I-SEARCH ACTIVISM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY
OF I-SEARCH INSTRUCTION IN A BASIC SKILLS ENGLISH COURSE

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A Dissertation

by

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SPRING 2015
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I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University
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to be awarded for the dissertation.

________________________________________________________,
Graduate Coordinator                                      ________________
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated first and foremost to my family. My children Sierra and Reed have motivated me to grapple with this project when I didn’t feel like doing it anymore. I would look at your picture and imagine you cheering me at graduation, and I would feel like there was nothing that I couldn’t do. My parents Boyd and Toni instilled in me a Puritan work ethic that enabled me to spend the countless hours necessary to produce this study. But most importantly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful wife Monica, whose shoulder I would cry on when I didn’t think I could possibly finish, who would proofread a poorly-written draft of this dissertation and reminded me it was better than the errors I focused on, whose unconditional support empowered me to do my best work. Without all of you, this study would not be possible, and I dedicate this dissertation to you with the same me love, support, and encouragement you have given me throughout this entire journey.

I also dedicate this dissertation to basic skills practitioners throughout the world and at Pine College. If teaching is the art of stealing (as I’ve been told on numerous occasions), you have allowed me to become a master thief much to the benefit of my students. I have tapped into your collective wisdom to write this dissertation, and I hope that this study can pay it forward and help other basic skills practitioners grappling with the best way to help basic skills students succeed.
Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to basic skill students, especially every student who has ever walked though my classroom door and the students in the case study who have been most giving of their time and honesty. Your hard work, dedication, and passion move me to be the best instructor I can be. You are my teachers, and I have learned much from each and everyone of you.

I am most grateful to everyone who has contributed to this study.
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I have been honored to work closely with a dissertation committee whose passion and teaching excellence I strive to emulate; I find you and your service to students exemplar. My dissertation committee has been instrumental in my journey toward producing this dissertation. First, this study would not be possible without Dr. Lisa Romero, who offered great insight to the ideas of Paulo Freire and in whose class I first decided to teach I-Search in spite of the department-mandated proficiency exam. You planted the seed that ultimately became this dissertation. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Dan Melzer, who helped me wrap my head around the behemoth of Chapter 2. And I could not have chosen a better committee chair than Dr. Porfirio Loeza. You have been a guide, a mentor, and a friend that have helped me complete all parts of this study. You have inspired me to become a fellow ethnographer. I am also eternally grateful for how you have been an advocate on my behalf. I thank my committee all kindly for your wisdom, guidance, friendship, and understanding throughout this process.

I would also like to acknowledge all the participants of this study. Even though the guarantee of confidentiality prevents me from acknowledging you by name, I am grateful for the time, energy, and honesty with which you have participated in this study. I know your time is precious, and I am truly appreciative of your wisdom and openness. I hope this study does you justice.
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Fields of Study

Basic Skills English, Freshman Composition, Student Leadership.
Abstract

of

I-SEARCH ACTIVISM: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY
OF I-SEARCH INSTRUCTION IN A BASIC SKILLS ENGLISH COURSE

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This ethnographic case study examines faculty’s perceptions of basic skills instruction as well as the efficacy of an I-Search curriculum implemented in a basic skills English class. I synthesized Macrorie’s (1988) popular I-Search assignment with Freire’s (2011) problem posing pedagogy to create a three unit sequence: in unit 1, students define a core belief and/or value; in unit 2, students define a problem with storytelling and engage in research to understand the nature of the problem; and in unit 3, students conclude their I-Search paper by writing about solution(s) to their problem.

The purpose of this study is to propose an alternative to the traditional basic skills English curriculum. Prior research suggests that too many instructors cling to a behavioralist pedagogy in which instructors break complex literacy acts into sub-skills and present these sub-skills in decontextualized exercises and prescriptive processes (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). The traditional pedagogy has been found to lead to a stagnation of success where less than 50% of basic skills English students achieve their educational goals (California Community College Student Success Task Force, 2011; California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2014a). Since the literature suggests
that I-Search can present students with a genuine, authentic need that can contextualize instruction, this study—which includes surveys and interviews of basic skills English instructors, ten weeks of observation, and survey and interviews of a case study class instructor and students—examines students’ perceptions of instruction and how those perceptions can foster development.

The findings draw heavily upon Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development to suggest that I-Search presents students with an ecologically rich learning environment. With I-Search instruction, the instructor supported students’ autonomy by allowing students to pick any topic they like, and students responded by choosing a relevant and impactful topic along the mesosystem (or other environments with which students interact); these mesosystem connections led students to positively perceive the classroom and experience a genuine and authentic need for instruction. Students’ positive perception of the classroom then led to greater student engagement and the formation of “a tight, cohesive community.” Another recurring theme in the case study classroom was validation, both the instructor and students validating each other considerably throughout the course. Validation in the case study classroom may have accounted for students’ increase in competence, or the reported belief that students can exert the effort to successfully write academic essays (Ryan & Deci, 2000). All these instances of engagement led students to perceive more of an overlap between students’ home and academic cultures and begin the formation of what de Anda (1984) calls bi- or multicultural identities.
The findings culminate in an additional model, the Ecological Model of Student Engagement. While Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) model has been used to describe students’ college experience, there is a research gap about how his model can be applied to college instruction. The Ecological Model of Student Engagement not only accounted for engagement in the case study classroom but can also be used as a heuristic to help practitioners make their classrooms ecologically rich. This study also posits that I-Search instruction can be an alternative to traditional basic skills English curriculum, especially how I-Search provides natural scaffolding to help students understand the dialogic nature of academic discourse and write research papers.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

There's gotta be something more, gotta be more than this
I need a little less hard time, I need a little more bliss
I'm gonna take my chances
Taking a chance I might find what I'm looking for
There's gotta be something more

*(Sugarland, 2005, paragraph 2)*

**Impetus: A Qualm of Conscious or a Practitioner-Researcher’s Journey to I-Search**

I first began to sing the Sugarland song above while I was teaching English 60, a basic skills writing course one level below English 1A, and English 70, an integrated reading and writing course at the same level, at Pine College. (In order to protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms have replaced all names, including those of the case study community college, courses, the instructors, and students.) Both courses have an impromptu timed final that students must pass to pass the course: “A departmental proficiency essay exam is required for successful completion” *(Pine College, para. 3, 2011)*. As is true of virtually all required assessments, this department-mandated proficiency exam changed my instruction in profound and meaningful ways *(Stone, 2012; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009)*. I began to ask myself, “What can I do to help my students pass this exam?” and the answer to this question usually led to some form of simplified instruction. For instance, I have taught students a simplistic “Three reasons why” strategy to quickly generate ideas for an impromptu final. For the following prompt, “Write an essay in which you take a stand for or against Obama’s plan to lengthen the number of required school days,” I would suggest that students ask “What are three reasons why the school year should or should not be lengthened?” The answer to this
question could become the thesis statement and each reason could be more fully
developed in its own body paragraph. While I genuinely want all my students to be
successful, I often had a feeling in the pit of my stomach, my intuition warning that
something was not quite right with instruction: I did not feel I was preparing them for
English 1A, nor was I preparing them for other transfer-level courses. At these times, I
found myself repeating the Sugarland verse: “There’s gotta be something more!”

To make matters worse, I taught strategies that encouraged students to make black
and white declarative statements instead of grappling with the complexity of knowledge
inquiries. For instance, I found myself making statements such as, “For the English
60/70 exam, you should take a stance because it is easier to write an essay arguing for
one position.” “Students shouldn’t try to ‘Wow!’ instructors who grade the exam;
instead, they should write a simple, five-paragraph essay.” “If you can’t think of an
example, you can always embellish or even make stuff up. Just make sure your examples
are believable.” Statements such as these strongly contradict my own personal ethics
and continually forced me to have a mental tug-of-war between what is morally right (or
write) and my desire for students to pass the final. I firmly believe that simplified
instruction for timed finals failed to provide students with opportunities to grapple with
the subject, consider the ideas from multiple perspectives, and synthesize different ideas
together before they arrive at their perspective to express in their writing. At that time, I
had believed that I would have to either teach strategies for writing timed tests or teach
higher cognitive skills, but I couldn’t teach both. Again, I would repeat the chorus,
“There’s gotta be something more than this.”
A New Perspective. Even though I wasn’t aware of it at the time, I was in desperate need of a new perspective to inform my English 60 and 70 courses. Then in my doctoral program, I read Freire’s (2011) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for the first time in its entirety. While I was familiar with Freire’s ideas, especially the banking analogy and problem posing pedagogy, I read a part that made me carefully reflect and evaluate English 60/70 instruction: “In order to have the continued opportunity to express their ‘generosity,’ the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this generosity which is nourished in death, despair and poverty” (44). This passage, then, led to my own conscientzao, a critical reflection of my instruction, especially my simplification of instruction. “Can this simplified instruction just be false generosity that perpetuates students’ struggles with academic literacy?” I began to realize that my simplified instruction was purposeless, that it was just busywork that took up time but didn’t lead to as much development and growth as I wanted. As purposeless busywork, I was imposing prescriptive processes on my students without providing them with opportunities to make the connection between the skills and strategies I introduced and how they can help them achieve their genuine purposes. As a result, I was perpetuating injustice because students were only making marginal improvements in their writing; these marginal improvements, however, would not be sufficient to prepare students for the demands and rigor of English 1A and other transfer-level writing assignments.
An I-Search Solution. Even though I had decided not to teach to the test, I was still not sure what I should do instead. I then remembered being introduced to the I-Search assignment at a Puente training. Macrorie (1988) designed the I-Search assignment to address the problems he saw with the traditional research paper, which he considered a “joke” in the way that students glue together hodge-podge ideas in a way that most would consider plagiarism. Instead, he had students begin with a topic that they needed to know more about; in fact, Macrorie argues that a topic should choose students. Then students “search” for information that answers their genuine research questions; although he allows all types of research, he favors the interview as the best way to answer their research questions. Lastly, students write the story of their I-Search in a narrative form in their I-Search paper. I was drawn toward this assignment first because I felt I could introduce students to the research assignment that other transfer-level instructors assign. Secondly, I have always been a firm believer that composition instruction should be more than just literacy instruction; I feel composition instructors are in a unique position to educate the whole student through writing assignments. With I-Search, students can do more than write just a research paper; they may potentially solve problems that are keeping them from academic or any other type of success.

I then began my search for “a little more bliss” (Sugarland, 2005), or an English 60 and 70 curriculum which will not only help students pass the final but also introduce students to the higher cognitive skills essential for both college and professional success. I then synthesized the ideas of Freire with I-Search to create a more personally relevant three unit sequence in my English 60 and 70 courses. In the first unit, students write a
paragraph in which they define one of their most important core beliefs and/or values, which I later tie to the general problem-solving process. Before starting the I-Search unit, we talk a lot about limiting scripts, or the automatic, default responses that people have learned to deal with any situation or problem. We talk about how these scripts can lead us to act unconsciously in ways that can diminish our chances for success, and how we can rewrite limiting scripts to align more with success (Downing, 2010). I then suggest that I-Search instruction is one way to add new perspectives to the problem-solving process, and that I-Search can help students rewrite limiting scripts.

In the second unit, students begin I-Search instruction by exploring a problem they are either currently experiencing or feel passionate about. To accomplish this, instruction is scaffolded so that students can begin to engage in that essential first step in research, limiting a topic, or narrowing a general, broad topic to something that students can analyze to the depth necessary for college-level writing (Macrorie, 1988). Then I teach students creative writing techniques to define the problem with storytelling by freezing the most important moments involving the problem and then describing those moments in ways that makes them come alive for readers. Next, students create research questions that will help them understand the nature of the problem and search for different perspectives to apply to their situation. Lastly, students synthesize their own perspective with the research they collect and present this synthesis in their own writing (Graf & Birkenstein, 2007). This process, I reason, mirrors the problem-solving of experts (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) and is a process that students can apply to any and/or all their problems.
For the third unit, I ask students to continue with their research and present a solution(s) to the problem that can lead to either their own and/or others’ action. This unit focuses more on critical evaluation in that students weigh several different solutions to determine which ones are most relevant to their situations and only then propose them (Luther, 2006). Because I-Search instruction encourages students to write about a problem they are personally experiencing or an issue they feel passionate about, it inserts a genuine, authentic purpose into the writing process (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993). Students can then make a connection between English skills and strategies and how they help fulfill this purpose; thus, students will be more likely to internalize the skills or strategies and apply it to other environments. Moreover, this I-Search unit can become a non-cognitive strategy that students can apply anytime they experience a problem and seek alternative perspectives to solve it (Farrington et al., 2012).
**Background Information: Or an I-Search of Basic Skills and I-Search**

California community colleges (CCCs) have done a woeful job of creating a college environment where basic skills students succeed (Shulock & Moore, 2007). Nationally, researchers have found that on average 60% of community college students enroll in at least one basic skills course (Attewell, Levin, Demina, & Levey, 2006; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013); however, the California Community College Students Success Task Force (CCCSSTF; 2012) estimates that 70% of CCC students require at least one and many require two or more basic skills courses. The California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO; 2014a) reports that 59.5% of underprepared students failed to complete their educational goals—a certificate, an Associate degree, or transfer—within six years. Further, CCCCO reports that 56.4% of students who tested into basic skills English courses failed to complete a transfer-level English course. At Pine College, the site of the case study, 61.2% of basic skills students failed to achieve their academic goals, and 48.2% of basic skills English students failed to complete transfer-level English course (CCCCO, 2014b). While not all community college students may define success the same as researchers, these numbers indicate that too many students are falling through the cracks, and California community colleges are failing to meet the needs of its basic skills student.

At the same time, California is in desperate need for college-educated workers, and California community colleges can play a pivotal role in producing highly skilled workers for the information age (Moore & Shulock, 2010). President Obama (2009) projects that jobs requiring an associate degree will grow twice as fast as jobs requiring a
high school education, and if the United States fails to provide these college-educated workers, those jobs will go overseas (CCCSSTF, 2012; American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2012). In fact, Johnson and Sengupta (2009) project that California will need an additional one million college graduates to fill the demand for high-skilled jobs. Given the huge number of students who test into basic skills courses, modest improvements in the success rates of basic skills students can take huge steps toward filling this void. Moreover, since basic skills students are often non-traditional and come from diverse cultures and communities (CCCSSTF, 2012; AACC, 2012; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Moore & Shulock, 2010; Horner & Lu, 1999), they can provide strengths and perspectives that can enhance both college and professional work environments. (With that said, it is also imperative that colleges and work places view and embrace basic skills students’ strengths and perspectives as assets; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Basic skills students can provide employers with a skill set that white middle and upper class employees simply can’t. For instance, Wagner (2008) suggests that employers will need employees who can collaborate across great distances, perhaps even with colleagues in different countries and from different cultures. Given that college can help students engage in a process of bi- and multicultural socialization—that is, identifying with the conventions and values of both their home and academic cultures (de Anda, 1984; Rendon, 1994; Horner & Lu, 1999; Soliday, 2002)—basic skills students are in a prime position to serve as bridge builders and contribute to effective collaborations.
Traditional Basic Skills as an Ecologically Weak Environment. The abysmally low rates of basic skills students’ success and the pressing need for college-educated workers lead me to the following I-Search question: Why do basic skills community college students experience such low rates of success? While answers to this question are complex and involve many interdependent factors, it is imperative that any solution addresses the nature of the problem: the reasons community colleges are unable to provide basic skills instruction that helps students succeed (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). This I-Search question led me to the following assumption: traditional basic skills classrooms provide students with ecologically weak environments in which students too often fail to make connections between what they learn in the basic skills classroom and how they’ll apply it to outside environments.

My assumption draws heavily upon Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development. Bronfenbrenner challenged the positivist assumption that a variable can be isolated in experimental research; instead he argues that other factors, especially environmental, influence results and should be considered during analysis. Consequently, he borrows from the field of physical ecology to propose an Ecological Model of Human Development. In his model, he suggests that an individual’s interaction with the environment is determined not by the environment as it exists in reality but rather by how it is perceived by the individual. Further, he asserts that environments outside the microsystem also influence behavior and thus extends his model to include a mesosystem (or an outside environment in which the individual also interacts), the exosystem (or an environment in which the individual is not present but
which influences behavior in the environment nonetheless), and the macrosystem (or the most distal level of culture and subculture which provide the individual with the values, beliefs, and norms that can guide behavior). Bronfenbrenner then posits that the Ecological Model of Human Development can account for how the individual interacts with the environment in ways that progressively increase in complexity.

In an ecologically weak environment, students may perceive the classroom negatively, and this negative perception can negatively influence student engagement. For instance, students may perceive a macrosystem difference between their home and academic cultures (Ferdman, 1990; Rendon, 1994; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Soliday (2002) attributes this perceptual mismatch to what she calls the politics of agency, the tendency for policy makers, administrators, and faculty to attribute the low rate of success to cultural differences between students’ home and academic cultures. Attributing cultural differences as the source of failure, these institutional agents would implement policies and procedures which discount and neglect students’ home culture. However students whom these policies affect would likely feel invalidated (Rendon, 1994); these perceptions of invalidation can lead to negative perceptions of the environment, thus leading to disengagement with and withdrawal from the college environment, including dropping out.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) describes the exostem as an environment in which students are not present but which can influence students’ behavior nonetheless. English departments that not only create but also determine how standards are assessed (Fox, 1999) make up one of the strongest exosystem environments that affect students in the
classroom. The make-up of English departments can reveal a lot about the establishment of curricular standards. Qualification in community colleges is determined by expertise in English: composition, creative writing, technical writing, and literature. However, with the exception of composition, none of the specializations require the development of pedagogical content knowledge, the knowledge of how to present and arrange content knowledge so that students can understand and apply its principles (Shulman, 1986). Without this pedagogical content knowledge, curriculum sets minimum standards often based on the most salient features instructors observe in student writing: grammatical mistakes, lack of essay structure, and rudimentary development. Instructors then create curriculum that responds to these features and set a floor of the barest minimum sub-skills necessary for academic literacy (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). By focusing on these sub-skills, instructors are more likely to simplify instruction and present these sub-skills in a decontextualized fashion; that is, instruction is likely to break the complex processes of reading and writing into simple steps and provide students with opportunities to practice these sub-skills most often with other people’s writing (Soliday, 2002; Rose, 1980; Shaughnessy, 1971).

English faculty then must implement these curricular standards in the microsystem, or the basic skills classroom. CCCs too often herd basic skills students into lecture-based courses too similar to the traditional courses with which they have historically struggled (CCCSSTF, 2012; AACC, 2012; Rendon, 1994; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Grubb & Gabriner (2013) posit that there is a disconnect between how research suggests people learn and basic skills instruction (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Asera, 2006;
Horner & Lu, 1999; Soliday, 2002). In these courses, instruction is often guided by the traditional behaviorist perspective of instruction (Rendon, 1994) that follows the banking analogy; that is, the instructor, who is filled with knowledge, deposits that knowledge and prescriptive processes into students’ minds who passively absorb it (Freire, 2011). Such instruction is instructor-centered, with the instructor using controlling behavior which increases students’ extrinsic motivation (motivation caused by external factors such as rewards and avoidance of punishment) and decreases intrinsic motivation (motivation that is inherent in the act itself; Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, research suggests that learning involves a process similar to the way language is acquired: individuals experience a need to communicate; they use the skills and knowledge they currently have to communicate to the best of their ability; a more informed other offers help; and the individuals practice the skills until they have mastered and internalized them (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993). Such a process contextualizes learning so that students are more likely to make the connection between instruction and how it is applied outside of class; as a result, students are more likely to internalize instruction and transfer it to outside environments (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

Instructors too often view basic skills students from a deficiency model and overestimate their challenges and underestimate their assets (or strengths). As mentioned previously, instructors without pedagogical content knowledge most often focus on the most salient features of students’ work: errors, lack of essay structure, and rudimentary development. As a result, instructors often determine that they must first fill these deficiencies before students can engage with the higher-level skills of synthesis,
application, and critical evaluation essential for college-level work (Asera, 2006). For instance, Rose (1980) suggests that remedial English instructors often assign personal narrative essays so that students can focus more on rudimentary essay structure and errors and students can have a successful experience from which to gain momentum.

Moreover, Grubb & Gabriner (2013) adds to this by suggesting that instructors tend to simplify instruction by breaking a skill into smaller and even smaller chunks, such as one type of grammar error. However, research suggests that learning is an active process in which individuals form hypotheses, test hypotheses through active engagement, and then refine their hypotheses (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993). However, with simplified instruction, students are deprived of opportunities to create hypotheses, and if the learning style of the student doesn’t match the instructor (as is too often the case), students often struggle (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

Instructors underestimate the assets (knowledge, skills, and/or competencies) that students bring with them to the classroom. Gonzalez et al. (1995) call these assets “funds of knowledge,” the strategies (including skills, abilities, ideas, practices) that families develop in order to function and survive. Without intending to, instructors may invalidate students’ experiences when they discount or ignore the funds of knowledge that students bring into the classroom (Rendon, 1994). Ignoring or discounting funds of knowledge can have several detrimental effects on students’ attitudes and performance in school. Because students are deprived of an opportunity to build upon what they know (Piaget, 1972), students are more likely to struggle and experience a decreased perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Further, students are more likely to perceive a difference
between home and academic cultures; in extreme cases, this perceived difference can lead to the formation of oppositional identities (Ogbu & Simons, 1998), but in other cases, perceived difference can lead to disengagement and withdrawal (Rodby, 1999; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2001; Horner & Lu, 1999). Lastly, instructors may attribute students’ poor performance to “not caring” or “cultural differences” when in reality there may be very different reasons (Soliday, 2002; Moll, et. al. 1995; Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

**I-Search Activism.** If traditional basic skills instruction provides students with an ecologically weak environment that perpetuates students’ low rates of success, then basic skills English programs are in desperate need of a new paradigm. The purpose of the current study then is to test the efficacy of a basic skills English curriculum based on an I-Search curriculum—in which students define a problem with storytelling, conduct research to understand the nature of the problem, and then apply research to the problem in order to arrive at solutions—that can provide students with an ecologically rich environment. In an ecologically rich learning environment, students are more likely to perceive an alignment between the basic skills English classroom and the many other environments with which students interact: other college courses, family, work, and community environments. Because of this perceived alignment, students are more likely to view the environment positively (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995), engage more actively with instruction (Kuh, 2008, 2009), and internalize and transfer instruction (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Consequently, the current study can potentially spark conversations at English departments about how basic skills English instruction can
be restructured to better meet students’ needs. Then readers of this study, especially basic skills instructors and administrators, can search for similarities between the case study site and their institution and determine if an I-Search (or research) curriculum would be appropriate at their institutions.

Since Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) posits that an individual’s perception of the environment influences their behavior, affective issues such as intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and personal relevance (Gay, 2002; Verhoeven & Snow, 1991) can sometimes drastically affect students’ perceptions of and engagement with the classroom. For instance, Deci and Ryan (1985) introduces Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with the assumption that humans are born innately curious and seek optimal challenges; SDT can then explain how elements in the socio-cultural environment can either increase or decrease this innate curiosity. When individuals feel their autonomy is supported (that is, when students are encouraged to pursue topics that satisfy their innate curiosity), they feel an increase in intrinsic motivation that can increase engagement. Similarly, Macrorie (1988) designed I-Search to encourage students’ autonomy by empowering students to “find out something to satisfy an itch of curiosity as insistent as athlete’s foot. Somebody’s got a question and wants an answer to it” (162). The literature on I-Search has found that when students choose a personally relevant and meaningful topic, they are more motivated and exert more effort toward their I-Search assignment (Rubin, 2002; Johns, 2006; Arnold, 1989; Muchmore, Chow-Hoy, Clark, Herter, Moss, Russell, & Young, 2011; Klausman, 2007; Luther, 2006; Kuiper, Volman, & Terwel, 2005). The research suggests that when
students choose a personally meaningful topic, they actively engage with their topic and are more open instruction. The active engagement can then lead students to not only achieving but also transferring course outcomes. However, because students will not naturally choose a personally relevant topic, the literature suggests that instructors can scaffold instruction to help students choose a topic through collective brainstorming and mapping activities (Minnick & Aungst, 2007; Assaf, et al., 2011; Luther, 2006; Klausman, 2007).

Since research suggests the transition between students’ home and academic culture is not as smooth for basic skills students (Horner & Lu, 1999; Rose, 1980; Tinto, 2007), the I-Search assignment can serve as bridge between students’ home and academic culture. My I-Search curriculum marries two conflicting paradigms in composition: expressivism (Elbow, 1995) and social constructivism (Bartholomae, 2002; see Crick (2003) for an argument for the synthesis of these two paradigms). First, Elbow argues that the purpose of composition courses should be to encourage students to become not academic but rather general writers. To accomplish this, he argues that composition instructors should limit their authority so that instruction can nurture the growth of students’ voice. However, Bartholomae argues that composition courses should be guided by social constructivism in that instruction should socialize students to academic discourse. My I-Search unit uses expressivist techniques when students use storytelling to define the problem in a way that is personally relevant to them and develops their voice. Then instructors use social constructivism techniques to expose students to the conventions and values of academic literacy, especially a dialogic epistemology of
knowledge. I-Search literature has similarly found that the I-Search assignment can serve as bridges between students’ home and academic culture (Rubin, 2002; Johns, 2006; Muchmore, et. al., 2001; Assaf, et. al., 2011; Luther, 2006; Zorfass & Copel, 1995). Such a bridge can serve as a validating experience (Rendon, 1994) which encourages students to develop bi- and/or multi-cultural identities (de Anda, 1985). These bi- and/or multicultural identities can help students embrace both home and college roles and perceive overlaps between their home and academic cultures.

Since students often experience challenges outside of college that affect their success in college (Sternglass, 1997; Tinto, 2007; Gittell & Steffy, 2000), I-Search can provide instructors with an opportunity to engage in the problem-posing pedagogy encouraged by critical pedagogy. Freire (2011) posits that because the traditional pedagogy dehumanizes individuals, a problem-posing curriculum, in which instructors become co-leaners and engage students in dialogues about their problem, encourages students to develop conscientizao (or a critical awareness of their situation), co-construct a solution to the problem, and empower praxis (or some form of humanizing action). Similarly, Macrorie (1988) designed I-Search to encourage students to reflect on their experience and write the “truth” as students know it. The literature has found that students who choose a personally relevant topic based on their experience often engage in praxis (Assaf, Ash, Saunders, & Johnson; 2011; Kaszyca & Krueger, 2002; Minnick & Aungst, 2007; Arnold, 1989). For instance, the literature describes how one student made sense of an acquaintance rape she experienced in high school (Rubin, 2002); another established home reading practices after searching the benefits of reading on
education (Klausman, 2007); and a young mother searched whether or not she should pursue a career in architecture (Macrorie, 1988). As these examples illustrate, the I-Search process can become a non-cognitive strategy that helps students develop a critical awareness of their situation and then engage in actions to improve it (Farrington, et al., 2012).

**Statement of the Problem**

Because basic skills English programs are failing to prepare too many basic skills English students for the rigor and demands of academic writing, basic skills English programs are in desperate need of a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1963). The recent Basic Skills Accountability Report Supplement to the ARCC (CCCCO, 2012) offers some sobering statistics: “Of those who assessed below transfer level in English writing, the largest proportion assessed at two levels below transfer, and about 38% of this proportion succeeded in completing transfer-level English” (5). The report also disaggregates the data based on the level of basic skills courses: 46% for students who test into one level below transfer, 34% for students who test two levels below transfer, and 27% for students who test three levels below transfer (see Table 1). Since completion of a transfer-level English course is a requirement for a degree, transfer, and the completion of most certificates, these numbers indicate that students are not completing their educational goals; in fact, the Student Success Scorecard reports that only 40.5% of underprepared students (students that require at least one basic skills course) complete their educational goal (CCCCO, 2014a). However, since the completion of a basic skills sequence and transfer-level English are critical points that give students momentum to achieve their
Table 1:
Percentage of Basic Skill Students who Progress to and Successful Pass Freshman Composition (CCCCO, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level below transfer</th>
<th>Percentage assessed (Fall 2010)</th>
<th>Percentage progressing to and successfully completing transfer English within 6 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

educational goals (Leinbach & Jenkins, 2008), community colleges can strategically invest resources into basic skills English programs to push students past these momentum points.

These sobering statistics lead to some questions that need to be asked: why do basic skills students fail to complete college-level English courses? Grubb and Gabriner (2013) pose an answer to this question by describing a remedial pedagogy, basic skills instructors breaking academic literacy into sub-skills and then assigning decontextualized exercises and modeling prescriptive processes. For instance, an instructor may perceive run-on sentence errors as a problem in student writing and then assign exercises on correcting run-on sentence errors in other people’s writing. Moreover, Rose (1980) posits that there is a disconnect between the types of tasks assigned in basic skills writing courses and those in transfer-level courses. Basic skills writing courses tend to assign simplified personal narratives that lack the complexity of transfer-level courses; consequently, completion of a basic skills course does not necessarily prepare students for college-level writing. Overall, basic skills instruction is presented in a way that
contradicts the basic precepts of how people learn (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Asera, 2006). In order to increase the success of basic skills students, English departments need to align basic skills English instruction with what research and theory suggests are the ways that people learn (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000). In other words, basic skills English programs are in desperate need of a new paradigm to inform practice.

In spite of the desperate need for a new paradigm, there is a gap in the research about what basic skills English reform can be implemented at scale. While some programs have been found to have a great deal of success—accelerated programs (Goen-Salter, 2008; Adams, Gearhart, Miller, & Roberts, 2009; Goen & Gillotte-Tropp, 2003), stretch courses (Glau, 2007), and learning communities (Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013)—these programs have often struggled when implemented at scale in community colleges. These special programs often depend on the transformational leadership and instruction from institutional agents who often go above and beyond the call of duty; when merely replicated, these programs tend to have only marginal increases in student success, if any at all (Coburn, 2003). For instance, the success of Puente, an English and professional development learning community that targets nontraditional students (Puente, n. d.), is dependent on both the efforts and dedication of the transformational state leaders, English professors, and counselors who self-select into these programs. Many institutional agents who self-select into these special programs may feel a strong sense of calling toward these programs that traditional instructors do not, and this sense of calling may lead them to form transformational
relationships with their students. When these special programs are implemented at scale, the reformers often do not take the time to receive feedback and “buy-in” from the actual practitioners who will be implementing the reform (Quint, Jaggars, Byndloss, & Magazinnik, 2013). Even though the case study is not participating in scale reform, the current study will test the efficacy of an I-Search curriculum that can be implemented at scale in both relevance (Gay, 2002) and accelerated scale reform.

The current study strives to spark dialogic, problem-posing conversations about the nature of basic skills instruction in English departments. In particular, the current study seeks to add to the literature that questions the myth that students must first learn lower cognitive strategies such as writing grammatically correct sentences and developing their ideas at a rudimentary level before they can learn higher cognitive strategies such as critical evaluation, synthesis and application (Soliday, 2002; Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009). Instead, the current study will suggest that student can develop academic literacy skills better when taught in the contest of literacy tasks that demand high cognitive skills; when instruction is contextualized with genuine, authentic literacy tasks, and when instructors scaffold instruction to provide students with the support needed to navigate these interactions (Rose, 1980), basic skills students will be more likely to internalize and transfer instruction to other environments (Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000). This research study will then strive to fill this research gap by examining one reform, teaching I-Search (or research), in basic skills courses that can be implemented at scale. Even if community colleges do not add research to their basic skills curriculum, this study can encourage English departments to consider
alternatives “outside the box” that have the potential to increase basic skills English students’ success (CCCSSTF, 2011). It is only through these dialogues that English departments can initiate a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 2012) that is so desperately needed in basic skills English programs.

The Nature of the Study

The current study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does the case study classroom reflect the culture of the basic skills English program, especially the influence of the department-mandated proficiency exam?
2. In what ways does I-Search instruction mediate teaching and learning in a basic skills English class?
   a. How might students apply, internalize, and transfer I-Search instruction inside and outside the basic skills English classroom?
3. How can instructors scaffold I-Search instruction in order to meet students’ needs and lead to the development of academic literacy?

This study is based on the assumption that an I-Search curriculum can present students with an ecologically rich learning environment in which students perceive connections between instruction and how they might apply it outside the classroom. In an ecologically rich environment, instruction is contextualized, thus enabling students to make the instruction-skill-application connection. From this perspective, students can learn lower and higher cognitive skills at the same time; in fact, students may be more likely to internalize and transfer lower cognitive skills when they are taught in the context of genuine, authentic literacy tasks that demand higher cognitive skills.

In order to achieve this purpose, the current study uses an ethnographic case study methodology to examine one basic skills English program and one classroom that incorporates I-Search instruction. This methodology follows the conviction of Grubb and Gabriner (2013) that “observations inside classrooms, as well as an understanding of the
institutional context, are necessary to analyze teaching and learning activities in any educational setting” (6). First, a case study approach will allow me to track how development occurs over time, how instruction builds upon past lessons, and how I-Search instruction can facilitate the development of academic literacy over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Second, since I-Search represents the convergence of several, complex factors, an ethnographic study will allow me to provide rich descriptions of the learning environment that can capture the nuance and complexity of learning and development (Geertz, 1994). In order to unearth the multiple, interdependent levels of I-Search instruction, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Model of Human Development will allow me to capture human behavior holistically, especially how outside environments may influence instruction. I will then use Deci and Ryan’s (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to infer how I-Search instruction in the classroom affects students’ learning, especially affective issues that are essential to basic skills students’ success. Readers can then look to see what parts of the study are similar to their situation and apply elements of the study there (Boudah, 2011; Merriam, 2009).

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Given that theoretical frameworks can provide me with a language to analyze data, the current study uses SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) as a theoretical framework and the Ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) as a conceptual framework. SDT aligns well with the I-Search unit I’ve created in my course. SDT and I-Search share the same assumption: that people are born innately curious and seek to expand their knowledge. SDT then asserts that individuals have three essential
psychological needs—autonomy (or the belief that the individual is the originator of the action), competence, and relatedness (or the feeling of being connected to others). I-Search has the potential to meet these three needs. First, since I-Search allows students to choose a topic that they “need” to know about, I-Search instruction encourages instructors to support students’ autonomy. Second, since I-Search allows students to choose topics they are already knowledgeable about, students may feel more competence in their ability to write a research paper at the conclusion of the course. Finally, because I-Search invites instructors and students to be co-constructors of knowledge, and because dialogue is an essential part of the I-Search process, students may feel a sense of relatedness to others involved in the I-Search paper; students feeling a sense of relatedness will be more likely to synthesize the values and convention of the instructor, and thus academic discourse, as their own (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). As a result, SDT offers me language and a structure with which to infer the effects of instruction on students.

Since my synthesis of I-Search (Macrorie, 1988) and Freire (2011) presents the convergence of several complex, interdependent factors, I use Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development to determine how these relationships can lead to the development of academic literacy (see Figure 1.) The microsystem, or the classroom environment in which development occurs, can account for how the instructor invites students to actively engage with I-Search instruction: students define a problem with storytelling, conduct research to gain a greater understanding of that problem, and then propose a solution(s) to the problem.
Bronfenbrenner then posits that it’s not how the environment exists in reality but rather how the individual perceives it that accounts for the extent to which each individual interacts with the environment. The mesosystem, or an environment outside the classroom with which the developing individual also interacts, can account for how students bring their personal experiences, especially experiences involving problems, into the classroom. Lastly, the macrosystem, or the level of culture, can account for the convergence of students’ home and academic cultures; that is, the macrosystem can account for how students apply academic values, beliefs, and conventions to their own culture to thus gain a better understanding of both. In an ecologically rich environment, students can view instruction as a validating experience (Rendon, 1994), in which students can contribute their own perspective and beliefs to enhance academic culture.

**Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development**

Figure 1 depicts how Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) viewed the Ecological Model of Human Development as a series of systems embedded within each other, much like Russian dolls.
As such, I-Search instruction has the potential to contextualize instruction in the contact zone, the overlap between students’ home and academic culture (Pratt, 1998).

Consequently, the Ecological Model of Human Development allows me to go back and forth between the microsystem classroom, experiential factors of the instructor and students, and the global factor of students’ and academic culture in order to paint as holistic and complex picture of instruction as possible.

