I-Searching in Context: Thinking Critically about the Research Unit

For Jason Luther, the I-Search paper alone did not seem to do enough to help students think critically. In this article, he shows how he supplements the I-Search paper with a unit to develop habits and methods of inquiry utilizing documentary films, creative nonfiction, and feature articles discussed through Socratic seminars.

As final exams near, I usually ask students to evaluate our English course and my teaching. When I did this in 2003, my high school juniors were putting the finishing touches on their I-Search papers, and their comments were unequivocal when it came to the third question: "What was the most meaningful assignment all year and why?" Out of sixty-three students who completed the evaluation, fifty-eight of them, or 92 percent, agreed that the I-Search paper was the most meaningful assignment they had had all year (and I had assigned at least one paper a month).

This I-Search was not just meaningful for the students. I genuinely enjoyed reading the papers, even after I got home from a full day in the classroom. I can remember the personal questions students asked and the stories that unfolded in their answers, and I can't say that about many other papers that I have read since I started teaching five years ago. But this is exactly what Ken Macrorie had in mind when he published *The I-Search Paper* in the 1980s. In the preface to the 1988 edition, he writes that an I-Search is when "[a] person conducts a search to find out something he needs to know for his own life and writes the story of his adventure" (preface, par. 17). The most important requirement for the I-Search is that students' searches are genuine. That is, their questions must speak to immediate and important needs in *their* lives. The goal is to get back to the basics of inquiry: "curiosity, need, rigor in judging one's findings" (par. 33). By requiring that students ask a genuine question, the I-Search establishes a significant purpose and context for students, encouraging them to enjoy inquiry, not fear it.

Because knowledge is grounded in context, Macrorie insists that the I-Search be written in narrative form. "The most fundamental mode of human communication," he argues, "is telling stories" (98). Instead of insisting that students write in a voice they do not naturally use, he argues that we should encourage students to explore their curiosity in a voice they are comfortable with. He says, "Students may be beginners in writing, engineering, or mathematics, but they're not beginners as human beings" (98-99). An important corollary to this version of research is countenancing—encouraging students to converse with sources—which Macrorie cautions is not developed by requiring them to regurgitate "the accepted word" that authorities pass down through lectures and textbooks. Instead, countenancing develops through the genuine, student-initiated conversations that occur between those who know (professionals) and those who want to know (students). Eventually, by encouraging students to use their experiences and searches to synthesize meaning, they become authorities themselves. Even if the