Repositioning the I-Search: An Assignment for Negotiating Prior Writing Knowledge in FYC

Adrienne Jankens
Wayne State University, dx1044@wayne.edu

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Repositioning the I-Search: An Assignment for Negotiating Prior Writing Knowledge in FYC

Adrienne Jankens

This article describes the outcomes of a teacher-research study on inquiry-based assignments and near transfer of writing-related knowledge that led to the revision of the I-Search assignment for integration into an argument and research-centered FYC curriculum.

Introduction

The Composition Program at Wayne State University has, since 2011, worked on curriculum revision that supports students’ transfer of writing-related knowledge across the composition sequence and into writing intensive courses in the major. As part of this long-term curriculum development project, several piloted iterations of the first-year composition course explored the use of research-supported writing projects and teaching strategies focused on transfer. In 2012, I conducted a teacher-research study of my inquiry-based FYC course to understand whether and how an inquiry-based learning environment and writing projects could support students’ meta-awareness about writing for navigating new writing tasks. The I-Search project was central to the curriculum I developed, the second project in a sequence that required students to use inquiry-based learning strategies like question-posing and inductive research to navigate several potentially new genres, including personal blogs, evaluation and proposal arguments related to students’ discourse communities, and translations of these arguments into genres that appropriately addressed the intended audience. The I-Search, which Macrorie describes as a paper that “tell[s] the story of what you did in your search, in the order in which everything happened” (64), is grounded in a question that has personal relevance to the writer. I selected the I-Search for my FYC class because it makes space for students’ recontextualization
of prior knowledge—a process integral to positive transfer (Rounsaville et al.; Nowacek; Rounsaville; Yancey et al.)—and acknowledges FYC students as novice researchers and writers who require engagement, practice, and feedback.

My exploration of an inquiry-based approach to teaching the FYC course at our institution occurred alongside sections of the course that focused on genre-based and argument-based instruction. In this light, this teacher-research study contributed to discussions about the ways various pedagogical approaches serve programmatic goals. As Weiser’s (1999) work suggests, such local research, circulated within the research site, emphasizes the importance of research for improving students’ learning (102). Thus, the project serves as an example that can be considered as other programs think through curriculum revision and pedagogical practice.

Among other conclusions about student question-asking and reflection, my study’s major conclusion about the integration of an inquiry-based writing sequence into a transfer-focused FYC curriculum was that in order to facilitate strong connection-making between contexts, teachers must provide students with feedback regarding research questions, methods, and revision that is not only supportive and specific, but also sometimes directive. I learned that while I often took an approach to commenting that was encouraging and generative, this openness had to be met with explicit direction to best support students’ inquiry and exploration.

As Muchmore et al. point out in their analysis of student learning in the I-Search, while critics of the I-Search are often concerned that the project “lacks rigor and that by foregoing the traditional research paper in favor of the I-Search, students will not be adequately prepared for the kinds of writing and thinking that they will be required to do in college and the workplace” (53), student work on the I-Search includes writing that became “more analytical and provided greater evidence of student learning” (68). Olivas’s article on the careful construction of
research questions for the inquiry-based writing project and Klausman’s article on the I-Search as a means of engaging students in meaningful research both provide useful support for implementing inquiry-based writing projects.\(^1\) To these discussions, I add an in-depth look at two students’ work to think beyond the impetus for using the I-Search to engage students in research, toward its value for FYC students’ negotiation of prior knowledge and new genres.

In Winter 2015, a “task force” of six full-time lecturers and one graduate assistant in our program was charged with revising the FYC curriculum to reinforce students’ practice with secondary research and rhetorical concepts. As discussions of a workable sequence evolved, and we sought an assignment to help students gain familiarity with research tools and evaluating sources, the I-Search emerged as a useful bridge. It would appear in the sequence between students’ initial work analyzing college-level discourse in a rhetorical analysis assignment and their development of researched arguments in the third project. Because the I-Search, in one project, could give students an opportunity to explore questions of personal interest and relevance, practice library-based, scholarly research, reflect on the research and writing process, and develop claims about research and their topics, the group agreed to integrate it.