**The Ecological Model of Student Engagement.** While I have found literature that applies the Ecological Model to examine the relationship between students and larger college culture (Renn, 2001; Andrejack, 2011; Masse, 2009;), I noticed a knowledge gap about how the ecological model is applied to college instruction. I found it imperative to address this gap because Renn and Arnold (2003) stress that the ecological model can be a heuristic with pedagogical implications for instruction. I found that an additional model, the Ecological Model of Student Engagement, was necessary to fill this gap, account for engagement in the case study class, and serve as a heuristic to help practitioners create ecologically rich classrooms conducive to engagement. To create this model, I synthesized Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model (1979, 1993, 1995) with Deci and Ryan’s (1985, 2000) SDT to describe how I-Search instruction in the case study classroom created an ecologically rich environment in which engagement was the cultural norm (see Figure 2). This model can serve as a heuristic to help basic skills instructors encourage students to make the instruction-skill-application connection that positively influence students’ perceptions of the classroom. This model can then serve as
Figure 2. The Ecological Model of Student Engagement.
theoretical rationales as instructors strive to create classroom environments that students perceive as relevant and that are conducive to student engagement.

**Operational Definitions**

**Basic Skills**

Defining pre-transfer level courses is problematic. While there are several names for pre-college level courses—remedial, developmental, college preparatory, basic skills—each definition can be seen as having a negative connotation or failing to capture the phenomenon of pre-transfer level courses. The traditional term “remedial education” uses medical language to suggest that students have a cognitive deficiency which needs to be cured before students can progress to transfer-level courses (Soliday, 2002; Rose, 1980). Developmental education can be considered too general because all education in its nature is developmental (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Freire (2011) might object to the use of “basic” in basic skills because the term implies that instruction should only include a simplified curriculum, and that it oppresses students from low SES by denying them instruction in higher cognitive skills such as synthesis, critical evaluation, and application. However, having to choose one name, I will use the term that is used predominantly in California: basic skills, “Those foundational skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language (ESL), as well as learning and study skills, which are necessary for students to succeed in college-level work” (CCCCO, 2012, p. 2).

**Banking Analogy of Education**
A metaphor popularized by the seminal work of Freire’s (2011) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that describes the traditional approach to education in which a teacher who is considered an expert at the topic deposits knowledge, often through lecture, into the passive minds of students. According to Freire, this type of education can be viewed as a false generosity that perpetuates oppression (See also Behavioral Paradigm of Education).

**Behavioral Paradigm of Education**

A form of instruction in which the instructor assumes the role of expert and determines the knowledge and skills that students should master. Instructors using a behavioral paradigm often break complex skills into smaller sub-skills and then have students engage in exercises which are often “out of context” to how the skill is used in larger contexts. Behavioralist instructors often use controlling behaviors such as rewarding desired and punishing undesired behaviors which can decrease intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). There is a disconnect between the behavioral paradigm of education and what research suggests are the ways adults learn (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; see also the banking analogy).

**Conflict Theory**

A theory that explains the stratification of groups in society and the role of education in this stratification. In conflict theory, Collins (1971) describes how the dominant status group sets standards that create boundaries for inclusion into and exclusion from the high status group. In their seminal work *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis (1978) argue that capitalistic business
interest comprises of the high-status group and pressures schools to tailor education to the needs of their interests. While proponents of a functional paradigm would argue that modern society is meritocratic, conflict theorists argue that achievement is determined more by social connections and family status than individual effort and ability (Hurn, 1994).

Critical Pedagogy

A pedagogy argued for by Freire (2011) in which the oppressed can humanize not only the oppressed but also the oppressor. See banking analogy and problem posing pedagogy for more information about critical pedagogy.

Developmentally Instigative Characteristics (DICs)

Bronfenbrenner (1993) added developmentally instigative characteristics (DICs) to his Ecological Model to account for the characteristics of the individual that induce or inhibit engagement within the microsystem. However, Bronfenbrenner stresses that DICs do not cause development but rather “may be thought of as 'putting a spin' on a body in motion” (p. 14).

In the current study, I interpret the DICs to include those psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) hypothesize are necessary to increase intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning. In this study, I approach DICs from the assumption that I-Search does not cause these DICs but rather strengthens (or potentially weakens) those DICs that students already bring to the classroom.
Ecological Model of Human Development

A model of human behavior popularized by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) as a response to his critique of experimental research which tends to isolate variables. According to Bronfenbrenner, a variable can never be isolated because other factors, especially environmental, inevitably influence results. Consequently, he developed the Ecological Model to account for how the individual, with developmentally instigative characteristics that either induce or inhibit engagement, interacts with the environment in ways that progressively increase in complexity: the microsystem, or the direct environment the behavior is occurring; the mesosystem, or an outside environment in which the individual also participates and which influences behavior in the microsystem; the exosystem, or an environment in which the individual is not present but influences behavior in the microsystem nonetheless; and macrosystem, or the culture(s) and/or subculture(s) that influence behavior in the microsystem. Lastly, Bronfenbrenner (1995) added the chronosystem to account for time, both the historical past experiences of the developing individual as well as the sequencing and scaffolding of activities in the microsystem. For this study, the Ecological Model of Human Development will offer me both the language and a lens to examine how I-Search instruction affects an individual’s perception of the environment and how that perception affects engagement within that environment; that is, I can use the Ecological Model to determine how I-Search mediates instruction and learning in the classroom.
I-Search

Macrorie (1988) initially designed I-Search to offer instructors an alternative to the traditional research paper. For I-Search, students choose a topic (or, as Macrorie frames it, a topic chooses students), write about what they know about the topic before the search, search to determine other perspectives about the topic, and then write about the journey of their knowledge inquiry in their I-Search paper. Students write the I-Search paper for both the instructor and other individuals who would like to be more informed about the topic.

In this study, I-Search represents my synthesis of Macrorie (1988) with Freire (2011) in which students define a problem with storytelling, engage in research to gain a better understanding of that problem, and then synthesize research with their own perspective to propose solution(s) that can lead to praxis, or humanizing action.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Deci and Ryan (1985) describe intrinsic motivation as motivation which springs from an inherent desire to engage in a task, such as the pleasure of reading a good book or mastery of a musical instrument. Intrinsic motivation contrasts with extrinsic motivation, which is motivation that emanates from a desire for an external reward such as a good grade. Research has continually found that intrinsic motivation leads to greater engagement than extrinsic motivation (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci,
While education is by its nature extrinsic, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) suggest that the process of integrated regulation, in which individuals synthesize the values and goals of others into themselves, can make extrinsically motivating tasks more intrinsically motivating.

**Problem-Posing Education**

A progressive form of education popularized by Freire (2011) and intended to liberate students in which a teacher poses a problem to students and then empowers students to pose solutions through dialogues. In a problem-posing pedagogy, the instructor, who traditionally accepts an authoritative role, instead adopts a role of co-investigator, exploring possible solutions with students. The teacher and students engage in dialogues to arrive at praxis, or some form of liberating action.

**Perceived Self-Efficacy**

The “beliefs that an individual can organize and execute the actions necessary for a desired result” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Perceived self-efficacy is an inferential process based on several complex and interdependent factors including similar past experiences, observations of models, and social interactions. Perceived self-efficacy is similar to Deci and Ryan’s (1985) need for competence.

**Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) crafted SDT to be a unifying psychological theory to account for the conditions of optimal development. According to SDT, individuals have three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and
relatedness—that must be met “for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth, integration, as well as constructive social development” (p. 68). SDT aligns well with the elements of I-Search presented in the current study and is used as a theoretical framework to determine how an I-Search assignment can facilitate students’ intrinsic motivation and self-regulated learning by supporting these three psychological needs.

**Limitations**

This study is limited in several ways, including a qualitative methodology and the selection of the case study course. This study is based on the assumption that even though the findings of this study are determined by many factors, including the dynamics of the instructor and the make-up of the class, I-Search instruction played a prominent role in the findings. However, given that this is a qualitative study, it is impossible to determine what factors are more influential than others with certainty. I have triangulated the data from several perspectives in order to determine that it is most likely I-Search instruction that leads to the results, even though other factors do, indeed, play a prominent role. Given the qualitative nature of the study, the findings of this study are only applicable at the case study site; it is up to readers to make the connection between the findings at the case study and how they might be applied at their institutions.

Given that I created the I-Search curriculum used in this study, I am biased in that I want it to succeed. I genuinely feel that I-Search is an improvement to the traditional model of instruction that too many basic skills English instructors use (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Rose, 1980; Soliday, 2002; Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Kutz,
Groden, & Zamel, 1993). However, to overcome this bias, I collaborated with the case study instructor and encouraged him to add his own perspective, thus distancing myself from the study and allowing me to approach it more objectively. I then purposely looked for evidence that contradicted the assumption that an I-Search curriculum presents students with an ecologically rich learning environment which leads to greater engagement and the internalization of learning outcomes. Lastly, I member-checked with the participants of the study, thus verifying the observations and triangulating data. The combination of these steps helped me present a more accurate portrayal and analysis of I-Search instruction at the case study site.

The current study is further limited because I have purposely chosen to use my work site as the case study site. This choice could potentially bias the results of this study; that is, since I am familiar with both instructors and students at the case study site, I am not as likely to be as objective as if I was an outside researcher. However, I have chosen defamiliarizing techniques such as purposely looking for contradicting evidence and review my findings with my dissertation committee to limit the influence of using my own work site (Geertz, 1983; Kaomea, 2003; Pan, 2012). Further, I’m an insider, (that is, an emic; Merriam, 2009), who is intimately familiar with the culture of basic skills English instruction and more capable of making subtle and nuanced observations that an outsider might miss. I was also able to quickly establish rapport with participants, and this rapport led to honest, authentic responses.
Conclusion

The current study challenges the deficiency model of basic skills English instruction that stresses that students must first learn lower level skills before they can learn higher level skills. As an alternative, I suggest that if instructors present students with genuine, authentic literacy tasks that require high cognitive skills, scaffold instruction to support students’ needs, and engage students in dialogic conversations, instruction can be contextualized, and students can learn both low and high cognitive skills at the same time. In fact, students in the case study class may be more likely to internalize and transfer the academic literacy skills because instruction is contextualized. Further, since students choose their own topic, instruction can be culturally relevant; as a result, students may be intrinsically motivated and approach instruction from a position of strength (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Moll, et. al., 1995), thus increasing perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Chapter 2 will include a thorough review of relevant and peer-reviewed literature about Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development, traditional basic skills programs, I-Search (Macrorie, 1988) instruction, and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000). Chapter 3 then argues that since the I-Search assignment represents the convergence of several complex, interdependent factors, an ethnographic case study methodology is the best way to answer the research questions and paint a comprehensive picture of I-Search instruction with thick descriptions (Geertz, 1994). Chapter 4 then identifies common themes found at the case study site and analyzes them to determine how instruction may be internalized and
transferred to other environments. Lastly, chapter 5 summarizes and interprets the findings, inviting readers to consider applying the findings of the case study to their own institutions.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Chapter 1 defined the problem of basic skills education as the unacceptably low rates of success: 56% of basic skills English students fail to complete a transfer level English course (California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO), 2014). Because transfer-level English is a requirement for most educational goals, these numbers suggest that too many students are failing early in their educational journey. This led me to the following two I-Search questions: (1) why do students struggle so mightily in basic skills courses? And (2) how can English departments increase their success rates in basic skills English courses? Because research suggests a remedial pedagogy in which students receive drill instruction in decontextualized sub-skills stagnates success (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Asera, 2006), I developed an I-Search unit as an alternative to the remedial pedagogy; in my I-Search unit, students identify a core belief and/or value in unit 1, define a problem with storytelling and examine the nature of the problem in unit 2, and then propose a solution(s) in unit 3. The I-Search unit can provide students with a genuine, authentic purpose that contextualizes instruction; thus students are more likely to make the instruction-skill-application connection. Chapter 1 also introduced the theoretical frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) which allows me to examine how I-Search instruction may affect student learning and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Model of Human Development that will allow me to paint a holistic picture of I-Search instruction with rich, thick descriptions.
This literature review will begin with the assumption that active engagement mediates instruction and learning in a basic skills English course; that is, the more students engage with instruction, the more likely they will learn, internalize, and transfer instruction (Kuh, 2008, 2009). From here, I will use the literature review to test two hypotheses: (1) traditional basic skills English courses present students with an ecologically weak environment in which students are less likely to perceive an overlap between the basic skills English classroom and other environments with which students interact: home environments, other college courses, work environments, college organizations, etc. (2) I-Search is more likely to present students with an ecologically rich environment in which they perceive an overlap between the classroom and the many other environments with which they interact. This perceived overlap can then lead students to actively engage with instruction, thus potentially internalizing and transferring instruction (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

In order to test my hypothesis with the literature, I will examine the following three parts in the literature: in part I, I will examine Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1994) Ecological Model of Human Development in order to provide both the framework and language to analyze the literature about basic skills English courses. The remaining two parts will take a structure similar to my I-Search unit. In part II, I will use the ecological model to analyze why students struggle in traditional basic skills courses, in order to determine what specific issues I can confront with the I-Search unit. In part III, I will again use the Ecological Model to determine the potential ways that I-Search can mediate instruction and learning in a basic skills English classroom; I will lastly examine Self-
Determination Theory (SDT) to provide me with the language and concepts to analyze how I-Search instruction can lead to student learning, internalization, and transfer of instruction.

**Part I: The Ecological Conceptual Framework**

In order to compare the hypothesis to the literature, I need both a framework and language that can look at the relationships between the basic skills classroom—which includes interactions between individual students, the instructor, texts, and instruction—and the many other environments with which students interact—family, work, peer groups, other campus environments, other college classes—as holistically as possible. In order to accomplish this, I use Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development to transverse back and forth between the basic skills English classroom and other environments to determine the amount of convergence. I can then infer how the richness of the ecological environment may affect active engagement and learning in the basic skills classroom.

I have chosen to use Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Model of Human Behavior to examine the complex relationships between interdependent factors. In his seminal book *The Ecology of Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner challenges objective, scientific method, or “development-out-of-context” as he calls it, that attempts to isolate and manipulate certain variables in order to determine how the presence or absence of that variable affects behavior. He argues that any variable cannot possibly be isolated because other factors, especially environmental, influence results. As an alternative, he extends physical ecology, in which interdependent systems occur naturally, to create the
Ecological Model of Human Development, in which behavior is determined by interactions between the individual and the environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) draws heavily upon the ideas of Lewin’s (1935) study of soldiers during World War II. Away from the trenches, soldiers viewed the forest in bucolic terms; however, as they approached the trenches, they began to perceive the forest as dangerous, with many opportunities to be ambushed by the enemy; soldiers’ perceptions of the forest were mediated by their proximity to the trenches. Bronfenbrenner (1979) similarly extends this argument by positing that it’s not the environment as it exists in reality but rather how it is perceived by the individual that affects behavior. This can be especially true for basic skills English students’ perceptions of the basic skills writing class; that is, students’ perceptions of the classroom can influence engagement with instruction (Kuh, 2008, 2009).

However, the question remains: what influences an individual’s perception of the environment? Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) argues that these perceptions can be influenced by experiences in environments outside the immediate environment. In an attempt to present a unifying theory of psychological development, Bronfenbrenner posits the Ecological Model of Human Development as a series of interdependent and embedded systems: the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. In Bronfenbrenner’s model, these systems are fully embedded in each other, much like Russian dolls (see Figure 3). This model allows researchers to transverse back and forth between the individual, with differing “backgrounds and developmental trajectories” (Renn & Arnold,
2003, p. 270), and the environments with which students interact. According to Bronfenbrenner, the Ecological Model serves as an alternative to laboratory experiments which discount if not completely neglect environmental influences. In fact, Bronfenbrenner posits that if researchers maintain rigor, experiments in real world settings can produce more accurate findings because it considers the influence of the environment.

**Microsystem**

In order to determine the relationship between these different variables, the center of Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) model is the microsystem, or the direct environment in which behavior is occurring. Bronfenbrenner defines the microsystem as, “pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-
to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment” (p. 15). As alluded to above, the microsystem consists of both physical objects, which can contain functional possibilities (Lewin, 1935), as well as social features that influence the individuals’ perceptions of, engagement with, and development in the environment. In basic skills English courses, the instructor leads lessons and activities in which students interact with academic literacy and each other.

A major tenet of the Ecological Model is that the developing individual engages in tasks and develops skills of increasing complexity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Renn, 2000). For instance, Renn (2000) used the Ecological Model in order to examine college students of mixed race from diverse institutions: three primarily white private research universities in the Northeast, one rural Southern college, one public Midwestern college, and a primarily white community college. She found that, “Participants often remarked on how opportunities to engage in academic work in the area of identity provided meaningful settings to think, read, hear, and talk about important issues related to identity” (p. 398). In fact, the college environment provided mixed-race students with theoretical models to understand the social construction of race more complexly and apply these ideas to themselves. Similarly, the ecological model may serve as a tool to examine the basic skills English classroom. Since a major purpose of basic skills English instruction is to provide students with opportunities to master academic literacy, basic skills English instruction must, by necessity, be structured to
gradually increase in complexity to prepare students to grapple with more and more complex literacy acts.

The individual. The microsystem consists of interactions between the individual student and other participants in the microsystem, mainly the instructor and other students. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993), individual engagement is determined not by the environment as it exists in reality but rather how it is perceived by the individual. According to the Ecological Model, researchers must consider the fact that individuals in the same environment do not behave similarly; that is, researchers must answer the question, “Why do individuals behave differently in the same environment?” Bronfenbrenner (1993) posits that an individual’s interactions within the microsystem are influenced by developmentally instigative characteristics (DICs), the individual’s characteristics that either encourage or discourage active engagement with the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003). For instance, given that many students are vocationally oriented (Cox, 1999; Masse, 2009; Sternglass, 1997), their vocational orientation can serve as a strong DICs. When the environment aligns well with the achievement of a vocational goal, these DICs can encourage active engagement with the environment. However, when the environment does not align well with the goals (as is often the case in basic skills courses for which students do not received college credit; Cox, 2009; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013), this perception can weaken DICs. Bronfenbrenner (1993) emphasizes that DICs do not cause development but rather strengthens or weakens already existing forces: DICs “do not determine the course of development; rather, they may be thought of as 'putting a spin' on a body in motion” (p.
Therefore, the ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1995) can account for how instructors tap into those characteristics that students bring into the classroom and that can either encourage or discourage active engagement.

However, it must also be noted that the relationship between the individual and the microsystem is one of reciprocity; that is, the environment can influence the individual as well as the individual can influence the environment. For instance, Knaus (2012) describes how he uses critical race theory and responsive, voice-centered training to encourage his students to reflect on the violence in their community. When one student shared a story about how she was raped, the dynamics of the class changed. The class became more open to discuss issues of sexual assault and more supportive of each other. Similarly, my I-Search unit has the potential to provide students with opportunities to reciprocally change the dynamics of the classroom. When students share their problems with each other, there is the possibility of students not only supporting but also becoming a resource for each other. Students can begin to shape the class around their own needs and interests and potentially change the dynamics of the class (and culture).

**Chronosystem.** In addition to DICs, the individual also has a history that can influence behavior and development in the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner (1995) added the chronosystem to account for this influence: “The individual's own developmental life course is seen as embedded in and powerfully shaped by conditions and events occurring during the historical period through which the person lives” (p. 641). In basic skills English courses, students’ past educational experiences, especially if they were not successful, can have profound effects on classroom behavior. For research, the
chronosystem can encourage researchers to collect data where interviewees share their past experience and infer how the relationship between the past experience and the current microsystem influence each other.

The chronosystem can have implications for how instructors structure and scaffold instruction. Since schema theory posits that individuals assimilate new information in relation to what they already know, instructors can begin lessons with an inductive opening that taps into that knowledge that students bring to the classroom (Anderson, 1984). For instance, instructors can begin a lesson on making inferences by showing commercials in which advertisers encourage viewers to make the inference, “I need to buy this product.” This inductive opening allows students to approach instruction from a position of strength because the focus is on what students do or know, rather than what they lack. Since the ultimate purpose of basic skills course is to gradually increase the complexity of instruction, researchers can look for references to past lessons to determine how instruction builds upon itself.

**Mesosystem**

Next, since outside environments can have a direct impact on the microsystem, Bronfenbrenner (1993) added the mesosystem, which “comprises linkages and processes taking place between two or more settings containing the developing person” (p. 22), as the next level. Since many community college students also work, have family responsibilities, and participate in groups outside of college, they are likely to have rich mesosystems that can influence behavior in the classroom (Tinto, 2006; Andrejack, 2011; Sternglass, 1997; Gitell & Steffy, 2000; Horowitz, 2013). For instance, in a qualitative
study of commuter students in a large California public university, Masse (2009) found that one student’s family had exerted pressure on her to work in order to provide financial support for the family; this pressure influenced the amount of time and energy she could exert toward the classroom, but she also notes how a different student’s family had offered both emotional and financial support toward her college education. Similar to DICs, mesosystem connections can affect the amount of time, energy, and effort that students exert towards instruction and should be considered when examining basic skills writing classrooms.

Researchers can also use the mesosystem to account for how individuals outside the classroom can influence college students’ assimilation into college culture. A wide range of research suggests that students’ integration process into college culture can have a profound impact on their likelihood of success (Tinto, 1987; Astin, 2007), and students’ mesosystem connections can have a strong influence on students’ integration into culture. For instance, traditional students who have parents who attended college may have grown up hearing stories that underscore the importance of and integration into college. However, nontraditional students who are often the first in their family to attend college (Rendon, 1994; Rendon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000) are not as likely to have these strong mesosystem connections to the classroom and are more likely to experience “bumps” in their college journey. There exists an opportunity in basic skills English classrooms to introduce students to college culture by integrating mesosystem messages about college culture into instruction.
Mesosystem analysis provides researchers with an excellent opportunity to analyze how students perceive the environment. In fact, Renn and Arnold (2003) argue that, “The ease with which students can move from one peer microsystem to another within the mesosystem may influence the total number of different interactions a student experiences and therefore influence his or her developmental possibilities” (p. 271). The ease of interactions the authors reference above may be accounted for by perceived alignment or misalignment within mesosystems and can potentially account for students’ differing levels of engagement. For instance, if students perceive that instruction will help them be successful in other college courses or work environments, they are more likely to perceive an overlap and actively engage in class (Rodby, 1999); however, if students do not perceive the overlap, then they may be more likely to engage minimally, thus lacking opportunities to develop academic literacy (Cox, 2009). This perceived alignment or misalignment can then account for how basic skills students perceive the college environment.

**Exosystem**

Further, the exosystem represents environments in which the individual is not present but influences behavior in the microsystem nonetheless (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993). A strong exosystem environment may be the English department in which faculty creates both curriculum and policies that dictate what instructors do (but not necessarily how). The curriculum that English departments create can exert pressure on instructors that affect not only what they do but also how. For instance, English department faculty can institute a mandated-department final that student must pass to pass the course, as is
the case of the case study site. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) point out that department-mandated finals put pressure on instructors that often lead them to instruct in controlling ways that undermine students’ intrinsic motivation. This policy can have profound effects on students’ perceptions of the classroom that affects students’ engagement.

Macrosystem

Lastly, the macrosystem is the level of culture that provides beliefs, values, and norms that guide behavior in the classroom (Vygotsky, 1978). The macrosystem consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exosystem characteristics of a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure, with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in such overarching systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 25).

As such, the two predominant cultures in the basic skills English classroom are academic culture and students’ home culture. Similar to the mesosystem, perceived alignment between home and academic cultures can result in active engagement and perceived misalignment can result in diminished and/or disengagement. For instance, Rodby (1999) reports how the perceptions of one basic skills student, Horatio, was influenced by his perception of and interactions with the college environment. To begin, Horatio viewed college as an opportunity to strengthen his ties to his Chicano heritage. However, as California was voting on Proposition 187, the proposition taking away services from undocumented workers, his perception of the college environment shifted; he began to associate the college environment with the same forces trying to push Proposition 187: he missed class regularly, turning in only a minimal amount of work at a significantly lower quality. The instructor then encouraged Horatio to see college as an opportunity to
educate his classmates to resist Proposition 187. After the perspective change, Horatio began to interact with the class at the same level as before Proposition 187 became an issue. In this example, Horatio’s active engagement with his composition course was directly tied to how he perceived it: when his perceptions aligned with his cultural heritage, engagement was greater; however, when his perception of college was opposed to his personal identity, he resisted engagement. As this line of reasoning suggests, active engagement can then be seen as the quality of alignment between academic culture and the many other cultures with which students interact.

Basic skills students may also be seen as being between their home culture and academic culture; that is, similar to generation 1.5 students (Harklau, Siegal, & Losey, 1999), basic skills students may be seen as partially assimilating portions of academic culture while misperceiving other portions. For instance, drawing upon Nathan’s (2005) idea of the liminal state—“the ambiguous place of being neither here nor there” (p. 147)—Andrejack (2011) suggests that adult students can view “a common experience, such as striving to become a better writer, taking a basic skills class, or just being an adult student and feeling (as one student stated) like ‘a duck in jello,’ may create a feeling of lowliness, which could create a liminal state” (p. 177). As Andrejack alludes, the chronosystem, which includes students’ historical and past educational experience, can have profound effects on their ability to assimilate to academic culture. If basic skills students have not had a history of educational success, then their placement in a basic skills English course (still considered “bonehead English” by many) could possibly reinforce the idea that they might not be cut out for college (Cox, 2009), thus placing
students in a liminal state. Similar to Andrejack, researchers can use the idea of a liminal state to account for students’ perceptions of the relationship between home and academic cultures.

**Conclusion**

Past research has found Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development a useful tool to examine higher education. Renn (2003) found the ecological model useful for examining how students of mixed race negotiate their identity through their interaction in a college environment. Andrejack (2011) found the model useful for examining adult culture on a northern Atlantic college; while he found that adults formed not a culture but rather a peer group, he did find the model useful for examining the convergence of several mesosystems. Masse (2009) found the model useful for examining the college culture of commuter students in that it can account for how other mesosystem environments can both encourage and discourage active participation in college. Rodby (1999) found the model useful to examine the literacy experience of generation 1.5 students in college composition courses. In a previous study, I had similarly used the ecological model to examine student motivation in Community College Puente Program, a special program that offers students English instruction, counseling, and mentoring to meet the program’s high expectations. Lastly, Barton (2007) found the ecological model useful in examining the literacy practices of individuals. (However, Barton challenges the notion that the ecological model may be conceived as co-centric circles. Consequently, I closely examined the data to determine if it represents co-centric circles, as Bronfenbrenner conceptualizes it, or some alternative
In conclusion, I find that Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development is an effective framework to examine the culture of a basic skills English classroom. First, given that research has found that the perceived congruence between the basic skills English classroom and the many other environments with which students interact can predict student success (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Tinto, 1979; Astin, 2007), the Ecological Model can be one way to measure the level of congruence and alignment between environments. Moreover, given Bronfenbrenner’s emphasis on how the complexity of an individual’s interactions with the environment increases progressively, the ecological model in general and the chronosystem in particular can measure and account for that increase. This increased complexity can capture the ultimate goal of basic skills instruction: helping students meet and exceed academic literacy expectations.

**Part II: Traditional Basic Skills Courses**

In part I, I examined Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development that will provide me with both the language and framework with which to analyze the literature and my data. In the ecological model, the developing individual interacts with the environment in progressively complex ways. Consequently, Bronfenbrenner posed the idea of developmentally instigative characteristics (DICs) to account for the characteristics of the individual that determines the extent to which he or she interacts with the environment. However, Bronfenbrenner also posits that environments outside the immediate environment (which he calls the microsystem) also
influence behavior: the mesosystem (or other environments with which individuals also interact); the exosystem (or environments in which the individual is not present but influences behavior in the microsystem nonetheless); the macrosystem (or the level of culture which provides the values, beliefs, and norms that guide behavior in the microsystem); and the chronosystem (or the past lived experience of the developing individual). The Ecological Model of Human Development can then account for how all these systems converge together to account for individual behavior in the microsystem.

This section is structured like the first part of my I-Search curriculum; that is, I will use this section to understand the nature of the problem. I will search the literature for answers to the following I-Search question: Why do students in traditional basic skills courses experience such abysmally low rates of success in both basic skills courses and, for those who progress beyond basic skills courses, in transfer-level English courses? I’ll argue that traditional basic skills courses create an ecologically weak environment in which students perceive little overlap between the English classroom and the many other environments with which they interact: other college courses, home and family, work, peer groups, other organizations, etc. Because of this lack of perceived overlap, students are less likely to engage with the classroom to the extent necessary for the development and internalization of academic literacy. This section can then inform my I-Search solution by helping me design an ecologically rich classroom environment where students are more likely to perceive overlaps between instruction and application.
Conflict Theory

Although conflict theory is not a theoretical framework for interpreting data, it will provide me with a theoretical lens with which to examine the literature about traditional basic skills instruction. I have chosen to use conflict theory because the student population of Pine College does not necessarily represent the diversity of California; the students at Pine College are predominantly white, with a student population of 70% “White, not of Hispanic origin,” 12.4% Hispanic population, 4.9% Asian, 3.3% African American, and 9.4% other or not identified (Pine College, 2012b). However, as indicated by a rise in students who receive financial aid (39% in the fall of 2009 compared to 53% in the fall of 2012; Kelly, 2013, personal communication, 4/12/2013), the case study does have a growing number of students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds for whom conflict theory can provide insight. Further, I have noticed a slight shift in the literature where researchers are beginning to examine SES in addition to ethnicity; in fact, Tinto (2006) argues that at selective four-year universities, there is greater ethnic diversity than SES diversity, and the gap between well-to-do and poor students appears to be increasing. Therefore, Conflict Theory (Collins, 1971; Bowles & Gintis, 1978) can help me understand how the relationships between community colleges, basic skills English programs, curriculum, instructors, and students can lead to a stagnation of success.

Conflict theory draws heavily upon Marx’s ideas of economic determinism, or the belief that the economic structure of society influences all human activity (Marger, 1987). In economic structures, the have-nots (or the proletariat) struggle with the haves (or the
bourgeoisie) over scarce resources which are necessary to live and to live well. Since the have-nots live a relatively comfortable life, they strive to perpetuate the status quo. The haves will occasionally concede resources to the have-nots to communicate that things are getting better, but these concessions often present the have-nots with a “false consciousness,” that is, a state of ignorance caused by the ruling class’ control of information. In order to improve their situation, the proletariat must develop a class consciousness of how the structure of society perpetuates their low SES and only then start a revolution for a more equitable society (see Freire (2011) for a similar perspective).

Collins (1971) applies Marx’s ideas to the educational system in the late 1960s to describe how employment requirements reflect the efforts of competing status groups—that is, groups of individuals who share a common culture while excluding those with dissimilar characteristics—to monopolize job opportunities by imposing their cultural standards on the selection process. In Collin’s view, schools often serve the purpose of indoctrinating students to the values and conventions of the dominant status group, to either recruit future members (especially those already from high status groups) or to instill a sense of respect for high status groups’ authority (especially for students coming from among middle class and blue collar backgrounds). Even though education may also serve as a means by which students from middle class and blue collar backgrounds may achieve upward mobility, conflict theorists argue that social connections and family status have a greater influence on achievement than individual effort and ability (Hurn, 1994).
In their seminal work *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Bowles and Gintis (1978) add to Collins (1971) by specifying capitalist business interest as the high status group. They argue that the structure of education, especially junior (or community) colleges, is overly influenced by capitalist interests, preparing students for non-professional work in local businesses and industries. A proponent of Bowles and Gintis would argue that business interests infiltrate community college boards and advisory committees and lobby community colleges to take a more vocational track. In vocational tracks, business interests can argue for policies and curriculum that stress following rules, allowing minimal discretion of tasks, and showing respect for the authority of teachers, the same behaviors that are desired of low- and middle-income, non-professional jobs (Hurn, 1994). The notion that education may facilitate social mobility and educational and occupational success based on meritocracy may be a “false consciousness;” instead they would argue that educational and occupational success is determined more by associations than merit.

I was unable to find any studies that use conflict theory to understand the composition classroom. To search for studies, I first searched CompPile, Eric, and then Google Scholar and scoured search results for studies involving basic skills English, college composition, and Conflict Theory. Then I searched Dissertations Abstracts International (DAI) for conflict theory and still did not find one study involving the use of conflict theory and composition. However, I was able to scour dissertations that applied conflict theory to some part of the college experience and searched for similarities between these studies and composition students. For instance, McDonough
(2000) used conflict theory to examine transfer from community college to four-year college nursing programs; Zurita (1999) used it to explain the college experiences of Latino/a college students at a Midwestern university; Cowan (2006) used it to examine policies and programs to recruit diverse faculty; and Kelly (2008) used it to analyze students who report no ethnicity on college applications. Although there is considerable overlap between conflict theory and other theoretical frameworks such as critical pedagogy (Freire, 2011), critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006), systems theory (Bess & Dee, 2008), I found that Conflict Theory had greater explanatory potential to describe the development of basic skills programs and explain why basic skills programs may resist reform to increase student success rates.

In order to answer my I-Search question about the abysmally low rate of success for basic skills English courses, I will use conflict theory to better understand why traditional basic skills courses fail to serve over half of the community college population (CCCSSTF, 2011; AACC, 2012; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). I will first use conflict theory to argue that basic skills instruction at community colleges are marginalized programs within marginalized institutions; that is, basic skills practitioners too often lack the political capital (Bordieu, 2011) to facilitate change. Then I’ll argue that the structure of community college English departments, with a predominance of faculty from literacy analysis (or creative writing) backgrounds, is not conducive to basic skills English instruction. I’ll lastly argue that there is a conflict of goals between basic skills instructors, who often must enforce curricular standards, and basic skills students, who are often vocationally driven. Part I of this literature review can then determine the
applicability of conflict theory to basic skills English courses, and other basic skills researchers can determine if conflict theory can similarly be applied to their study.

**Macrosystem**

I will examine the literature about the macrosystem, that is, literature that describes the culture of basic skills English instruction both nationally and at the community college level. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) defines the macrosystem as the highest level of culture that can unite the micro-, meso-, and exosystems together, and that presents the values, beliefs, and norms that guide behavior within a microsystem. This in turn will help me understand how the culture of basic skills instruction influences all other parts of basic skills English students’ experience.

If conflict theory describes conflicts between high-status and low-status groups, community colleges would definitely be considered a low-status group. Soliday (2002) describes how when colleges and universities experience conflict between research and teaching missions, research missions win out. The research mission of a college and university brings prestige to the institution which often results in grants and funds. In order to preserve its high status, conflict theory would argue that high status institutions create structures that perpetuate its status by accepting only the brightest students and pressuring faculty to both publish and represent the university in the media. High-status colleges and universities can also recruit leaders with strong political connections; in fact, at the time of the current study, the chancellor of the UC system is Janet Napolitano, the former director of Homeland Security in the Obama administration.
**Marginalization of Community Colleges.** Lacking the prestige of a research mission, community colleges often have to struggle because of a lack of both power and funds. In California, the state of the case study, Murphy (2004) points out that community colleges receive the least funds per full-time equivalent student (FTES) of the four branches of education: University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), community colleges, and secondary education; in fact, during the Great Recession, California community colleges lost $809 million in cuts, or over $1,400.00 per FTES (Edwards, 2013). Even with Proposition 98, a complex funding formula that guarantees a minimum funding base for K-12 and community colleges (Manwaring, 2005), community colleges are pitted in battles with K-12 for funds, which community colleges routinely lose (Murphy, 2004). To exacerbate the problem, California community colleges have a decentralized power structure and lack central leadership with the authority to institute reform; in fact, Edwards (2013) argues that the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) lacks authority to make and enforce decisions. As a result, each community college creates its own policies and procedures unless forced to action by legislative mandate. This lack of central leadership leaves CCCs at a distinct political disadvantage when competing for funds at the state level.

**Exosystem**

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995), the exosystem is an environment in which the developing individuals (in this case, basic skills English students) are not present but can still have an effect, sometimes profound, on developing individuals. In the case of basic skills English instruction, the primary exosystem
environment is the English department, which often distributes resources and sets the curricular standard for basic skills students. Even though students are not present during English department meetings, the decisions that faculty (sometimes with the assistance of administrators) make can have profound effects on students. In this section, I’ll review and analyze the literature about English departments using Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model of Human Development. This analysis will help me understand how the distribution of resources and the setting of curricular standards affect basic skills English students and may contribute to their low success rate.

**Basic Skills English Programs as Marginalized.** If conflict theory posits that high status groups impose their standards on the selection process (Collins, 1997; Hurn, 1993), then an analysis of basic skills English programs would include answers to the question, “Who are the high status groups in English departments?” In this section, I’ll argue that high status groups in English courses are transfer-level specialists in literature (and sometimes creative writing) and that basic skills programs would thus be marginalized. Basic skills programs have to struggle to compete for diminishing resources, and basic skills students lack strong faculty advocates in English department decisions.

