The Truth about Subjectivity in Research

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"Time to clear the miasma and admit that the best researchers act both subjectively and objectively and [in the best case] write so that professionals and the public can understand their searches and profit from them" (Macrorie, 1988, p. v). What began for Ken Macrorie (1984; 1988) as an attempt to help his freshman composition students improve their writing ability became a model for student research across the curriculum. The I-Search paper, as described by Macrorie (1984; 1988), is an alternative to the traditional research paper. Topics originate from students' own questions, needs, interests, and relevance. The I-Search process is designed to give students "lifetime skills in listening, interviewing, reading, quoting, reporting, and writing in a way that others will profit from and enjoy" (Macrorie, 1988, p. 71). Students "own" the I-Search process and in the end, they tell the stories of their searches.

In this paper, the authors describe an application of the I-Search process in a recreation and leisure studies course.

Principles of the I-Search

Variations on the I-search process have been implemented at elementary, secondary, and higher education levels (Beach & Finders, 1999; Dellinger, 1989; Jensen, 1989; Macrorie, 1988; Tallman, 1998). In each approach, fundamental underlying principles guide students and instructors through choosing a topic, locating sources, and telling the story. First, students investigate a topic that they are interested in, one that will meet a need in their life. When locating information, students consult firsthand sources such as people, objects, or events that they can talk to and/or observe, as well as secondhand sources such as books, journals, newspapers, or people who can tell them about what others have done. Students share their topics with their classmates and knowledgeable others and reflect on the process of research as they go along. Contrary to the objective writing style prominent in the social sciences, students relate their stories in first person, reflecting on what they know, what they want to know, and what they learned. As a result, the writing is more authentic, the students are truly engaged, and finally, research makes sense.

Theoretical Basis

The I-search has its theoretical roots in the expressionist rhetoric of the 1960s and '70s. In this paradigm, truth is found, not in the outside world, but within. The art of

writing is a means of discovery (Berlin, 1987). Based on the work of cognitive developmentalist Jerome Bruner (1966), the major tenets of the theory included a process approach to writing, finding voice, allowing intellectual freedom, responding, and developing an understanding of the writer's mind.

Components of the I-Search Used in a Recreation and Leisure Studies Course

The first author of this paper uses a variation of the I-search process in her freshman composition classes. She consulted with the second author of this paper to help design and implement the I-search process in the graduate recreation and leisure studies course, Trends and Issues in Therapeutic Recreation. Following the principles of the I-search, the following components were developed for this course: 1) history paper, 2) inquiry, 3) reflection paper, 4) search, and 5) synthesizing and writing. These components are discussed in the following sections.

History paper. Students enrolled in Trends and Issues in Therapeutic Recreation do not always have a comprehensive background in therapeutic recreation (TR). In fact, some students are child life, gerontology, or rehabilitation studies majors. Therefore, the development of a short history paper of TR, or of the students' chosen field, is required. While not typically a "step" in the I-search process, this component ensures that students begin with an understanding of important developments related to practice and professional issues. The paper is intended as an overview, one that captures important historical highlights. From this historical grounding, students are better prepared to begin their I-search. Additionally, writing about and discussing historical aspects serendipitously reveals many of the trends and issues typically presented by the instructor.

The Inquiry. With a better understanding of the history of students' professional fields (e.g., TR, child life, gerontology), students brainstorm questions about their field that they want answered. Good questions lead to interesting inquiries. Emanating from the "what I know," "what I do not know," and "what I would like to know" rubric, students then develop a long list of questions. These questions can be general or specific and personal (e.g., "How much money can I expect to make?") or professional ("Will I be required to obtain population- or setting-specific certifications?"). Students are reminded that this is *their* search so they should consider questions that are interesting and valuable to *them*. Students bring their long list of questions to class where they are shared and discussed. During this discussion, questions can be added or modified. Together, the instructor and students determine and list categories in which all of the students' questions can be grouped. For example, categories might include health care reform, education, philosophy, research, credentialing, emerging populations and settings, economics, and so forth. Students are then encouraged to repeat this process, grouping their own long list of questions. Generally, the category in which a majority of the students' own questions are placed represents their area of primary interest. Again, the instructor and class members continue to give and receive feedback so that students are confident that they have identified the topic area that is most compelling to them. To complete the inquiry components, students develop a tentative purpose statement for their I-search

paper and propose a short list of focused questions related to this statement. The students are reminded that the purpose statement and the short list of questions are flexible and that they will be revisiting and revising these areas throughout their search.