The analysis I describe below guided us toward redeveloping the language for the assignment. While Macrorie’s description of the I-Search project provides minimal guidance in terms of expected rhetorical moves (an approach I took in my initial presentation of the project to students in my study), to integrate the project into our revised curriculum, and to better support students’ recontextualization of prior writing knowledge, we built in scaffolding language as well as brainstorming and reflective heuristics to help students and instructors understand how a genre so reflective of students’ individual processes could nevertheless attend to so many varied purposes (Appendix A). These revisions better attend to the rhetorical moves students will be
asked to use in other writing in the course as well as in other academic writing contexts, even though the I-Search genre will not explicitly reappear in these other contexts.

In the next section, I step back to explore composition scholarship on FYC students’ use of prior writing knowledge. Then, I focus on examples of this negotiation of writing experiences and strategies, looking at the work of two first-semester freshmen in my study as they navigate the I-Search project. Finally, I describe how the conclusions of this analysis led to the development of explicit directions in our program’s revision of the I-Search assignment to better support recontextualization of prior knowledge.

**Negotiating Prior Knowledge in FYC**

Composition scholarship on transfer brings into focus whether and how students make meaningful connections between their prior knowledge and the composition course and can usefully frame discussion of a project like the I-Search that makes this knowledge explicit. Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi find that for students to review their entire writing toolbox when faced with a new writing task, teachers must prompt and encourage students to reflect on what prior knowledge is influencing their approaches (108). The authors write that “effective writers” successfully demonstrate this ability to reflect on, select from, and adapt prior writing knowledge when they face new writing projects (98). When teachers ask students to explore prior knowledge, they ask them to do more than just draw from a set of previously developed skills; teachers ask students to reconstruct or recontextualize their prior knowledge (Nowacek), negotiating between prior knowledge and present task. Working with prior knowledge is a matter of problem-solving (Rounsaville) and active connection-making (Nowacek 27). When such negotiation does not happen, students may conduct “assemblage,” adding of new knowledge onto prior knowledge without recontextualization, or encounter “critical incidents,” applying
prior knowledge with little or no positive impact, and then return to revise their practice (Robertson et al. 2012). Yancey et al. (2014) describe how, when students work with prior knowledge, or develop new writing knowledge through these experiences, they develop their own models of writing.

While reflective writing is often the method of choice for prompting this work, we might also design writing assignments that integrate reflection or connection-making moves into a larger, more formal text. Nowacek argues that in creating a “genred discursive space,” open to making connections, instructors facilitate transfer, because these spaces “are not already saturated with prior association” (87). Such spaces may help students develop the kind of “rhetorical adaptability” that Hassel and Giordano argue is a key challenge for writing programs to attend to. The I-Search project I describe below enacts such a space.

Writing the I-Search requires students to articulate what they already know about a topic and then describe and reflect on their research and writing processes. As a genre, the I-Search is both unfamiliar to most students (thus lacking “prior association”) and flexible enough to accommodate the myriad rhetorical purposes with which students might approach it. That is, while the I-Search is at once a research paper, narrative essay, and reflective text, it is not any one of these things alone, and because of its emphasis on students’ questions and the lack of necessity for “final” conclusions, it leaves space for students to negotiate these genres and their understanding of college level writing and research, with the promise of teacher feedback.

**Researching the I-Search**

The data for my study, collected over the course of one semester, and representing the work of fifteen students in an inquiry-based composition classroom, provides evidence of whether and how inquiry-based teaching and learning strategies supported students’ meeting of our program’s
FYC outcomes (reading, writing, research, and reflection) and whether and how these strategies helped students develop habits of mind that aid in the near transfer of writing-related knowledge. Following recommendations for participant-observer study (Merriam; Emerson et al.) and teacher research (Ray; Fleischer), I took field notes on each class meeting. I also audiotaped several class sessions and collected all student writing.

During the first five weeks of the semester, students worked through writing tasks that required them to identify and recontextualize prior knowledge about writing. In their About Me pages for their blogs (Project 1), students introduced themselves to the class and reflected on their primary and secondary discourses. Then, in an early reflection post, I asked them to respond to the following prompts about college writing and writing in our class, specifically:

- What do you see as key characteristics of college writing? Where do these ideas come from?
- What goals do you have for this class? Why is achieving these goals important to you?
- What do you understand about what it means to be successful in a college writing course? That is, how do you think you will be a successful student in this class, achieving your goals? How do you think you will work to write successfully in other courses?
- After reviewing the learning objectives, how would you put the goals of the course into your own words? What questions do you have about these learning objectives?