Before I examine the influence of English departments on basic skills instruction, I will present a brief history in order to contextualize the literature. Many basic skills English proponents argue that even though many policy makers and administrators have institutional amnesia (Rose, 1985) and view basic skills education as novel phenomenon in higher education, remedial programs have existed for at least the last one hundred
years to serve both institutional and student needs. Soliday (2002) chronicles the evolution of remedial English programs in higher education. Initially, composition (called language and rhetoric) and literature courses were housed in separate departments. Then after periods of low enrollment, language and rhetoric and literature departments merged into the modern English department, the structure dominant in higher education today. At that time, there were three levels of transfer composition courses in addition to remedial courses; however, after a surge of English majors brought about by enrollment increases, English departments maintained the first-year composition courses and incorporated second-year composition instruction into literature courses, again a structure that remains dominant to this day. It is in the backdrop of this history that I’ll analyze the structure of English departments and basic skills English programs to determine who comprises the high-status groups (in this section) and what standards they impose on students (the next section on curriculum).

Since faculty make up English departments, a close examination of faculty can reveal the high status group in English departments. The minimum qualification for an English instructor is some form of expertise in English (literary analysis, creative writing, composition, and/or technical writing) usually determined by the receipt of a Master’s degree. Viewed from a purely numbers point of view, more faculty are hired from a literature than any other expertise (Soliday, 2002; Hairston, 1985). Both literary analysis and creative writing have a rich tradition in colleges and universities that instructors can draw upon for status. For instance, Bloom’s (1998) literary analysis of Shakespeare in Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human is a New York Time’s bestseller while a book
on college composition would never reach such prestige. This fact can explain two characteristics of basic skills English programs. First, while 72% of California students test into a basic skills English course, English departments only designate 24% of their courses as basic skills (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, 2012). Even though basic skills students may progress to transfer-level courses, literature focused faculty can designate a disproportionate amount of classes toward literary analysis and creative writing at the expense of basic skills. Second, given that full-time faculty in English departments designate themselves to teach transfer level courses, basic skills English courses are too frequently relegated to part-time, adjunct faculty (Asera, 2006; Esch, 2009; Soliday, 2002; Horner & Lu, 1999). While there are great adjunct instructors who do an exceptional job instructing students, most part-time faculty, who often have a limited presence on campus, are placed in a position where they instruct students who are often the most at-risk (Soliday, 2002). Further, union and collective bargaining agreements can prevent adjunct faculty from participating in loadable shared governance or English department responsibilities that require pay, as is the case at the case study site. This lack of high-status full-time faculty to instruct and advocate is especially harmful for basic skills students who often require additional support and resources in order to meet academic writing expectations (CCCSSTF, 2012; AACC, 2012).

From the social constructivist perspective, both reading and writing are complex social constructions in which readers and writers create meaning by combining what they know with the ideas in the text (Goen-Salter, 2008; Stotsky, 1983; McCormick, 1994). However, since the high status group lacks expertise in composition, English departments
tend to house reading and writing in separate courses. This structure is based on the assumption that “reading and writing are distinct and separate processes” (Goen-Salter, 2008, p. 84) and that students learned everything they need to know about reading by the third grade (Goen-Salter, 2008). This assumption has several effects on basic skills English instruction. Students may not take reading courses even though they may lack exposure to reading academic texts. These students, who have not yet developed the skills and strategies that exposure to reading academic texts can bring (Stotsky, 1983; McCormick, 1994), may likely suffer when they are assigned to write about college-level texts, which is often the case in transfer-level courses. Or students who do take reading courses may not automatically make the link between what they learn in reading courses and how they might apply it in writing courses (Goen-Salter, 2008). Critical pedagogy proponents would then argue that this separation can serve as a false consciousness in that students are deprived of opportunities to engage with texts in ways that are demanded by other disciplines (Freire, 2011).

**Basic Skills English Curriculum or the Establishment of College Literacy Standards.** Basic skills English curriculum sets the standards and serves as a gate-keeping function to determine which students can progress to transfer-level courses and which cannot. In this section, I’ll review and analyze literature about basic skills English curriculum through a critical lens; this will help me identify ways that a basic skills English curriculum can perpetuate inequality. In this section, I’ll conclude that basic skills English curriculum presents students with a simplified curriculum that fails to
increase in enough complexity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995) to support students’ academic literacy development.

Because critical pedagogy can explain how basic skills English curriculum can perpetuate inequality, I will use critical pedagogy as a framework to analyze the literature but not the data. Critical pedagogy is similarly derived from the Marx’s ideas of economic determinism—the belief that economic structures affect the structure of social organizations (Hurn, 1994). In his seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2011), who served as a leading advocate for critical pedagogy, described educational institutions as using a banking analogy, with a teacher who is filled with knowledge depositing that knowledge into the minds of students who serve as passive receptacles. This type of instruction serves as a false generosity that perpetuates oppression because students are deprived of opportunities to develop cognitive skills through active engagement. It is in this sense that basic skills curriculum, too, may be perceived as a false generosity because the literacy tasks that students complete in basic skills English courses are simpler than those in transfer-level courses and work environments (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Then, just because students can successfully complete simplified basic skills tasks doesn’t necessarily mean they can successfully complete the more complex transfer-level tasks (Rose, 1980).

**Academic standards.** Faculty then have to create curriculum that sets the standards for basic skills courses, which have historically been based on what faculty perceive as students’ deficiencies (Soliday, 2002; Fox, 1999). This standard is based on the assumption that before students can engage in transfer-level course work, they must
first master basic skills such as writing grammatically correct sentences, understanding the simplistic five-paragraph essay structure, and engaging in crude, rudimentary analysis with personal examples (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Soliday, 2002; Horner & Lu, 1999). The tasks assigned in basic skills English courses are often simplistic so that the complexity of the task will not interfere with the basic skills mentioned above. For instance, Rose (1980) argues that basic skills instructors often assign narrative tasks in order to determine if students are writing grammatically correct sentences. (Rose continues to cite research that even if students write grammatically correct sentences for narrative essays, that ability doesn’t necessarily transfer to the more complex sentences that characterize transfer-level writing.) What Rose recommends instead is that instructors assign literacy tasks more similar to those in other transfer-level courses and then scaffold instruction to help students meet those literacy expectations.

The literature suggests that traditional basic skills English curriculum simplifies instruction by reducing complex cognitive tasks to regimented processes prescribed by the instructor (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Soliday, 2009; Asera, 2006). This simplification of curriculum, though, can be seen as a false generosity that actually perpetuates inequity (Freire, 2011). For example, Asera (2006) calls basic skills pedagogy a “simplistic pedagogy: if students don’t understand it, say it louder, say it slower! Too often, that is, basic skills courses are taught through drill and memorizations of rules. What’s missing is any sign of intellectual vitality or engagement” (p. 2). Asera argues that this focus on skills instruction has two effects on students: (1) boredom and frustration with an approach that can be considered “mind-numbing;” and (2) instruction simplifies tasks
that are in actuality quite complex. Grubb and Gabriner (2013) add to this perspective by observing 169 basic skills classes in twenty California community colleges and interviewing 325 instructors and administrators. They described basic skills instruction as the “remedial pedagogy,” “drill and practice on sub-skills, usually devoid of any references to how these skills are used in subsequent courses or in adult roles…” Unfortunately remedial pedagogy violates many of the precepts of effective instruction” (1). In basic skills English courses, they found that the remedial pedagogy included grammar exercises made up of other people’s writing, prescriptive writing processes that produced either narrative or simplistic five-paragraph essays, and rudimentary development using personal examples. As Rose (1980) points out, literacy task assigned in basic skills courses are simpler than those in transfer-level courses, which require a great deal of sophistication and reading. Basic skills English curriculum may be too similar to traditional K-12 curriculum with which many basic skills students have historically struggled (AACC, 2012; CCCSSTF, 2013; Boykin & Noguera, 2012). Hence, basic skills courses might not complete its original purpose in preparing students for college-level courses.

**Department Proficiency Exams.** Because the skills and strategies developed in basic skills curriculum are perceived as the bare minimum for college-level work, English departments want assurance that students who progress beyond basic skills English courses possess these minimal standards. In order to give this assurance, many basic skills English programs, including the case study site, have instituted department mandated proficiency exams. Soliday (2002) points out that the development of testing
technologies in the 1940’s and 1950’s provided English departments with the birth of the
mandated proficiency exam that has stirred much passionate and intense debate in
English departments. White (1995) argues that while impromptu essays are not as
effective as portfolio assessments, they are a cost-effective method to gather information
about students, and that “No assessment device is good or bad in itself but only in
context. Only when we know what we are seeking to discover can we claim that a
particular kind of assessment is appropriate” (34). The mandated proficiency exam,
which is usually graded blindly, provides English departments with an objective
assessment of students’ abilities that can be compared to the standards of curriculum:
students’ understanding of essay structure, their ability to produce their own essays, their
ability to develop ideas at a rudimentary level with personal examples, and their ability to
follow directions. The assessment then can be used as proof to both English and transfer-
level instructors that students who pass the exam have the prerequisite skills necessary
for transfer-level work.

The department-mandated proficiency exam is a complex shift in instruction that
has profound effects on what instructors do in the classroom and how they do it (Soliday,
2002; Stone, 2012). Whether instructors feel positively or negatively about department
proficiency exams, they are a reality that must be dealt with. Because there is great
diversity among the specialties of basic skills English instructors, the timed essay can
provide some form of standardization of instruction. Since most instructors genuinely
want students to pass the assessment, they would likely tailor instruction to the exam
(Stone, 2012). Instructors would likely provide students with foundational skills and
knowledge—such as developing a writing process (Lindemann, 2001; Perl, 1980) and
developing a textual schema for academic essays (Bartholomae, 2002)—that students
need to pass the proficiency exam. For instance, instructors may assign practice finals
for students to complete; each practice final could provide students even more
opportunities to engage in the writing process, thus potentially leading to greater mastery.
Further, instructors may also provide students with several examples of both passing and
not passing essays; students can then analyze these essays to inductively develop a
textual schema for this staple of academic writing, the essay. These are definitely
competencies that students will use in other transfer-level courses.

On the other hand, while department proficiency exams may offer consistency in
instruction that help students develop foundational literacy skills and strategies, they do
so at a cost; that is, timed department proficiency exams may lead to instruction that
violates many of the precepts of effective learning (Feak & Dobson, 1996; O’Neil,
Murphy, Huot, & Williamson, 2006). As basic skills English instructors reflect on how
they can design the course to offer students the best chance to pass the final, they may
end up teaching to the test and simplifying instruction by focusing on a five-paragraph
essay structure that students can quickly generate ideas for in a two-hour time frame
(Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). In the impetus of chapter 1, I shared how the department
proficiency exam led me to simplify instruction by teaching strategies such as the “the
three reasons why strategy” to help students quickly generate a thesis statement and three
topic sentences for a five paragraph essay. As a result, students are likely to make black
and white declarative statements without considering the gray nuance that is valued in
academic literacy (Bartholomae, 2002). Even if instruction helps students pass the impromptu exam, the skills and strategies learned for the final might not necessarily transfer to other college-level writing tasks (Rose, 1980; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). In transfer-level writing tasks, students have to grapple with the subject by reading texts and considering the ideas from multiple perspectives, synthesizing different ideas together, critically evaluating them, and applying them to real-life situations. However in a timed essay, students do not have the time to engage in these interactions; in fact, other than the basic skills classroom, students may not encounter an impromptu essay exam in any other course (Rose, 1980).

Department proficiency exams violate the principles of social constructivism, the theory that individuals actively construct meaning through dialogues in which they combine what they know with new information (Berlin, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1994; Bess & Dee, 2008). By their very nature, there are no opportunities for students to engage in these dialogues to facilitate learning. Since impromptu finals involve either a very limited reading or no reading at all, students are unable to frame their ideas in relation to others’ ideas (Bruner, 1990); this divide becomes even greater when any instance of communication with a classmate may be considered cheating or plagiarism and grounds for automatic failure. Further, since the final product is virtually always graded anonymously without any feedback from the grader, there is little chance that the completion of the final can lead to discussions that foster development. This lack of social interaction is especially harmful for basic skills students who are academic novices
and in need of guidance as they develop an understanding of academic literacy and culture (Bartholomae, 2002).

Perhaps the greatest unintended consequence of department proficiency exams is that instruction violates the reading-writing connection, the belief that both reading and writing involve active constructions of meaning, and that reading and writing are inextricably linked (Stotsky, 1983; Goen-Salter, 2008; McCormick, 1994; Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986). This tendency contradicts the type of writing that students will most likely complete for transfer-level courses, in which students write about the texts they read. In order to transform their reading experience of a text into an essay that expresses their unique perspective, students must first literally understand the text and only then add their interpretation, perhaps explaining a part of the text with their own examples, perhaps synthesizing disparate authors’ ideas, perhaps critically evaluating the text and taking a stance on it (Graff & Birkenstein, 2007). However, a proficiency exam, with the only reading portion being a paragraph or very short background information, does not provide students with opportunities to develop these reading skills. In virtually all cases, instructors may feel handcuffed by department proficiency exams and dedicate hours of precious class time to preparing students for the test. As instructors grapple with what exactly to include in instruction, they may focus more on writing strategies for the proficiency exam and cut out assignments based on reading. Thus, students who progress through basic skills English courses may likely struggle with transfer-level writing assignments because reading skills remain inadequately addressed; again, this may be considered a false-generosity that perpetuates struggle and failure.
I will offer one last warning about department proficiency exams. Because of its high-stakes, pass or fail nature, proficiency exams may serve as a barrier that ends basic skills students’ college aspirations before they really have a chance to begin. Fox (1999) warns that standards, including the standards measured by department proficiency exams, “have been—and still are—used less as a way of raising standards than as a means of excluding students new to higher education” (p. iv). This statement may be especially pertinent to basic skills students. Basic skills education is based on the assumption that students must first learn essential skills such as writing grammatically correct sentences and rudimentary paragraph development before they can engage in “real” academic literacy (Soliday, 2002). However, longitudinal studies paint a very different picture. Shaughnessy (1977) compared a basic skills students’ writing sample at the very beginning of his college career, which was riddled with errors and included declarative statements, with one done three years into college, which demonstrated sophisticated academic competence. Similarly, Sternglass (1997) examined case study students longitudinally and discovered that exposure to academic texts in content area courses influenced their academic literacy development. As these two examples attest, basic skills courses are the beginning, rather than the end, of their academic literacy development, and exposure to academic reading and writing will continue this development. While I will not argue that there should be no standards for basic skills English courses, English departments should de-emphasize, if not eliminate, the role of high-stakes proficiency exams accordingly.
Microsystem.

I had previously reviewed and analyzed the literature about the macrosystem and the exosystem, describing how community college basic skills English programs represent marginalized programs within marginalized institutions. In this section, I’ll shift the emphasis to the microsystem, or the classroom where basic skills English instruction is delivered. I will first examine the literature that paints a picture of instructors and instruction, followed by a profile of basic skills students. I will then conclude that the basic skills English classroom provides an ecologically weak environment in which students are less likely to make instruction-skill-application connection. Because of this lack of perceived overlap, basic skills students may not exert the amount of effort toward instruction that is necessary for the learning, development, and internalization of academic literacy.

Basic skills instructors and instruction. If curriculum establishes college’s literacy standards, then instructors serve as gatekeepers, ensuring that students meet these standards. However, basic skills English instructors may serve two sometimes conflicting standards: English content knowledge, especially literary analysis (Hairston, 1985), and pedagogical content knowledge of education (Shulman, 1986). Basic skills instructors must negotiate these two standards as they craft a curriculum that can potentially lead students to academic literacy development while determining which students can progress to transfer-level English and which cannot. In this section, I’ll examine the literature about the negotiation of these sometimes conflicting standards and analyze how they can affect instruction.
As previously mentioned, the structure of community colleges, in which minimum qualification for teaching a course is determined by content mastery, may create a disconnect between two different standards that guide instructors and English departments: the standard of their English specialization (Soliday, 2002; Hairston, 1985; Bess & Dee, 2007) and the pedagogical standard of education (Shulman, 1986). While instructors have to teach the curriculum, they may naturally frame instruction from their specialty. For some receiving a Master’s in English Composition, they may be guided by the standard of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and align instruction with the ways that research suggests people learn. Unfortunately, composition specialists remain the exception rather than the rule in English departments and are a solid minority. Other instructors specialize in creative writing and encourage the development of students’ voice instead of academic discourse (Elbow, 1998). A small minority of instructors received their expertise in technical writing. However, due to the historical dominance of literature in English departments (Soliday, 2002; Hairston, 1985), literature experts remain the solid majority in English departments. These instructors may assign literature and guide students to a close reading and interpretation of literary works. The diversity of English specialties can lead to a lack of consistency in instruction; as a result, instructors might not necessarily know if students who progress through basic skills courses possess a foundational understanding of academic discourse.

Except for instructors who have a Master’s in Composition or have received a certificate for teaching composition, the majority of English instructors lack pedagogical content knowledge, the knowledge of how to present and arrange instruction so that
students can understand and apply its principles. Pedagogical content knowledge can include building instruction on the knowledge that students bring to the class, can provide students with conceptual representations of the content area, and can even help students clarify and correct their misconceptions (Shulman, 1986). Instructors who lack pedagogical content knowledge for composition often fall back on the type of instruction they received in college: an instructor standing at the front of the classroom and lecturing (see also Freire, 2011; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Cox, 2009). Basic skills instructors may break academic literacy into several small sub-skills and then go over sample problems and model prescriptive processes without relating to students how they’ll use these sub-skills in future courses or careers (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Further, this style of instruction may match students’ instruction in their secondary education with which many basic skills students have historically struggled (CCCSSTF, 2013; AACC, 2013).

Through the development of their English expertise, basic skills English instructors may be so practiced at their reading and writing processes that they have become completely internalized and subconscious. This is especially true for reading in that instructors make subconscious, complex interactions with a text in a fraction of a second (LaBaerge & Samuels, 1974); hence, basic skills instructors may lack an experiential base (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) with which to relate to basic skills students who may have limited academic reading and writing experience. This lack of awareness (or meta-cognition) of their reading and writing processes may make it difficult for instructors to understand students’ challenges with academic literacy.
Without being able to relate to students’ challenges, they may view instruction from a
deficit point of view and break instruction into even simpler sub-skills.

Basic skills instructors too often overestimate the challenges that basic skills
students experience and view students from a deficiency point of view. Basic skills
instructors respond to the most salient features of student writing: grammatical errors,
lack of essay structure, and lack of development. Without pedagogical content
knowledge, basic skills instructors often resort to what Grubb and Gabriner (2013)
describe as behavioralist instruction, or Freire (2011) describes with a banking analogy:
the instructor contains knowledge and deposits that knowledge into the minds of students
who serve as passive receptacles. Grubb and Gabriner offer an alarming example: an
instructor arrives to class without acknowledging the students, starts to go over a sample
problem, and when a student asks a question, the instructor repeats the information and
goes to a different example. For basic skills English courses, these tasks can include
grammar exercises, samples of essays, and modeling of simplified writing steps. As a
result, students need a significant amount of motivation to maintain persistence; however
as the low rates of basic skills success suggest (CCCCO, 2014), too many students don’t
have this amount of motivation and drop out.

On the other hand, research also suggests that instructors genuinely like their
students and simplify the curriculum to put students in a position where they can succeed.
For instance, Grubb and Gabriner (2013) found that because instructors genuinely like
students, they lower standards so that students can be successful. Rose (1980) adds to
this by suggesting that basic skills English instructors assign students a simple narrative
to give students an initial success that can create momentum for even more success. However well-intentioned these instructors may be, they may actually doing students a disservice by not providing them with the skills and strategies they’ll need in transfer-level courses. This lowering of standards may be seen as a false generosity that may help students in the short term but actually harms them in the long term. For instance, even if students can write grammatically correct sentences for a narrative essay, that ability will not necessarily transfer to writing tasks which demand more complex sentence structures (Rose, 1980). The simplification of instruction can be especially dangerous when students need to pass a mandated proficiency exam. When combined with a remedial pedagogy, the traditional instructor may find students disaffected, bored, and/or frustrated (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Cox, 1999; Asera, 2006).

**Students.** Conflict often occurs when the expectations of students conflict with those of the instructor. For instance as I previously mentioned, Cox (2009) observed that community college students were often vocationally oriented and wanted instruction to explicitly prepare them for an occupation. However, when students fail to perceive the connection between instruction and application in the real world (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013), students disengage and “earn the grade,” or do the barest minimum to receive a passing grade. Cox adds that community college students often desire instruction that will reveal test answers so that they can receive their desired grade in the most efficient manner; consequently, when instructors offer problem-posing techniques that guide students toward knowledge and skills development, students sometimes resist. In fact, she observed how students actively resisted peer response because it was not worth points
toward the final grade. In basic skills courses, if students just do the barest minimum to
pass without developing the skills and strategies of academic literacy, they may be
placing themselves in a position to struggle even further because critical literacy skills
remain underdeveloped. Consequently, it is imperative to offer alternative curricula that
can positively influence students’ perceptions of the classroom and lead to greater
engagement.

In order to understand the experience of basic skills students, I’ll apply
Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) idea of developmentally instigative characteristics (DICs).
According to Bronfenbrenner, DICs can help researchers determine the extent to which
developing individuals (in this case basic skills English students) engage with the
classroom. However, Bronfenbrenner stresses that DICs do not cause engagement or
disengagement but rather strengthen or weaken the momentum already in place. For
instance, if a student feels that his or her home environment is invalidated in an academic
setting, then this perception can weaken DICs and lead to decreased engagement with the
environment. Figure 4 represents the DICs of a theoretical student: the x-axis represents
active engagement and the y-axis represents time. The bottom arrow represents the
momentum gained from students’ initial decision to first attend college; the student,
perceiving that college can improve his/her life, would activate his/her DICs, and the
student can use this momentum to actively engage in the classroom. However, other
factors—such as the student’s past educational experiences, perceived disconnect
between academic and home cultures, and a perceived lack of relevance—can weaken
DICs, thus reducing active engagement. If the assumption holds true that active
engagement leads to positive progress toward learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008, 2009), then the weakened DICs can create an obstacle toward these outcomes and educational goals.

Given that students are vocationally-oriented, they often experience frustration because they fail to recognize how they can apply basic skills instruction to their vocational jobs (Cox, 1999; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). For instance, McDonough (2011) describes how “One student, Ryan, stated, ‘I feel like I’m going to get a degree in something I care about and I’m going to use it to get a job.’” (p. 186). In this case, students such as Ryan would become frustrated when they fail to make these connections to the “real world,” especially work environments. This failure to explicitly state the connection between instruction and application can have at least three consequences to students: (1) students may get bored and disinterested because instruction seems just like busy-work (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Asera, 2006); (2) because instruction is not
contextualized, students may fail to make the instruction-skill-application connection and fail to internalize and transfer instruction (Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000); and (3) students tend to do the barest minimum to receive a passing grade (Cox, 2009).

**Students’ Conflicts within Academic Culture.** I have based this section on the assumption that students’ perceptions of academic culture in general and academic literacy specifically may affect their perception of and behavior in traditional basic skills English courses. I’ll then argue that in some instances, students’ perceptions of academic culture might not match the reality they experience once they enroll in classes (Tinto, 1987; Astin, 1993). In these instances, students’ initial understanding of academic culture may serve as their impetus and motivation to attend college, but the realities they experience—such as matriculation, assessment, college policies and procedures—may serve as obstacles toward completion (Shulock & Moore, 2007). Further, students’ perception of academic discourse, especially academic literacy, may not necessarily match that of their instructors; students may be seen as playing in a game for which they do not know the rules (Bartholomae, 2002). In this section, I’ll review and analyze the literature to help me better understand the source of these conflicts.

**Attribution of Success—Meritocracy vs. Social Connections.** Social mobility may explain some of the purposes and rationales that basic skills students, who often come from middle class or blue-collar backgrounds, have for attending college. A community college education can empower students to improve their social status and achieve social mobility even if basic skills students do not possess a history of academic success. Many educators equate a college education with the American dream; as such, mainstream
culture has sent images of individuals lifting themselves up by their bootstraps and exerting the effort necessary for success (AACC, 2013). Moreover, most students are familiar with the famous chart depicting the educational level of individuals and the average income they’ll earn throughout their lifetime (see Figure 5). Since many employers use education certification to qualify applicants for employment (Collins, 1971; Hurn, 1994), basic skills students often view college as an opportunity to find a career that will not only provide financial security but also job satisfaction. A college education is seen as a means by which students can actualize these perceived futures (Markus & Narius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). Such cultural messages are based on the assumption of meritocracy, the belief that success is determined by individual effort, and that if individuals exert enough effort, they will succeed in college.
(Hurn, 1994). Attributing success to individual effort, students may perceive help and assistance as a negative stigma and be less likely to seek help and assistance along the way.

However, conflict theorists would argue that students’ educational and occupational success is more influenced by social connections, especially from their family and friends, than individual merit; in other words, even though individual effort is necessary for success, friends and family can play a greater role in college students’ educational and occupational success. Students from high status groups belong to a culture that more easily matches that of the college environment; in contrast, students from low status backgrounds may experience conflict or tension when they try to integrate elements of their home culture with academic culture. As a result, students must either negotiate this tension, or they may eventually drop out of college (Tinto, 2006). Since basic skills students are often the first in their family (and sometimes among their friends) to attend college, they often lack access to family and friends who can help negotiate the college transition (Tinto, 2006; Rendon, Jalamo & Nora, 2000; Astin, 1993). There then exists the potential for barriers—such as matriculation, financial aid, lack of knowledge of student support services, lack of knowledge of college students’ habits of mind (Conley, 2007)—that can trip up students on their college journey (Shulock & Moore, 2007; Tinto, 1987; Grubb, et. al., 2011a). Since many community colleges are often classified as commuter students—students who commute to college, attend class, and then leave (Masse, 2009)—they often have limited
opportunities to develop connections with others who can help facilitate this transition (Tinto, 2006). Students in this position may feel like they have to go through college all alone when, in reality, they may actually have access to resources they either don’t know about or are too intimidated to utilize (Nevarez & Wood, 2010).

Without assistance, students are less likely to perceive the relationship between basic skills English courses and their academic goals (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). For instance, Cox (2009) synthesized four qualitative studies she conducted on community college students (two of which she was the lead researcher) to describe how community college students attend college in order to receive a decent job to support themselves and their family. In fact, Cox found that all but two of the students she interviewed framed their motivation for going to college in terms of occupational goals. For these students, the requirement to take basics skills courses, for which students do not often receive transferable college credit, frustrates them; they may perceive the requirement as just a delay to achieving their occupational goal. The disconnect between students’ goals and basic skills English instructors’ purposes can cause students to view the classroom negatively and can lead to decreased engagement.

*Epistemology of Knowledge—Fixed vs. Socially Constructed.* Students’ understanding of the epistemology of knowledge (or folk psychology) may differ from their instructors. Bruner (1990) defines folk psychology as, “a system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transaction with the social world” (p. 35). College instructors would have adopted the academic cultural belief that “knowledge is persuasion,” and that knowledge is socially constructed through dialogues
(Graff & Birkenstein, 2007; Bess & Dee, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This epistemology of knowledge leads instructors to take a more critical stance toward the ideas they read. As they read, they apply the skills valued in academic literacy, such as synthesis, application, and critical evaluation, to determine the validity and strength of ideas. This epistemological view of literacy then determines the expectations and standards that they set for students (Fox, 1999).

Basic skills English students’ perception of academic knowledge may differ from their instructors in that they may perceive knowledge as fixed and permanent, and that once a person creates knowledge, that knowledge remains unchanged (Wagner, 2008; Boyking & Noguera, 2011; Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000). Macrorie (1989) attributes this tendency to the structure of textbooks which presents only the conclusions, the abstracted or generalized findings of experts, detached from the experience in which they were formed… The discoveries of experts seem to be delivered by the genius of God, and students come to feel that they could not make such discoveries themselves (vii).

This concept of fixed knowledge may also be reinforced, ironically, from their secondary education, when students may have used reading to find the answer to multiple-choice test questions (Wagner, 2008). For instance, Cox (2009) argues that the students she examined from four community colleges were mostly instrumentally oriented; that is, they wanted the instructor to let students know what was going to be on the test. Students essentially wanted the teacher to accept a banking role and deposit knowledge into their minds (Freire, 2011). For this type of reading, students do not need to use the higher cognitive skills valued in academic literacy.
Students are not as likely to have a deep understanding of the literacy conventions and structures that are utilized and valued in academic discourse. For instance, Bruner (1990) suggests that language mediates culture and meaning; however, students may not have access to academic culture and lack understanding of the ways that academic culture creates meaning, especially through literacy. Bartholomae (2002), who applies this idea to college composition, suggests that because composition students have to write as if they were experts, they tend to “to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand” (p. 74); in other words, basic skills writers are asked to meet instructors’ expectations with only a vague notion of what those expectations are. To make matters worse, because of the subjective nature of English instruction, instructors’ expectations may vary from instructor to instructor.

Students may also have a false folk psychology of the writing process as well. For instance, Muchmore, et al. (2001) report how students are taught prescriptive processes for writing research papers that includes notecards, outlines, bibliographic format, and properly placed footnotes; these prescriptive processes generate formulaic essays written in the 3rd person devoid of original analysis and evidence of learning (Macrorie, 1988). However, since students rarely have opportunities to talk with authors, and authors don’t often share their writing processes with students, students may likely form the belief that professional writers have a lot of talent and that they can write exemplar texts easily (Sommers, 1980). They would fail to understand how writing is a
very messy process involving several different revisions and drafts (Lamott, 2007; Perl, 1980). Further, students may believe that knowledge creation is a solitary act done in isolation; this notion fails to account for all the people—colleagues, other writers, editors—who play instrumental roles in the production of texts (Bruffee, 2002). All of these beliefs can leave students believing that people are either born writers or not, and the fact that they are in basic skills English courses can be seen as proof that they are not writers.

This inaccurate and incomplete folk psychology of writing may lead students to view writing as a mere regurgitation of factual information without the student writer adding his/her perspective. For writing, this false folk psychology may lead to the production of student writing that glues disparate, hodge-podge ideas together without much application, synthesis, evaluation, or even coherence (Muchmore, et al., 2001). In fact, Macrorie (1988) calls such writing a “bad joke” and an “art of plagiarism” (p. 25). For this type of writing, basic skills students would not likely ask where the information came from, what was the process that the knowledge was created, what situations is the information applicable to, how does information “a” relate to information “b”, and so forth; in other words, students are not likely to engage in the type of academic inquiry which is valued and essential for college-level writing. Basic skills instructors are likely to view student writing without these characteristics as superficial and weak.

_Disconnect between Home and Academic Cultures._ Basic skills English students may perceive a disconnect between their home and academic cultures. Soliday (2002) describes the politics of agency as the tendency for policy makers, administrators, and
faculty to attribute the source of students’ failure to the perceived differences between students’ home and academic culture (Ferdman, 1990; Ogbu, 1983; Jalamo, 1995). If instructors view the source of student failure to cultural differences, then they may invalidate students’ attempts to bring their home culture into the classroom (Rendon, 1994). For instance, because texting does not allow for the use of vocal tone and body language, younger students tend to use emoticons and acronyms in order to create meaning. While the use of emoticons and acronyms to express language pithily may be viewed as a complex form of communication, students are routinely admonished for its use in academic writing.

When students’ home culture is invalidated in the classroom, students may form a negative perception of the environment that can lead to disengagement and harm learning. For instance, Ogbu and Simons (1998) suggest that students of color can be classified as either voluntary minorities—emigrants who chose to move to the United States for a greater chance of success—or involuntary minorities—former slaves who were forcibly removed from their homeland and brought to the United States against their will. In the case of involuntary minorities, they may likely form an oppositional identity in which they actively resist academic culture in order to preserve their cultural identity. While the concept of involuntary minorities are an extreme example, it does capture the tendency for students to disengage when conflicts between home and academic cultures arise. Given that instructors and students influence each other in reciprocal ways (Skinner & Belmont, 1993), this focus on challenges and neglect of strengths are likely to foster students’ insecurity (Cox, 1999) that can negatively affect perceived self-efficacy
(Bandura, 1997), interest (Dewey, 1913; Deci, 1985) and motivation, especially intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

**Part III: An I-Search Solution**

In part I of this literature review, I examined the literature about Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development, a unifying theory of cognitive development that accounts for the developmental interactions between the individual and the environment. In this model, the developing individual, which has developmentally instigative characteristics (DICs) that either induce or inhibit engagement in the environment, engages with the microsystem (or the direct environment in which development is occurring) in ways that progressively increase in complexity. Bronfenbrenner posits that other environments, including the mesosystem (or outside environments in which the developing individual also interacts), the exosystem (or environments in which the developing individual is not present but influence behavior in the microsystem nonetheless), and macrosystem (or the most distal environment that includes culture and subculture and provides the values, beliefs and norms that dictate behavior in the microsystem) also influence behavior in the microsystem. Further, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) stresses that it is not the environment as it exists in reality but rather how it is perceived by the developing individual which influences development.

In part II of this literature review, I examined the literature about the traditional basic skills curriculum to conclude that the traditional basic skills English classroom presents students with an ecologically weak learning environment in which students too
often fail to make connections between the classroom (or microsystem) and the many other environments (or the mesosystem) with which they also interact. Students are more likely to view the classroom negatively and less likely to engage with the environment to

Figure 6. Synthesis of Research on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development
the extent that is necessary for development (Kuh, 2008). In an ecologically weak environment, students slog through instruction, doing the barest minimum to receive a passing grade without much enjoyment (Cox, 2009) or sense of achievement (Asera, 2006).

In part III of this literature review, I will conduct the second part of my I-Search curriculum and write about a solution to the problems associated with traditional basic skills instruction. If the traditional basic skills curriculum can be described as ecologically weak, then an I-Search curriculum has the potential to create an ecologically rich environment. In my model (see Figure 6), which synthesizes the research on basic skills English instruction1, the student begins the course extrinsically motivated to receive a passing grade and achieve his/her educational goal in the least amount of time necessary (Cox, 2009). However, given that I-Search allows students to choose problems (or topics) that they are either currently experiencing or feel passionate about (Macrorie, 1988), students are more likely to form a strong mesosystem connection between the basic skills English classroom and college, work, home, and/or community environments with which students also interact. This mesosystem connection is likely to present students with a genuine and authentic need to not only write their I-Search papers but also solve their problem(s), so students are more likely to perceive the classroom positively and actively engage with it to the extent necessary for the development of academic literacy (please see the blue arrows in Figure 6; Macrorie, 1985; Ballenger,

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1 Although the model presented in Figure 6 is linear, I do not mean to suggest that students’ interactions with the basic skills English classroom is linear. Instead, I see them as recursive and holistic, and I present my model linearly for ease of explanation only.
Students can then direct that active engagement toward the microsystem, where students can engage in dialogic (Freire, 2011) and collaborative learning (Bruffee, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). These interactions can then validate students’ experiences in an academic setting (Rendon, 1994) as well as increase their competence (Elliot, MacGregor, & Thrash, 2002) and perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; please see purple arrows in Figure 6). As such, an I-Search curriculum is more likely to present academic literacy in a way that encourages the active engagement necessary for internalization and transfer of instruction to other environments (Kuh, 2008; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

In this section, I will first examine some of the theory and research about how adults learn and then explain how I-Search aligns with this theory and research. Then I’ll examine the literature about I-Search to determine what researchers have found when an I-Search curriculum is implemented in real-life situations. This section will conclude with the finding that the current research done on I-Search includes more promising practices, that is, practices that make intuitive sense and may have received a great amount of success but has yet to be tested by rigorous research (Quint, et al., 2013; Muchmore, et al., 2001); the current study can extend this literature by examining an I-Search unit using a rigorous, ethnographic case study methodology.

The Developing Individual, or the Direction of Developmentally Instigative Characteristics

As argued previously, DICs are the individual’s characteristics which either inhibit or encourage engagement in the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). However,
Bronfenbrenner cautions that DICs do not cause development but rather “put a spin” on development already occurring; that is, DICs can either cause a faster spin (and greater engagement) or slow the spin (and lessen engagement). Bronfenbrenner (1979) also argues that behavior is not influenced by the environment as it exists in reality but rather how it is perceived by the developing individual. I will then argue that the more students perceive mesosystem connections between the basic skills English classroom and other environments with which they interact, the more positively they perceive the classroom, and the more they will engage with instruction. I’ll first examine the research about students’ DICs in the traditional classroom which research describes as vocational in nature (Cox, 2009; Andrejack, 2011; CCCSSTF, 2011; Masse, 2009). I will then argue that the structure of I-Search instruction is conducive to extending students’ DICs beyond vocational goals toward personal problems they are experiencing and/or issues they feel passionate about (Macrorie, 1985). Students are more likely to perceive strong mesosystem connections that can positively influence students’ perception of the environment and lead to greater engagement in the classroom.

