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## DEVELOPING RESEARCH-BASED NARRATIVES TO TEACH UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

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### Abstract

What is college-level undergraduate writing and how does it need to be taught? This paper addresses the question and is divided into three parts. The first part introduces a need analysis used to develop college curriculum. In the need analysis, information is collected from interviews of faculty members at a Midwestern community college to identify their perceptions of appropriate college-level writing in English. Using the qualitative research method of transcendental phenomenology, the researcher explores the perceptions of faculty members about college-level writing and synthesizes a set of principles to be considered when teaching students how to write. In the second part of the paper, the researcher explains how the aforementioned principles are used to develop a curriculum to teach students to draft research-based narratives, as a means to satisfy requirements for college-level English writing. The research-based narratives are developed in the form of I-Search investigations, based upon previous work pioneered by Ken Macrorie. In the third part of the paper, the researcher explains the benefits of basing work assigned to students on a careful, systematic, selective need analysis. Implications of this study include developing relevant assignments for students, teaching students the value of research and writing early in their college careers, and accepting local responsibility for developing standards of teaching and writing.

**Keywords:** College-Level Writing, Undergraduate Teaching, Transcendental Phenomenology.

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### 1. Introduction and Purpose

What are the important functions of college-level writing in English within the context of an American community college and how does it need to be taught? Answering this question is difficult. Consider some of the various functions of college-level writing recognized in the published literature. It can be interpreted to mean producing writing that helps students to learn subject matter of discipline-specific courses (Gentile, 2006; Knodt, 2006; LeCourt, 1996; Lujan, 2006; Schorn, 2006; Stout, 2005). College-level writing might include helping student writers to discover their voices in, their interpretations of, important personal and social experiences (Bizzell, 1999; Coles, 1978; Elbow, 1991; Macrorie, 1985; Miller & Judy, 1978; Spigelman, 2004). Another feature of college-level writing might be to identify, question, and challenge social norms (Berlin, 1982, 1988; Bridwell-Bowles, 1995; Edelstein, 2005; Shor, 1992). A fourth important feature might be to achieve practical goals, such as demonstrating mastery of selected rhetorical, linguistic, and socio-cultural skills (Bourdieu, 1984a, 1984b; Horner et al, 2002; Bizzell, 1999).

Determining how to operationalize features of college-level writing into specific assignments can become problematic. For example, a laboratory report written by a chemistry student would demonstrate knowledge of an academic concept, as might the creation of a five-paragraph essay

or a sonnet. Would one of these forms be more reflective of the essence of college-level writing than the others? How would we know? Who decides?

## 2. The Needs Analysis

What principles of college-level writing would university faculty members like to see manifested in their students' writing? Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), in their famous qualitative study of 14 faculty members at George Mason University (GMU) in the United States, concluded that college-level writing would adhere to three important qualities:

1. Clear evidence in writing that the writer(s) have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study.
2. The dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception.
3. An imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response. (pp. 5-7)

The three observations presented by Thaiss and Zawacki are helpful, but they have limitations and need some refinement. In college-level writing, are there circumstances in which emotional displays are helpful, appropriate? What, exactly, do we mean when we say the word "writing?" Are mathematical equations, computer codes, and scientific notations all forms of college-level writing? These forms would appear to be compatible with the three observations outlined by Thaiss and Zawacki. But perhaps some people might disagree. Would interpretations of college-level writing that are appropriate for a public research university like GMU also apply in other contexts, such as in an American community college, where I teach?

To address these questions, I conducted extended qualitative interviews of six faculty members across disciplines at a Midwestern American community college. Three faculty members were English professors, one was a biology professor, and one was a mathematics professor. Although they could not represent the academic diversity of all faculty members in the college, their backgrounds were diverse enough to provide some valuable insights into the diversity of thought about the qualities of college-level writing. I interviewed each faculty member two times, for up to four hours for each participant. Using open-ended interviews, I engaged them in conversations, asking them to describe their perceptions of college-level writing, the limitations of what is or is not acceptable as college-level writing, and the changes over the years that they may have observed in characteristics of acceptable college-level writing. All of the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. I analyzed the data for trends using the qualitative method of transcendental phenomenology, applying the analysis tools of epoche, reduction, textural descriptions, imaginative variation, composite structural description, and textural-structural synthesis (Husserl, 1950, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). Through each stage of analysis, I grouped specific observations into more general categories and eventually abstract principles, resulting in general conclusions. I invited each of the participants to review my analysis to ensure that my interpretations were faithful, reasonable.