In preparation for Project 2, the I-Search project, I asked students to write blog posts about how inquiry-based writing and learning was described in Macrorie’s “I-Search” and Postman and Weingartner’s “What’s Worth Knowing?”:

- How do I determine what is worth exploring personally and (especially) within a particular discourse community?
- What specific questions might I be interested in exploring for Project 2?
- What strategies for learning are presented in these texts? How do these strategies connect to what I know about writing?

Through these two sets of questions, I explicitly prompted students to make connections with prior knowledge. Then we spent several classes forming questions, learning about the library tools and
research strategies, and holding conferences to discuss research plans. I commented on drafts of the project, and then students wrote reflections about what they planned to revise for their final submissions.

In my work analyzing data from the I-Search project, specifically, I worked through two iterations of analysis. Because I was interested, in part, in learning about what kinds of questions students were asking, I catalogued their I-Search questions (Figure 1), identifying I-Search projects organized according to four purposes: personal or scholarly curiosity, personal relevance or use-value, reflective meaning-making, and meeting assignment requirements. While questions in the first two categories—personal or scholarly curiosity and personal relevance or use-value—represent topics with which students have personal connections, curiosity questions do not lead to imminent decision-making or problem-solving in the same way that use-value questions do. Questions centered on reflective meaning-making have personal relevance but are centered on past experiences rather than present contexts or future personal decisions. The fourth category, which no final versions of I-Search questions fall under, appeared nevertheless as the purpose of several draft questions in students’ blog posts.

Figure 1. Categories of Students’ I-Search Question Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>I-Search Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal or Scholarly Curiosity</td>
<td>Arun</td>
<td>What kind of behavior do police officers expect from the citizens they pull over that will reduce ticket chances?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David</td>
<td>What is it like to go fishing and am I up for it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>Who is really the teacher, the instructor or the student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maiya</td>
<td>Is building a romantic relationship with a coworker more beneficial or detrimental to the company?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>Why does the age gap in pilots exist?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use-Value</td>
<td>Reflective Meaning-Making</td>
<td>Meeting Assignment Requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison*</td>
<td>Felicity</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could I become a physician?</td>
<td>How does communication affect [golf] players at different times during the game?</td>
<td>Why were my catechism students misbehaving and how could I make a change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do servers benefit from the one-hour classes for five days? If not, why are the classes ineffective?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the process for becoming a CDT and is it worth it?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inara</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does being in a sorority really make you feel like you have a family?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I get involved on campus?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should I get my Ph.D. in clinical psychology?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do I get into the Peace Corps? Where do I go, and will it be safe?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasmine*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does a pastor communicate effectively with everyone in a congregation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second iteration of analysis, I focused on understanding how students worked through the initial inquiry-based assignment sequence of the course, looking more closely at what happened between their introductory blog posts in the class and their final submission of the I-Search paper. From the fifteen students who participated in the study, I conducted a deeper analysis of four students who conferenced with me during their work on the I-Search, focusing specifically on the textual and dialogic moments where they encountered new information about writing, were asked to reflect on prior knowledge, or explored strategies for writing in new genres. To do this, I read through all submitted work from these four students, from the first homework assignment to the final draft of the I-Search (assignments described above), tracing the development of research questions and these moments of negotiation. To map patterns in students’ work, I used
Robertson et al.’s concepts of “remixing,” “assemblage” and “critical incidents” to identify what was happening in these moments of negotiation, noting also when I saw similar moves happening across student work. As I constructed the narratives of these four students’ work, I went to my field notes to integrate discussions from their conferences.

Below, I focus on two of these students—Charlotte and Felicity—because their work on the I-Search project shows two markedly different experiences with recontextualization of prior knowledge in the assignment. Because my goal in this article is to present these cases as an impetus for revision of the I-Search project description, I share elements of Charlotte and Felicity’s writing that show how they revised and developed their knowledge about writing. This focus seems useful for addressing the misconception that our traditional college students enter FYC with a common set of writing experiences or beliefs about writing and for demonstrating the flexible approaches students may take toward writing the I-Search.

**Focusing My Own Inquiry: Reading Charlotte and Felicity**

What I understood about Charlotte and Felicity’s similarities was admittedly superficial: they were both in their first semester of college, had long brown hair and were also in an honors college class together. Later in the semester, Charlotte, Felicity, and three other students in the course worked together on a collaborative proposal argument about Charlotte’s workplace. In terms of dispositions and personalities, field notes from my study describe the two as quite different: Charlotte was quiet in class, but expressed in her writing a desire to engage in the university’s research and social opportunities, while Felicity’s previous role as high school golf team captain seemed to transfer into her later group work experience, where she regularly dictated tasks and served as the mouthpiece for the other four students. Felicity participated in class discussions but was often focused on other tasks during work time (like her honors class or
scheduling classes for the upcoming semester). However, she dutifully completed assignments and came to her writing conference with detailed plans and questions. Charlotte was a quiet worker, and our primary exchanges with each other occurred during our conferences.