DICs in Traditional Basic Skills English Courses. In the traditional basic skills classroom, research has found that the strongest DICs that students bring to the classroom are vocational; students pursue a college education in order to achieve an occupational goal and/or career (Cox, 2009; Andrejack, 2011; CCCSSTF, 2011; Masse, 2009). For instance, Cox (2009) describes how only two of the over 100 community college students she interviewed expressed an educational goal other than vocation. Cox continues to explain that because community college students sacrifice money they could make in the
short-term for greater money and job satisfaction in the long term, they want to learn something useful for their future careers. When students perceive that their class is irrelevant to their career goals, they become instrumental and determine the barest minimum they need to do to obtain their required grade (usually a “C”). Cox further argues that these students believe that college is not something enjoyable but rather something to be “slogged” through, thus negatively influencing students’ perception of the classroom.

Community college students at the beginning of the semester may have the same orientation that Cox (2009) observed, that they are attending college to achieve some kind of vocational goal. However, the structure of the I-Search paper may encourage students to expand this initial purpose and make connections between instruction and personal and/or home problems they are experiencing, between instruction and community problems, between instruction and college challenges. I-Search has the potential to tap into even more of students’ DICs and direct them toward active engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Students are then more likely to perceive the writing classroom as relevant to their situation and engage more actively with instruction (Gay, 2002), thus leading to the achievement of learning outcomes (Kuh, 1990, 2008, 2009), internalization, and transfer of instruction (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

**Profile of Basic Skills Students.** Given that students’ DICs can determine the extent to which they engage with the classroom environment, I will present a profile of basic skills students in order to infer what some of their DICs may be. With this profile, I will attempt to describe the most salient student characteristics described by the literature.
However, in reality, basic skills students defy description; they range from students who should really be in transfer level courses but didn’t prepare for the assessment (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010; Asera, 2006), to non-traditional students (Rendon, 2002; Rendon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000; Ferdman, 1990; Attinasi Jr., 1989), and to second-language and generation 1.5 learners (Rodby, 1999; Pan, 2012; Johns, 2006). Since the I-Search model presented in this study draws so heavily on what students bring to the classroom, this profile will help me understand the challenges that basic skills students may experience and how an I-Search assignment may relate to those challenges. The literature review will further help me better understand the assets (or strengths) that students bring to the classroom that can serve as a foundation for instruction (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

The research paints a picture of many basic skills students as non-traditional and the first in their family to attend college, and as non-traditional students, they lack access to the resources, especially others, who can help them navigate and negotiate the college transition. Without access to these resources, students often have to go through the sometimes complex process of matriculation and attending class without the benefit of outside help (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1987, 2006). Further, Cox suggests that community college students sometimes are fearful that they may not be cut out to be successful college students; they may form a false perception of college culture, attach a negative stigma to receiving help, and try to navigate the college experience on their own. Resisting help, students may be more prone to obstacles and barriers that divert students’ attention away from college and can lead to drop out. With an I-Search paper, though,
instructors can introduce students to the nature of academic culture that can directly confront students’ false perception. The I-Search paper can then introduce students to the dialogic nature of knowledge (Freire, 2011) and how knowledge is created by teams of people collaborating (Graf & Birkenstein, 2007). Basic skills students can change their perception of seeking help from one of weakness to one of strength.

As research suggests, basic skills community college students tend to be low-income and experience significant barriers to college completion (Tinto, 2006; Moore & Shulock, 2010; Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Low income students often have priorities outside the classroom, including personal, family and work responsibilities, that can often pull them away from college (Gillett & Steffy, 2000; Tinto, 2006; Shulock & Moore, 2010; Quint, Jaggars, Byndloss, & Magazinnik, 2013; Rendon, 1994; Sternglass, 1997; Masse, 2009). For example, in a case study of college leavers from LaGuardia Community College, Gillett and Steffy (2000) suggest that “The picture of student life that emerges from the interviews with students is a schedule crowded with too many classes coupled with too many job and family responsibilities” (24); in fact, the researchers reported that 30% of students report financial reasons and 27% report personal reasons as the cause for leaving college. Andrejack (2011) adds to this by finding that pressure from different environments, including other college courses, work, family, and organizations, contributes mesosystem pressures that can pull students away from the classroom.

The research paints a picture of students struggling with the work-family-college balance (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013); this struggle becomes even greater when the customs
and culture of college seem foreign to students. However, an I-Search curriculum can present students with an opportunity to examine these problems in the course of their classwork. Students can begin to perceive a genuine need to apply the conventions and values of academic culture to their problem and/or issue. This genuine need can lead students to perceive the classroom environment as more relevant and lead to greater engagement and achievement of learning outcomes (Kuh, 1990, 2008, 2009). In other words, students are doing more than just writing an I-Search paper; they are also learning strategies to overcome problems they experience.

**Basic Skills Students’ Assets.** Basic skills students bring many assets (or strengths and competencies) that instructors can tap into and use as a foundation for instruction (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Gay, 2002; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). For instance, Gonzalez, et al. (1995) reported how four teachers, in collaboration with researchers, became ethnographers, examining the households of their students. Each teacher chose three students to serve as case studies, and then visited each student a minimum of three times—observing the home, distributing surveys, and conducting interviews—kept field notes and a personal journal, and shared and collaboratively analyzed the data in labs. The researchers found that, contrary to the belief that low SES homes are void of knowledge, students’ households have abundant and diverse funds of knowledge, “those historically developed and accumulated strategies (skills, abilities, ideas, practices) or bodies of knowledge that are essential to a household’s functioning and well-being” (pp. 446-447). These funds of knowledge are socially created based on a sense of confianza (or mutual trust) and exchanged to complete practical matters. This notion of funds of
knowledge contradicts the concept of multiculturalism that focuses on holidays, typical foods, and national artifacts which too often present a simplified and inadequate picture of students’ cultures. Funds of knowledge are a classroom resource that too few instructors and teachers tap into.

Basic skills students, especially younger students, tend to have proficiencies in technology that instructors can draw upon. Prensky (2001) calls these students digital natives, students who have grown up with new technology—“computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (p. 1)—and argues that technology has changed the ways that digital natives think and behave. For instance, Ito, et al. (2010) describe how youth join affinity groups (also see Gee, 2000) through the use of technology—which the authors call the “genre of participation.” Through the use of technology, digital natives “lurk” around web forums and “geek around” to gain a deeper understanding of a topic that interests them. Since the web allows great amounts of knowledge that can be conjured up at a moment’s notice, digital natives have developed skills to quickly sift through this information to determine what meets their needs and purposes (see also Wagner, 2008). However, as Prensky points out, digital natives struggle when they are thrust into a traditional classroom learning environment which doesn’t utilize technology. Consequently the current study will determine how an I-Search curriculum can utilize technology that taps into students’ assets and strengths; students can then perceive an alignment between their home and academic cultures that can positively influence students’ perceptions of the
environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) and lead to greater engagement and the achievement of outcomes (Kuh, 2008, 2009).

**Mesosystem, or Perceptions of Relevance and the Creation of Genuine Needs**

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) defines the mesosystem as environments outside the direct environment with which the individual also interacts. In the college classroom, there can potentially be several mesosystem environments: other college courses, home environments, community environments, work environments, etc. Renn and Arnold (2003) see the mesosystem as a strong connection that can facilitate learning, and that the ease with which students can navigate between microsystems within a mesosystem determines the quality of their interactions. Because I-Search invites students to examine problems they are either experiencing or feel passionate about, students are more likely to bring outside environments into the basic skills English classroom, thus strengthening the mesosystem connection, positively influencing students’ perception of the classroom, and leading to active engagement.

In the next section I will use Cultural Relevance Theory (Gay, 2000) to infer how students may perceive I-Search instruction and the basic skills English classroom. Given that students are likely to make a connection between their I-Search paper and other environments with which they interact, they are more likely to perceive I-Search instruction as relevant and experience a genuine need for instruction. This genuine need can then encourage students to combine those skills and competencies they already possess with instruction in order to not only write their I-Search paper but also solve their problems.
Culturally Relevant and Responsive Curriculum. Research suggests that a culturally relevant curriculum, a curriculum which can be responsive to the lived experience of students, can encourage active engagement (Gay, 2002; Knaus, 2012; Rendon, 1994; Gonzalez, et al., 1995). Gay (2002) argues that culturally responsive teaching “is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experience and frame of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly” (p. 106). Gay argues that teachers (and instructors) can use cultural scaffolding, instruction that is built upon the culture and students’ lived experience, to present a more responsive pedagogy. For example, Knaus (2012) describes how he uses responsive, voice centered teaching and dialogic instruction to help urban youth reflect on the violence in their communities and develop survival strategies. For student writing, Knaus would “constantly ask students to push deeper, to clarify exactly what they wished to share. [Knaus] demanded that students share raw words that they believed captured the depth, intricacies, and complexities they wanted to write about” (p. 138). With cultural scaffolding, students are likely to perceive an overlap between the basic skills classroom and other environments with which students interact, especially home and community environments, and perceive instruction as relevant to their lives. This greater engagement can push students to develop skills and strategies to interact with the environment in ways that increase in complexity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995).

Culturally responsive instruction can also encourage students to develop conscientzao of their lived experience (Freire, 2011); that is, students can become aware
of the challenges and barriers that are impeding their success and then determine solutions to those challenges (Knaus, 2012). For instance, Blackmon, a community based educator and founder of Leadership Excellence for Urban Youth, describes her pedagogy with the metaphor of the mirror: “When I’m at my very, very best I hold up a mirror to [students’] lives and say what do you think about that… And that’s it… then I give ‘em a mirror and I’m gone” (Watson, 2011, p. 44). This awareness of the problem can be crucial to students because they may be responding to the problem in ways they are not consciously aware of (Downing, 2010). A culturally relevant curriculum can encourage students to use their assets (Gay, 2002; Boykin & Noguera, 2011), such as funds of knowledge, the skills, abilities, ideas, and practices that allow students’ from middle-class and blue-collar households to survive and preserve a sense of well-being (Gonzalez, et al., 1995). Students can then apply these funds of knowledge to their problems in order to arrive at praxis, or humanizing action that can liberate students from oppression (Freire, 2011). This can allow students to approach their education from a position of strength rather than deficiency and creatively overcome any challenge they encounter.

If there is great diversity among basic skills students (Horner & Lu, 1999), how can instructors assign topics that are culturally relevant to all students? One answer may be found in inquiry-based learning, which is derived from the ideas of Dewey (1913) who encouraged both students and teachers to search for answers to authentic questions. Both inquiry-based learning and I-Search are based on the assumption that people are innately curious and have questions they need answered (Macrorie, 1988; Ballenger, 2009). As such, writing instructors can strive to create a classroom environment in which students
are empowered to pursue their knowledge inquiries. Instructors can encourage students to choose topics about problems they are currently experiencing and/or issues they feel passionate about; this will allow students to understand alternative perspectives that can help them understand both the nature of the problem as well as potential solutions (Freire, 2011). Inquiry-based learning can be viewed as instructors supporting their students’ autonomy by allowing students to be the originators of their knowledge inquiries (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 1985). By supporting students’ autonomy, students tend to have greater intrinsic motivation—or motivation inherent in the activity itself—that leads to greater engagement with instruction. This intrinsic motivation can be crucial since I-Search is likely placed along students’ zone of proximal development (that is, a task just beyond the development of students so that students require help to successfully complete it; Vygotsky, 1986), and the extra motivation can push students to grapple with an unfamiliar academic discourse (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001).

One of the main tenets of Macrorie’s (1988) I-Search assignment is that students choose a personally meaningful and relevant topic that allows a student to find out “something he needs to know for his life and writes the story of his journey” (p. iv). Macrorie likens this topic choice to having an itch: “The search should take place because somebody needs to find out something or wants to satisfy an itch of curiosity as insistent as athlete’s foot. Somebody’s got a question and wants an answer to it” (162). Most often, though not always, the itch will come from personal experience. The literature about I-Search suggests that because personally meaningful and relevant topics can serve as an invitation to bring the personal into the academic, students are more engaged with I-
Search (Rubin, 2002; Johns, 2006; Arnold, 1989; Muchmore, et al., 2011; Klausman, 2007; Luther, 2006; Kuiper, Volman, & Terwel, 2005). For instance, Rubin (2002) interviewed six students a year after they wrote their I-Search paper to determine how the assignment impacted them. One student had decided to write her I-Search paper about an acquaintance rape she had suffered that year; her I-Search led her to interview a counselor at a crisis center, and she reported learning that she had not been the only victim of acquaintance rape and that it wasn’t her fault. In this case, the student had an unresolved issue from her past, and the I-Search helped her come to terms with it and begin the healing process. The personally relevant nature of the topic led her (and other students described in the study) to positively perceive the classroom and actively engage with it; in fact, she viewed the classroom so positively that she went above and beyond the requirements of the assignment. This example confirms Renn and Arnold’s (2003) argument that the ease with which students can transverse microsystems can serve as a gauge of engagement within microsystems.

The structure of the I-Search assignment can encourage students to extend instruction for the I-Search paper outside the classroom, thus forming another strong mesosystem connection. For instance, Macrorie (1988) chronicles the I-Search of one of his students who wanted to learn about the domestication of wolves. Without being required to, this I-Search led him to drive several hours to interview someone who had raised wolves and incorporated this knowledge into his I-Search paper, thus strengthening the mesosystem connection. Similarly, Rubin (2002) found that choosing a personally relevant topic had caused “a blurring of the line between the self and subject of inquiry.
Because of this sense that they themselves were the subjects of their own research, the knowledge gained during the research process often intertwined with the students’ own identities in significant ways” (para. 37). In fact, Rachel, a student interviewed by Rubin, reported that she was so engaged by her topic about the media effects on body image that she distributed 150 surveys about the media and body image to her classmates. These examples illustrate how an I-Search assignment can extend instruction beyond the classroom through active engagement within the mesosystem; this active engagement is the result of students generating I-Search questions and finding the answer in the mesosystem. These examples are representative of how I-Search can lead students to perceive the classroom (and instruction) positively because students make strong mesosystem connections that make instruction relevant.

**Humanizing Action.** The literature also reports that I-Search can serve as praxis, or some sort of humanizing action that can benefit students themselves or others in students’ communities (Rubin, 2002; Klausman, 2007; Arnold, 1989; Assaf, et al., 2011; Luther, 2006; Alvey, et al., 2011). The structure of I-Search is conducive to Freire’s (2011) idea of praxis, or liberating action in that students can gain conscientizao, or a critical awareness of their situation. The search provides students with opportunities to obtain different perspectives, thus gaining greater insight to their situation. Assaf et al. (2011) suggests that I-Search can encourage students to “be better prepared to fully participate in and contribute to society” (p. 147). For instance, Klausman (2007) found that several of his high school students’ I-Search papers led to civic engagement even though that was not a required part of the assignment; Klausman’s I-Search assignment
led students to help veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, to start a business with humanizing employee practices, to launch a recycling program at work, and to institute reading practices for their children. As these examples attest, students gained a greater awareness of their situation, and this greater awareness led to praxis. This form of humanizing action can also be seen as a non-cognitive strategy that students can apply to any and/or all parts of their life (Farrington et al., 2012).

**Technology and I-Search.** Although the use of technology might not be a physical environment, I feel it can still represent a virtual environment to which students can form strong mesosystem connections. Although Macrorie (1988) could have never anticipated the technological advances brought about by the internet, the literature reveals the inquiry-based nature of I-Search fits well with technology (Davis, 1995; Alvey, Phillips, Bigelow, Smith, Pfaff, Colt, Leander, Dalton, & Ma, 2011; Zorfass & Copel, 1995; Assaf, et. al., 2011; Luther, 2006). Davis (1995) shared his experience of having high school students post in newsgroups—both soliciting information about their topic as well as contributing their own perspective—and found that many students used newsgroups to engage in forms of dialogic learning consistent with Freire’s (2011) problem-posing pedagogy. For instance, inspired by passing a Mormon temple during a ski trip, one student learned about the Church of Latter Day Saints, and this information offered her greater clarity about her own religion. Alvey et al. (2011) add even greater internet interactivity with their proposal of iSearch 2.0, a fusion of I-Search with Web 2.0, a term that captures the ability of individuals to tap into collective wisdom, remix online content, and/or socially construct knowledge using the internet (O’Reilly, 2005).
In iSearch 2.0, students “geek around” the internet searching for relevant information that answers their I-Search questions and then “mess around” trying to present the information in ways that are personally and aesthetically pleasing for students. The researchers find that the knowledge students create in iSearch 2.0 is along the “edge of knowledge,” or knowledge that cannot be found in the encyclopedia and must be socially constructed. Technology allows students, especially digital natives who exert strong competencies with technology (Wagner, 2008; O’Reilly, 2005), to approach instruction from a position of strength; consequently, instructors and teachers can use technology as scaffolding to introduce the demands and expectations of academic discourse in ways that represent a blending of the two or more cultures.

Microsystem—Inquiry Based Learning

Once students make mesosystem connections to other environments, they then experience a need to use academic conventions and values within the microsystem classroom. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) describes the microsystem as the direct environment in which behavior is occurring which includes physical, social, and symbolic features; in the microsystem, the developing individual can interact with the environment in ways that progressively increase in complexity. The microsystem can provide developing students with opportunities to receive scaffolded instruction (Vygotsky, 1978) as well as engage in collaborative activities (Bruffee, 2002) that can lead to the development of academic literacy. In this section, I suggest that I-Search presents the union of two dominant paradigms in composition: expressivism and social constructivism. The structure of my I-Search paper can potentially provide students with
the scaffolding necessary to help students interact with the environment in progressively
complex ways and internalize the conventions and values of academic discourse.

**Socio-Cultural Bridges.** Given that many basic skills students are unfamiliar
with academic discourse (Bartholomae, 2002), I-Search can serve as a socio-cultural
bridge to students. I-Search may be seen as a marriage of two dominant paradigms in
English composition: expressivism and social constructionism. (See Crick (2003) for an
argument for the union of these two perspectives.) This union can then be seen as a way
to encourage students to apply their home culture and values in an academic setting while
using the values and conventions of academic discourse to their home culture.

Expressivism, championed by Peter Elbow (1995), argues that there is an inherent
conflict between being a writer and an academic, and that the job of English composition
instructors should be to foster students’ writing ability. To accomplish this, expressivists
encourage strategies that limit the instructor’s authority and power in order to create a
safe environment for students to develop their writing voice. For instance, instructors can
assign prompts that students know more about than the instructor and use storytelling to
encourage students to use their own words, language, and voice (Knaus, 2012).

Macrorie’s (1988) I-Search assignment reflects some of the principles of expressivism by
stressing the importance of storytelling: “The most fundamental mode of human
communication is storytelling” (p. 98) and that students should tell the story of their
search in their I-Search papers. Students may see storytelling as an invitation to actively
engage with research in personally meaningful and relevant ways and use their own voice
and language to define the problem (Gay, 2002), thus validating students’ home culture
and values in an academic setting (Rendon, 1994). Further, storytelling can be seen as a form of deconstruction (or narrative therapy) in which students critically examine power structures in stories and offer alternatives that pose more equity (Borunda, 2012; Knaus, 2012; Lewis, 2012).

Macrorie also incorporates elements of the social-construction paradigm in order to introduce students to their role as academic writers. Social constructivism, championed by Bartholomae (2002), argues that the purpose of composition instruction should be to socialize students to academic discourse. Social constructivism begins from the assumption that in learning, students actively construct meaning through interactions with texts, instructors, and other students. From this perspective, social interactions promote students’ cognitive development as participants exchange perspectives and interpretations of texts and model academic discourse (Gambrell, Mazzoni, & Almasi, 2000). For instance, Graf and Birkenstein (2007) describe two basic moves for academic writing that they call “they say” and “I say.” For the “they say” move, students must understand the text (and spoken language) at a literal level; the authors suggest that summary writing is an essential skill for this purpose. For “I say,” students must assert their perspective in relation to the author’s perspective. To accomplish this step, students must engage in those high cognitive skills essential for academic literacy: synthesis, critical evaluation, and application. As students embark on their I-Search journey, they are engaging in both of these steps continually. When students develop I-Search questions and begin to search for answers to those questions, they must first understand the authors and interviewees who provide answers to their I-Search questions at a literal
level; they can demonstrate this literal meaning by summarizing their ideas in their I-Search papers. Lastly, students must then assert their perspective onto other’s ideas. To accomplish this, students need to engage in synthesis, critical evaluation, and application in order to determine the relationship between the author’s perspective and their own. Thus, students are developing a more accurate understanding of knowledge construction that can empower them to contribute their own perspective (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993).

I-Search can also encourage students to engage in Freire’s (2011) dialogic learning, students engaging not only experts but also their peers in conversations that introduce students to new perspectives and increase learning. Much of the literature has found that the structure and format of I-Search is conducive to students engaging in these dialogues (Assaf, et. al., 2011; Kaszyca & Krueger, 2002; Minnick & Aungst, 2007; Arnold, 1989). For instance, when searching for sources for an I-Search paper, Macrorie recommends topic day, an activity in which students sit in a circle, share their topic, and receive feedback from their classmates about potential sources and knowledge about their topics. Topic day allows students to serve as sources of knowledge for their classmates, thus serving as a validating experience (Rendon, 1994). This validating experience can increase students’ feeling of relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2009) and thus positively influence student engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). For instance, Assaf et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative case study of Joel Johnson, a 7th grade language arts teacher who incorporated I-Search, I-Charts—a graphic organizer that facilitates questioning, summarizing, comparing, and synthesizing strategies (Randall, 1996)—and technology
into a class of predominantly English-language learners (ELL). Johnson first scaffolded instruction by providing students with opportunities to brainstorm potential resources for the required interview. For instance, “When Calvin struggled with finding a person to interview about sexually transmitted diseases, Natasha gave Calvin the name of a family friend who was a doctor at a local hospital” (p. 39). Before students were to contact experts to interview, Johnson further engaged students in an exercise in which the class collectively created a list of interviewing guidelines that included “Write down your questions… Introduce yourself and tell your purpose… If you don’t understand, ask” (p. 39). Strategies such as these will encourage students to consider perspectives they hadn’t considered before; students can then compare this perspective to their own and adjust their own perspective accordingly (Borunda, 2011). This can also make students more likely to utilize resources when they experience struggles and obstacles during the I-Search process, a process that students can use in other parts of their lives.

Given that I-Search is likely located upon students’ zone of proximal development (ZPD), a task just beyond the development of the individual thus requiring the help of another (Vygotsky, 1986), I-Search can provide students with opportunities to collaborate. For instance, since students who do not pick a personally meaningful and relevant topic do not receive the benefits of increased engagement as students who do (see also Rubin, 2002; Johns, 2006; Arnold, 1989; Assaf, et al., 2011; Luther, 2006; Alvey, et al., 2011), several articles suggest that instructors can encourage students to collectively brainstorm topics together as a whole class (Minnick & Aungst, 2007; Assaf, et al., 2011; Luther, 2006; Klausman, 2007). This process can allow students to
“try on” several different topics as well as bounce ideas off of each other before choosing their own. Luther (2006) adds to this practice by suggesting that instructors can have students write a reflective journal after brainstorming potential topics “to catch students in the act of thinking” (p. 53). The act of writing down their ideas can objectify their thoughts, allowing students to stand back and observe their ideas more objectively. This strategy can not only help students generate ideas but also evaluate the “writability” of their ideas. Lastly, Minnick and Aungst (2007) describe how one teacher scaffolded topic generation by having students create a structured map with several branches—interests, sports, potential careers, entertainment—and share their structured map with each other. These strategies provide students with opportunities to engage in dialogic and collaborative learning (Bruffee, 2002) that can serve as scaffolding. The collaborative nature of these activities can increase students’ competence (Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996; Reis, et al., 2000) and perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), leading to a more positive perception of the environment.

However, since I-Search is likely located along students’ ZPD, students may experience a genuine need to use critical evaluation skills in their I-Search paper. Several articles suggest that these critical evaluation skills can be modeled by providing students with opportunities to engage with sources collectively before engaging in their I-Search projects individually (Muchmore, et. al., 2001; Assaf, et. al., 2011; Johns, 2006; Luther, 2006; Zorfass & Copal, 1995). For instance, Luther (2006) describes how he uses Jamie Spurlock’s Supersize Me (2004) to suggest that knowledge is argument instead of truth, thus encouraging his students to approach their knowledge inquiries more critically and
to frame their response in relation to others. Johns (2006) similarly reports on how she used I-Search in a freshman composition studio course consisting largely of generation 1.5 students at San Diego State University. She had students first analyze journalistic writing about other nations’ perceptions of the US-led war in Iraq. Through these exercises, students are provided with opportunities to grapple with texts, to work with each other, to build on each other’s ideas, to help each other complete tasks, and to develop crucial academic skills collectively (Bruffee, 2002). This collaboration can increase students’ perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) that they can engage in critical evaluation individually in their I-Search assignments; moreover, if students do encounter a challenge, they will be more likely to utilize resources (instructor, classmates, and/or experts) to help them overcome these challenges (Kaszyca & Krueger, 2002).

However, students may still need even more scaffolding to apply critical evaluation, synthesis, and application to their own I-Search papers. Some articles suggest using graphic organizers as scaffolding to help students actively engage with texts and develop higher cognitive skills (Assaf, et al., 2011; Joyce & Tallman, 1997; Reigstad, 1997; Joyce & Tallman, 1997). For instance, Assaf, et al. (2011) describes how teacher Johnson uses Inquiry Charts (also called I-Charts), a structured chart “for teachers and students to learn questioning strategies, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, and comparing, while also serving as an independent research tool” (p. 32). I-Charts, modeled off of Randall’s (1996) strategy, offer students a systematic process for examining each article; with enough practice, these skills can be internalized (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000), and students can begin to apply these strategies without the I-
Chart. Moreover, several articles also suggest offering students’ opportunities to engage
with texts and with others: classmates, the instructor, tutors, and/or experts. For instance,
Johns (2006) provides tutors for her students and designates class time for individual
conferences. Alvey, et al. (2011) add to this by suggesting web savvy seminars, a chance
for students to share the challenges they experienced collecting sources and how they
overcame those challenges. Such activities allow students to exchange perspectives
about what to do when they encounter challenges with sources; then students can begin to
“try on” these strategies and see if they work for them individually. Such processes
match the ways that children and adults learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

**Macrosystem, or Validating Experiences**

Because I-Search instruction has the potential to positively influence active
engagement, students are more likely to make connections at the macrosystem, or cultural
level. Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) describes the macrosystem as the level of
culture that unites the micro-, meso-, exo-, and chronosystem and provides individuals
with the cultural values, beliefs, and norms that guide behavior in the microsystem. The
structure of the I-Search paper can encourage students to synthesize their
home/community values and beliefs with academic culture’s (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).
As such, students’ experiences are likely to be validated in an academic setting, and
students can perceive an overlap between the two cultures.

I-Search can offer students a more accurate view of the nature of academic
discourse that they can use to replace their false folk psychology (Bruner, 1990).
Macrorie (1988) created the I-Search assignment to encourage students to engage in a similar knowledge-inquiry process as experts:

But if [students] were to see the experts at work—finding needs in their own lives and answering them, working brilliantly, working stupidly, making mistakes, stumbling into profitable answers—they would understand the true nature of productive women and men, and would come to believe they might become [experts] themselves (p. vii)

The literature has found that I-Search contextualizes instruction, thus facilitating the development of academic skills and strategies—critical evaluation, summarization, integration of sources—utilized by experts (Rubin, 2002; Johns, 2006; Muchmore, et. al., 2001; Assaf, et. al., 2011; Luther, 2006; Zorfass & Copel, 1995). Muchmore et al. (2001) wanted to critically examine the perception among pre- and in-service teachers that the personal emphasis in I-Search failed to prepare students for the rigor of academic writing. Consequently, they systematically analyzed the research papers written for Margaret Russell, a veteran Detroit high school English teacher; the first year students (n=22) wrote the traditional research paper and the second and third year students (n=16 and =26 respectively) wrote I-Search papers. After systematically defining five levels of analysis in the students’ papers, the authors found that the traditional research paper had greater evidence of low level reasoning (36% to 8% respectively) and the I-Search had greater evidence of high level analytical reasoning (23% to 9% respectively). Such an increase in high level analysis can be attributed to the contextualization of instruction; that is, because students are engaged in authentic literacy tasks, they are more likely to experience a genuine need to use academic literacy and make the connection between the skills or strategies and application (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993). Thus, students are
more likely to internalize the skills or strategies used for their I-Search paper (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) and transfer those skills and strategies to other environments, especially other courses (Rubin, 2002; Johns, 2006; Muchmore, et. al., 2001; Assaf, et. al., 2011; Luther, 2006; Zoraff & Copel, 1995).

I-Search can be seen as a validating experience, that is, an experience that validates students’ home culture(s) in an academic setting. To determine what role in- and out-of –class interactions played in student learning, Rendon (1994) examined the interviews of students from four different types of colleges: a predominantly minority community college, a predominantly black urban, commuter college, a predominantly white residential college, and an elite research university. She found that even though students, especially nontraditional students, experienced anxiety about navigating the college experience, institutional agents can take the initiative and validate nontraditional students’ experiences in and out of class by expressing a genuine concern for students, by treating students equally, by providing students with individual help, and by offering students genuine feedback. She continues to argue that institutional agents can persuade nontraditional students that their perspective can enhance academic culture because they come from diverse backgrounds. The literature suggests that I-Search can provide students with opportunities to have their home culture(s) validated in an academic setting and perceive an overlap between home and academic cultures, thus developing bi- or multicultural identities (de Anda, 1984). Both validation and the development of bi- and multi-cultural identities can positively influence students’ perception of the classroom and lead to greater engagement with that environment. This greater engagement can push
students to develop skills and strategies to interact with the environment in progressively complex ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995).

**Exosystem, or Reform at Scale**

The I-Search curriculum has the potential to serve as an exosystem connection by providing English departments with an alternative curriculum. Given that the traditional basic skills English courses do not work as effectively as they need to, it is imperative that community colleges develop alternative models of basic skills instruction that can be implemented at scale (CCCSSTF, 2012; AACC, 2012; Shulock & Moore, 2010; Quint, et al., 2013). While there have been special basic skills programs and services which have been found to have success for small pockets of students, there is little known with certainty about what will work when implemented at scale (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Coburn, 2003; Quint, et al., 2013). Any improvement in basic skills scale reform, however marginal, has the potential to decrease the opportunity and achievement gap (Nevarez & Wood, 2010) and increase the number of college-educated workers emerging into the economy (Shulock & Moore, 2007).

It is through this backdrop that I will examine research at scale. Even though the case study is not participating in scale reform, the current study can contribute to the literature on reform scale in two ways. First, this study can provide a perspective of students’ ability at the case study site to complete research, the staple of freshman composition, thus contributing to literature about acceleration programs (Adams, Gearheart, Miller, & Roberts, 2009; Glau, 2009; Goen-Salter, 2008; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Second, this study can provide a perspective about the efficacy of a culturally
relevant curriculum (Gay, 2002) in basic skills English courses. Since this is a qualitative study, the results of this study are not generalizable, but readers can look for similarities between this study and reform movements at their institution and apply this study’s ideas there, if applicable.

Even if community college basic skills programs are marginalized programs within marginalized institutions (Soliday, 2002), many community colleges strive to meet the call of reformers and develop more equitable models of basic skills English instruction implemented at scale (CCCSSTF, 2012; AACC, 2012; Shulock & Moore, 2010; Quint, et al., 2013). Many community colleges try to incorporate elements of special programs that have been found to have success for small pockets of students into more traditional classrooms. To accomplish this, Coburn (2003) argues that educational leaders and reformers should consider issues of scale from the multiple perspectives of (1) depth, or reform that “goes beyond surface structures or procedures… to alter teacher’s beliefs, norms of social interaction, and pedagogical principles as enacted in the curriculum” (p. 4), (2) sustainability over the long run, and (3) a shift in ownership from the reformer to practitioners. I pose that an I-Search curriculum is one curriculum (among many) that can meet these guidelines and shift the culture of basic skills English programs: a shift from a deficiency to an assets-based model of instruction (Boykin & Noguera, 2011); a shift from passive to active engagement that allows students to internalize and transfer instruction (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000); a shift from a banking to a problem-posing pedagogy in which instructors establish a co-learner
relationships with students and engage in joint knowledge inquiries (Freire, 2011; Rendon, 1994; Gay, 2002).

An I-Search curriculum has the potential to present students with a relevant curriculum in which students are presented with genuine, authentic literacy tasks. Quint et al. (2013) found that community colleges receiving Obama’s Achieving the Dream funds also focused on reform that sought to increase instructional relevance by altering “the curriculum and/or instructional modalities to make the courses more engaging for students” (25). The authors found that instructional relevance is especially likely to reach large portions of target students and positively correlate with student outcomes. For instance, the I-BEST model in Washington state has been found to have a great deal of success by forming learning communities between basic skills courses and career and technical education (CTE; Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009), which encourages students to create strong mesosystem connections between the basic skills classroom and work environments. (However, it must be noted that I-BEST has been implemented at scale in vocational programs and not basic skills English courses.) Because basic skills instruction is taught in the context of a career, instruction is more likely to be perceived as relevant by students and lead to a positive perception of the environment, increased engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995; Lewin, 1935), and the achievement of learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008; 2009).

Research has found some success with accelerated programs in which students can progress through basic skills courses more quickly (Goen-Salter, 2008; Glau, 2007; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Adams, Gearheart, Miller, & Roberts, 2009). For instance,
Glau (2007) reports how Arizona State University’s (ASU) stretch course, a program in which basic skills students take two semester to complete freshman composition, has led to increases in student success. Students in the stretch program receive transferable Writing Across the Curriculum credit their first semester and freshman composition their second semester. In order to implement this program, ASU had to use political cover by insisting that students were completing freshman composition quality work; any attacks on the stretch program would similarly be attacks on freshman composition as well. Similarly, the City College of Baltimore has implemented a studio course in which basic skills students enroll in freshman composition with 16 other students who test directly into freshman composition. The basic skills students take a supplement course to provide additional scaffolding to overcome the challenges of freshman composition. Similar to ASU, CCB had to use political capital by negotiating with faculty to receive two units of credit for three hours of instruction in order to pass this program by administration. Both the stretch and studio courses have received increases in success rates of basic skills English students and show promise as scale reform.

Further, some programs have combined the two approaches in order to meet the needs of its students. For instance, Goen-Salter (2008) describes how San Francisco State University (SFSU) responded to the CSU policy requiring students to complete all remediation within the first year or face disenrollment. Challenging the tendency of English departments to separate reading and writing into separate classes (Rose, 1980; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Soliday, 2009; Horner & Lu, 1999), SFSU created the Integrated Reading/Writing (IRW) program in which students who test two levels below
college composition enroll in a three unit writing course with a one-unit reading course and progress through college composition in two semesters instead of three. Three years after implementation, the IRW experienced retention rates of 99% (compared to 85% in the traditional sequence) and pass rates of 99% (compared to 89% in the traditional sequence). Goen-Salter attributes this success to the meta-cognitive activities incorporated through the IRW, the community of learners that students formed in the cohort model, and the bridges between the academic and personal lives of students. It is in the environment similar to the IRW that students can receive the high support they need to meet the program’s high expectations. The current study can then determine the ability of basic skills English students at the case study site to write research as long as students receive scaffolded instruction. Reformers considering accelerated programs can then determine what parts of this study are similar to their sites and consider implementing portions of this study there.

I-Search has the potential to provide faculty, who may or may not be familiar with composition theory, a curriculum they can implement in these scale reforms. The I-Search model presented in this study can contribute to the literature about scale reform in at least two ways. First, this study can determine the efficacy of I-Search as a relevance curriculum; that is, since students choose a topic that is relevant to their lives, this study will seek to make the connection between the relevant topic and engagement at the case study site. Second, this study can add to the literature on acceleration by evaluating the ability of basic skills writers to write an I-Search (or a research paper) at the case study site. This can be used to help practitioners determine what scaffolding may be required
in accelerated programs. However, since this is a qualitative study, the results are not generalizable; hence, practitioners will have to look for similarities between the case study site and their own institutions and only then determine what parts might be applied.

