larger, social, and cultural issue that they now feel more empowered to respond to. One student, a veteran and a volunteer for the local VFW, reported that he is now in a better position to work with combat veterans, many of whom are bitter at their lack of care, since he is able to explain the best current practices for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder as well as the symptoms. Another student, a partner with her husband in a start-up construction business, wrote: "I learned more about the local business and political climate doing this research than I ever have previously." She commented that she was now going to pay more attention to local issues.

The intersection of the call for civic engagement and the call for student scholars at the center of writing pedagogy, along with the daunting challenge of introducing beginning students to the demands and rewards of academic writing, is an ideal location for a revival of Ken Macrorie's I-Search paper. The I-Search as conceived here can "transform the political and social relationships" between the student writers and the academy (Bartholomae 18), with results that are, possibly, a realization of what Min-Zhan Lu has called for: rather than conceiving of "the academy" as a fixed entity that students "enter" or are initiated into, we can focus on the areas of conflict—the tension between students' lived experiences and the

scholarship and debates relevant to those experiences; students can then “act on rather than merely react to the conditions” of their lives (122).

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