Perhaps for the conclusions I present in this article, Felicity could stand alone as an example, as she develops as the more interesting case regarding the challenges of students’ negotiation of prior knowledge and the impetus for integrating more structure into the I-Search assignment. However, a look at both students highlights the I-Search as a project that allows space for this negotiation, and that, when carefully constructed, can work as a key bridge assignment in a curriculum with multiple and rigorous goals for student learning. In the sections below, I describe Charlotte and Felicity’s pre-project reflections, writing conferences, drafts, and revised versions of the I-Search to show both the careful scaffolding of the project and spaces for explicitly prompting reflection. Both drove our task force’s later revision of the project.

**Charlotte: Red Robin Server Class**

In an early reflection, Charlotte explains that she understands the expectations for college writing are “very different” from those she faced in high school, that college writing requires “in depth reading and researching”; “mature,” “sophisticated,” and layered topics; complex vocabulary; clear ideas “supported with evidence and facts”; acknowledgement and refutation of opposing viewpoints; and “structured,” error-free writing.

Later, in a blog post, Charlotte develops these ideas about writing when she draws from what she has read in Macrorie’s text,

The “I Search” piece [...] emphasized finding a topic that has personal meaning. The paper made me realize my search would not come quickly and I should keep a pen and paper next to me to write down possible ideas. The paper mentioned that the answer to my question
should fulfill a need in my life. I should let ideas come to me and once I find one I should interview experts, ask where I can find more information, look at first hand reports, and read articles.

In her post, Charlotte works through the knowledge she described in her first reflection, stating that she understands from the reading that “deep thinking and drawing relationships” are more important than “structure and length”.

In our conference, Charlotte told me that to research her question about the effectiveness of workplace training, she planned to talk to trainers, people who had been through the program, and people who would be in the training session the following week. Our conference centered largely on affirmation of these plans. But after composing her draft, Charlotte reflects on questions about her audience and research methods:

It was easy for me to understand what I had written about gemming because I work in a restaurant. In contrast, I do not know if people that are not familiar with the restaurant business will comprehend some parts of my paper. Additionally, I did not like how the interviewing portions of my paper did not seem very personal. I think I should have described my interviewing environment and mood a bit more. In addition, I wonder if the questions I asked during the interview process were relevant to my search and I fear I should have asked more questions.

For Charlotte, this reflective moment created some revision plans tied to meeting the needs of the audience, including re-analyzing her interviews, further explaining her observations, and elaborating on her reasons for research.
In Charlotte’s conclusion in her final draft, she demonstrates her uptake of the rhetorical moves of the I-Search, reflecting on her research process and posing tentative conclusions and potential follow-up questions:

I felt I was coming close to finding the answer to my question and new questions were popping into my brain. I learned the teacher of the class does not even believe in it, however when I was interviewing her, I realized I missed some crucial follow up questions. In addition, I began to think, “Does Red Robin need to assign new teachers to the classes?” I learned the teacher feels the classes are too unorganized for the students to understand and apply what is taught to their jobs. I learned that the students in the class are overwhelmed with paperwork and have so many questions that they do not see the point of the class. They find the follow shifts to be more useful than the actual class especially because it was hard for them to attend the class in the first place. The answer to my question seems to favor the idea that servers do not benefit from the server classes. The classes are ineffective due to the overwhelming amount of paperwork and the lack of organization. After thinking about all the information I had learned, I began to think the classes need major revision. I thought, “Do the classes need new teaching materials? Does the length and timing of the classes need to be revised?”