**Conclusions about I-Search**

Based on this literature review, it is evident that the structure and processes of I-Search make it a great vehicle to help students learn the skills and strategies to become active members of academic discourse communities. First, because students engage in an inquiry-based process of choosing a personally relevant and meaningful topic, they are more likely perceive the classroom positively and actively engage with it; students can have the motivation and drive necessary to exert the effort needed for academic literacy development (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001). Second, since the I-Search paper will likely be along the students’ zone of proximal development, the dialogic nature of I-Search can provide students with the support to grapple with I-Search and academic discourse. Lastly, I-Search contextualizes instruction, helping students make the instruction-skill-application connection; as a result, students will be more likely to internalize the skills and strategies and transfer them to other environments (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000).

However, I agree with Muchmore, et al. (2001) when they write that while I-Search “has been embraced by many high school English teachers and college writing instructors, it has received little attention from researchers” (p. 53). This would make I-Search what Quint, et al. (2013) call a promising practice, an assignment that makes intuitive sense and has been found to have a great deal of success but hasn’t been verified
by research. To date, most of the literature about I-Search has either been a how-to or a personal testimonial (Arnold, 1989; Joyce & Tallman, 1997; Reigstad, 1997; Keans, 1994; Johns, 2006; Kaszyca & Krueger, 1994; Luther, 2006; Klausman, 2007; Alvey, et al., 2011). Those studies that did have a research methodology had a shortcoming which hurt its validity. For instance, Rubin (2002) examined six students who self-reported that I-Search had impacted both their personal and academic lives. By focusing on only students who self-reported impact, the author fails to account for other students, who may likely be the majority of students who have to write I-Search papers. Second, the data only included the actual I-Search papers and interviews conducted one year after the completion of the I-Search paper; while this data could have determined elements of I-Search that “stuck” longitudinally, there may have been valuable perspectives if interviews were conducted during the I-Search paper as well. Lastly, while Rubins was not employed at the case study site during the time of the interviews, he did “supervise” the I-Search papers, and the results could have been influenced by his authority of the grade and/or likability. Minnick and Aungst (2007) also conducted a qualitative case study of an intern teacher who was required to teach I-Search from her mentor teacher. The results of this study may be more descriptive of a novice teacher than the actual I-Search paper. Lastly, Muchmore, et al. (2001) examined three years of research papers—a first year with the traditional research paper and the second and third with I-Search—for evidence of complexity of analysis and student learning. While the researchers engaged in a very thorough and systematic process to define complexity of analysis and
evidence of learning, the study’s findings would be strengthened if they had triangulated the data with student surveys and/or interviews.

Consequently, the current study strives to address this gap through a rigorous ethnographic case study methodology. First, the researcher will not be the teacher, thus likability and the power of the grade will not be as strong an influence on the results. Secondly, I will triangulate results by obtaining the researcher’s, instructors’, and students’ perspectives as well as collecting data through observation, surveys, and interviews. Lastly, I will member-check all the findings with participants to determine if my perspective as a researcher truly reflects those of the participants. Through this process, I will strive to make my findings as valid as possible and contribute to the literature on I-Search by providing explanation of how I-Search can mediate teaching and learning.

**Theoretical framework: Self-Determination Theory.**

In part I, I examined the Ecological Model of Human Development, in which an individual interacts with the microsystem (or the direct environment) in ways that progressively increase in complexity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995). In part II, I examined literature on traditional basic skills English instruction, concluding that basic skills English courses tend to be ecologically weak learning environments in which students too often fail to make connections between what they learn in the classroom and how they might apply it outside the classroom. In part III, I examined the literature on I-Search, concluding that I-Search has the potential to create an ecologically rich learning environment in which students make connections between classroom instruction and
other environments with which they interact: other college courses, work, home, community, etc. In an ecologically rich learning environment, students are more likely to engage with instruction to the extent that is necessary for internalization and transfer (Bransford, Browning, and Cocking, 2000).

However, I still need a tool with which to infer how I-Search instruction can potentially mediate teaching and learning in the basic skills English classroom. More specifically, I need to account for how instruction can both tap into students’ already existing interests and competencies and affect their perceptions of the classroom. I have therefore decided to use Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Ryan and Deci (1985, 2000) developed SDT based on the assumption that people, who innately desire to feel volition, seek to continually learn and overcome optimal challenges. SDT then describes the socio-environmental characteristics that can either encourage and nourish or thwart and undermine this natural propensity. SDT posits that individuals have three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The need for autonomy refers to the innate desire for people to feel volitional and to initiate their behaviors; when individuals (especially students) feel their autonomy is supported, they can tap into their intrinsic motivation, or motivation that is inherent in the activity itself, and seek to expand their capacities. Competence refers to the extent to which individuals feel they can be successful at the task (see also perceived self-efficacy; Bandura, 1997). Relatedness refers to an individual connecting with others in the environment, especially in a warm and friendly manner; when individuals feel a sense of relatedness, they may synthesize their own goals and values with those of others, thus leading to internalization. The
research has found that when individuals feel that their needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, their engagement in that environment increases (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, Barch, 2004; Benware & Deci, 1984), thus leading to the achievement of learning outcomes (Clabaugh, 2013; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2009; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

In this part, I will examine the literature of SDT’s three needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. I will conclude that when instructors (and teachers) meet these three needs, students will likely exert more effort towards their studies and engage more actively with the class; further students will be more likely to engage in self-regulated learning, thus empowering students to develop their academic literacy skills on their own outside of class. This understanding will then allow me to infer different ways that I-Search instruction can lead to the understanding, internalization, and transfer of instruction.

SDT and Autonomy Support. Research has found that when instructors support students’ autonomy, students experience an increase in engagement and greater learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Reeve et al., 2004). For instance, in a quasi-experimental study, Clabaugh (2013) trained three California community college instructors on autonomy support, observed and transcribed their classes, and distributed surveys to students. He found that when instructors supported their students’ autonomy, students engaged more deeply, learned more quickly, and became more successful students. Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2009) contributed to this literature by suggesting that a third component, classroom structure—“the amount and clarity of information that expectations and ways of effectively
achieving desired educational outcomes” (p. 589)—that can also increase student performance as well. They examined 1,584 students in 133 classrooms in public, Midwest high schools; observers were trained to rate teacher instructional styles (including autonomy support and structure) and student engagement; the researchers also distributed surveys to students to measure their engagement. They found that teachers’ autonomy support coupled with a structured classroom led to greater student engagement; in fact, the researchers suggest that a structured class during critical moments in a lesson, especially at the beginning, set the conditions for students to regulate their own learning later on in the lesson. If students are allowed to choose their own topic, students might feel that their autonomy is supported and have increased motivation and engagement.

In addition, research has also found that when students engage in autonomous behavior in the classroom, teachers may respond by supporting students’ autonomy more (Skinner and Belmont, 1993; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). For instance, Skinner and Belmont (1993) distributed questionnaires to 144 third and fourth grade students and their fourteen teachers at two points in the school year: October and March. They found a reciprocal relationship between teacher behavior and student engagement: when teachers reported greater autonomy support, student engagement increased; when students reported greater engagement, teachers reported even more autonomy support. However, there was no observation portion of the study to triangulate and strengthen their findings. This may be the case in a basic skills English classroom that adopts an I-Search curriculum: while the instructor will likely lack expertise on the topics that students choose, they may be more likely to support students’ autonomy when
they see students engage with instruction. Consequently for the current study, I will look for evidence not only of the instructor supporting students’ autonomy, but also student engagement to see if that encourages the instructor to support students’ autonomy even more.

The research also suggests that students can benefit from supporting their classmates’ autonomy and having their autonomy supported by classmates (McLachlan & Hagger, 2010; Benware & Deci, 1984) although this literature is rather scant. For instance, Benware and Deci (1984) compared students in an experimental group who were instructed to teach a history article to classmates to the control group who were instructed they would be tested on the article. Participants were distributed a Likert survey assessing their interest, enjoyment, and time they spent studying. They found that experimental group students were more intrinsically motivated, had higher conceptual learning scores, and perceived themselves to be more actively engaged; that is, in order to teach the article to classmates, students would have a greater autonomous orientation, and that orientation could lead to greater student engagement. It can be inferred that by instructing students to teach the article, they felt more connected to their classmates, thus encouraging them to internalize extrinsic motivation and increase autonomous behavior. Additionally, McLachlan and Hagger (2010) examined how tutors at a research university can support the autonomy of tutees. They used nine tutors (five assigned to the experimental group and four to the control group) and presented the experimental group with a brief 20 minute presentation on autonomy support. Tutors were then given self-report measures of perceived autonomy support at three points: before the training,
directly after the training, and two weeks after the training. They found that tutors in the experimental group reported less controlling behaviors and greater autonomy support than tutors in the control group; further, they added that non-verbal communication can be yet another tool for tutors (and other educators) to support students’ autonomy. However, this study could have addressed methodological weaknesses—including a small sample size, lack of an observation component, lack of a tutee’s perspective, terse training of tutors, and a short seven week study period—to determine how autonomy support was internalized to strengthen results. While the literature predominantly focuses on teacher supporting students’ autonomy, students supporting each other’s autonomy remain an untapped potential. The current study can address this gap and look for evidence of both students supporting classmates’ autonomy and receiving autonomy support from classmates.

**SDT and Competence.** Because students may feel anxiety about their beliefs that they can be successful in college (Cox, 2009; Rendon, 1994; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013), instruction can strive to facilitate not only literacy development but also positively influence students’ feelings of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Feelings of competence are increased when an individual receives feedback, communications, and rewards within an environment that increase feelings of effectance motivation, or momentum gained from the completion of a challenging task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This sense of competence is important for the current study because writing an I-Search paper may be perceived as a challenging, and perhaps even a daunting, task. A sense of
competence can then account for students grappling with academic discourse even though it might be extremely difficult for them.

Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that there is a relationship between competence and intrinsic motivation, a sense of satisfaction that is inherent in the task itself; for instance, an individual can receive pleasure from the act of reading a book. Intrinsic motivation is contrasted with extrinsic motivation which is a reward that is external of the act itself; for instance, studying a subject in order to receive a good grade on a test. As Ryan and Deci argue, “social-contextual events (e.g. feedback, communication, rewards) that conduce toward feelings of competence during action can enhance intrinsic motivation for that action” (p. 70; see also Deci & Ryan, 1985). This sense of competence can be especially crucial when the individual is engaged in a particularly difficult task. In this case, the intrinsic motivation (i.e. writing about a topic that students have always wanted to learn more about) can motivate students to grapple with the conventions and values of academic discourse even though it might be challenging for them. This point suggests that even though students may be intrinsically motivated to write their I-Search papers, they may additionally benefit from feeling a sense of competence.

Competence can also create a sense of well-being in an individual (Elliot, MacGregor, & thrash, 2002; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996; Reis, et al., 2000). For instance, Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis (1996) examined the competence and autonomy of 60 university psychology students who completed daily competence questionnaires and wrote journals over a 14 day period. The researchers found that students who reported a good day also gave themselves high ratings for competence on that same day; students
who consistently reported good days also consistently gave themselves higher competence scores on average. Thus, the researchers concluded that when individuals feel competent, they also have a good sense of well-being. This finding is important for the current study because a sense of well-being is conducive to the learning of academic discourse in a basic skills English classroom.

Similar to competence, Bandura (1997) defines perceived self-efficacy as “the beliefs that an individual can organize and execute the actions necessary for a desired result” (3). Bandura continues to describe perceived self-efficacy as an inferential process based on several, complex and interdependent factors with similar past experiences being the most prominent. If basic skills students’ past experiences in secondary school were negative, then their perceived self-efficacy for college would likely be similarly low. This is especially true for basic skills writers who may have received cryptic responses to their writing in the past, marking only errors with little if any comments on the context (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). In order to effectively help basic skills writers develop their academic literacy skills, instruction can also address students’ perceived self-efficacy and competence to encourage students to grapple with academic discourse.

If instructors provide high expectations and high support, I-Search instruction may positively influence students’ feeling of competence and perceived self-efficacy. Before the basic skills English course, a research paper may have been an enigma that students had only the vaguest notions of how to write. In all likelihood, students may have considered research a copying and pasting of quotes that the student found about the
topic (Macrorie, 1988; Muchmore et al., 2001). However, if instructors present I-Search as dialogic conversations, then students can learn that they have a perspective that is valid and worthy of academic writing (Graf & Birkenstein, 2007; Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993). Such a realization can be evidence that reinforces the belief that students can exert the effort to be successful in college and that they possess the skills and abilities necessary for college success (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). The current study intends to examine different ways that I-Search instruction can positively influence students’ feeling of competence and perceived self-efficacy.

**Relatedness and SDT.** The third psychological need is relatedness, or the “need to feel a sense of belongingness and connectedness with others [which] is centrally important for internalization” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 73). When instructors create a classroom environment that conveys warmth, caring, and respect for all participants, students are more likely to feel a sense of connection to participants, including the instructor. This fact is important because in virtually all educational institutions, students complete work that is turned into the instructor and assigned a grade; this structure is extrinsic by nature. A sense of relatedness can then account for how an extrinsic assignment, such as an I-Search paper, can be internalized and become intrinsically motivating. Ryan and Deci (2000) call this internalization of extrinsic motivation integrated regulation, that is, extrinsic motivation that has been “fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one’s other values and needs” (p. 73). A student may internalize the values and conventions of academic discourse by relating and connecting to the instructor who represents those
values and conventions. This sense of connection, especially when warmth and caring is associated with it, can facilitate students’ adoption of academic culture’s values and conventions (as they are reflected by the instructor) and contribute to the development of bi- or multicultural identities (de Anda, 1985).

A sense of relatedness to others may also positively relate to the achievement of outcomes (Reis, et al., 2000; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Reeve, et al., 2004; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). For instance, extending Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis’ (1996) study, which only examined autonomy and competence, Reis, et al. (2000) added measures of relatedness to determine why individuals have fluctuations between good and bad days. They found that, like autonomy and competence, relatedness also predicted good days even though they found that a sense of relatedness corresponded with positive outcomes while a lack of relatedness didn’t necessarily correspond with bad days. (The researchers accounted for this by differentiating between conflict, which did correspond with bad days, and relatedness.) Thus, they conclude that socializing can lead to a greater sense of relatedness and, with autonomy and competence, contribute to a greater sense of well-being. As stated previously, this sense of well-being is conducive to the internalization and socialization of academic discourse in that students can confront affective issues that can serve as obstacles and barriers to success.

However, the challenge remains: how can a practitioner create a sense of relatedness in the classroom? One possible answer to this question would be Validation Theory, (Rendon, 1994), the extent to which students’ experiences, values, and knowledge are not only acknowledged but also embraced in the classroom and college
environment. Rendon examined nontraditional students and found that even though they experienced anxiety about navigating the college experience, institutional agents can validate their experiences by expressing a genuine concern for students, treating students equally, providing students with individual help, and offering students genuine feedback. Institutional agents can also stress that since nontraditional students come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse perspectives about the world, they can actually enhance and enrich academic culture, but Rendon argues that students feel most validated when institutional agents take the initiative to validate students. A sense of relatedness can encourage students to perceive a convergence of students’ home and academic cultures (de Anda, 1984). I can thus look for evidence of validation that can create a sense of connectedness in students at the case study site.

The literature does suggest that the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can conflict with each other. For instance, even though classroom structure can also be created in a way to create a safe environment that does indeed support students’ autonomy, classroom structure can also be done in a way that is controlling and undermining of students’ sense of autonomy. Elliot, MacGregor, and Thrash (2002) further warn that tension may occur between competence and relatedness when competition is used to increase competence. A sense of competition in which students strive to be better than each other can cut into relatedness and negatively impact learning. Practitioners should continually negotiate the incorporation of these three needs so that the classroom environment is conducive to the internalization and socialization of academic discourse.
Conclusion

Based on my review of the literature, I have concluded that conflict theory is a good conceptual tool to examine basic skills instruction, especially in community colleges. I feel that basic skills English instruction at community colleges can be explained as a series of conflicts: conflicts between literature and socialization of academic discourse missions; conflicts between four-year universities and two-year community colleges; conflicts between students’ purposes for going to college and instructors’ purposes for delivering a curriculum. Conflict theory can also explain how English faculty (who make up English departments) set the academic discourse standards of the barest minimum that faculty believe students need in order to succeed with academic discourse and how cultural disconnects contribute to students’ struggles to meet these expectations.

I additionally conclude that the Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993 1995) is an appropriate conceptual tool to examine basic skills English programs. The Ecological Model can explain how traditional basic skills classes are like an island: students too often fail to perceive a connection between instruction and how it is applied in the real world, in many other environments with which students also interact. Further, the ecological model could be used as a heuristic to help basic skills English departments revise curriculum. Because as Renn and Arnold (2009) argue, the ease with which students can transverse microsystems within a mesosystem determines the quality of their interactions within various microsystems, students in an ecologically rich learning environment can transverse microsystems and thus have high quality interactions. These
high-quality interactions can, in turn, lead to greater engagement and increase the likelihood of the internalization of instruction. Basic skills English programs can thus strive to align their curriculum with not only transfer-level courses but also professional environments in order to ease the ability with which students navigate microsystems within a mesosystem.

This dissertation has examined the literature about traditional basic skills instruction as well as how I-Search can be considered an alternative to traditional instruction. In the remainder of this dissertation, I will explain an ethnographic case study methodology in chapter 3, explaining why this methodology can best describe the relationship between I-Search instruction and students’ development of academic literacy. Then in chapter 4, I will analyze the data using the Ecological Model to determine how I-Search instruction affects students’ perceptions of the classroom and their engagement within it. Lastly in chapter 5, I will interpret and evaluate the findings in terms of the literature and discuss the limitations and the implications of this research study.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In Chapter 1, I defined the problem as the abysmally low rates of success among basic skills English students (California Community College Students Success Task Force, 2013; American Association of Community College, 2013; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013), and posited that a synthesis of Macrorie’s (1989) I-Search assignment with Freire’s (2011) problem-posing pedagogy as an alternative to the traditional curriculum. Then in Chapter 2, I situated my I-Search curriculum in the literature to understand the nature of the problem of traditional basic skills English instruction, to inform the design of my I-Search curriculum, and to allow me to build the current study on the foundation of past studies (Merriam, 2009).

Chapter 3 then presents the methodology for this study, including the research design, research questions, the population and setting, the protection of participants, data collection, analysis, and a conclusion. Given that the purpose of this study is to provide English departments and faculty with an alternative curriculum that can potentially increase student success, this dissertation uses an ethnographic case study approach (Merriam, 2009; Cresswell, 2013) to describe not only the culture of the case study site, especially the influence of a department-mandated proficiency exam, but also a case study class that adopts my I-Search curriculum. I collected more than enough data to be able to analyze and describe the study site and class in a way that can leave readers believing “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (Polkington,
1989, p. 46) and then consider what elements of the case study site might be applied at their institutions.

**Research Design**

The current study uses ethnographic case study methods (Merriam, 2009; Cresswell, 2013) to test the feasibility of an I-Search curriculum in a basic skills English course. I chose a case study methodology because the case study site and classroom is a naturally bound system which can be described with thick descriptions (Geertz, 1994) and concrete, vivid details to which readers can relate (Merriam, 2009; Boudah, 2011). Moreover, a case study methodology helped me understand the context more fully by collecting data from multiple sources and perspectives. These rich descriptions can invite readers to determine the extent to which the case study’s perspectives are relevant to their situation and consider applying an I-Search (or research) curriculum at their institutions (Boudah, 2011). Perhaps a few readers may even try to teach an I-Search (or research) unit in their own basic skills writing courses or adopt a basic skills English research curriculum at their institution.

Given that I-Search instruction presents the complex, interdependent convergence of students, the instructor, and curriculum (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013), ethnographic techniques will allow me to capture the complexity and nuance of these relationships holistically. Even though the current study is not a traditional ethnography (that is, I only observe a ten week I-Search unit in the case study class), I use ethnographic techniques to discern the culture and perspective of participants consistent with Rosaldo’s (1993) call for a more fluid ethnographic process that embraces the “native’s point of view” but is
not as rigid as traditional ethnography. Ethnographic techniques allowed me to immerse myself into the world of basic skills English instructors who grapple with socializing students to academic discourse and basic skills English students who grapple with meeting these standards. More specifically, ethnographic research techniques allowed me to capture the complex dynamics between instructors and students—with their own experiences, values, perspectives, and skills—and instruction (Pan, 2012) with thick descriptions.

Two findings of research further support the use of ethnographic techniques to capture the culture of case study classroom. First, the culture of a college can have a positive (or negative) impact on student learning outcomes; that is, college culture can have an influence on the desired behaviors and discourse of members within that community (Kuh, 1995; Renn & Arnold, 2003). An ethnographic study of a classroom can identify desired behaviors among participants and infer how those desired behaviors may lead to or detract from the achievement of learning outcomes. Second, commuter students’, who are typically prevalent on community colleges, only exposure to college culture may be the classroom (Masse, 2009). Donaldson and Graham (1999) call this tendency the connecting classroom and describe how students’ greatest (and sometimes only) exposure to college culture may be the college classroom. This connecting classroom may be even more relevant in a composition course in which instructors introduce and socialize students to academic discourse. An ethnographic study of a college classroom can determine the cultural beliefs, values, and norms that guide behavior and can influence the development of academic literacy.
Role of the Researcher

Although I am a full-time professor at the case study site, I have no power to make decisions that may affect any of the participants of the study, especially the case study instructor and students. My role in this research was to pilot the I-Search unit for four semesters with my own students before the case study instructor implemented his version of it. I also conducted and transcribed each interview myself. After the transcription was complete, I member-checked by sending the transcript to interviewees to ask for feedback or corrections, encouraging the participant to make sure the transcript conveyed their intent and allowing them the discretion to change the transcript if necessary.

Research Questions

This research includes the following three questions:

1. How does the case study classroom reflect the culture of the basic skills English program, especially the influence of the department-mandated proficiency exam?
2. In what ways does I-Search instruction mediate teaching and learning in a basic skills English class?
   a. How might students apply, internalize, and transfer I-Search instruction inside and outside the basic skills English classroom?
3. How can instructors scaffold I-Search instruction in order to meet students’ needs and lead to the development of academic literacy?

Although I have taken great efforts to limit the influence of my own personal beliefs, prejudices, and assumptions, the research questions above are based on the assumption that I-Search presents students with an ecologically rich learning environment. In this environment, students are presented with genuine, authentic literacy tasks that can contextualize instruction and lead to internalization and transfer of instruction to other environments. Research question 1 helped me describe how the culture of basic skills
instruction at the case study site may influence instruction while research questions 2 and 3 helped me determine how an I-Search curriculum influences the classroom culture. The answers to these research questions allowed me to describe the culture of the case study site and classroom with thick, rich descriptions (Geertz, 1994).

**Setting, Population, and Sample**

Pine College is a public California community college that serves over 20,000 students in the foothills of the mountains (Pine College, 2012a). (In order to protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms replaced all names, including those of the community college, courses, the instructors, and students.) Similar to other campuses, more women attend Pine College than men, (52.7% compared to 45.9% with 1.4% not reporting gender). Ethnically, the student population of Pine College does not necessarily reflect the ethnic diversity of California, with a student population of 70% “White, not of Hispanic origin,” 12.4% Hispanic population, 4.9% Asian, 3.3% African American, and 9.4% other or not identified. Approximately, 40% of students attend college full-time (enrolled in 12 units or more) while the remaining students are enrolled part-time or attend non-credit courses (Pine College, 2012b). While Pine College serves an affluent community, the number of students receiving financial aid has increased in recent years: 39% in the fall of 2009 compared to 53% in the fall of 2012 (Kelly, 2013, personal communication, 4/12/2013). The 2008 student cohort at Pine College had a higher graduation and transfer rate compared to the national median in spring of 2012 (39% compared to 26% respectively), and Pine College had a 72% first-time student retention rate in the fall of 2011 (Pine College, 2012b).
I have taught at the case study site for the past ten years (four as an adjunct and six as a full-time instructor) and chose the current college I work at as the site for my case study because I was able to glean more information as an insider (that is, an emic) than an outsider (or an etic; Merriam, 2009). Consequently, participant interviewees were less likely to be restrained and more likely to be forthcoming with their perspectives (Athanasas & Heath, 1995). I am in a better position to understand the culture of basic skills English instruction at Pine College.

Since the participants are limited to one basic skills program and one basic skills English course within that program, I feel that ethnographic techniques let me best capture the culture of both the basic skills English program and course adopting my I-Search curriculum. With a qualitative methodology, I focused on a limited number of participants—surveys distributed to English 60 (and 70) instructors, three interviewed instructors, one case study class, and three interviewed students—and approached the data holistically, focusing on the convergence of several complex, interdependent factors. A qualitative methodology allowed me to capture the complexity and nuance of a curriculum implemented in the “real world” and with “real students” who experience “real problems.”

However, since I approached Pine College as an insider, I was sure “to let the familiar become strange and look at events from an outsider’s eyes” (Pan, 2012, p. 41). For instance, the literature suggests that researchers can use defamiliarizing tools to uncover what may lie hidden beneath the surface and diminish any researcher biases (Geertz, 1983; Kaomea, 2003). To defamiliarize the study site, I bracketed, or I made
myself aware of the assumptions that guided the current research study (Merriam, 2009). For instance, given that I created the I-Search curriculum under review, I naturally want to see it succeed. However, I forced myself to consciously and purposefully look for data and evidence that contradicted the study’s assumptions in order to limit the influences of my own biases.

**Piloting I-Search.** Before the study, I had piloted an I-Search unit in two of my basic skills writing courses, English 60, a three-unit basic skills writing course one level below transfer, and English 70, an integrated six-unit integrated basic skills reading and writing course at the same level, for four semesters (see “Impetus” on page 1 for a description of the I-Search unit I piloted to students). As I piloted these courses, I engaged in action research by giving students surveys about their experience engaging in I-Search. When I asked the question, “Should English 60 (or 70) instructors teach I-Search in their courses?” the answer was usually a resounding “Yes!” by over 90%; the lowest percentage of the four semesters was 91%. By piloting the I-Search unit for four semesters, I was able to identify students’ challenges and then scaffold instruction to meet those challenges.

**Choosing a Case Study Instructor.** I had to choose a basic skills writing instructor to use for the case study course. I first used reputational and convenience sampling (Merriam, 2009) to ask my colleagues for an instructor that (a) has a good reputation for working with basic skills students and (b) would be willing to teach an I-Search unit in a basic skills English course. I ended up choosing a case study instructor who was already familiar with my I-Search unit. First, as an instructional assistant in the
Writing Center, he had already worked with many of my students who were writing their I-Search papers for my class. Secondly, he had adapted and taught a similar unit in a freshman composition course that he had taken over for an instructor who had health issues. As long as he agreed to teach some form of my I-Search curriculum, I had given him the discretion to use as little or as much of my I-Search material: PowerPoint presentations, Workbook, course design, etc. He had decided that in order to have the greatest fidelity, he would use a majority of my material for his course. However, we both agreed that he would modify or adapt the material in order to mesh my curriculum with his own unique teaching style. Given that he was already familiar with my I-Search unit, he already had some ideas about how he would teach the I-Search unit before the study began. This early exposure to the I-Search unit made training him for the case study significantly easier.

I then met with him several times weekly for lunch before the beginning of the observation period to discuss the I-Search unit as well as other matters. These weekly lunches helped to establish rapport with him as well as introduce portions of my I-Search curriculum in small, digestible chunks. These training sessions were more like dialogic conversations than formal training sessions. I would often introduce a portion of the I-Search assignment, and he would then share similar lessons or activities he uses. It’s in this way we were able to conjoin our two perspectives to create a collaborative I-Search unit.
Protection of Participants

This research was conducted from the perspective that it is my responsibility as a researcher to protect the anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy of all participants. I first described the human subjects form and de-identification processes to participants and encouraged them to ask any questions they had about the research process. I then emphasized that participation is optional, and that participation or non-participation will not affect students’ grades or instructors’ and students’ treatment at Pine College. I stressed to all participants who filled out the surveys that they reserve the right to not complete the surveys and/or refuse to answer any question for any reason. For interviews, I similarly went over the informed consent sheet and stressed that the interviewee may refuse to answer any question or stop the audio recording and/or interview at any time and for any reason. I also member-checked with interviewees by providing them with an interview transcript and requested that they review it to verify that it accurately reflects their perspective, and if it doesn’t, to make revisions so that it does. Lastly, I offered all participants an opportunity to read the final results once it is published and expressed my willingness to present this study to anyone who may benefit from it.

I ensured students’ anonymity by not collecting demographic data, by using pseudonyms, and by removing any identifying descriptions or information. There was no linkage between the participants of the study and the data collected from them. To de-identify surveys, I first highlighted significant statements and then typed them into a Word document, replacing any names with pseudonyms and removing any identifying
descriptions. The statements also were numbered so that I cannot link the statement with the actual participant. I stored the surveys in a locked location where only I, the researcher, had access to and limited access of the data to myself, the researcher, and my dissertation committee. I destroyed all original data after I de-identified it and will keep all de-identified data for at least three years.

**Data Collection**

Because the purpose of this study is to describe the culture of the basic skills English program at the case study site and class that adopted my I-Search curriculum, the data collection occurred in two parts. First, I collected survey and interview data from the basic skills English instructors in order to describe the culture of the basic skills English program, especially the influence of a department mandated proficiency exam. Second, I collected observation, survey, and interview data for the case study class to describe the culture of the case study class. This allowed me to identify patterns from multiple perspectives that were used to infer characteristics of the classroom culture. This informed by descriptions of the culture of the case study class and determine how the case study instructor was able to implement the I-Search curriculum within the context of the basic skills English department. All these methods of data collection enabled me to triangulate the data from several sources in order to increase the validity of my findings and accurately portray the culture of the case study site and class as accurately as possible.
Part I—Basic Skills English Instruction at Case Study Site

For the case study English department, I collected survey and interview data to paint a holistic picture of the culture of basic skills English instruction.

Surveys. Given my purpose of determining a basic skills English reform that can be implemented at scale, the current study strives to describe the culture of the case study basic skills English program by collecting both surveys and interview data from basic skills English instructors. I first distributed surveys to faculty who teach both English 60 and 70 at the English department meeting; I also e-mailed surveys to instructors offering them an opportunity to e-mail their responses as well. First, the surveys determined instructors’ general perspectives of teaching English 60 and 70: (1) the challenges that basic skills students experience, (2) their best practices, and (3) the impact of the department-mandated proficiency exam (see Appendix 1 for the full survey). The three questions helped me paint a picture of the case study’s culture by comparing students’ challenges and instructors’ best practices to the influence of the department exam and situate the culture of the case study course within the larger culture of basic skills English instruction at the case study site.

Interviews. Once I had a chance to analyze the survey data, I asked and interviewed three basic skills instructors. The interviews had the same purpose as the survey but allowed me to capture the perspectives of basic skills English instructors with much greater detail. After ensuring that each participant had sufficient experience with English 60 or 70 (that is, each participant had recently taught English 60 or 70 within the past year), I used maximum variation sampling to choose instructors who had diverse
experience with the course: I chose one full-time instructor who is a reading-writing instructor; one full-time instructor who supports the final; and one part-time instructor.

All interviews were semi-structured, and before each interview, I used survey results to create an interview guide with potential questions I could ask during the interview. The interviews were conducted in a neutral conference room at the case study site and lasted no longer than an hour each. By focusing on instructors with diverse experience, the common patterns found through surveys and interviews would be more representative of case study culture rather than the idiosyncrasies of the respondent and interviewee.

During the interview, I took extensive notes on the contents and, importantly, the body language that the interviewee used. To record notes, I folded a piece of paper about four inches from the left edge and wrote symbols with times to indicate body language that accompanied a comment. To capture the comments, I used Ochs (1979) Theory of Transcription in order to limit cultural biases; for instance, instead of placing emphasis on the spoken word of the interviewee, I marked body language that accompanied a comment in the left column and the comment that preceded it in the right. This allowed me to determine exactly what comments were emphasized by the interviewee while limiting a left to right cultural bias.

Part II: I-Search Study Site

For the case study, I collected several forms of data (observation, surveys, and interviews) in order to triangulate data and strengthen the validity of findings.

Observation. To begin the observation period, the case study instructor introduced me as both a researcher and an instructor at Pine College. After that, I
explained my research study and stressed that I will be examining the implementation of a new writing curriculum. I stressed that my primary role as a researcher is to protect the confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of all participants, and that I will remove all names and identifying information and descriptions to protect their anonymity. I also stressed that I genuinely appreciate their participation, and that I will attend class and take notes, audio-record class sessions, ask students to complete surveys, and interview some students. I stressed that I wanted students to behave as if I wasn’t in the class, hence earning my moniker, “the Invisible Man.”

I assumed the role of participant observer, immersing myself in their environment so that I can describe it in thick, rich descriptions (Merriam, 2009; Geertz, 1994). I considered myself a participant observer because I created the I-Search curriculum that the case study instructor implemented; that is, my experience creating and piloting the curriculum to my students inevitably influenced instruction. However, I limited my participation in the case study class although students were aware of my role of observer. I attended all class sessions except one for which I had a previous commitment, audio-recorded each session, and took copious notes during the entire I-Search unit.

The instructor or students occasionally asked me questions (addressed to my moniker “the invisible man”), and I answered them. I was very cognizant of my relationship with participants since a “researcher who lacks sensitivity to demands in the lives of informants, or who holds fast to the comfortable distance of authority rather than becoming a learner in the culture, severely limits the nature of data and undermines research” (Athanases & Heath, 1995, p. 268). After a while, students adjusted to my
presence in the classroom and often came up to me during breaks and/or before or after class and engaged in conversations. I also saw students outside the classroom and engaged in conversations with them as well. These interactions allowed me to know the students as individuals and helped establish rapport that led to more frank and candid responses about the curriculum.

I used course documents to create observational protocol and began observing the course. To record my observations, I drew a line about ¾ of the way down the page, and recorded actual observations in the left column. Since I was looking mostly for elements of active engagement or disengagement, my observation focused more on students than on the instructor. In the right column, I recorded any early hunches or hypotheses about how I-Search instruction may affect students’ perceptions of the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995; Lewin, 1935) and may lead to active engagement in the classroom: students’ interests, perceived self-efficacy, transferability and/or other themes I noticed. I also marked different elements from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model (the microsystem, the mesosystem, or macrosystem) that may account for student behavior in the classroom; these early analyses facilitated the analysis of data. Once students left, I occasionally and quickly debriefed the case study instructor, asking him to share his perspective of some of the more salient features of the class and his rationales for those features. Immediately following the observation, I wrote an analytic memo to record my initial thoughts and hunches while engaging in rudimentary analysis (Merriam, 2009). For analytic memos, I began to expand on the hunches that I had made during the observation.
**Surveys.** At the end of the observation period, I distributed surveys to students about the I-Search assignment. The surveys were open-ended questions that the case study instructor graciously offered twenty-minutes of class time for students to answer (see Appendix 3). The questions were carefully crafted to (a) relate directly to and provide data that addressed research questions (Boudah, 2011) and (b) confirm observations and patterns I noticed in the observation portion. For example, since research question #2 states “How might students transfer and apply I-Search instruction to environments outside the basic skills English classroom?” I included a question about how I-Search instruction might prepare them for transfer-level English. Students were instructed that these surveys were informal, and the directions for the surveys included, “This survey will be more like a free-write than an organized response. Please write the first thing that comes to your mind after you look at each question. Your response to this survey can come in the form of sentences, lists, or any other method that expresses your ideas.”

**Interview.** Lastly, I used student interviews to strengthen the inferences about the culture of the case study class culture. To select interviewees, I used convenience sampling to interview three of the four student volunteers. All interviews were semi-structured, and before each interview, I created an interview guide with potential questions I could ask during the interview. As with the survey, the interview guide contained questions that related to (a) the research questions and (b) patterns and conclusions found through other forms of data (Boudah, 2011; see Appendix 4 for the complete interview guide). However, I retained flexibility in the order and the amount of
time for each question. For example, if a student was providing valuable information that related directly to one of the research questions, I encouraged the student to develop that idea further, even if that meant not asking every question. The interviews were conducted at a local coffee shop and lasted no more than 30 minutes each. As such, interviews triangulated data from several different sources and perspectives, thus increasing the strength and validity of my findings.

Since I interviewed the instructor several times throughout the semester, and since there was only one instructor, the interviews were less structured than those with students. During instructor interview, I asked him questions related to the rudimentary findings of the study so that he could either verify them or I could reconsider findings. Further, the instructor interview allowed me to tap into what Athanases and Heath (1995) call “wisdom of practice,” or “acts of reflection that reveal teacher thinking” (273) which helped me frame and analyze the data. Since I knew the case study instructor before the study, we already had a professional and personal relationship, and I feel I had greater flexibility to pursue even “uncomfortable” topics that outside researchers might not have access to.