What I discovered is that the six community college faculty included in this study supported most of the observations presented by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). However, in my study, the faculty of English tended to be more tolerant of including personal experience and emotion within their perceptions of the appropriateness of college-level writing. Nearly all of the faculty, especially in mathematics and biology, were tolerant of various interpretations of the word "writing." For them, the term "writing" could include a personal essay, a poem, a mathematical formula, a scientific notation, a diagram, or even a cartoon-like drawing, as long as it communicated student learning of important academic material. Three of the six informants (one in biology, one in economics, and one in mathematics), stated that they would not penalize student work for errors in writing mechanics, including grammar, spelling, punctuation, general format, paragraph structure, etc.

While it may be tempting to dismiss the community college faculty interviewed in this study as too lenient, it is important to point out that greater open-mindedness and tolerance of rhetorical diversity may be a trend in college-level writing. Consider the important case of PhD candidate Patrick Robert Reid Stewart of the University of British Columbia (UBC), who successfully defended his PhD dissertation about indigenous architecture (Hutchinson, 2015). Stewart wrote his dissertation in an oral style of English, reflecting the style of English spoken by many native peoples of Canada. As such, he did not apply standard English punctuation or grammatical structures in his writing. Stewart (2015) also explained in the introduction of his dissertation that his refusal to apply standard conventions of English writing was an act of defiance, a form of protest against the imposition of standards of colonial European education upon native peoples of Canada. Although controversial, his decision was accepted by his dissertation committee and the university, because his work embodied, to their satisfaction, other qualities essential to college-level writing, such as the importance of the evidence he presented, the quality of his research, the relevance of his study, the synthesis of ideas from the published literature of his field. These are highly esteemed qualities in college-level writing (Addison & McGee, 2010; Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Beaufort, 1997; Bizzel, 1999; Gentile, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; Tinberg, 1997).

As a professor of an English 122 (advanced writing) course at Johnson County Community College, my challenge was to develop a course curriculum that would teach students useful skills in college-level writing. The course needed to challenge students to improve the quality of their college-level writing and research skills while also holding true to our knowledge of contemporary trends in the field of writing studies. My review of the literature and interviews that I had conducted with representatives of biology, economics, English, and mathematics led me to the following conclusion. I needed to develop a course that would encourage students to be “persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study,” that would encourage “dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception,” and that would focus on addressing the needs of an “imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). At the same time, I needed to be mindful that students would need to learn to shift between formal and informal writing, as a way to address the needs of their various academic audiences in the college.

### **3. The I-Search Book**

The challenge for me was to discover a strategy of teaching students how to improve college-level writing using a realistic, motivating assignment. After reflection over a period of time, I developed the I-Search Book assignment, based upon the concept of Research-based narrative, a form of personal writing.

Personal writing, in which students write and reflect using first-person accounts that may have general appeal, may be appropriate for college-level writing situations. Admittedly, this approach does have its critics. Spigelman (2004) points out that use of personal writing may encourage “unmediated disclosure” (p. 66). Those who use personal writing need to be mindful to critique the value of their evidence, including their own personal experience. Nevertheless, many compositionists are proponents of using personal writing to communicate and illustrate important ideas (Bizzell, 1999; Coles, 1978; Elbow, 1991; Macrorie, 1985; Miller & Judy, 1978; Spigelman, 2004). Within the field of composition studies, personal writing has been used with outside academic research to explore important professional issues. These issues include the struggles of female faculty members to gain tenure in male-dominated departments, the struggles of female writers to find their own voices when critiquing male-dominated literature, and female poets trying to find their own voices in a world dominated by male poets (Bloom, 1992; Bolker, 1979; Rich, 1972).

In my situation of teaching second-semester undergraduate writing at an American community college, I wanted students to be able to gain experience using both personal writing and more-formal, more objective academic forms. I wanted students to experience how to research topics of their own choosing using published sources and how to gather their own materials from primary sources in the field. To accomplish this, I developed an assignment that challenges students to draft personal narratives with a formal academic research component on a non-fiction topic of each student's choice. I call the extended form of this research-based narrative the I-Search Book. The concept of the I-Search paper has been around for a while. Ken Macrorie first introduced the I-Search paper in his book *Searching Writing* in 1980, last updating it in 1988 in his book *The I-Search Paper*. My assignment is based upon the pioneering work of Macrorie.

Macrorie argued that college-level writing courses need to engage students by encouraging them to write about topics, to explore topics, they care about (Macrorie, 1980, 1988). In a composition course, good college-level writing assignments challenge students to explore topics about which they have a genuine, personal interest, a need to know. Once they have selected a topic, they begin to gather information from a wide variety of sources, including professional publications, scholarly articles, personal interviews with local experts, whatever. Students are not limited in their research to the holdings of the library. They may pursue the information that they need from any credible source. After they have discovered their topics, they develop I-Search questions that help them to focus their research efforts and to show the personal connection that they have with their topics. The drafting of these papers, unlike in many other research-based courses, tends to vary between formal and informal styles. Usage of the first is expected, as students report upon their learning, their discoveries, as a personal journey. Hence, they are encouraged to use the first-person pronoun "I." When reviewing more formal academic papers and explaining the connection with their topics, students may adopt a more formal tone. The power of this approach is that it encourages students to adopt the rhetorical style they need to fit the context at hand with their paper, their evidence, their purpose. As with any research project, students need to document their sources appropriately but, as Macrorie points out, form does not become the focus of this assignment. The purpose of the assignment is to encourage students to use academic research and writing as a means to learn about something valuable and interesting for themselves.