In her final draft, Charlotte pays close attention to conventions of the genre and research methods she uses, demonstrating the following rhetorical moves:

- Highlighting expertise and detailed descriptions of prior knowledge (“I have taught the host and busser class before so I know about how the classes run.”)
- Defining key terms for her reader (“CDT” and “gemming”)
- Stating motivation (“I also teach one of the classes, so I want to know if it is a waste of time or if the trainees actually find it valuable”)
- Stating research questions as questions (“[D]o servers benefit from the one-hour classes for five days? If not, why are the classes ineffective?”)
• Briefly describing interviewees (“Michelle is in her thirties, married, has a son, and has worked as a bartender at Red Robin for over five years.”)
• Incorporating reflections on interviews (“After listening to Rachel’s responses, I realized she does not like the classes because they are held at inconvenient times and she does not find the information taught relevant.”)
• Reflecting on missed research opportunities (“I was hoping to observe his behavior during the class and ask him questions. I wanted to pick his brain and find out his honest opinion regarding the training process.”)
• Summarizing findings (“The classes are ineffective due to the overwhelming amount of paperwork and the lack of organization.”)
• Raising questions for future research (“Do the classes need new teaching materials? Does the length and timing of the classes need to be revised?”)

In the I-Search, Charlotte utilizes her understanding of approaching new genres by considering purpose and audience. She revises her approaches as she thinks about moves like incorporating interviews and reflection into her writing. Charlotte seems to be “remixing,” what Robertson et al. call the process of revising prior knowledge to “incorporate new concepts and practices into the prior model of writing.”

**Felicity: Communication in Golf**

Though Felicity did not respond to the reflection prompt to explore prior knowledge about college writing, in her assigned response to the readings she writes to identify what she already knows:

With Macrorie’s piece, I already knew a lot about the interview process. Such as you have to really consider what the best way to reach a person is and that depends on that person and your topic. I also knew that you should always have questions to ask but you should also know some things about your topic before you go to the interview, even if you have to go and research it. Lastly, I knew that you should usually include why you were writing this paper and what you learned from it.
Here, Felicity seems to point out how the concepts presented in the readings match up with ideas she already has about writing.

When I conferenced with Felicity, I learned more about her experiences on her high school golf team and communication during meets. This excerpt from my field notes paraphrases our conversation:

She explains some things about how she experienced communication as a player, from her coach, with other players. I ask her about intimidation from opponents, and she cites examples of “smack talk”. I ask her about the coach—did he ride around on a cart? Yes, and she explains how he couldn’t tell them what to play, but they could figure it out through what he was saying. She also talks about how when she was captain of the team, other players would want her to give them advice. After we talk about these ideas, she asks if she can write the paper in first person, and how she should incorporate what her coach and players say, and I affirm she can paraphrase her interviews.

My questions to Felicity are meant to elicit information about the role of opponents and the coach in communication during a match. Her questions to me are more about the technical aspects of the paper (writing in first person, integrating interviews) than about content, which shows her concern for understanding some of the stylistic conventions of the genre. However, while I hope to push Felicity to think about aspects of communication in golf that she may not have already explored or could not write about from personal experience alone, her approach suggests a deductive rather than inductive approach to research: posing a question for which she already has answers and using interview data to support the conclusions she wants to make.

In her reflection, Felicity writes about the scope of her project and about how to finish the paper:
I am not sure though on what I am going to write for my conclusion. Yes, my question was answered for my team but it could affect other teams differently. But other teams don’t really matter to me as much; my team was my family and my home. The only reason I wrote about this discourse for this paper is to see how communication affected my team to try and figure out ways to improve the scores. I should add that reason to my paper.

Here, Felicity implicitly identifies an authentic inquiry (how she can use what she knows about communication to improve scores), though she does not ultimately revise her project to explore this question in the final draft. Drawing from my comments on her draft and a brief discussion we had in class, Felicity addresses concerns about content and about her overall topic in her reflection:

I need to add some more narrative to the paper, especially when I am talking about the golf game. I have so much to say about that, the look on my friends face when the coach told her that a teammate that she didn’t like and was below her in rank was doing better than her. How her game completely changed, instead of giving her motivation like my coach thought it just made her so mad she could barely hit the ball . . . How can they [the audience] possibly understand this communication when they have never met these people? . . .

Maybe I should be doing this paper on a broader subject, not just my home team but the instructions are to write about a discourse we are involved in. Maybe I should not have wrote about something I have so much experience in, or am less passionate about but then I wouldn’t be as interested.

This question about audience and purpose indicates Felicity working through some of the tensions of the rhetorical situation of the I-Search.