**Data Analysis**

As is typical of qualitative research, I engaged in a systemic process of analyzing data to make sure that no essential data was ignored and the most salient features were emphasized (Merriam, 2009). I searched for patterns within the data that I used to infer the culture of the case study classroom. I looked for themes (or codes) that were repeated frequently and from various sources that defined the desired behavior within the
classroom. I also looked for instances when behavior is approved and encouraged in class as well as instances of when behavior is discouraged (Kuh, 1990). This further allowed me to infer how the culture of the case study site may affect individual students, thus determining how the case study culture either encourages or detracts from learning.

**Epoch (or bracket).** In order to make sure that the results of this study represent the culture of the environment and not my beliefs, I engaged in epoch, or the process of bracketing my personal beliefs, prejudices, and assumptions about the culture so that I can diminish its influence and to focus more intently on the actual culture itself (Merriam, 2009; Cresswell, 2013). Since I created the I-Search unit in this study, I have a strong bias to see it be successful; however, this strong bias made me overcompensate and purposely look for evidence that contradicts its validity. By bracketing, I was able to acknowledge these personal biases and to focus more intently on the culture itself.

**Rudimentary coding during data collection.** While writing both interview and observation notes, I began rudimentary data analysis by creating a three or four inch margin on the right side of the notes, writing actual observations in the left column, and recording my early hunches and hypotheses in the right column (Merriam, 2008). As I was taking observation notes, I looked for evidence of an ecologically rich learning environment (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem) that may influence students’ perceptions of the classroom and affect their engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995). I then wrote notes about these inferences to the right of the actual observation notes so that I could easily make the connection between evidence and the inferences I made. This early analysis gave me a focus for future
observations and aided in the identifying of patterns that can constitute program and class culture.

**Analytic memo.** Directly after each observation period and interview, I wrote an analytic memo to expand on the rudimentary analysis during data collection. In the analytic memo, I first reviewed my observation notes and the rudimentary analysis created during the observation period and expanded on them. I then strove to engage in synthesis, uniting disparate forms of data together and placing the data into Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development. This synthesis of current with past data gave me an even greater focus as I collected more data that began to account for the formation of an emerging culture.

**Transcription as analysis.** As I transcribed the interviews and observations, I began to analyze the data as well by keeping both my interview and observation notes by me so that I could record elements of body language or other non-verbal cues not evident in the recording. I was able to write notes in brackets to be able to notate the body language and/or tone that accompanied each comment (Ochs, 1979). I also added comments to record any early, rudimentary codes I made on interview and observation guides. This allowed me to unite both the transcript and notes in a way that captured the culture with thick descriptions (Geertz, 1994). Further, this process also helped me create student surveys and interview guides, thus triangulating the data from multiple sources.

**Coding.** As is true of qualitative research, I first gleaned the data for strong statements that presented a description of the culture (Cresswell, 2013). During this process, I strove to view all the data equally by numbering the participants so that I could
not tell what comment came from which participant. I started to look for common patterns and inserted them into themes, or clusters of meaning, that provided glimpses of the department and class culture. Lastly, I engaged in horizontalization, or the presentation of the data into a matrix (Merriam, 2009), so that I could view all the data objectively without giving any piece of data greater weight than another. I further highlighted the different methods of collection—observation, survey, interview, document—in order to aid in the triangulation of data. From here, I began to insert data into an ecological model that accounted for the culture of both the case study department and class.

It was during coding when the culture of the program and case study site emerged from the data. As the researcher, I strove to ensure that the inferences I made about classroom culture were supported by several sources of data: artifacts, survey, interview, and observation. Once an element of the culture emerged from the data, I member-checked with participants to compare their perspective with my interpretation. As a result, I was able to determine that the results of this study are more representative of the participants and less of my own biases as a researcher.

Validity

Given that, “To have any effect on either the practice or the theory of a field, research studies must be rigorously conducted; they need to present insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, practitioners, and other researchers” (Merriam, 2009, p. 210), the current study utilized the following strategies and techniques to make the findings as strong, valid, and reliable as possible. To strengthen validity, that is, the
extent to which the results of this finding represent the culture of the environment (Merriam, 2009), I first triangulated the data. Whenever I inferred a characteristic of the case study culture from one source of data, I sought a second, third, or more sources of data to confirm that finding; if, for example, I had observed that an element of I-Search instruction can be transferred to other environments, I looked for a similar finding in survey and/or interview data to corroborate this finding. I also triangulated data at different points of time in the observation, thus determining how lessons developed over time (also see Bronfenbrenner’s (1995) idea of chronosystem.) This ensured that the observation wasn’t an anomaly but rather a reflection of the case study culture.

Further, I sought to verify a hunch with past research. Bogdan and Biklan (2011) suggest that qualitative researchers often consult the literature during analysis to see how other researchers have analyzed similar data. I used the past research to both situate my findings for the current study (Athanases & Heath, 1995) and as models of data analysis. However, I was cognizant of the fact that each environment constructs knowledge differently (Bess & Dee, 2008), and I was sure to place the greater emphasis on the data from the current case study over what other researchers found.

Another strategy I used to strengthen the validity was member checking, or the verification of findings with participants. Whenever I transcribed an interview, I sent it to the interviewee to make sure that the contents reflect the interviewee’s beliefs and perspective. If an interviewee wanted to revise any part of the interview transcript (which one interviewee chose to do), I used the revision as the final version. I also member-checked the observations I made during the I-Search class with the instructor
and students. I asked participants for their interpretation of the classroom events and then compared them to my interpretation, revising my interpretation in the case of discrepancies. I also ran my findings by other basic skills instructors at Pine College and my dissertation committee, in order to determine their perspective of the findings.

I also used a variety of other strategies to increase validity. For instance, I observed the course for ten weeks, ensuring that my findings are a result of patterns within instruction rather than abnormal occurrences. Whenever possible, I offered thick, rich descriptions of the classroom setting and participants’ responses so that readers can compare my interpretation of the results with the data. I involved the members of my dissertation committee with my analysis, drawing upon their expertise and authority to make my results more valid. I also used maximum variation sampling for instructor interviews so that I could determine if the descriptions of the culture I inferred from the data accurately portrayed the actual culture and not the idiosyncrasies of the interviewee.

**Conclusion**

Chapter 3 presented an overview of the ethnographic case study methodology for this dissertation. The case study methodology allowed me to describe the culture of the case study environment with thick, rich descriptions (Geertz, 1994). By using ethnographic techniques, I was able to obtain an insider’s perspective of the case study class’ culture that allowed me to capture the convergence of students’ lives with I-Search instruction. This methodology allowed me to paint a picture of basic skills English and I-Search instruction at the case study site so that other readers can empathize with
participants. This, in turn, allowed readers to determine which elements of the case study may be implemented at their institutions.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS, OR AN ECOLOGICALLY RICH LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The findings of this chapter present my description of the basic skills English culture at Pine College and a case study course that adopts my I-Search curriculum. (In order to protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms replaced all names, including those of the community college, courses, the instructors, and students.) The findings answer the research questions below:

1. How does the case study classroom reflect the culture of the basic skills English program, especially the department mandated proficiency exam?
2. In what ways does I-Search instruction mediate teaching and learning in a basic skills English class?
   a. How might students apply, internalize, and transfer I-Search instruction inside and outside the basic skills English classroom?
3. How can instructors scaffold I-Search instruction in order to meet students’ needs and lead to the development of academic literacy?

To answer these research questions, I first focused on the culture of English 60 and 70 instruction at the case study site. I surveyed instructors and used maximum variation sampling (Merriam, 2009) to interview three instructors: the survey and interview questions focused on three topics: challenges of basic skills students, instructors’ best practices, and the effects of the English 60 mandated proficiency exam on students, instructors, and instruction. For Part II, I immersed myself as a participant observer (in that I designed the I-Search curriculum being implemented) in a case study basic skills course that adopted my I-Search curriculum. I first trained the case study instructor in my I-Search curriculum, observed the case study class for ten weeks (27 hours), surveyed students (n=6 of 7, 86%), and interviewed the instructor and three students. The
methodology allowed me to describe the case study classroom with rich, thick
descriptions.

I found that I-Search instruction contributed to a classroom culture that was
ecologically rich (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995) and which I describe as a culture of
engagement. In order to describe this culture, I found that an additional model, the
Ecological Model of Student Engagement, was necessary to account for student
engagement in the classroom culture.

In order to answer my research questions, I’ve organized this chapter into three
parts: in part I, I focus on how I-Search instruction presents students with a relevant
curriculum that can potentially address students’ challenges outside the classroom. In
part II, I shift the focus to academic discourse and literacy by focusing on the academic
student challenges that instructors perceive and how I-Search helps overcome these
challenges with contextualized instruction. I end this chapter with suggested scaffolding
(choosing and limiting a topic as well as finding and integrating sources) to help basic
skills English practitioners incorporate I-Search (or research) instruction into basic skills
courses.

**Part I: A Relevant Curriculum**

Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) posits that it is not the environment as it
exists in reality but rather how it is perceived by the individual that influences behavior.
This section examines those factors that can influence students’ perceptions of the
classroom. The literature paints a bleak picture of students’ perceptions of basic skills
English courses. Grubb & Gabriner (2013) describe how basic skills instructors break
complex literacy acts into sub-skills and then present these sub-skills in decontextualized exercises without reference to whole literacy acts; Asera (2006) describes these practices as “mind-numbing.” Cox (2009) adds to this by describing how students fail to make connections between composition instruction and their vocational goals and “make the grade,” or do the barest minimum to earn a passing grade. Several researchers also describe a tension created between a disconnect between students’ home and academic cultures (Rendon, 1994; Rendon, Jalamo, & Nora, 2000; Ferdman, 1990; Attinase Jr., 1989). This literature led me to conclude that students may have a negative perception of the traditional classroom that decreases engagement.

However, since I created the I-Search curriculum to encourage students to make strong mesosystem connections, the purpose of this section is to determine how strong mesosystem connections can influence students’ perceptions of the classroom; thus, I will examine the research question below:

How does the case study classroom reflect the culture of the basic skills English program, especially the department-mandated proficiency exam?

This research question helped me identify instructors’ perceptions of students’ needs and determine how I-Search instruction can help instructors meet these needs. I will then examine research question #2—How does I-Search instruction mediate teaching and learning in a basic skills English classroom?—which will help me describe mesosystem connections and the influence of those connections on engagement. By observing these two research questions together, I can infer how the I-Search curriculum fits into basic skills instruction at Pine College and situate the case study class in department culture.

The following assumptions guided me: by identifying the beliefs of faculty at Pine
College, I can also infer their values. For instance, if faculty perceive that basic skills English students are unable to think critically (the belief), I can infer that these same faculty value critical thinking, especially in academic discourse.

This section serves several purposes for this study. Directly, a primary purpose of this section is to describe the culture of English 60 (and 70) instruction at the case study site in order to situate the case study classroom within the larger macrosystem and determine how this macrosystem might influence instruction. I will focus particularly on the influence of the department-mandated proficiency exam; being an emic—that is, an insider (Merriam, 2009) who has taught both English 60 and 70 for the past 10 years—I have experienced firsthand the influence of this exam and engaged in many conversations both for and against it. Similar to other researchers (Stone, 2012; Soliday, 2012), I know that this department-mandated proficiency exam can have profound effects on instructors, students, and instruction.

To answer this research question, I first distributed surveys to faculty at the department flex meeting (n = 14 out of 35, 44%). After I had read the survey responses, I used maximum variation sampling (Cresswell, 2012) to choose one full-time faculty who supported the final, one full-time reading faculty who taught English 60 and 70, and one adjunct faculty to interview. Once transcribed and analyzed, the common themes were presented horizontally in a data matrix (Merriam, 2009); I then dissected each theme further by coding them into subthemes, which are presented and used for the organization of part one.
Table 2.
Qualitative Data Themes for Research Question 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English 60 student challenges</th>
<th>instructor best practices</th>
<th>influence of the English 60 exam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Life challenges</td>
<td>• writing process</td>
<td>• validity of the exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• affective issues</td>
<td>• contextualization of instruction</td>
<td>• positive student effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• academically underprepared</td>
<td>• reading</td>
<td>• negative student effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• critical thinking</td>
<td>• positive instructor effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• strategies for affect</td>
<td>• negative instructor effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Challenges and Best Practices for English 60 (and 70) Instruction at Pine College

This part will help me understand how macrosystem cultural forces may influence instruction in the case study classroom. To describe this culture, I asked the following survey questions: “Based on your experiences teaching English 60, what do you feel are some of the challenges that students experience in the classroom?” and “Based on your experience teaching English 60, what activities, lessons, and/or assignments have you found to be successful?” I also asked faculty to provide me with detailed examples in their response whenever possible. This helped me identify instructors’ perception of students’ challenges and best practices that can help students overcome these challenges. This will then help me infer both the beliefs and values that guide behavior and inform English 60 instruction at Pine College.

Three themes emerged from my analysis of the data: non-academic, student affect, and relevance. However I noticed a pattern of each student challenge being
accompanied by a best practice that directly addressed that challenge. For example, several instructors who reported that students have difficulty writing grammatically correct sentences included grammar instruction. One instructor who perceived that students lack critical thinking skills set up reading response groups in his/her classroom. Another instructor who perceived the challenges of English as a Second Language (ESL) students assigned texts on multicultural education, cultural literacy, and immigration policy topics. Based on this evidence, I conclude that the culture of English 60 (and 70) instruction is student-centered, tying best practices to instructors’ perceptions of students’ challenges and experience. (However, one limitation of the current study is that I didn’t ask respondents to report on students’ assets—or the strengths and competencies that students bring to the classroom; Boykin & Noguera, 2011. If I had, I could have concluded that the department culture is student-centered more assertively.) The next section focuses on non-academic challenges that may affect students’ behavior and performance in the classroom.

**Non-Academic Issues.** One theme that emerged from the data is non-academic issues, challenges that students experience not necessarily related to English instruction and academic discourse (see Table 3). 50% (7 out of 14) of the instructors reported some form of non-academic issues: personal problems, finances, second language acquisition difficulties, and learning disabilities. For instance, one respondent reports that “Personal life issues—unstable homes, poverty, substance abuse—make it difficult to attend regularly and concentrate… Overload of other activities + responsibilities.” Additionally, “Tom,” an adjunct faculty, reported he typically loses on average one third
Table 3.

Frequency of Nonacademic Theme and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Nonacademic Challenges</th>
<th>71%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life-School-Work</td>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL/LD</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of his students due to personal reasons. This belief aligns well with the research which reports that students struggle with the school/work/family balance (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013). Moreover, Gittell and Steffy (2000) describe that 30% of leavers at LaGuardia college report financial reasons while 27% report personal issues that interfered with instruction. Viewed from Maslow’s hierarchy (Schmutte, 2006), life challenges would require students’ immediate attention and resources while they would exert “whatever’s leftover” toward their college education. Out of necessity, students often prioritize life challenges over college.

While English 60 faculty acknowledged how life challenges can interfere with English instruction, I didn’t find any best practices that corresponded with addressing these life challenges in the surveys. This can be contributed to a limitation of the current study: I asked participants to report on best classroom practices but not on how they help students overcome their challenges. However, “Pam” reported that, “So what I really like to do is treat them like individuals and then meet their needs. I try to be as open as possible to help the students wherever they are and with whatever they need to succeed.” Tom similarly reported that,
if you get on RateMyProfessor.com, if you get to know me, if you get to see my syllabus, you're going to realize that I'm very approachable, very helpful, very supportive – I'll even help you find jobs or resources or money or solutions to mental health problems or whatever. I will go to bat for you.

The literature suggests that it is crucial to address these affective issues because many basic skills English students are non-traditional students who experience many barriers to academic success (Rendon, 1994; Ferdman, 1990; Gonzalez, et al., 1995; Attinase Jr., 1989). Composition instructors have a unique opportunity to help students overcome these challenges by the topics they assign in class. They can create assignments where students write about the challenges they experience and how they might overcome them. This can create discussion of the challenges as a cultural norm in the classroom, and students can feel supported by both the instructor and classmates. Based on my analysis, instructors filling out the survey may have considered such personal issues—or what Bolman and Deal (2008) call the human resources frame—not a best practice but rather a part of the job.

**Student Affect.** The next sub-theme to emerge from instructors’ responses is sensitivity to student affect: I coded 8 out of 14 (57%) instructors as having at least one response dealing with the affective; many of these instructors had multiple responses about affect. Instructor responses tended to focus on two types of affect: competence and relevance. One of the respondents provided an example of how these affective issues typically play out in the basic skills English classroom:

For example, a male student—let’s call him “Jeff”—often came to class late and made negative comments on how basic the course material was. This student quickly realized how weak his English skills were and promptly improved his attitude, but I believe his initial resistance is a common challenge among English 60 students.
This quote states how affect can influence his perception of the environment which in turn affects his behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995; Lewin, 1935). This underscores the power of students’ perception of classroom relevance, especially how this perception mediates behavior. In this hypothetical example, Jeff’s initial perception was based on “how basic the course material was.” It can be inferred that such basic material would not relate to vocational goals or other college classes. When this hypothetical student “Jeff” finds the course challenging, this can influence the second affective issue, competence; this can either introduce or add a sense of doubt about his ability to succeed in college; that lack of competence can potentially lead to disengagement or dropping out (Cox, 2009; Venezia, personal communication, 3/18/2014) which more than 50% of basic skills students do within the first year (CCCSSTF, 2013; Grubb and Gabriner, 2013).

Low Perceived Self-Efficacy and Confidence. The most common affect mentioned by faculty is a lack of perceived self-efficacy (PSE; Bandura, 1997) and confidence in their ability to successfully complete the course. The following quotes are representative of this sub-theme: “a belief that students can’t ‘do English.’” This manifests itself in ways such as giving up quickly (e.g. not turning in assignments) as well as stating up front how much the student dislikes English” and “Students at the 60 level often have a lack of confidence, being told at some point that they weren’t good writers or feeling frustrated because they don’t ‘get’ English.” In her interview, Pam extends this reasoning by associating this lack of confidence with students’ inability to even perceive themselves as writers:
lack of confidence. The main thing is the inability to even perceive themselves as writers. Students… just can’t imagine it. They’ve been told for 12 years that they’re basically terrible English students, and it’s not even in the realm of imagination.

This inability to imagine themselves as writers can be explained by Bartholomae (2002) who argues that since composition students, especially basic skill students, have to write as if they were insiders to academic discourse, they approximate it. If students have a low PSE—that is, the belief that they can execute the required actions to obtain a desired result even if it is difficult—then they may feel that they just don’t have the necessary skills and abilities to even approximate it. This low PSE can be exacerbated if students have a false folk psychology (Bruner, 1990) that writing is easy for everyone but themselves (Lamott, 2009; Perl, 1980). This low PSE combined with the false folk psychology can account for how students can’t even imagine themselves as writers.

A repeated word found within instructors’ responses is “fear.” Both Pam and Sarah emphasize that a lack of competence ultimately leads to fear: “I think the biggest challenges that students face is their fear. And because students feel a lot of writing fear… trepidation, and… insecurity, but they don’t realize that’s what they are feeling.” and “when people hate English, that hate comes from fear, fear of not being able to do it.” This sense of fear is exacerbated when students have a high stakes proficiency exam. This response aligns well with the ideas of Cox (2009) who stresses that this fear manifests itself most saliently when students submit their work to be evaluated by the instructor. This act takes courage because students’ perception that “they’re not quite cut out for college” can be confirmed. This lack of confidence and fear detracts from the
learning environment and makes students reluctant to take the necessary risks for learning academic discourse.

The instructors reported incorporating strategies to help students address affect, such as stress and anxiety, especially with the high-stakes exam at the end of the course. The following quote is representative, “Many students must address their anxiety about the exam, so I try to spend a lot of time exploring strategies for relieving anxiety, timed test taking strategies, and the writing process.” In her instructor interview, Sarah extends this by suggesting a relationship between anxiety and trust: she recommends that a new instructor should be

aware of what an emotional bomb that exam is for students. I think if you don’t manage that anxiety well, your class just kind of runs amuck because your students don’t trust you. And if you don’t have that student trust, you have all kinds of other problems.

Viewed in terms of Maslow’s hierarchy (Schmutte, 2006), students must first address these negative emotions before they can engage to the extent necessary for academic literacy development. In this sense, instructors must deal with negative affect as part of instruction, or students may likely dwell on it. One method that stood out strongly was the complaining minute described by Sarah:

But I might give them a complaining minute… I might say, “Oh, I’m about to give you a terrible assignment that you will hate. And you’ll go home tonight and you will curse me. And I give you permission, and I forgive you. It is okay. And what we’re going to do now, we’re going to take sixty seconds, and you guys can just complain and moan and groan, as long as you’re not bothering anybody; you can swear if you want. Just go.” And they’re like the first couple of times, “Really!” “Yeah, really. Go.” And then after a while, they are just like [student voice] “Raahhhh!” “I hate this!” and “I’m tired!” and “uhhh and ohhhh” and “I hate you.” And then it’s kind of like “Okay. Stop. We’re done.” And then they feel better… It’s meant to just get it out because you know they’ve got to get it out.
This negative affect can trap students at the lower end of Maslow’s hierarchy and detract energy away from engagement. This complaining minute not only acknowledges that students might have a negative emotion but also helps students realize that they’re not the only ones dealing with this issue; students may then be more willing to take the risks necessary for learning and more likely to ask for help.

Although none of the survey respondents reported this, I feel confident that since addressing affective issues was mentioned by all the interviewees, it is also a feature of the department culture. When discussing how to build “safe class culture” that can increase students’ confidence, Sarah reported that

‘You’re here for a reason; and it makes sense that you don’t know these things; it’s okay; you’re going to be amazed at how much you grow from beginning to end; and it’s really about growth; it’s not about writing a perfect essay at the end of the semester; it’s about how much you’ve changed,” and I talk about that every single day. Probably more than some of them want me to. But I really think it makes a better class culture. I think it makes the class a better place to be because it feels good, or it feels safe. And it might not feel good but it feels safe.

And Pam adds to building students’ confidence by stressing how she believes in students:

The only thing I felt I could do was just to keep being encouraging and opening myself up, offering the extra work, identifying the little bit more, keeping tabs, some of the … high touch stuff. ‘I believe you can do it! I believe you can do it!’ I have students coming to my office saying, “I can’t do this!” And I’m like, “Yeah you can,” and here is the one part where you did do it; you didn’t do it here, but you need to.

Deci and Ryan (1985) posit that relatedness, or the desire to feel close and affectionate relations with others, is one of the three basic psychological needs. As reflected in these quotes, the faculty view creating a sense of relatedness as a way to help students overcome negative affect. Exchanges such as these can persuade students that instructors
genuinely care for students and want to see them succeed. This can lead to students perceiving the classroom more positively and exerting more effort toward and being more open to instruction. These personal relationships that define relatedness can help create a “safe place culture,” as Sarah calls it, when students take the risks necessary for learning in spite of negative affect. Further, since Pam stresses the parts where the student did do it right, this can help the student realize that they are actually closer than they realized to getting it right. This sense of relatedness can also increase the likelihood that students may seek help to overcome their challenges.

Relevance. When discussing student challenges, three of the respondents focused on perceived relevance of the course: “skills class is not for transfer credit, some students resent not being certified for English 1A” and “the class is irrelevant to their life goals.” Students constantly tell me that they believe what is learned in English 60 is only for the classroom and does not apply to their life goals.” This subtheme aligns with the research of Cox (2009) who found that students are vocationally oriented and sacrifice their two greatest resources—time and money—in the short term for fulfilling a life supporting and satisfying career in the long term. However, when students perceive that basic skills English courses are not only irrelevant to their life goals but will require them to take more time, the student may do what Cox calls “making the grade,” doing the barest minimum work possible to earn a passing grade. Since students will need the English skills and strategies in other courses and professional work environments, “making the grade” can be detrimental to students’ college careers. This is a perception that many of the faculty directly reported confronting.
Some English 60 instructors reported that they assign topics related to the assignments students receive for other college courses but with more scaffolding (see also Rose, 1980). The sub-theme that emerged from the data is “contextualization of instruction” (6 of 14 responses, 43%). I broke this theme further into two separate subthemes with contextualization based on current/future college courses (3 of 6, 50%) and contextualization based on personal/career (3 of 6, 50%). This theme fits nicely with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) idea of the mesosystem (that is, an environment outside the classroom with which students also interact). As argued in chapter 2, the more alignment students perceive between the classroom and other environments, the more positively they may perceive the classroom and the more actively they may engage with it. Renn and Arnold (2003) argue that the more easily students can weave in and out of microsystems within a mesosystem, the stronger quality interactions they have in each corresponding microsystem. By contextualizing instruction, instructors are increasing the likelihood that students will observe similarities between microsystems and transfer instruction.

A sub-theme that emerged from the data is the desire for faculty to align their English 60 assignments with other transfer-level courses. The following quote is representative of this subtheme:

Writing assignments in context with reading-supplemental materials. For my writing assignments, I assign essays that (1) answer a prompt they might get in other college courses and NOT essays focused on a specific rhetorical mode and (2) are related to readings that are discussed in class. This helps with invention and gives basic skill students the sense of doing real college-level work.
This quote, along with others, mirrors the call of Rose (1980) who argues that basic skills English courses should assign topics related to transfer-level assignments but with more scaffolding. When there is more of an alignment, students experience a genuine need for the skills and strategies introduced in instruction (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993) and are more likely to make the connection between instruction and application in college settings (Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000). In his interview, Tom extends this benefit by using the term “honored to be college students” and acknowledging their efforts:

Students feel more like they are in college; they’re being treated with different types of resources and then being respected enough to be asked “What do you think about this? What do you think about that?” I just think [students] feel more... honored, and I think they feel that the instructor cares about the class, and that is a big thing to them.

In addition to internalization and transfer, students may also experience an increase in their competence; that is, when students successfully complete tasks that they perceive as “real college work,” they are more likely to believe they can complete other tasks (see also Bandura’s (1997) idea of perceived self-efficacy). Students will then be more likely to interact with academic literacy tasks, even for personal reasons, and thus develop their academic literacy skills and strategies further.

The second sub-theme that emerged was contextualization through real life experiences, especially work environment (3 of 6 responses, 50%). The following quote is representative of this subtheme: “The more hands on, practical, & ‘real world’ the assignment is, the easier it is for students to process it.” The instructors reported that they contextualize instruction through the lived experience of students (1 of 3 responses, 33%)
and vocational goals (2 of 3 responses, 67%). As alluded to in the previous section, Cox (2009) points out that students are, by and large, vocationally oriented. This mesosystem connection can lead students to perceive the classroom as relevant and actively engage with it; that is, the more students perceive instruction as relevant to their career goals, the more students will engage with instruction.

**The English 60 Exam’s Effect on Students.** A major theme to emerge from the data is the effect of the English 60 exam on students: 10 of 14 (71%) reported an influence on students with 9 out of 10 (90%) reporting a negative effect and 5 out of 10 (50%) reporting a positive effect. (Only one faculty member reported the final as a solely positive influence on students.) For faculty who perceive a positive influence, they see the exam as motivating students and focusing their work. The following quotes are representative of this sub-theme:

- It can be motivating
- The benefit of that anxiety, however, is focused work.
- For others I think it can be very motivating. I think giving them practice exams + sample essay, etc. with very quantifiable goals/scores that helps light a fire under many students’ butts.

Because of its high stakes nature, the exam may actually cause students to take instruction more seriously and thus apply themselves more. This is especially true since the exam happens at the end of the semester, a time when many students may lose steam. Another faculty reported that the exam can validate students’ efforts in class: “The exam reinforces that… their efforts are working.” Pam adds to this by capturing a sense of celebration that some students have when they pass the exam:

I can tell a story about a girl who tried so hard but failed it before and was really scared. And when she passed it, she burst into tears; I’ve had [students give] high
fives to each other; they’re so happy that it is kind of gratifying, especially if they hadn’t done it before.

In this sense, passing the exam can increase students’ competence (Ryan & Deci, 1985) and perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) that students can be successful in college.

The negative influence of the exam stemmed from its high stakes nature: “don’t pass the exam, don’t pass the class” as one instructor put it. For faculty who reported a negative effect (9 out of 10, 90%) all of the responses were related to the affective, with words such as “pressure,” “anxiety,” “stress,” and “fear” recurring throughout faculty responses:

✓ Students hate it… Students stress about writing a timed essay with no advance notice of the topic… disliking the fact of its importance in the outcome of the class (i.e. don’t pass the exam, don’t pass the class).
✓ My students are affected by the exam because it scares them. The fact that they have to pass the exam to pass the class makes them very anxious.
✓ There is a great deal of pressure related to the English 60 exam
✓ For some, it puts a lot more stress on them (for those with test anxiety/who write better at home or with more time).

In addition to teaching students a writing process for timed essays, some instructors feel they must also incorporate instruction to help students manage their anxiety. Such a negative affect may not be conducive to creating a safe environment for students. Learning inevitably involves risk, and a high-stakes exam may make the learning environment more dangerous. Since basic skills English students might already doubt their ability to succeed in English (Cox, 2009; Grubb & Gabriner, 2013), the high stakes nature can exacerbate this fear, thus adding fuel to the fire and perhaps even confirming students’ doubts about their abilities to successfully write English essays. Since the English 60 exam is perceived as a cause of students’ negative perception of the
environment, and since students already doubt their ability to do well in English, it might be worthwhile to reconsider the final at Pine College. Faculty can measure what they feel students need to succeed in English 1A and only then determine if the English 60 exam is a good measuring tool. If not, faculty can revise the curriculum so that they can match what they perceive as the necessary competencies for English 1A with an assessment.

Even though the data does suggest that English 60 instruction is student-centered in that instruction directly addresses instructors’ perceptions of students’ challenges, two limitations of this study is that I did not ask faculty what they perceive as students assets (that is, students strengths and competencies; Boykin & Noguera, 2011) nor did I ask instructors how they help students overcome their challenges. A truly student-centered classroom would encourage students to use their strengths to overcome their challenges and deal with affective issues. Future researchers can add survey and interview questions about how instructors perceive these two factors. This will allow researchers to infer a relationship (or lack thereof) between instructors’ perceptions of students’ challenges, students’ assets, instruction, and personal relationship that paint an even more accurate portrait of the program’s culture.

**I-Search Instruction and Student Engagement at the Case Study Site.**

As reported in chapter 1, the I-Search curriculum examined in this study represents a three unit sequence: in unit one, students write a single body paragraph defining a core belief and/or value; in unit two, students define a problem with storytelling and then engage in research to better understand the nature of the problem; in unit three, students write a solution essay in which students recommend either one or
several solutions that can lead to action. This unit is designed to not only socialize students to academic discourse but also teach non-cognitive strategies (Farrington, et al., 2012) that they can apply to any problem.

While I based the I-Search curriculum on the latest theory and research, a major purpose of the current study is to determine how this curriculum plays out in the real world, with real students experiencing real problems. To test this curriculum, I used an ethnographic case study methodology in order to describe the classroom culture with thick descriptions (Geertz, 1994). I first used purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) to choose a case study instructor who was already familiar with my curriculum and who had a reputation for working well with students. I then trained him in my I-Search curriculum gradually through weekly lunches and let him use all my I-Search material including a workbook, PowerPoint presentations, handouts, etc. I then immersed myself in the classroom environment by being a participant observer (in that I created the I-Search curriculum), audio recording classroom discussions, taking copious notes, and beginning rudimentary analysis using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) ecological taxonomy. Once the students had left the classroom, I occasionally debriefed the instructor and wrote an analytic memo of my initial thoughts after each classroom session. I then transcribed audio recordings, recording both notes I made on my observation protocol as well as themes that I noticed during transcription. Once the observation period was over, I used convenience sampling to interview three students, transcribing the audio recordings, and marking emergent themes. To analyze the data, I first examined the transcripts for strong statements, categorized them into themes, and then coded each
theme further into subthemes. Because qualitative research is inductive by nature (Merriam, 2009), I was careful to ensure that the data naturally “fit” into both my ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995) and that I wasn’t “forcing” a fit. I then presented the data horizontally by placing it in a data matrix.

When I consider the research question, “In what ways does I-Search instruction mediate learning and teaching in a basic skills English class?” I found that the structure and nature of I-Search instruction was conducive to student engagement. Simply put, students at the case study site exerted great effort toward and engaged actively with the instructor, classmates, and their I-Search assignment. Based on my analysis of the data, I would describe the classroom culture as a culture of engagement. Data suggests that students perceived the case study classroom positively in part because students continually made mesosystem connections. In order to capture the dynamics between the instructor, students, and instruction, I have created an additional model, the Ecological Model of Student Engagement, to account for the formation of the culture of engagement in the case study classroom (see figure 7 for the model.) I felt an additional model was needed because of a gap in the literature; the existing literature applied the Ecological Model to the relationship between students and college culture, but failed to account for how college instruction can be ecologically rich (Renn & Arnold, 2003; Rodby, 1999; Renn, 2001; Andrejack, 2011; Masse, 2009; Attinasi Jr., 1989). For instance, Renn and Arnold (2003) argue that the ease with which students can navigate between
Figure 11. The Ecological Model of Student Engagement.
microsystems within a mesosystem determine the quality of their interaction (and achievement of learning outcomes). Further, Rodby (1999) applies Bronfenbrenner’s model to one case study student in a composition classroom. However, none of these studies address how a college classroom can be ecologically rich and can influence students’ perceptions of the classroom. The Ecological Model of Student Engagement can not only account for engagement in the classroom but also may be used as a heuristic to help instructors make their classes more ecologically rich.

Although I present this model linearly for ease of description, this model is actually holistic and recursive: students skip certain steps, spend more time on certain steps than others, complete certain steps backwards, etc. In Figure 7, the white arrows represent the actions and perceptions of the developing student while the black arrows represent the actions of the instructor and classmates. Based on my interpretation of the data, the assigning of the I-Search topic supported students’ autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and served as an invitation for students to make strong mesosystem connections to other environments with which they interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995). These mesosystem connections then led students to perceive instructions as relevant as well as presented students with a genuine, authentic need for instruction, thus positively influencing their perception of the classroom environment and leading to active engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). While this active engagement may have been caused by factors in addition to the I-Search assignment, the structure and processes of I-Search were conducive to students forming a tight,
supportive community of learners. Students then returned to the mesosystem to exert more effort toward their I-Search paper and, in the case of a few students, engage in some form of praxis, or liberating action (Freire, 2011). Because students engaged actively in the classroom and mesosystem, and because both instructors and students validated each other, students reported experiencing greater competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Elliot, MacGregor, & Thrash, 2002; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reis, et al., 2000) and perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) that they can successfully engage in academic discourse acts; that is, the students in the case study did not report that academic literacy was easy but rather that they possessed the skills and knowledge and could exert the effort necessary to successfully complete them. This then led students to perceive a convergence of home and academic cultures and begin the process of forming bi- and multicultural identities. In the remainder of this chapter, I’ll go over each part of the model, which I’m calling the Ecological Model of Student Engagement, in greater detail buttressed by the data.

**Mesosystem connections**

In Chapter 2 I argued that based on my analysis of the literature, students’ perceptions of basic skills English classrooms is based on the strength and quality of mesosystem connections which Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993, 1995) defines mesosystem as environments outside the microsystem with which individuals also interact. Renn and Arnold (2003) applied this idea to higher education to argue that the ease with which students can navigate between microsystems within a mesosystem determines the quality
of their interactions. I then argued that an I-Search curriculum has the potential to create an ecologically rich environment. Because students can choose a topic that is personally relevant and interesting, students are more likely to make strong mesosystem connections and form a positive perception of the classroom. Since students are not only writing an I-Search paper but also improving their understanding of mesosystem environments, students are more likely to perceive the classroom as relevant to their situation and experience a genuine, authentic need to use academic literacy. One purpose of this section, then, is to test the validity of this claim in a real life basic skills English classroom at the case study site. I will then strive to infer when students are making mesosystem connections in the classroom and then verify those mesosystem connections with survey and interview data from both the instructor and students.