The Search. Successfully identifying compelling questions is essential, but the searching part of the process is often the most difficult. As students proceed through this component, they are instructed to keep reminding themselves what it is they want to know and why they want to know it. In keeping with I-search principles, students are encouraged to consult a variety of nontraditional and traditional sources. At a minimum, students are required to develop an annotated bibliography of at least 10 secondhand sources (generally, texts, journal articles, special publications, web sites, videos) and to conduct interviews with a minimum of three firsthand sources – people considered to be experts or authorities able to help students answer their questions. The individuals could be professionals, educators, or consumers and the interviews may be conducted in person, via e-mail, or by phone. Students' questions guide the interview. These experts are also asked to identify what they consider to be the most important sources for investigating the students' topic. Finally, students are instructed to compare and contrast the statements/views of one expert with those of other experts. After completing each interview, students summarize the key points that relate to their purpose statement and that will be helpful in writing their paper.

Synthesizing and Writing. To complete the I-search process, students write a paper that tells the story of their search and presents their findings. This paper is written in their own pre-professional voice and from their personal point of view. The instructor provides key discussion points for the students to consider. In the paper, students may reflect on what they knew and did not know about the topic when beginning the I-search. Students may also reflect on why they decided to write the paper on a particular topic by address the following questions: How is the paper important or valuable to them? How will it make a difference in their professional life? Students are encouraged to reflect on what they learned from writing the paper, as well, as what they did not learn. Finally, students may discuss how they will use the results of their I-search professionally and personally. Sources are identified and documented as appropriate.

Reflection. An ongoing part of the I-search involves reflecting on the learning process. In this course, two formal approaches to reflection were taken. One, students were required to submit one posting per week to an on-line discussion forum. The postings could be a reflection on students' experiences, reactions, thoughts, and learning. They could indicate students' growing awareness, changing perceptions, and unique insights. Students could ask their classmates for assistance such as tips, possible sources, or names of experts. The posting were also an opportunity for students to respond to the ideas and insights of others – to ask questions about, make comments on, and encourage the work of their classmates. Two, students were required to write and submit two reflection papers. One paper was due at the mid-point of the course and simply required students to summarize their current reflection on the I-search process. The other paper provided an

overall reflection on the I-search process. Students could consider difficulty or ease of the process; things that surprised them; things they learned (or did not learn) about their field, their classmates, or themselves; what they learned about research and writing; and how they could use the experience to benefit them in the future. Students reviewed their on-line journal entries for ideas, insights, and comments.

Evaluating the Process. A quote from a student in the course helps to demonstrate the success generated by the I-search process: "I felt more interested in this research process than I have with any other in my graduate career." From an instructor's perspective, it was especially pleasing to note the increased volume and quality of in-class discussion. Students routinely demonstrated critical thinking skills such as accuracy, logic, bias, and opinion. Student engagement resulted in a greater sense of collaboration. The final papers, among the best ever received by the instructor, were focused, interesting, and relevant. Instances of plagiarism and the use of pretentious language were rare. At the mid-point of the course, student concerns of confusion, doubt, and time management gradually gave way to feelings of certainty, confidence, and encouragement. A few examples of student responses seemed to capture the essence of the process: "A fantastic way to research and learn." "I have thoroughly enjoyed this opportunity to research a topic in which I am genuinely interested." And, "I now understand the power of research. I realize that research can lead to answers and new questions."

The truth about subjectivity in research is clear: by making a place for the writer's unique vision, we can make research a more meaningful experience.

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