Felicity makes the following moves in her paper:
• Addressing prior knowledge (“The game is a very stressful and intense time for the player and when they start to experience that stress is when communication plays the most important role.”)
• Highlighting expertise (“I know from being the captain of my high school team that communication between players and their captain is extremely essential.”)
• Stating a research goal (“I would like to learn more on how communication affects the players at different times during the game.”)
• Providing general commentary on communication in golf (for example, “When observing a match with a lot of trash talking you can tell by how fast the players are moving and how hard they are hitting”) with only one specific detail (“After watching the number four player, Shelby, for a while I observed her gripping her club tighter every time her opponent started directing conversation to her. Then I watched her take more practice swings than usual when her opponent was psyching her out.”)
• Using interviews to demonstrate different perspectives on communication between coach and players (“However, when interviewing my teammate I got a mixed review on how helpful coach’s communication is.”)
• Developing conclusions for practical application (“This research showed me how to improve my team by modifying the communication during matches.”)

Felicity notes in her conclusion that research has helped her develop more questions about her topic: “I want to know if other teams react differently to the different forms of communication. I also want to know if communication affects players differently depending on what level they are such as: high school, college and masters. What changes in communication would improve their scores? By answering my question I gained even more questions about the communication during golf matches.” Overall, though, while Felicity’s project displays the question-posing and answering moves of the I-Search, much of her “search” is based in her exploration of memory rather than on developing conclusions from new primary research. While Felicity attends to her prior knowledge in her writing, she does not address new information with an effort to integrate or recontextualize prior knowledge as it meets or challenges new information. Felicity might be, as Robertson et al. describe it, “grafting isolated bits of new knowledge onto a continuing schema of old knowledge.”

**Analysis**
I do not want to draw such a great distinction between these two students in terms of how their final drafts of the I-Search look. Both pose personally relevant questions, describe their search, report conducting primary research, and conclude the essay by posing further questions or plans for potential future research. However, I see three major differences. First, the temporal space of Charlotte’s I-Search is important. Her project looks at the present and future, rather than at the past, and engages her in researching a question she does not already have an answer to. Charlotte’s I-Search also sets up research ideas for her future writing tasks in the course. Felicity, however, writes about her past, golf, instead of her present or future. Felicity’s project, which I categorized as centered on “reflective meaning-making,” did not support the kind of near transfer she needed for immediate success in the assignment sequence. By exploring a community and issue she was no longer involved in, Felicity limited her preparation for future projects in the assignment sequence. This is not to say that Felicity’s project did not have personal relevance; for her, the use-value in the I-Search was in narrating and reflecting on a formative past experience. The project, however, did not give her the kind of practice with research processes that she needed to be most successful in subsequent projects. Second, the degree to which both students inhabit primary research methods is distinctly different. While I encouraged Felicity to conduct a deeper observation of a golf match, the results of this “observation” are a cursory description of communication during a match, lacking specifics. My teacher senses tell me this meant that either Felicity did not conduct an observation, and instead incorporated general commentary that she felt would suffice, or that she did not work to develop thorough enough notes on an authentic observation because it was a new research method for her. In either case, Felicity sticks close to her prior knowledge, and does not work to tread new paths. Third, the kinds of reflection happening in the conclusions suggest to me evidence of Charlotte’s grasp of the I-Search genre over and
above Felicity’s “boundary guarding” use of academic conclusion moves. In the final sentences of the paper, Charlotte poses a tentative conclusion: “Based on my research, I have concluded that Red Robin needs to greatly consider the idea that the server training classes need major revision. This type of change would be beneficial to the improvement of the restaurant.” However, Felicity’s exploration of communication during golf matches has closed. She poses questions for possible research, but she does not explore them in the context of the class.

The reflective moment where Felicity raises questions about purpose and audience would have been an important moment for me to push her to think through the inquiries she poses, to help her see these ideas as key questions about writing: How do I help an audience understand a scene when they have not experienced it? How does my writing style change when I write about something I am not passionate about? Further dialoguing with Felicity about these ideas may have helped her begin to more successfully recontextualize her prior knowledge. Charlotte and Felicity’s reflections and revision plans push them to degrees of revision that play with the rhetorical moves they feel will connect with the audience, however Felicity’s integral reflection on the concept of inquiry-based research itself dies in this moment between conferencing and revision.

The remixing and assemblage that Charlotte and Felicity demonstrated in their early reflections in the class seemed to persist as their learning strategies throughout the project. While I provided Felicity with feedback, including questions and suggestions for revision, my lack of explicit direction to move her into an inquiry-based, inductive approach to research and writing was a missed opportunity for helping her develop the disposition toward research and writing I hoped she would begin to take on in the beginning of the course. Felicity stuck close to her prior knowledge and was successful only in meeting very surface-level conventions of the I-Search, but
not in taking on the kind of inquiry or inductive approach that would best prepare her for future writing in the course.