**Autonomy Support, an Invitation to Make Mesosystem Connections.** Based on my analysis of the data, I conclude that the I-Search assignment in the case study class was conducive to students making strong mesosystem connections between the basic skills English classroom and the many other environments with which students interact. The I-Search assignment initially served as an invitation to bring outside environment(s) into the basic skills English classroom, and once students accepted this initial invitation, students continued to make strong mesosystem connections throughout instruction. The instructor went to great lengths to create a classroom culture that valued making mesosystem connections, and the case study students seemed to adopt this classroom cultural value and let this value guide their interactions.
The assigning of the I-Search paper can first be seen as the instructor supporting students’ autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve, et al., 2004; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2000). Instructors can support students’ autonomy by connecting the day-to-day activities in the classroom with sources of students’ autonomous behaviors. As Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010) point out, “Autonomy-supportive teachers facilitate students’ personal autonomy by taking the students’ perspective; identifying and nurturing the students’ needs, interests, and preferences; providing optimal challenges; highlighting meaningful learning goals; and presenting interesting, relevant, and enriched activities” (p. 589). By its very nature, the I-Search assignment is conducive to supporting students’ autonomy and creating an ecologically rich learning environment. First, by choosing any topic that interests students, students are likely to tap into their autonomous sources of motivation. This both increases students’ interest and contextualizes instruction in that students are more likely to make the instruction-skill-application connection. By supporting students’ autonomy, Sam, the case study instructor, tapped into students’ intrinsic motivation, the motivation that is inherent in the activity itself, and directed that intrinsic motivation toward active engagement.

The data at the case study site suggests that both the structure of the I-Search assignment and the assigning of the I-Search paper supported students’ autonomy. By supporting students’ autonomy, the classroom culture reflected the norm of making
strong mesosystem connections and sharing those connections with others. The problem nature of the prompt initiates a mesosystem connection:

For your second writing assignment, you will write a three to five page I-Search paper, defining a problem and/or issue by describing a story that defines the problem/issue and quoting research that reveals the nature of the problem. Please be sure to support your ideas with specific descriptions of the story as well as quotes from your research.

Even though students could hypothetically write about a problem in their basic skills English classroom (and in my two years of piloting I-Search and at the case study

Figure 8. Initial Mesosystem Connection in the Ecological Model of Student Engagement.

Figure 8 shows how the assigning of the I-Search paper supported students’ autonomy and encouraged them to build mesosystem bridges between the classroom and the many other environments with which students interact. As a result, students are more likely to perceive the classroom as relevant and experience a genuine, authentic need for instruction.
classroom, no student has yet to do so), students went to an outside mesosystem environment for the topic of their I-Search paper; students extended instruction beyond the classroom and examined those mesosystem environments that had intrinsic interest for students: a student could have experienced a problem in that environment that is still lingering; a student could want to discover a truth about that environment; a student could find a relationship between that environment and their future careers. Students saw the I-Search paper as more than just the paper they have to write; they saw it as an opportunity to learn more about something that they have been innately curious about but never taken the time to explore in detail.

Both the instructor and student data seems to suggest that this was the case; students continually made strong mesosystem connections when choosing a topic, and these strong mesosystem connections led to greater student engagement and the achievement of student learning outcomes. For instance, the case study instructor Sam attributes how smoothly the I-Search assignment went to students picking their own topics:

- clearly stating, “Pick something you care about” and stating it as a problem that bothers you in the world, something that you’re aware of, or something you have personal experience with. And I think the personal experience angle might have been the main [factor] that accounts for how smoothly it’s gone. Like the student who picked the topic of textbook prices had an immediate and practical reason to write about that topic; the same thing is true for cyber bullying, panhandling and homelessness, all of the topics that students write about. Students had a clear and personal investment and that’s got to help.

Sam’s response suggests that he values flexibility on how students frame their topic:

- something students care about, something that bothers students, something that students
have personal experience with. This flexibility can be seen as supporting students’ autonomy and allowing them to pick a topic that can potentially form the strongest mesosystem connection and be the most impactful. His last statement about how students “had a clear and personal investment” seems to suggest that he wanted the I-Search assignment to be more than just a paper students write; instead, he wanted it to be an assignment that can provide students with an alternative perspective about their life and how to improve them. Sam can be seen as wanting to support students’ autonomy and directing students’ autonomous behaviors toward active engagement with their I-Search papers.

If this was Sam’s intention, then the data suggests that this is exactly how students perceived it. Once Sam introduced the I-Search assignment, he offered students an opportunity to share their topics to not only serve as models but also allow students to build on each other’s ideas. The following exchange, which took place on 9/29, demonstrates how the instructor encouraged students to make strong mesosystem connections:

**Sam.** [You can write about] anything you want! And it’s a problem. It’s a definition of a problem. You’re going to tell a story that defines a problem or an issue you want to look into…

**Derek.** Anything.

**Sam.** Anything you want.

**Alice.** It doesn’t have to be anything that happens near us?

**Sam.** Nope. It just has to be a problem…. It can be a big problem like the problem with standardized tests; it can be the problem of… Do you have any ideas?
Then the following exchange took place on 10/1 when the instructor was asking students to begin the process of limiting their I-Search topic.

Sam. How can we limit [the topic of animal abuse] even further?

Andy. Like a certain species…

Alice. In South America, a lot of the donkeys aren’t treated well because their pack mules; all of their hooves are super messed up. They’re talking about hoof care. I went to a donkey conference at UC Davis; that’s the only reason I know about that.

Sam. Interesting… [Laughter]

Mary. You went to a donkey conference?

Paul. Why a donkey conference?

Sam. That sounds fascinating to me!

Walt. Oh my God.

Alice. I learned so much there. I have 6 miniature donkeys…

Walt. Mexico and donkey abuse.

Alice. They’re so bad! Their hooves make me want to hurl. Their hooves should be like this [motioning with her hand] but they’re like this [again motioning with her hand.]

Mary. It’s the same thing with horses if you don’t take care of their hooves.

Alice. You would think they would take better care of them, because that’s what they rely on, but they don’t.

April. Mexico too.

Sam. Why does that personally apply to you if I might ask?

Alice. I have 6 donkeys! I got 6 donkeys because my neighbors are in their 80’s, and they have something like 23 donkeys total. So they keep giving them to us so that they don’t end up with more. We went [to the conference] to know how to take better care of them. They were like, “Oh we have a new donkey. Name it, it’s yours.”

Sam. Obviously you care about them.

Alice. Oh yeah! He’s my best friend. I keep him in the house.…
In my observation protocol, I made the following comment, “strong mesosystem connection—this really opened up the class, even in a little humorous way, and I really feel it made the class a more comforting and open environment conducive to student engagement.” In this exchange, in which nearly half of the students participated, Alice not only modeled how to limit a topic but also engaged the class in a lively discussion. She modeled how to make a strong mesosystem connection that is relevant: she chose this topic initially because this was an issue she cared deeply about; her miniature donkey was like a best friend. Even though other students did not write about donkeys, they could begin to think of strong mesosystem connections that were important to them and how they could write about it. Further, when the instructor asked, “How is that topic personally appealing to you?”, he helped students realize that they will learn to not only write academic essays but also skills that are relevant to their life; this classroom cultural value, repeated over and over throughout the assignment, then became the cultural norm of the class. Students were also able to feed off of each other’s ideas in that Mary and April were able to relate the care of donkeys to the care of horses. It will be argued later in this chapter that the cultural norm of strong mesosystem connections led students to engage more actively with instruction and begin the formation of a tight, cohesive community of learners. Both characteristics were essential for the achievement of student learning outcomes at the case study site.
The Self—A Precursor to Engagement.

In the previous section, I explained how the assigning of the I-Search paper encouraged students to make the initial mesosystem connection with instruction. In this section, I’ll examine the role of students’ individual self in I-Search instruction; more specifically, I’ll examine what I’m calling the precursors to engagement—developmentally instigative characteristics (DICs), or the personal characteristics that account for classroom engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). DICs are "the attributes of the person most likely to shape the course of development, for better or for worse, and induce or inhibit dynamic dispositions toward the immediate environment" (p. 11). In this section, I’ll present two potential DICs that may account for the increased engagement in the case study classroom. Students first perceived an I-Search assignment as relevant to not only their college career but also their home life and/or professional environments. Secondly, I-Search instruction presented students with a genuine, authentic need for instruction. Because this need applies to not only reading and writing but also the problems that students wrote about, students were more open to instruction. This openness to instruction paved the way for what I’m calling the culture of engagement, or a classroom culture where active engagement is the cultural norm that guides behavior.

Relevance. An analysis of the topics that students chose further corroborates the importance of making strong mesosystem connections; that is, the strength of the topic that students chose was a good indicator of engagement because of its relevance to
students’ lives. At the case study site, the topics that students chose crossed what Bronfenbrenner (1995) calls the chronosystem, or the system that accounts for time in development. This idea of the chronosystem helped make sense of the type of mesosystem connections that students formed with their topic choice. In student interviews, the three case study students reported making mesosystem connections along different stages of the chronosystem: one student chose a past environment; a second a present environment; and a third a potential future environment. The chronosystem then accounted for how and why students perceived the classroom as they did: it was the most relevant to their experience and had the potential to be the most impactful.

One type of chronosystem connection students made in the case study classroom was a past environment. “Alice” offers an example of how a past environment in which she was depressed and bullied and served as the impetus for her I-Search paper:

I was diagnosed as severely depressed in the seventh grade. Bullying and suicidal attempts were something that stuck with me, and it’s something that I’m really passionate about; it’s just so controlling, and it can really control a person. Even now, I haven’t cut myself or haven’t tried to kill myself in two years, but it’s still there... Like when someone bullies me, I can hear my thoughts come back, “Maybe you should? Maybe that’s true; you are an idiot?” And I’m like, “No, I’m not! I know I’m not.” That really sucks, but at the same time, if people just wouldn’t bully other people, it wouldn’t be that big of a problem.

This quote reminds me of the ideas of Rubin (2002) who describes how one of her students used her I-Search assignment to better understand an acquaintance rape she suffered and how her I-Search paper helped her begin the healing process. Rubin argued that there was “a blurring of the line between the self and subject of inquiry. Because of this sense that they themselves were the subjects of their own research, the knowledge
gained during the research process often intertwined with students’ own identities in
significant ways” (para. 37). Alice similarly suggests that even though she has dealt
with this issue, some residual effects of this environment and experience still lingered.
Her I-Search assignment then provided her with an opportunity to explore these lingering
effects in detail and perhaps even learn alternative ways to deal with them. The fact that
she feels “passionate” about this topic and her belief that “if other people would stop
bullying each other, it wouldn’t be a big deal” suggests that she would like to help others
as well. The combination of these two factors leads me to conclude that this is a strong
mesosystem connection that has the potential to lead to optimal engagement in the
classroom.

The data also suggests that students can make mesosystem connections with
environments with which they currently interact; this provides students with an
opportunity to better understand their routine occurrences and offer alternative ways to
react. “Andy” provides an example of this with his conversations he had with his mother
about current events:

The first thing I thought about was my mom because we were always talking
about things all the time, always watching the news together, talking about what’s
going on, and then out of that I thought about Isis because that was the big point
being drilled into our heads at that time.

This quote again reminds me of the research of Rubin (2002) who describes the I-Search
paper of one student who wrote about the effects of media on body image; she had
actually distributed surveys to her fellow high school students in order to obtain their
perspective. Andy similarly used his I-Search paper to better understand the news media:
“I could tell what to really believe from the news… [The news media] lie and twist and only show certain things. It’s pretty bad actually.” This topic was relevant for Andy because he can apply the ideas that he learned from his I-Search to the media and then approach the news and other media more critically. He can use this information to make sense of and contribute to the conversations he has about current events with his mother and others. His I-Search paper can not only facilitate his understanding of academic discourse but also help him critically approach media sources.

The data lastly paints a picture of mesosystem connections with environments that students may likely interact with in the future; this mesosystem environment is especially important given that many students’ purpose for attending college is vocational in nature (Cox, 2009). “Walt,” who served some time in prison for drug abuse, described how his I-Search paper was initially attached to his career aspirations in law:

I’d love to go on and get a law degree, pass the bar, and get into some kind of law, criminal law. I know a judge who has a criminal history; I know two or three guys who are in prison, who have felonies, and who have actually passed the bar: as long as you have not committed fraud or not committed crimes against women or children, you can take the bar.

Walt specifies exactly what type of injustices he would like to redress:

With some attorneys, like the public defender’s office, there are some really good people who are really involved and really care. Then there are some people who just don’t care. And I watch kids and first-time offenders, who don’t really know the law and their rights, take deals that they shouldn’t take. You know, first-time offenders take these orders because cops blanket charge some, so they can narrow it down and get two or three. Then they tell these kids that, “Hey look, you have five charges; you’re going to get charged for all of them. Then you’re going to have three strikes right off the bat.” And in the state of California, it’s against the law to strike someone out for noncapital crime on the first offense; they can't do it. Once the kids signed a plea bargain, it comes under contractual law, and they
have to uphold their end of the deal, even if it’s a bogus one… Anyway, I just want to get involved and broaden my horizons. I really do.

For Walt, his I-Search took the shape of what Markus and Ruvolo (1989) call possible selves, or what an individual feels he or she might likely become in the future. In this case, Walt reports that the I-Search paper is helping him take steps to actualize these possible selves; in fact, in the words of Walt himself, “When you talk or type law, it has to be just right, to the letter of the law. So I didn’t understand how to get what I feel or what I was thinking across on paper, like I do now. I have a better understanding, and I think it’s only going to get better the further I go in English.” These possible selves can not only energize but also focus his efforts towards those skills and strategies that will be crucial as a future lawyer. The case study classroom appeared more relevant to Walt because he could apply the knowledge and skills he was learning to legal writing.

These examples underscore the importance of mesosystem connections in the formation of the case study classroom culture. Students in the case study class perceived congruence, or overlap, between the basic skills English classroom and other environments with which they interact. These perceptions enabled students to perceive their I-Search paper as more than just a paper to write but also an opportunity to better understand and interact with others environments within the mesosystem. Strong mesosystem connections are more likely to lead students to perceive basic skills English instructions as relevant. As will be argued in the next sections, strong mesosystem connections helped students experience a genuine and authentic need for instruction; this
perception of relevance and need led to even greater student engagement in the classroom.

**Need.** The structure of the I-Search assignment is conducive to presenting students with a genuine, authentic need to not only write their I-Search paper but also solve their problem. When people learn anything in life, they first experience a need for certain skills or strategies and then engage in a process to learn and master them (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993); for example, when a college student is assigned to write an academic essay, that college student has a genuine, authentic need to understand essay structure and the values and conventions of academic literacy (Bartholomae, 2002). Similarly, there is evidence that the I-Search assignment presented students with a genuine authentic need for instruction. For instance, when the instructor encouraged students to add sensory details to their story that defines the problem, the following exchange took place on 10/13 after the instructor had students free-write about the story to define their problem:

**Sam.** Is anyone brave and wants to share a part of what they wrote. But not all at once, because I can only call on one person.

**Drew.** [Student reading what he wrote.] About a month ago, a few friends and I went up to San Francisco to go skateboarding. That night at about midnight, we had gone to skate the ledges and the rails. While we were skateboarding, we encountered a very angry security guard. The security guard screamed that he was going to call the police. My friend Sky asked him, ‘Why couldn’t we be there because we weren’t damaging any property?’ [The security guard] punched him in the face.…

**Sam.** True story, not exaggerated?

**Drew.** This happened last week on my birthday.

**Derek.** That’s hard-core…. That was an exciting birthday.
Sam. That was a very engaging story; it got the reader involved in the story right away. Good job there with the choice of a story. Perfect! Let’s be critical; pretend its peer response day: what else could Drew put into the story?

Alice. Maybe what led up to him being punched in the face?

Drew. Well that’s the thing, it was such a brief encounter that there wasn’t really much more to it. It’s like why can’t we escape? [The sound of a fist hitting a hand.]

Sam. Maybe a little bit more about how sudden it was. What else could he have put in?

Stan. He could’ve added more description.

Sam. Yes, he could’ve added sensory detail, but it’s kind of hard to add sensory detail about being punched in the face. How did that feel for you? Were you scared?

Drew. Yeah I think all of us jumped back when the security guard actually punched Sky in the face.

Derek. Maybe a little bit more description about where you were: was it a skate park, a parking lot?

Drew. The building was the ferry building… There were piers.

Sam. I think this discussion points out that you might need to spell out some of the stuff for your reader. So those kind of details…. “A breeze flew in from the sea as my friends and I skated down the park…” Some of that detail will really allow your reader to connect your story.

Drew. I’ve been to San Francisco two or three times, and I don’t know anything about it.

Sam. You need to explain to your reader what it felt like to be in your shoes.

Drew. I felt the ocean breeze on my face and as my friend Sky was decked in the face… [Laughter whole class]

In my observation protocol, I made the following note: “Great use of a student story as a model. Students can begin to see in various accessible ways how they might add sensory detail to the writing, thus making their writing more engaging and more persuasive.”

While the sudden nature of the story was impactful, the story read by the student was bereft of sensory detail. By presenting students with a genuine authentic need,
instruction is more likely to be contextualized; students were more likely to make the
connection between the application of the skill/strategy and its communicative and
rhetorical purposes, thus understanding instruction at a deep level (Downing, 2010). The
exchange also captures the sense of enjoyment in the class; that is, while the class was
still achieving learning outcomes, they did so in a humorous way. As will be further
described in the section on the microsystem classroom, his classmates also helped him by
offering him advice about sensory details that he could include in his story.

The I-Search paper also presented students with a genuine need to use critical
thinking skills in order to make sense of and apply the ideas from their research to their
problem. For instance, Alice shared the following on 10/13:

**Alice.** I’m doing [I-Search on] how teenage bullying and suicide go together. It’s
kind of hard for me… I’m reading a lot of first-hand stories: I’ve had that
problem, and my best friend has had that problem. Since I’ve been reading a lot of
stories, I don’t know how to incorporate it.

**Sam.** That’s a really great choice because it’s relevant, and that’s something that
really matters, obviously to everybody. It is tough because we may have so much
personal experience?

**Alice.** Because I’m reading other people’s experiences… I doubt that they’re
lying – if they were really being bullied or they thought they were being bullied
because they were outcast…

During her interview, she expanded on this idea:

For that story, I could understand how people are angry, and they reacted in an
extreme way. They took a pool table and chopped it up and put it on the people’s
lawn, or something like that. They found out that their daughter and their
neighbor’s daughter were best friends, and then they weren’t friends anymore.
And then the neighbor’s daughter and her mom came up with this whole fake
page and were just so rude to her. I had to think, “How biased is this
statement?”… No matter what, it’s still bad: a girl lost her life and she shouldn’t
have; she was a teenager, and it shouldn’t have happened. But at the same time,
that was from her parents. When you’re writing about someone who you love and lost, you don’t include any of the bad things. You just don’t. It seems rude. You would never know if that girl bullied a bunch of people; you would never know that. That was kind of hard for me because I was thinking, “Did [she] bully people as well?” I mean, I’ve bullied people before, and I’ve received bad karma for it.

In this sense, Alice struggled because she was dealing with situations that happened in real life. There were no wrong or right answers; there was no factual information she could extract from the article. She had to determine the extent to which the ideas in the article related to the problem she was writing about in her I-Search paper. In this sense, because Alice was reading whole texts, she had a need to evaluate the bias of the parent authors because they had lost their daughter; she accomplished this by comparing what the authors were claiming to her own and friends’ experience. This led her to consider information that the parents may have left out: did she bully others? Because she was reading whole texts, her engagement with reading was contextualized in that Alice could see how critical thinking skills and/or strategies helped her make sense of and evaluate texts. This orientation would lead Alice to a greater understanding of the purpose of the critical evaluation and the ability to flexibly adapt it to other literacy acts (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Stated in other words, Alice is more likely to internalize and transfer critical evaluation skills and/or strategies because they are contextualized in whole literacy acts (Browning, Bransford, & Cocking, 2002). In the next section, I’ll report how strong mesosystem connections encouraged by the instructor and the I-Search assignment as well as students’ positive perception of the classroom led to greater student engagement in the case study classroom.
The Microsystem Classroom, or Engagement.

In the previous section, I suggested that the instructor supported students’ autonomy, and this led to students making strong mesosystem connections that led students to perceive instruction as relevant and presented students with genuine and authentic needs for instruction. In this section, I’ll describe the classroom culture in detail, focusing on how I-Search instruction is conducive to the formation of a culture of engagement. More specifically, I will explain how the continual sharing of mesosystem connections described previously led to the creation of a sense of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) and a strong sense of community. This led both the instructor and students to validate each other, and students reported feeling greater competence in their ability to exert the effort necessary to write their I-Search paper. This in turn led students to return to the mesosystem to both exert more effort toward their I-Search paper and, for some students, engage in praxis, or liberating action (see Figure 9).

At the case study site, the I-Search assignment was conducive to the instructor and students forming a “tight, cohesive community.” This perception of a community led to a classroom culture in which students felt a sense of relatedness to each other (Deci & Ryan, 2000; 1985) which was conducive toward collaboration and participants supporting each other. When asked to describe the case study class, instructor Sam described them as a community, a cohesive group of learners engaged in collaborative learning, and I think that has to do with a lot of factors… students get to know each other more than if it’s the top-down approach with a topic that everybody has to write on…
I found it particularly revealing that the first word he used to describe the case study class was community; in fact, he further explained that “I’ve taught classes on this campus where it took a lot longer to form a tight, cohesive community.” This corroborates my

Figure 9. The Microsystem in the Ecological Model of Student Engagement.

Figure 9 describes engagement in the microsystem classroom. Students actively engaged with their classmates, the instructor, and instruction in the classroom. Then, because both students’ efforts and home culture were validated in the classroom, students increased their competence in their ability to successfully engage in academic literacy tasks. This led students to engage once again in the mesosystem.

it’s partly that I have a really unique group of students who have formed a really tight bond.
own observations; I counted sixteen notes in my observation protocol when I had described the classroom as a “strong community.” Walt’s description of the English 60 final reveals the close nature of students to each other and the strength of the classroom community:

When I first went into [the final], and everybody was scattered, I grouped us all together. I was like, “We are going to win or lose together!” It was pretty cool. It was quiet, the table. I brought a dictionary [that everyone used]. We all had our pens, and if one of us ran out of paper, we would give that person paper. We were all ready, and when they handed [the test] out, it was on!

This response seems to suggest that the class (which was at seven students at the time) approached the final as a community. They had communal resources that were available to everyone, and although the test did not allow collaboration and help, students’ responses suggested that they viewed each other as a team and that they supported each other as much as they could in a testing situation. The way they had supported each other whether they “won or lost” seemed unconditional. Then, when the class had passed the final, they celebrated together: “Yes! Everybody [passed the final]! Everybody!” This is a really strong statement to just how strong a community this class had built.

While the data paints a picture of I-Search instruction, with its continual sharing of mesosystem connection, as being conducive to the formation of community, the formation of any community is a complex process dependent upon several factors. First, the instructor had played a primary role in community at the case study class. Because I had chosen a case study instructor who had a good reputation for working with students, he demonstrated considerable skills that helped facilitate the formation of community.
Through both this words and body language, he sent the message, “I care” to students; this message enhanced a sense of relatedness and facilitated the formation of community. The instructor maintained structure in the class by explicitly stating learning goals and enforcing behavioral norms. The instructor was also able to use humor to create a classroom environment that the three students I interviewed described as “fun” and that I recorded several times that “students seemed to be enjoying themselves.”

Second, the nature of the case class also had a strong influence on the formation of community. The class was considerably smaller than traditional basic skills English courses: the class started with eleven students at the beginning of the semester and ended with seven. With such a small class, students were better able to get to know each other and form closer relationships with other students than the traditional class, as the data supports. Moreover, I observed several instances in which Walt served as a student leader who encouraged and empowered others to actively participate in class. All these classroom characteristics were also conducive to the formation of community.

Lastly, the case study instructor used two forms of technology—i-Clickers (or remote controls that students used to answer multiple choice questions) and streaming videos—that resulted discernible spikes in student engagement. Whenever the instructor added an i-Clicker slide, some students would race to be the first one to answer it, students would stand to get a better view of the PowerPoint slide, and students would cheer or grumble if they got the answer right or wrong respectively. Students also engaged in lively discussions after watching streaming videos in class; students often
used critical thinking skills to not only evaluate but also state their perspective in relation to the video. The data paints a picture of all these factors, as well as others, converging to account for the formation of a strong sense of community in the case study classroom. However, I would add that all these factors happened in the context of I-Search instruction.

**Students Supporting Each Other**

One of the major ways that this sense of community manifested itself in the classroom was in students supporting each other, a major theme that emerged from the data. In fact, this theme came up so frequently that I refer to it as a cultural norm that guided behavior in the case study classroom. The following exchange on 11/20 is illustrative of the sense of support:

**Walt.** Let me see if I got this thesis statement; as you know this always drives me crazy! The thesis is my point? Or the point I’m trying to get to? Or the point I’m trying to get you to realize?

**Sam.** I want to give your classmates a chance to help you; I’ve been talking a lot this class... What does the rest of the class say?...

**Mary.** It’s saying what your body paragraphs are going to be, and then your conclusion pretty much sums it up.

**Walt.** Your body paragraphs are about what your point is anyway?

**Mary.** Exactly.

**Stan.** [The body paragraphs:] That’s your support for your thesis statement.

**Walt.** So the thesis is the point I’m trying to get at in this essay, but it’s not really the facts as much as what my take on the facts are.

**Sam.** Precisely! It might be helpful, or it might not, and it’s a good and concise way to understand it.

**Mary.** I want to give an example. Say you’re doing an essay about what animals you think are the best pets. You have 3 animals, thus 3 body paragraphs: dogs,
cats, and rabbits. Somewhere (and I’m going off my memory) “Dogs, cats, and bunnies are the best pets for people.” And how you put it… Like you put dogs 1st, so dogs would be your 1st paragraph.

Walt. All because dogs is the 1st in the line?

Mary. Yes, and cats 2nd, and bunnies 3rd. And then you take your thesis statement and sum it up in your conclusion.

Sam. Good job. You explain what’s called a three-part thesis. And they’re not my favorite type of thesis statement, but their functional, and they’re really good at getting you through that exam…. Please don’t take away from Mary’s great feedback—it’s a great way to write a thesis—that this is the only way to write a thesis statement! You don’t need to say, “my 3 points are… Bing! Bang! Bongo!” (Which I really don’t like)

This exchange illustrates many of the factors that led to students forming a tight and cohesive sense of community in the classroom. First, the instructor offers students a chance to answer other classmates’ question; other students in addition to Mary who answered the question would have thought about how they would answer it, thus fostering a greater understanding of the thesis statement. Sam had used this technique several times throughout the observation; in fact, I would conclude that this technique was successful in the way it established a cultural norm of students seeking each other’s help in addition to the instructor. Second, this exchange reinforces the fact that both the instructor and students are sources of knowledge and understanding. Such an understanding can serve as a foundation for instruction to resemble the problem-posing pedagogy (on which I-Search is based) as a cultural norm. Third, Mary answered the question in a way the instructor would not have. (In fact, the instructor reported “Bing! Bang! Bongo! [is a strategy] which I really don’t like”). This explanation of a thesis with a simple example may have been easier for Walt to understand than the more
complex one that the instructor may have offered; this understanding could have served as the foundation that allowed him to have a more complex understanding later on during the semester or in other content area courses. Lastly, other students who still struggle with thesis statements may have better understood the thesis from this explanation and perceived that they’re not the only one struggling with it.

Interview data seems to suggest this was the case: students learned from and supported each other at the case study site. Sam provides an example of two students from different walks of life coming together to help and support each other:

People seem willing to reach across these lines and help each other because they see each other as classmates: “Hey! You’re my classmate! How can we help?”… I have one student who has long, unkempt looking hair, and another student has short hair and dresses in an obviously conservative fashion (tight blue jeans with a buckle, that kind of look)… Those two have helped each other countless times outside of class in the Learning Center and in class just to better understand assignments; I’ve heard encouraging words pass between them both ways when one was stressed out about the class, or another class. I’ve seen them reach across and say, “Hey, you’ll get it done!”

This instructor’s response corroborated my own observations that students from all different walks of life came together to help each other succeed. Walt describes this tendency as, “I believe we are all at the same level. We really honestly wanted to help each other, so it wasn’t a drag. We just did it: we said what we thought, whether it was right or wrong.” Walt stresses that he perceived that students were at the same level. This speaks to the safety of the class culture; if other students felt as Walt does (and I have concluded this based on my analysis of the data,) students are less likely to compare themselves negatively to others, if they compare themselves at all. The fact that he said
what he felt even if it was wrong speaks to a classroom culture as being conducive to students taking the risks necessary to understand and apply the conventions, values, and norms of academic discourse.

Students also seemed to teach each other classroom material, especially grammar group work activities. During group work, I would often listen to the groups for time on versus time off task; I would then record any time off task in my observation protocol. With a few exceptions, students were mostly on task during group projects. While I occasionally heard students off task during the beginning or middle of the group work activity, most off task talk was done at the end of the group project when the groups may have already completed the task. In fact, even though my audio recorder seldom picked it up, I would hear students teach each other the material consistently. For instance on 10/20, I was fortunate enough to catch the following exchange:

Paul. To find out the subject you look for the object of the sentence.

Alice. So who will be putting a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in their lunch? Their mother?

Paul. Yes, their mother…

Andy corroborated this observation when he remarked on the grammar homework:

The group work projects… had to do a lot with sentence structure, which really helped quite a bit. I never really understood that all the way through high school. So getting to this point, I have no idea about any of that. Getting in groups and going over that really helped quite a bit, and seeing other people’s point of view assisted me.

This seems to suggest that he perceived grammar instruction as beyond his reach in high school but that the structure of group work in the classroom helped him finally
understand grammar at what I would consider a functional level. I would conclude that when he had opportunities to explain grammar instruction to others (and I observed this quite a bit with Andy) or had ideas explained to him by his classmates, it had finally “stuck.” To use English 60 instructor Tom’s words, the instructor had provided Andy with an opportunity to “put the teacher’s hat on,” and this practice at the case study classroom seemed to work well for Andy and other students; in fact, both Alice and Walt had similarly reported that instruction in group work had helped them come closer to solving the enigma of grammar. By helping their classmates (or receiving help from their classmates), students were more likely to apply what they learned in class not only toward their I-Search papers and the final, but also toward other writing assignments, as all three students I interviewed reported.

**Relatedness.** The question remains though, “Why did this class form such a strong community when many other basic skills English classes don’t?” Deci and Ryan (2000, 1985) provide an intriguing answer to this question with their idea of relatedness and integrated regulation. The authors first define relatedness as the desire for individuals to feel connected to others in the environment through close, warm, and interpersonal relationships. In the classroom, a sense of relatedness makes students more open to integrated regulation, or the individuals’ synthesis of others’ values and goals into their own self. Integrated regulation can account for how the structure of college, in which students receive a grade for their efforts, can be more intrinsic when students synthesize the values and goals of the instructor with their own.
I believe that Deci and Ryan’s (2000, 1985) idea of relatedness and integrated regulation can account for the strong sense of community in the classroom and the cultural value of participants collaborating and supporting each other. I believe the answer begins with a sense of relatedness that the instructor strove to create in the classroom by emphasizing that he cared about students as individuals. When asked about why the class had formed such a strong community, part of his answer included that, “I hope, and I like to think, that it has something to do with my teaching style, being accommodating and encouraging student feedback rather than needing to have that role of authority at the top of the class.” Consequently, he arrived early and left class late in order to engage in conversations with students; he made himself available to help students with more than just writing. Although he wasn’t a counselor, he would listen to students and refer them to the resources if necessary. For example, when “Mary” had family and work problems, he listened to her and referred her to counseling. When Mary’s problems outside of class persisted to the point where she couldn’t continue with the class, she let the instructor know through a classmate. Students can see how Sam modeled caring and warm relationships, and students then began to exhibit similar qualities in their relationship with classmates. The structure of the I-Search assignment in which students write about problems was conducive to this sense of relatedness. Students had more opportunities to talk with the instructor individually or the class collectively to add insights about their problems/solutions.
Based on student interview data, students responded to Sam’s efforts, and a sense of relatedness was a prominent value in the classroom culture. Alice reported that:

I really enjoyed the course. That was my favorite class. It’s good to have a professor who actually cares about the students’ education, not just about what they’re doing. It’s cool to have someone who wants you to pass the class but won’t just pass out extra credit. You have to actually learn. [The professor] wants you to learn something for your own good and not his benefit. That’s why I really like this class.

Alice’s response suggests that she didn’t want to just “make the grade” but rather had a mastery orientation to understand and apply instruction. Because she perceived that Sam had cared about her as an individual, she (and other students) were more open to instruction and more likely to synthesize Sam’s academic values and beliefs as her (or their) own. Comments such as this suggest that the instructor created what English 60 instructor Sarah called a “safe classroom culture” which was conducive to taking the risks necessary for learning. This safe classroom culture reflected a sense of relatedness that made students more open to other students and instruction about academic cultural values and norms.

Because several other students in addition to Alice reported that they enjoyed the class, I looked to the data to understand why. Two themes repeatedly came up: first, the instructor shared his own stories often; for instance, the instructor began the semester with a PowerPoint that told his story; further, he continually shared his literacy struggles, especially with academic literacy. This tendency humanized Sam and offered students an opportunity to relate to him as more than just an instructor but also a person. As a result, students were more likely to share their own self and their own story. Second, the
instructor often used humor in self-deprecating ways that contributed to the sense of relatedness. He would often share his love of hobbits and comic book characters in ways that made people laugh. Students took this role and also were able to use humor, as exemplified by the following comment from Paul on 10/01:

**Sam.** What’s a mnemonic?

**Paul.** Pneumonic! Pneumonic! Pneumonic!

**Derek.** How something sounds.

**Paul.** Pneumonic spelled with a P!

**Sam.** Okay, so you’re “Who’s on 1st?” with me. Paul is using a homonym to make a joke about homonyms. Very well played!

To me, this example illustrates how students viewed Sam as a person, and this led them to feel safer to use humor in the classroom. This can serve as the ultimate form of validation: the instructor and the class can be seen as validating Paul in an academic setting by validating his use of humor. The fact that students overwhelmingly reported that they enjoyed the class is a testament to the sense of relatedness and community in the classroom.

**A Return to the Mesosystem**

Even though students still perceived academic writing as difficult and still questioned their understanding of academic culture, their sense of community and relatedness led them to exert the effort necessary to successfully write their I-Search paper. In this section I’ll argue that students’ stronger sense of relatedness led them to return to the mesosystem and engage with their I-Search papers even more. This
engagement came in the form of greater effort exerted toward their I-Search paper and, in a few cases, praxis, or some form of humanizing action (Freire, 2011).

A prominent theme to emerge from the data was that students engaged not only in but also out of the classroom; this engagement came in the form of students exerting greater effort towards their I-Search paper than if they had written a traditional paper. The case study instructor attributed this extra effort to, “Students had a clear and personal investment and that’s got to help.” Alice confirms this perspective when she compares her I-Search assignment to traditional assignments:

I think that when we can choose something that you want to write about, you’ll do more hard work on it rather than when you have to write about. I thought that letting us choose our own topic was a lot better than not. I actually put a lot of effort into it, more than if it was a topic I didn't want to write about.

This “clear and personal investment” led to two students collecting qualitative data about their I-Search topics. Paul, who wrote about “the ridiculous price of textbooks,” had actually asked teachers and deans for their perspective; both had reported that the price of textbooks were out of control. Walt, who is writing about panhandling and homelessness, also went on the street to ask for people’s perspective about this issue:

Walt. With the I-Search, I didn’t just go to the Internet; I went out and talked to people. I walked up to people and asked them, “Have you ever given money to a homeless person? What do you think about people holding up a sign? How do you feel about aggressive panhandling? Do you consider all panhandlers aggressive?”…

Myself. What did they say?

Walt. About three quarters of them responded, “I wouldn’t give it to them because they’re going to use it on drugs.” “Okay,” I said, “what I’m asking is do
you think they have the same rights as the Girl Scouts, firemen, and Salvation Army to ask for money?"

**Myself.** What do they say to that?

**Walt.** They say, “Well, they’re doing it for a good cause, but the panhandlers, they should just get a job.” Most the people said that; they didn’t really like it. And some people said, “I always give money to them,” but very few because most people think they are going to automatically spend it on drugs. I found out that 80% of all homeless people have a mental disorder of some sort including addiction. I found out that California houses 36% of all homeless in the United States, and that 22% of that 36% are veterans of war with some type of mental disorder, including PTSD or some other form of social anxiety or anxiety disorder. This is stuff I didn’t know. 5% of homeless are whole families dislodged by the mortgage crisis. I mean it just blew my mind. Then I found out that there are some key people, normal people, average every day Joes out there doing miraculous, phenomenal things for the homeless.