In my second-semester English writing course, I built upon the foundation laid by Macrorie. I decided to have students devote the semester of the course to draft their I-Search work in the form of a small book. Instead of drafting a series of shorter, independent papers, I modeled our I-Search project after the basic requirements of a thesis or a dissertation. A thesis will often consist of five chapters: (1) Introduction, (2) Review of the Literature, (3) Research Methodology, (4) Research Results, and (5) Implications. For the I-Search book assignment, I combined Chapters 2 and 3 of the traditional thesis format and asked my students to draft four complementary papers that would fit within a four-chapter scheme: (1) Introduction, (2) I-Search Methodology, (3) I-Search Results, and (4) Implications. By eliminating Chapter 2, I freed students of the need to prove to an academic audience that their research would make a difference for "the field." This adjustment is more compatible with I-Search, which is focused more on empowering students to investigate and learn about topics of personal value. In addition, I worked with students to include discussion of relevant published literature in the other chapters of their books. This change also shortened the writing requirements of the course, making the workload manageable, both for the students and for me as reader and grader of students' work.

I have found it helpful to begin by asking students to identify something in their lives that they are unhappy about, something with which they are dissatisfied, something about which they would like to learn more. Most students come up with a list of things that bother them. Later, I

put them into small groups to discuss their lists. Sometimes, during the discussions, students will add and subtract topics from their lists, as they gather ideas by listening to others. At this stage, I encourage students to be open-minded in creating their lists. Invariably, some topics appear quite often. For example, many students express concern about not knowing what they want to pursue for a college major. Others want to explore a specific career choice, to learn more about it, to see whether or not it would be a good fit. Because I often have military veterans in my classes, I usually have students who want to investigate how to improve the quality of their family lives, after having been deployed overseas to fight in America's recent wars. Some students may choose to explore opportunities for opening a small business.

Next, I ask students to develop their I-Search questions for each of their potential topics. This becomes a very personal exercise, as it connects the student's identity with his or her choice of topic. In every case, a student will need to address these two questions: (1) Who am I and what are my values? (2) What do I want to achieve in life? What do I want to be doing 10, 15, or even 20 years from now? To answer these questions, students need to draft short, reflective essays about their meaningful life experiences, their reflections about what is important in life, their thoughts about the kind of life that they would like to have in the future. I often take them to the JCCC Counseling Center, where they can take personality assessments, such as the Myers Briggs Personality Inventory, and others, to gain a deeper appreciation of who they are and what they value. Working with each student, I will help him or her to develop appropriate additional questions for his or her potential topics. For example, a military veteran with family-related issues may choose to develop a set of questions like this: (1) Who am I and what do I want to achieve in my life? (2) What do I want to be doing, with whom do I want to be living and loving, 10 years from now? (3) What are some of the problems that my immediate family members are experiencing that could be caused by my overseas military service? (4) What steps can I take with my family now to restore our loving bonds?

Once students have selected their I-Search topics and have a set of I-Search questions, they may begin the research and writing process. We use class time to work on developing, answering, and investigating these questions. As a class, we offer advice of where students can go in the local community to find relevant, reasonable information. When computers are in the classroom, I set aside class time to show students how to locate published materials in our college's databases. We also use Google searches, to find published information from reputable web sites. Over time, the students gather much information about their topics and begin finding answers to their questions.

I show the students how to use their I-Search questions to focus their information gathering and how to organize their materials for writing. For Chapter 1, a short introduction of two or three pages, I ask the students to draft a brief narrative about their topic, to explain how they became interested in it. For Chapter 2, an introduction to I-Search, I ask the students to explain for an outside reader what I-Search means, who Ken Macrorie was, what makes I-Search different from other kinds of research writing that they have done in the past. Chapter 2 is usually about three to four pages in length. For Chapter 3, I ask the students to report on their I-Search findings, using a first-person narrative form. This is by far the longest chapter and will often be about 15 to 20 pages in length. To assist students in organizing and drafting their materials, I have them take their I-Search questions and use them as organizing devices for the content of this chapter. Each question becomes a subtitle. So, in the case of the military veteran investigating how to improve his family life after completion of military service, his questions would be changed into subtitles for his Chapter 3, as in this example:

- Who am I and what do I want to achieve in my life? [My identity and my dreams]
- What do I want to be doing, with whom do I want to be living and loving, 10 years from now? [Sharing my dreams]

- What are some of the problems that my immediate family members are experiencing? How might these be caused by my overseas military service? [The effects of war on my family]
- What steps can I take with my family now to restore our loving bonds? [Planning for restoration]

The last chapter of the book, Chapter 4, is an opportunity for students to reflect about what they have accomplished through their investigation and their writing. I ask them to reflect about their I-Search questions, to consider whether or not they have learned about their topics. I also ask them to consider the quality of their writing, to reflect about ways it has improved through the course. Furthermore, I ask them to reflect about the challenge of the I-Search task and to offer specific advice for those who may write an I-Search book in the future. Chapter 4 is a short, reflective piece, often two or three pages in length.