**Directing the I-Search**

Analysis of Charlotte and Felicity’s I-Search projects and the work surrounding them indicates that regular and direct feedback mechanisms must be integrated throughout an assignment sequence to support students who do not initially demonstrate or take up the inquiry-based and flexible practices required for the project to be successful. At the first indication of Felicity’s maintenance of a deductive research stance, more explicit prompting from me toward revision of her research question and methodology may have helped her better recontextualize her prior knowledge of how to approach research and writing in this new genre.

Despite the missed opportunity to explicitly direct Felicity’s research and her rhetorical approach to the project, however, the I-Search proved to be a useful writing task for students at this early moment of the writing course. For example, Charlotte’s inquiry about the training methods at the restaurant she worked at ultimately became the focus of a genre analysis project and the basis of a proposal argument that she, Felicity, and their groupmates worked on later in the semester. In fact, eight students in the study posed questions for the I-Search with personal relevance or use-value for the discourse communities in which they participated. With the exception of one student who did not complete the subsequent project, each of these students continued these explorations in the next project as they analyzed key genres of these discourse communities (likewise, without exception, students in the study who did not pose use-value questions did not continue pursuing their I-Search objects of inquiry in future projects). The study provided me with ways to improve integration of the I-Search into future classes, and also helped me reflect on how to balance encouragement and direction. I learned that successful integration of
an inquiry-based approach to learning depended on very carefully structured learning moments early in the semester, supporting students’ development of rhetorical skills and making way for more choice and exploration later in the term.

In our curriculum task force’s revision of the project (Appendix A), we integrated heuristics to make this genre’s potential explicit. Drawing from activities I had used in the classroom and working together to develop directions for how students should navigate researching and writing the body and conclusion of the project, we created an assignment description that invites students to pursue personally relevant inquiries while progressing on key learning outcomes like integrating secondary research and crafting claims about research and writing. Following Olivas’s argument for the need for significant class time to be spent on the development of research questions as texts, for discussion of question types, syntax, and scope, we have included explicit directions for how to write a research question, as well as how to craft the introduction, body, and conclusion of the project better guide students toward the work we expect them to do. The suggested calendar for the project includes several feedback moments where teacher and students work together to discuss the rhetorical moves in students’ drafts. The I-Search project thus works as a space in which FYC students explore connections between prior knowledge and new experiences with teachers who guide their inquiry, research, and revision.

The reflective inquiry that happened through and around this I-Search project had an immediate pedagogical impact in my classroom, one of the benefits of teacher-research, and provided a description of inquiry-based learning that we used, as a program, to understand how to integrate and scaffold the I-Search project into our required FYC curriculum. However, we might still use program assessment to ask further questions of the I-Search. Regarding our writing and researching outcomes, we might ask how students’ descriptions of the research process
demonstrate their ability to find, evaluate, and integrate source material, as well as how the assignment evidences their ability to compose the academic writing moves possible in the discursive space of the I-Search. Assessment focused on students’ work in the I-Search will allow us to continue the kind of reflective revision the task force worked through in the project’s initial integration, as we consider how to best frame assignment directions that support student learning and success.

Appendix A

Introductory College Writing
Project 2: I-Search Project [Excerpted]iv

Introduction/Rationale
This project will be used to explore and develop research skills and your ethos as a researcher. You will pick a topic and compose a research question or questions about that topic. Then you will use the “I-Search” method to work through the process of composing a reflective research narrative. The I-Search is a process of researching a question, but also refers to a particular form
of writing—a genre—that is based in questions, rather than answers, and that centers on a narrative of research. It is a project where you search for information rather than only reporting what other writers have researched before you. The outcome of the I-Search project may be an answer to your initial research question, an understanding of how to best research this kind of question, an evaluation of sources for a future research project, or even a refined sense of the argument you might pursue in the next project.

**Assignment Prompt**

For this project, pick a topic and compose a research question or set of related research questions on a topic of significant personal interest, and work through relevant research strategies to begin to find answers to these questions. Compose a 1500-2000 word project that explains your research process, findings, and reflections.

**How do I begin?**

- To start, consider what issue you would like to explore.
- Assess the knowledge you have about this topic and the knowledge you need, and brainstorm a list of questions.
- Group related questions together, and spend some time brainstorming any other related questions. These research questions will guide your inquiry: the reading, research, and writing you do for the paper.

**When you’re thinking about whether or not your I-Search question will “work,” ask yourself the following questions:**

- Is it written as a question or set of questions, instead of a statement?
- Do I need to clarify any terms to make my research question understandable to my audience?
- Am I personally invested in exploring this question? Why or how will exploring this question help me? Can I articulate my motivation for asking this question?
- Is my question something I can research using secondary sources? Can it be answered too easily, or do I need a diverse set of sources to understand the answer?
- Is my question specific or concrete enough to explore in 1500-2000 words? Or is it too broad or too narrow?

**What does the paper “look” like?**

The I-search paper is a narrative of sorts, describing your search for answers to your research questions. In this paper, you will use first person (“I”), and will think about what vocabulary, style, and tone work best to support your development of the topic.

Ken Macrorie, in his book *I-Search* lists four parts of the paper (What I Knew, Why I’m Writing This Paper, The Search, and What I Learned), though, as he notes, this is flexible:

1) The **introduction** (What I Knew and Why I’m Writing the Paper)
   a. In the introduction you will explain three things:
      i. Your research question
      ii. What you know or think you know about the topic
      iii. Your motivation for finding the answers to your question(s)
b. The introduction may be more than one paragraph long, depending on how much prior knowledge you have. Decide in which order the content is best presented.

II) Part 2: The body of the paper (The Search)
   a. The body of the essay is the narrative of your search for answers and your reflection on this research process.
      i. In the beginning of the project, we will learn about the tools available to you through the WSU library database. You will explore these library tools as you engage in library-based research on your topic.
   b. There are two ways students generally plan the research process:
      i. You might begin with the source that is “closest” to you, the one that is easiest to access. Write about what you find there to answer your question and what seems like an intuitive next step for research. Then move on to that next source, and continue to follow the research path.
      ii. Or, you might have a more concrete research plan in place when you begin. For example, you might plan to look at scholarly articles from three particular journals to answer your question, or you might plan to find the answers to your sub-questions in a certain order.
   c. You will find at least three relevant secondary sources to learn more about your topic. For each source you write about in the body of the essay, you should do the following:
      i. Explain how you found that source: What search tools did you use? How did you navigate them?
      ii. Summarize the information you find in that source as it relates to your question.
      iii. Reflect on how that source helps you answer your question and/or how it helps you build on the knowledge you’ve found in other sources.
   d. Your narration of the search process and your reflection on and analysis of sources will help you build transitions between your discussion of the sources you discover.

III) Part 3: The conclusion (What I Learned)
   a. The conclusion of the paper is different than the traditional conclusion you may be used to in academic writing. While you may be able to summarize what you’ve learned, it’s also just as likely that you will be left with more questions, or will have gone down an unsatisfying research path. This is also worth writing about, as you are nevertheless learning about the research process, and can always carry your inquiry forth in a future project. Your conclusion should include three things:
      i. An explanation/summary of what you learned through research about possible answers to your research question.
      ii. An explanation/summary of what you learned about research and/or writing through examining this question and using the research methods you used.
      iii. A claim about your conclusions in a nutshell; that is, state what you learned through this project (your research process, writing process and
topic) in one sentence (“After finishing this project, I hypothesize/claim/understand/argue that….”)

Works Cited


Reiff, Mary Jo and Anis Bawarshi. “Tracing Discursive Resources: How Students Use Prior Genre Knowledge to Negotiate New Writing Contexts in First-Year Composition.”


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i Minnick and Aungst’s “Insistent/Resistant: Re/Visiting the I-Search,” and Ann Johns’ “Students and Research: Reflective Feedback for I-Search Papers” examine the project as it plays out in K-12 or ESL classrooms, respectively.

ii Mark Blaauw-Hara’s May 2014 *TETYC* article, “Transfer Theory, Threshold Concepts, and First-Year Composition: Connecting Writing Courses to the Rest of the College” includes a useful and relevant discussion on revising assignments to better attend to common rhetorical moves.

iii Felicity explicitly mentions the assignment requirement in her blog post, “I am writing this paper because it is a requirement. However, I chose this certain topic because I never really thought about Facebook as a discourse before. Also, since it is mainly writing people probably think that
writing has everything to do with it but I feel differently. Also I feel it would be interesting to learn more about that. Or if we don’t have to talk about writing, I would like to choose the discourse golf.”

“The full I-Search assignment description designed by the curriculum task force includes a suggested class calendar and learning outcomes.