The Works Cited list follows Chapter 4, compiled according to the latest standards of the Modern Language Association (*MLA Handbook*, 2016).

At the end of the term, each student has drafted four complementary papers that create an extended monograph of about 25 to 35 pages in length. I refer to it as the I-Search “book,” because it has four chapters but, in fact, it is a monograph, a lengthy research-based narrative on a nonfiction topic of each student’s choice. The prose is polished, because we have edited the work in class and I have conferenced with students in my office and in the classroom throughout the term.

#### **4. Benefits of The I-Search Book**

There are important benefits associated with teaching students to draft I-Search books to satisfy the requirements of their advanced undergraduate writing courses. The I-Search book assignment adheres to the three general principles of college-level writing articulated by Thaiss and Zawacki (2006). By sticking with an extended, research-based narrative for the entire semester, students demonstrate their ability to be “persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 5). Students gain experience organizing and persevering through an extended, complex writing assignment, which can help to boost their self-confidence in the research and writing process. Furthermore, students learn to use “reason over emotion or sensual perception” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 5). Although students may reflect upon their passions and explore their feelings, their perceptions, their personal values with regard to a topic, they still need to logically, systematically address each of their I-Search questions in an organized way. I-Search permits the presence of emotion, but it requires application of reasoning skills to keep the writing within an academic framework. Likewise, I-Search encourages students to write for a reader who is “coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 7). Throughout the writing process, students are required to participate in peer editing sessions and in teacher-student conferences, during which their writing is critiqued. They are writing and researching topics for themselves, for their own benefits, but they are also writing for a larger public. Therefore, they need to learn to craft their writing into an easy, comfortable read.

In addition, the I-Search book assignment is flexible enough to accommodate the need for students to experiment with alternative discourses to communicate important factual information. An important discovery of my interviews with community college faculty members is that faculty members of various disciplines may permit, even encourage, students to use non-traditional ways to communicate complex academic concepts. These could include the use of equations, scientific notations, drawings, diagrams, cartoons, and the like. In the I-Search book, students have the freedom to include alternative discourse as part of their writing assignment, as long as there is a logical reason for including it. As a case in point, I have had visual art

students include samples of their art work in their I-Search books, as they wrote to describe their limitations as artists and what they wanted to learn in art school, or in an art apprenticeship. I encourage this inclusion, as long as it pertains to a student's topic and as long as the student includes at least 20 pages of standard English prose.

Perhaps most important of all, students learn that researching and writing can be enjoyable, rewarding experiences. We know that writing can be useful as a tool for learning disciplinary content (Gentile, 2006; Knodt, 2006; LeCourt, 1996; Lujan, 2006; Schorn, 2006; Stout, 2005). In the case of the I-Search book assignment, I am showing students how research and writing activities can have practical benefits, which can be motivating. I am not forcing the students to write about topics that they dislike. I am inviting them to use our writing class as an opportunity to learn more about a topic of deep personal interest for themselves. As they learn more about their topics, they begin to write. They learn to question their original assumptions, to synthesize sources, to clarify their thinking. They learn to communicate their findings, their ideas, to an academic audience, and this is where they learn about the importance of good writing to communicate messages, about the power of writing to clarify thought.

### **Conclusion**

This study reported how a college-level writing course was developed in an American community college to address the academic needs of local students. Results of this study, based upon interviews of community college faculty members, confirmed the findings of Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), that faculty members in higher education tend to prefer writing indicating that authors "have been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study," that faculty members prefer writing that reflects the "dominance of reason over emotion or sensual perception," and that faculty members prefer writing intended for an "imagined reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response" (pp. 5-7). Furthermore, this study discovered that community college faculty may be very tolerant of alternative discourses in college-level writing, depending upon the effectiveness of the alternative discourse to communicate academic ideas clearly.

The study illustrates how this information was used to develop a college-level writing course to meet the academic needs of undergraduate students enrolled in an American community college. The students completed an extended monograph, known as an I-Search book, which embodied the important principles of college-level research and writing, as identified in this study. Perhaps, most important of all, the students experienced that research and writing activities can be personally rewarding.

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