I interpret this as even more evidence for my previous claim: to students the I-Search is more than just a paper that students write; it’s an invitation to learn more about a topic that students have always been innately curious about but haven’t explored in depth. In this case, Walt not only discovered “everyday people’s perceptions” but actually compared those perceptions to the knowledge he learned through his research. This helped him discover a disconnect between peoples’ perceptions and the reality of homelessness. Exposure to this disconnect can go a long way in correcting people’s perceptions of the homeless. Students at the case study site were more likely to go above and beyond the requirements for the assignment. I found this critical for basic skills English students because Stanovich, (2000) describes the Matthew principle—students experiencing reading difficulties because they don’t read academic texts, but students don’t read academic texts because they experience reading difficulties. I would also
extend this argument to academic writing, especially research papers. I-Search, though, has the potential to reverse this trend. Because students have “a clear and personal investment,” they are going to be more motivated to grapple with reading and writing academic texts because doing so helps them learn more about the topic. As Shaughnessy (1977) and Sternglass (1997) point out, this additional literacy experience will likely help students develop both the foundation and higher cognitive skills crucial for academic literacy.

The second theme that emerged from the data is praxis, or students engaging in some form of humanizing action based upon the knowledge that they learned from their I-Search paper. This finding matches a lot of the research on I-Search: Klausman (2007) found that I-Search helped one of his students set up reading practices at home and another establish recycling programs at his/her work. Further, Rubin (2002) found that one students’ I-Search paper had led her to explain the damaging effects that the media has on body image to her classmates. Sam similarly stresses this point when he introduces the I-Search paper on 9/29:

Part of this for me, part of my motivation for liking the I-Search paper is it connects what we’re doing in here to out there. It’s not like filling out these worksheets, doing your math problem. It’s like, I hope it will take you beyond this class. It’s a way of thinking about the world that I hope from doing this will stick with you. That’s the hope. It’s a lofty hope but it’s my hope. It’s like Gandalf says in The Lord of the Rings: ‘maybe it’s only a fool’s hope, but it’s a hope.’

He emphasizes this point by using the term “real life skill” in his interview and provides two examples:
There is a student who wrote about high textbook prices for college students, and he has begun to look at how to engage with public policy; how laws, educational code, etc. directly affect his experience in the real world. He, in other words, is learning a real life skill of engaging with the political process... Similarly another student wrote about the problem of homelessness, which began as a different problem, the problem of panhandling being illegal in this county. His argument was essentially that a Girl Scout selling cookies was fundamentally no different than a homeless person asking for money. And he developed that into an argument that we need better resources and outreach for mentally ill, drug addicted, and general homeless populations. So for him, he’s looking practically at community solutions to the problem of homelessness and has gone out and talked to people from local organizations like the “Hope House” and “Nature Roots.” If that’s not a real life skill, I don’t know what is. He is coming out and connecting to community resources in real ways to try to help people that the student clearly cares passionately about. That to me (not to sound cheesy) is beautiful, to see someone tell me now that he wants to become a better writer so that he can articulate himself clearly and persuade people who need to be persuaded of the importance of resources for homeless.

Some, though I do not have enough data to say all, students reported taking the instructor up on this offer and practice using these “real life skills” outside of class. For example, Andy reported how his I-Search paper helped him take a more critical stance toward the media. He explains how he critically evaluated a news story involving his uncle:

A pretty good [example] actually is that my uncle was recently on the news because his daughter goes to school at “Children’s Elementary School.” A dog came in and smelled the room, and they then brought each person out and had the dog smell them too. They are not allowed to do that, because of civil rights. He made a big fit about it, and they put him on the news. They made him look like a total idiot, cutting certain things out and putting other things in. It’s just terrible how they can manipulate stuff like that and make you look like the bad guy.

He was able to apply his comparison of how the news portrayed the stories to the reality of the situation in order to determine how manipulative and deceitful the media can be.

Alice had even reported how her I-Search paper made her more aware of her own bullying and how she resists urges to bully others:
I mean, I’ve bullied people before, and I’ve received bad karma for it. That’s for sure. Now I don’t, and I try to avoid it as much as possible. I’ll start thinking weird thoughts about someone, and I’ll stop and think, “No, I’m not going to do it! I don’t know their life; I don’t know what they go through” so I try to get myself out of it.

In this sense, she became more meta-cognitively aware of herself and her thoughts and engaged in behaviors to directly stop and change negative thoughts. I feel it is important to know that this reflexive metacognition can be applied in most, if not all, parts of life.

Lastly, Walt had learned about a community response for homelessness that he would like to bring to his local county:

There is a housing community—it’s called micro-communities—in Oregon that works. This guy came down and showed that he has this working model where the homeless people themselves—through donated wood and lumber—build these little, tiny houses on trailers; they’re just a place to get out of the rain. They have community porta-potties and showers; they have a community kitchen, and people go there to stay. They are just little communities on property donated by the county to use, to lease for just one dollar for 10 years. It’s actually working, and who polices it are the people who actually lived there. It’s like a therapeutic community model.

As all these example attest, the fact that students’ I-Search papers can lead to humanizing action makes the assignment more relevant to their specific situation and leads to greater effort. This effort will make students more likely to use academic literacy outside of college purposes and practice using their skills and strategies until they become internalized, at which point they can be transferred to other environments (Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000).

In conclusion, the data points to the fact that I-Search can be more than just a research paper; it can be an invitation to develop non-cognitive strategies (Farrington, et
al., 2012) that students can apply to any life situation. When students experience a problem, they can use I-Search researching skills to learn other perspectives to help them not only understand but also solve their problem. When students examine others’ perspectives, they are further using high cognitive skills such as synthesis, evaluation, and application to determine how authors’ perspectives relates to their situation; this curriculum has the potential to “educate the whole student” (American College Personnel Association, 1994).

**Part II: Socialization of Academic Discourse through Contextualized Instruction.**

Part I of this chapter focused on how I-Search instruction led to a culture of engagement: I-Search instruction encouraged students to make strong mesosystem connections that led students to perceive I-Search instruction as relevant and presented students with a genuine and authentic need for instruction. This led students to view the classroom positively and not only actively engage with instruction but also form a community of learners. In this section, I’ll shift the focus from how I-Search is conducive to engagement to what students engaged with: academic discourse. I’ll first return to instructor data to determine what instructors perceive as students’ greatest academic challenges; this will allow me to situate the case study classroom in the larger culture of basic skills instruction at Pine College. Then I’ll return to the case study class to examine how I-Search instruction helps students develop the skills and strategies crucial for academic literacy.

**Academically Underprepared.**
The most predominant theme to emerge from instructor data is that English 60 students are academically underprepared; 11 of 14 responses (79%) reported students as being academically underprepared in at least one area, with several respondents marking two or more areas. English 60 instructors perceive that some of the skills that students lack are grammar, paragraph development, reading, and critical thinking (see Table 4 for the frequency of these responses.) The most common word that characterized these responses is “lack” or “lacking,” which was in 5 of 11 responses (45%). This seems to suggest that faculty, on one hand, are influenced by a deficiency model, focusing more on what students can’t do as opposed to what they can (Soliday, 2002; Asera, 2006). On the other hand, it can also be inferred that instructors are tailoring instruction around the actual needs of students. In reality, though, given that English 60 instructors are a diverse group, it is most likely a mixture of the two.

**Grammar.** Based on instructor survey and interview data, instructors tend to view grammatical errors in student writing as a pressing challenge. However, faculty responses of grammar challenges were rather terse: “Lacking grammar skills and the vocabulary to discuss these,” “Lack of preparedness… for English grammar rules,” and Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme—Academically Underprepared Subtheme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Paragraph development</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Reading</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Critical thinking</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Grammar & punctuation.” Pam further frames these challenges in the terms of audience awareness.

Students do lack an understanding of audience awareness… an understanding of what is necessary for this genre to be accepted. So for instance let’s just state the case of something like comma splices and run-ons. I’ve noticed a proliferation of that in the last three or four years. And I tell my students, I know what they’re saying; actually some of the stuff they’re saying is really good. I can make those breaks, but they don’t.

These findings align well with the research chronicled by Shaughnessy (1977) in the 1970s and confirmed later by Grubb and Gabriner’s (2013) observations of basic skills instructions in California community colleges nearly 40 years later. These findings point to a trend of instructors responding to one of the most salient features in student writing—grammatical errors. As such, instructors can designate a lot of time and energy to instruction to help eliminate these errors.

While faculty did find it important to address grammar in their classes, faculty reported struggles about how exactly to do it; no instructor reported a best practice about grammar instruction, and Pam reported that “I’ve never found a great way to do grammar.” More specifically, faculty reported that they struggle to introduce grammar instruction in a way that shows up in student writing. However, Tom reports that he not only uses games to introduce grammar in a way that adds competition and puts “the teacher’s hat” on students but also uses samples from actual student writing. Then he incorporates grammar as part of the rubric in the grade:

I give [a rubric] to [students] beforehand because it breaks down where I’m going to emphasize the points... For example, I don’t give a whole lot of points for grammar or
punctuation at the beginning of the semester, but at the end of the semester, I give more points because they should have all that down.

As this example demonstrates, the games have the potential to really engage students, and they help students make the connection between grammatical errors and their effect on readers (or “audience awareness” as Pam calls it.) As Tom demonstrates, grammar instruction can be functional in that he requires students to not only correct errors in other people’s writing but also in their own. In conclusion, while instructors report grammatical mistakes as a great student challenge, English 60 (and 70) faculty struggle about how to incorporate grammar instruction in a way that transfers to students’ writing.

**Paragraph Development and Writing Process.** Many instructors see lack of paragraph development as a pressing challenge to be addressed with instruction. Instructors often focused on paragraph development and stressed the need for students to add specific examples in their essays (see Table 5). Some respondents (3 out of 7, 43%) only reported development at the local level with no reference to holistic essays or critical evaluation. A critical pedagogist (Freire, 2011) would argue that a focus on the local level would lend itself to banking instruction, the reduction of complex acts into

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Representative Sampling of Lack of Paragraph Development Subtheme</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong>—Academically Underprepared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme</strong>—Lack of paragraph development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Lacking adequate training in paragraph development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Providing enough examples or details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Development: coming up w/ solid examples + then expanding upon them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
simplified steps that can be presented in prescriptive processes. In this case, students would likely be encouraged to add personal examples that would fail to meet the rigor of transfer-level courses, which require students to frame their ideas in relation to others’ ideas. This can be seen as a false generosity that actually perpetuates students’ struggles and failures.

However a majority of respondents (4 out of 7, 57%) reported paragraph/essay development either directly before or adjacent to critical thinking skills. For instance, the following response is representative of this subtheme: “Critical thinking, understanding levels of ideas, separating facts from opinions, not understanding when ideas overlap with each other… Providing enough examples or details.” I interpreted this as a more contextualized form of paragraph development; that is in order to critically evaluate ideas, those ideas must be viewed in relation to others’ ideas; this type of development connotes a social constructivist epistemology of knowledge. This type of pedagogy would be more conducive to Freire’s (2011) problem posing in that it captures the social construction of knowledge and allows students to sometimes challenge that construction (Horner & Lu, 1999).

By far, the greatest best practice reported by English 60 (and 70) faculty was a focus on the writing process; 11 out of 14 instructors (79%) report incorporating some form of process instruction into their English 60 (or 70) classes. While this was by far the most common theme for best practices, there is great diversity in the types of writing process instruction (see Table 6). To code simple writing process, I looked for references
Table 6.

Representative Sampling of Writing Process Subthemes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme—Writing Process</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Simple                | ✓ teaching the basic “building blocks” of essay writing  
|                       | ✓ to help create developed and detailed body paragraphs  
|                       | ✓ in-class essay assignments  |
| Writing Steps         | ✓ outlining practice in and out of class, in groups, or individually in emails to which I respond extensively  
|                       | ✓ brainstorming as a class  
|                       | ✓ group brainstorming and outlining work well.  
|                       | ✓ organization strategies/techniques  |
| Multiple Drafts (Revision) | ✓ to revise the essay. They have to type it, and to receive a sub-substantially higher grade, they have to respond to my comments on content and organization as well as edit for sentence-level errors.  
|                       | ✓ revision activities  
|                       | ✓ Students in my class do multiple drafts so that they can make multiple passes through writing. I have three destined drafts: the zero-draft (generating ideas on paper), developing draft (making it look like an essay); the craft draft (mechanics + sentence).  |

to “basic,” to local issues such as paragraph or sentence level development, and/or to the English 60 exam. I interpreted simple as the lowest level instruction because it is more likely to be decontextualized and be made up of prescriptive processes. However instructors noted that the pressure created by the English 60 exam may make instructors more likely to resort to a simplistic processes: “As a literary writer myself—I have been leery of strict rules like a 5 paragraph model essay, but… the longer I teach 60, the more I embrace simplistic patterns for least-skilled students—if they can feel less anxious about the writing process.” As Niemiec and Ryan (2009) point out, pressure created by the final can lead instructors to focus more on controlling behaviors and less on creativity.
For the English 60 exam, the greatest form of controlling behavior may result in the presentation of prescriptive processes.

I interpreted writing steps to be mid-level process instruction because it focused on the holistic essay; the most common words found in these responses were “outlining” but without reference to other’s ideas. The primary benefit, as noted by Tom, is for students to present their ideas in essay structure: outlining can help students “write a thesis, all the topic sentences for their body paragraphs; they know how to lead in with the introduction and at the end, they know how to summarize and conclude it. So they have the formula down, and they feel secure in that.” Outlining allows students to know what each part of the essay will contain before they write the first word, thus allowing students to approach the essay more holistically; that is, outlining can lead to greater coherence and cohesion in students’ writing. The outlining strategies presented in the data, however, did not have any reference to others’ ideas.

The highest level of process instruction I interpreted was revision, or students writing multiple drafts. For these responses, faculty reported considering the perspective of the audience (sometimes objectified by instructor response) and revising it based on intended readers’ expectations. Sarah emphasized this by having students brainstorm ways to improve bad writing:

And I show really bad writing. And then we talk about how to improve it. So we go through a process, live, of taking sentences that don’t work, that sound bad, whatever, and we improve them so that they are better. And they can watch that editing process happen and see that it’s really not magic, that it doesn’t come out perfect the first time… The best writing comes between drafts.
Revision allows faculty to insert the intended reader (or audience) into the writing process, allowing students to anticipate and meet readers’ expectations. Instruction such as this could also help debunk the myth that writers only write a single draft, and they write that single draft perfectly (Lamott, 2009; Perl, 1980). Instruction such as the bad writing emphasized by Sarah really shows students how writing is a “messy” process involving several drafts (and sometimes really, really bad drafts) being considered and reconsidered and yet reconsidered again. This instruction could also reinforce the belief that success in college is dependent upon effort not talent.

**Reading and Critical Thinking.** An interesting sub-theme to emerge from the data was students’ lack of both reading and critical thinking: 8 of 14 (57%) respondents reported reading and 7 of 14 (50%) reported critical thinking. (See Table 7). Since all but one respondent who reported critical thinking also reported a lack of reading as a challenge, I conclude that the culture reflects a belief of the connection between the two; that is, faculty believe that students’ lack of reading experience influence students’ ability to critically think, and vice versa. These findings mirrors the literature about the reading-writing connection, the belief that both reading and writing involve active constructions of meaning in which students combine what they know with the messages in the text in order to generate ideas for their writing (Stotsky, 1984). However, in K-12 instruction in which reading focused largely on finding the answers to tests questions (Wagner, 2008; at least before the implementation of Common Core), students may have an epistemology
Table 7

Representative Sampling of Reading and Critical Thinking Subthemes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Reading                       | the problem they have with reading comprehension  
Many students also read very little, so their vocabularies are limited, and they are reluctant to read assigned works.  
Many times I hear from students that they have never before read a full-length text.                                                                                     |
| Critical Thinking             | lack of critical thinking skills                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Reading and Critical Thinking | lack of preparedness for college level reading and writing… lack of prior instruction, skills and practice in critical thinking  
Poor reading skills can lead to poor writing, or sometimes it’s the lack of critical thinking skills needed to help write and develop college level essays.  
Critical thinking, understanding levels of ideas, separating details or facts from opinions, not understanding when ideas overlap with each other |

that knowledge is fixed and feel that they lack the expertise and authority to approach reading critically. The structure of English 60, with a high stakes impromptu final, is not conducive to the inclusion of reading and critical thinking instruction. The English 60 final would push faculty to focus more on writing instruction at the expense of reading instruction. Further since the proficiency exam is impromptu, students are more likely to support their ideas with personal examples instead of references to others’ ideas. This could harm students in the long run in that reading and critical thinking skills remain underdeveloped.

Because of the nature of English 60 exam and the structure of English department in which faculty often lack training in reading instruction, very few faculty reported
explicit reading instruction as a best practice. 4 of 14 (29%) respondents shared how they have students evaluate both student and professional essays: “Having students score their own/each other’s [essays]” and “Looking at/analyzing model essays—professional and student generated.” Tom extends student evaluation of essays by emphasizing that he wants students to put the “teacher’s hats” on: “If you were the teacher what would you say? What would you suggest? How would you guide this student?” In order to complete these tasks, students must use critical thinking skills to determine why one essay is passing and the other is not. This encourages students to look beyond the structure of essays and toward function and purpose as well. This foundational knowledge can help students extend writing beyond the five paragraph essay structure and modify it to reflect the types of writing that students will be required to do in other courses, as Tom stated in his interview.

While there was consistency in responses about the analysis of essays, there was no real consistency in the few responses for reading instruction (3 or 14 responses, 21%). Responses for reading instruction varied from incorporation of personally relevant narratives, to the incorporation of metacognition, and to the inclusion of questioning strategies. The following response stood out as a strong statement:

to have my students practice metacognition as they read. I ask them to record their thoughts as they engage with sometimes complex texts so that they can respond from their schema. They are asked to record not only what they find interesting or significant in the assigned reading, but what they find puzzling, and I ask them to write questions of the text and bring them to class.
Such instruction encourages students to approach reading as an interaction and to ask questions of the text, mirroring the type of interactions necessary to write about texts. This metacognition can empower students to flexibly adapt their processes for the many different types of texts they will be required to read in college. Since basic skills instruction is the beginning instead of the end of academic literacy development (Shaughnessy, 1977; Sternglass, 1997), the skill of metacognition can help students regulate and adjust their own learning based on the task’s demands (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990). Metacognition can be viewed as teaching students how to fish instead of giving students fish.

A few of the faculty at Pine College reported different best practices that help students critically evaluate the texts they read. One instructor, for instance, reported the use of a questioning strategy: “Questions for Development, which gives students nine questions to ask themselves about their topic.” These questions can get students to view reading as an interaction between the author and themselves as readers; these questions can serve as models as students begin to generate their own questions. This can also help students generate ideas for their writing, especially when they have to write about what they read. Tom similarly reported the use of media stimulates students’ critical thinking: he wrote that media can give students a more well-rounded perspective on the subject; that you are not in class just to learn where to place a comma or how to write an essay, but you’re here to think, and that thinking is going to be stimulated by media, outside resources, the library, and whatever things are available; those things are going to help stimulate your thoughts because writing is about getting excited about writing about something. Media helps students get excited about writing.
The thinking that Tom references above could be critical thinking; he further suggests that this critical thinking can positively influence affective issues such as increasing students’ motivation and engagement. For instance, media has the potential to tap into students’ competencies and direct it to critical thinking (Prensky, 2001; Wagner, 2008; Ito, et al., 2010), thus potentially increasing students’ competence with academic literacy. Unlike written texts which students may falsely believe contain fixed knowledge, students may be more open to the possibility that media may be misleading and biased, thus encouraging students to practice critical thinking; this makes it more likely for students to add their perspective, an act that many students are sometimes reticent to attempt.

**English 60 Exam at Pine College—A Source of Conflict**

Bess and Dee (2008) argue that life in higher education is so complex that educational leaders need to use multiple paradigms—mainly positivist, social constructivist, and postmodern—to make sense of it. Even though the English 60 exam is only a minuscule part of Pine College, its complexity necessitates that I similarly use multiple paradigms to make sense of how it fits with English 60 culture. The exam is based on a positivist paradigm, a belief that an objective reality independent of the observer’s perspective can be discovered through observation, analysis, and verification. The English 60 exam, then, is based on the assumption that the most important elements of academic discourse can be discerned by faculty, captured by a rubric, and assessed objectively. Students’ ability to pass the final would then ensure faculty that students
possess the minimal writing skills necessary for college-level writing, especially English 1A. Further the English 60 exam is based on the assumption that instructors can objectively assess the exam through a norming process with a fair degree of reliability. However, since many of the instructor’s responses about the English 60 exam challenge the assumptions above, I find a postmodern paradigm—that rejects the belief that reality can be objectively discerned and posits that organizations create structures that perpetuate those in power—was necessary to make sense of the data. Some of the respondents argue that the high-stakes, impromptu nature of the exam harm some students (especially ESL, LD, former foster youth, and students who experience test anxiety) and instructors. Many of these instructors argue quite persuasively for a curriculum based on social constructivist paradigm, or the belief that knowledge is created through dialogues and that meaning and purpose can be negotiated through interactions. Faculty viewing this perspective often reported contextualizing instruction, but argue that the structure of the English 60 exam directs instructors most precious resource—time—away from contextualized instruction and towards final preparation.

If there was some consensus about the students’ challenges and best practices, then instructors’ perception of the English 60 exam vary greatly along polar extremes. The three major themes that emerged from the data are the validity of English 60 exam, the effect on students, and the effect on faculty. (Please see table 8 for the frequency of each response.) In the chart below, the overall theme (bolded) is based on the total number of survey respondents. The sub themes (in regular text) are based on the total
Table 8.

Frequency of Influence of the English 60 Exam Theme and Subthemes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/Sub-theme</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Validity of exam</strong></td>
<td>9 of 14</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Negative</td>
<td>4 of 9</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Positive</td>
<td>5 of 9</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effect on student</strong></td>
<td>10 of 14</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Negative</td>
<td>9 of 10</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Positive</td>
<td>6 of 10</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effect on instructor</strong></td>
<td>10 of 14</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Negative</td>
<td>7 of 10</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Positive</td>
<td>5 of 10</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

responses within that theme. Some respondents reported both negative and positive effects on instructors and students, so the percentages don’t necessarily add up to 100%.

The exam has a profound effect on instruction; even the two respondents who declared that they refused to teach to the test reported best practices directly tailored to the English 60 exam. The nature of the exam exposes the diverse beliefs and values of faculty and sometimes even pits them against each other.

**Validity of the Exam.** A major theme to emerge from the data was instructors’ perception of the validity of the English 60 exam; the results represent a culture in conflict with 5 of 9 respondents (56%) viewing the exam is valid and the same number (5 of 9, 56%) viewing the exam is invalid. (I paradoxically coded one response as both valid and invalid.) The respondents who view the test as valid reported it is a good measure of either students’ writing ability (3 of 5 responses, 60%) or knowledge of essay structure (2 of 5 responses, 40%) even though these two factors can be seen as
Table 9
Representative Sampling of the English 60 Exam as a Valid Assessment Subtheme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Measure of writing ability            | ✓ The goal of the final exam is to make sure students can write a basic collegiate essay on their own without outside help, and the final exam is a strong assessment of this.  
  | ✓ it does provide a measure of a students’ writing ability.               |
| Measure students’ understanding of essay structure | ✓ I like it because it is a good indicator of knowledge of academic essay structure. The English Department faculty who grade the final stick to the rubric pretty well, so if a student passes the final, I’m pretty confident that he or she knows how to structure an academic essay, a skill that is the baseline of readiness for English 1A.  
  | ✓ mastering basic essay structure is an important foundational skill for college work, and most of my students have trouble in various ways doing that [emphasis in original]. |

interdependent (see Table 9). These responses all express satisfaction with the validity of the exam and align well with the positivist assumption that reality can be objectively analyzed and discerned; in this case, they assert that the English 60 exam accurately assesses both students’ understanding of essay structure and their ability to write an essay independently. Because many English 60 instructors also teach freshman composition, they have greater confidence that students who progress beyond English 60 have these foundational skills and will be prepared for the rigors of freshman composition.

On the other extreme, some faculty challenged the validity of the final; these responses vary from having no standards,

Sometimes it seems as though the exam standards are very low, especially in the amount of development of ideas allowed to pass and the number of major
sentence errors deemed passing. Consequently, I question whether students are really tested on as much as they will need for entering English 1A.

resentment over who has the power to determine who should progress to freshman composition,

I’ve always felt that the English 60 instructors should have the prerogative of deciding which of his/her students should be allowed to pass into English 1A.

To me I feel I can determine who’s doing the work and if they’re ready for English 1A; I’m going to know that by the end. I’m going to be honest with them because I’m not going to pass someone who’s not ready for English 1A. I don't want my name to be attached to that student. To me in that regard, the proficiency exam is not really that necessary because as an instructor, I know if someone is ready for English 1A.

to complaints about the impromptu nature of the exam

It would be beneficial to associate a short reading with the English 60 exam.

Further Tom even posits this hypothesis about the English 60 exam:

I think in some ways the proficiency exam is not necessarily testing what students know, but I think it is more or less to hold teachers accountable. It’s one of those things where if there are a few bad apples, it's going to make it rotten for everybody else.

These responses suggest a post-modern conflict that pits the instructors’ teaching philosophy about assessment against the exam and forces the instructor to conform.

Niemec and Ryan (2009) would even argue that the English 60 exam would undermine instructors’ enthusiasm and creativity and make instructors more reliant on controlling behaviors in the classroom. While it is desirable to have standardized outcomes, the responses suggest that the exam focuses on conformity to the standards rather than letting them come naturally from the instructors’ teaching belief and philosophy.
Socialization of Academic Discourse in the Case Study Class

Since the ultimate purpose of composition courses is the socialization of academic discourse and literacy prominent in higher education (Bartholomae, 2002), the macrosystem is of the utmost importance to basic skills English instructors. The central mission of composition courses is to guide students to not only understand the most important elements of academic discourse but also apply them to their own essays. Basic skills English instructors, however, have an additional charge: to provide students with the fundamental skills and strategies necessary to make these discourse transactions. The findings of this section answer the research question below:

How might students apply, internalize, and transfer I-Search instruction inside and outside the basic skills English classroom?

Since an assumption of this research question is that students must understand the conventions of academic discourse, especially essay structure and the social-constructivist, dialogic nature of knowledge, before they can apply it to their own writing, this section examines students’ understanding of academic discourse and how students are able to apply it to their own writing. In order to account for this, it’s necessary to examine the relationship between students’ home culture(s) and academic culture; I feel the relationship between these two cultures reveals both the source of basic skills students’ challenges as well as implications for their socialization of academic discourse.

The findings of this section reveal that I-Search instruction did indeed help students at the case study understand and apply the conventions of academic discourse and culture to their own writing. Initially students reported that they had difficulty
understanding academic discourse, especially essay structure, grammar, and MLA citations. The data further suggests that instruction encouraged students to adopt a social constructivist and dialogic epistemology of knowledge that helped students feel more comfortable contributing their perspectives to their knowledge inquiries. Even though students found academic discourse difficult, the classroom culture reflected a belief that students can exert the effort necessary to successfully write academic essays; in other words, students had greater competence and perceived self-efficacy that they could overcome writing challenges and successfully write academic essays. The combination of these two factors led me to conclude that students began to perceive a greater overlap between their home(s) and academic cultures and began the formation of bi-and multicultural identities (de Anda, 1984).

**Students struggling with academic discourse and culture.** The data paints a picture that students were unaccustomed to and unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse and culture, a trend that participants attributed to their high school English courses. This was also a common theme that arose from the English 60 instructor’s responses; high schools did not prepare students for college-level English. The faculty lamented at how little students wrote and read in high school and felt that too many basic skills English students lacked crucial reading and critical thinking skills necessary for college-level writing. Students in the case study classroom echoed this sentiment. For instance, Walt reported that, “a verb is an action word, a noun is a person place or thing—that’s what I got taught in school, and that’s all I knew. And to find out
how complicated the English language is.” As Walt’s response suggests, what he took away from secondary school wasn’t functional knowledge that can help him write but rather factual knowledge; this didn’t allow him to capture the complexities of English. Similarly Alice reveals how unprepared for college English she was: “I guess I was surprised that the English I learned in high school wasn’t the same; college was much more advanced. I didn’t expect it to be like, ‘Okay this is what we’re doing; write a 12 page paper.’ I didn’t really expect that.” These findings corroborate the research about the transition from secondary school to post-secondary education: secondary schools had significantly lower expectations for students because college was only seen as a viable option for college prep and advance placement students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2008; Wagner, 2008). This lack of understanding can negatively influence affective issues such as competence and perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), interest (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ballenger, 2009; Dewey, 1913), and motivation (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001).

This lack of familiarity became most pronounced when it came to essay structure; several students at the case study site reported problems with this staple of academic discourse. For instance, Andy describes how he created essays in high school: “I didn’t know [essay structure] at all; I would just throw stuff together on paper and call it good.” Needless to say, if he were to turn in an essay like this to his college instructors, it probably wouldn’t pass because it lacked critical thinking skills. Nowhere was lack of
essay structure more pronounced than some students’ difficulty understanding a thesis statement. The following exchange happened on 11/20:

**Sam.** What’s another way to describe a thesis? I want you guys to describe it.

**Walt.** My nemesis.

**Sam.** Fair enough. You’ve been writing with me for 13 weeks now, and you’ve written some decent thesis statements. How do you describe a thesis statement?

**Walt.** Okay I’ll say something though I don’t know what I’m going to say. [Class laughs.] The thesis statement for me is… It’s hard for me to wrap my head around it … Does it present to the reader what I want them to understand? The thing that’s getting me though, is the limited topic. I put a lot of facts in here, but not so much my opinion because my opinion is limited. My knowledge of the subject is (or was) limited, prior to doing research for this paper.

**Sam.** I think that’s a valid comment…

**Walt.** I just don’t understand it?

**Sam.** Maybe this will help you understand it. You do your research and you learn about that topic, so that you can form an informed [emphasis on informed] opinion, and that’s your thesis. After learning about this, I see that the problem isn’t panhandling but the problem is homelessness in general; panhandling is a side effect. My solution is we need more resources for homeless people.

This exchange brings up several elements that are telling of the experience of basic skills students at the case study. Walt calling the thesis statement “my nemesis” really captures how perplexing and challenging this part of the essay was to him. This was the fifth time he’d asked questions about a thesis statement at this point in the semester, and he was still unsure about its role and function. Further, even though the instructor had reported that he had written effective thesis statements in the past, he still doubted his ability; this suggests that his fear of writing thesis statements is greater than is warranted (see also Cox, 2009). Lastly, (and this will be explained in greater detail later in this section) Walt is hesitant to state his perspective. I found this interesting because when I interviewed
him, he was able to state facts off the top of his head; to me he had excellent command of his I-Search topic homelessness, yet still doubted his ability to contribute his perspective.

Another common theme to emerge was that students misunderstood the nature of research. For instance, Alice shares that, “I remember hearing about [research] in high school, but I didn’t really know anything about it; I didn’t know how to actually do research.” One can conclude from Andy’s description of throwing stuff together in a paper and calling it good that he found research as the copying and pasting of quotes together. These findings corroborate the literature on research instruction; research is often presented as a series of prescriptive processes such as bibliographic note cards that encourage students to copy and paste disparate facts together in a hodgepodge fashion that is devoid of any real meaning (Macrorie, 1988; Muchmore, et al., 2001; Luther, 2006; Johns, 2006) or as Macrorie calls it, “a bad joke” (p. 25). Without research instruction in basic skills courses, students will likely be plagued with a misunderstanding of academic culture and the conventions of a research paper.

**Introducing students to academic discourse and culture.** The next natural question is, “What academic values and norms did the case study instructor encourage students to adapt?” A prominent characteristic of the classroom culture is the belief of a social constructivist, dialogic epistemology of knowledge. The instructor focused on this with the analogy of Burke’s parlor conversations (Pare, 1991; see also Henderson & William (2001) for collection of essays on Burke’s influences):

**Sam.** That goes back to Kenneth Burke and his idea of the parlor: you can understand knowledge in the same way you do a conversation at a dinner party…
a semi-formal event in you want to join in a conversation: you’re bringing your
voice to a conversation that’s already underway. [[Instructor gives an example of
cyber bullying – Are you the first person to write about cyber bullying? – class
collectively says NO.] So you join a group of people and say, “Hi” and they
acknowledge you, but they are in hot debate. How do you join that debate?

Mary. State your opinion.

Sam. You state your opinion after doing what?

Derek. Research.

Walt. Listening to both sides of the conversation.

Sam. Introducing yourself and listening to both sides of the conversation.
Introducing yourself in this case might be your thesis, introducing your argument.
Listening to both sides, then, is stating your research.

Walt. You can use your experience with an opinion?

Sam. Yes! That’s right. All of that together is how you join the conversation. I
just wanted to explain it to you like that because that really helped me understand
research... You as a writer are joining a conversation that’s already underway.

I found this to be a very accessible way to introduce students to the social constructivist
and dialogic nature of knowledge. This is a metaphor that students can relate to; they’ve
all been to a party and had to listen before they could join in a conversation. Research,
then, is the listening, and students must listen to what is being said about their topic
before they can contribute their perspective, or as Walt stresses, listening to both sides.

By viewing research as participating in conversation already underway, students are more
likely to state their ideas in relation to others’ ideas, a practice that is both valued by and
required for academic writing. Moreover, although I do not have as much data to support
this claim, it is also possible that students can see their own problems in relation to
others’ ideas; hence others’ ideas can potentially provide students with a more accurate
perception of their own problem. Instruction such as this can encourage students to adopt an epistemology of knowledge more consistent with academic culture.

In order to engage in their knowledge inquiries, the classroom culture also reflected a valuing of others’ perspectives. The instructor stressed the importance of exchanging perspectives by reading and analyzing Leo Lionni’s (1970) *Fish is Fish*—a story about a fish and a tadpole who are inseparable friends but grow apart and then reunite in a pond—and made the following comments on 10/1:

You can’t really effectively be in someone else’s shoes without considering their perspective. So an I-Search paper is a more personalized form of research: you start with the problem you are either experiencing or an issue you feel passionate about; then you find out what other people have written about that problem. So for example, if you are not a frog, you need to read something to know what the frog’s perspective is. You can’t do it yourself. If you’ve never been homeless, you can’t write about being homeless because fish is fish.

The story *Fish is Fish* relates to I-Search in several ways. First, after the frog tells fish what is in the world outside the pond, the fish decides to jump out of the pond to see what is out there, “no matter what will happen.” When the fish jumped out of the pond, she did not have an accurate perception of what was outside the pond. As a result, the action based on this inaccurate perception was harmful to her. Similarly, people’s scripts may not be based on an accurate perception of their situation and may lead to harmful actions. However, I-Search has the potential to introduce students to alternative perspectives that can give them a more accurate understanding of their situation. Thus, any action based on an accurate understanding of their situation increases the likelihood of an improved outcome. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether or not students had a
more accurate understanding of their situation. Future researchers examining non-cognitive strategies can look for a relationship between students’ perceptions of their problems and their actions.

The data suggests that the case study students adopted this belief and valued considering others’ perspectives. Andy stresses the importance of learning alternative perspectives by emphasizing the importance of getting all the information down first: “To definitely get all my information done first and immediately. The first one would be to look up what they are and what they’ve done, and then after that it’s kind of like a chain reaction really. You have to make sure that you hit every single one, every single thing.” Alice adds to this by emphasizing how she compares her perspective to others:

I usually wouldn’t like [incorporating sources], but I actually did like it for this [paper]. Because with the primary support and secondary support you can say what I thought, how I feel about it, and then how other people feel about it. That’s why I really like including sources because it’s from my perspective and then from others’ perspectives as well… I’m an 18-year-old girl, and this is from a 42-year-old man’s perspective. I mean it could be absolutely anyone’s perspective. In this quote, she emphasizes a limitation about only considering her own perspective; there are many more perspectives to consider. The emphasis on perspectives resonated so strongly with Alice that she reports that she actually likes incorporating sources for her paper. This would also allow Alice to frame her ideas in reference to others’ ideas, a practice that is not only expected but also valued in academic writing. Although Alice doesn’t explicitly state this, considering others’ perspectives might even influence her own perspective; that is, other’s perspectives may have offered her an interpretation she
had not considered before. Walt provides an example of how another person’s perspective resonated quite strongly with him:

As a matter of fact, one of the quotes [for my I-Search paper] was from one of the ladies [who] says that, “We wouldn’t let our dogs stay outside like that, but we’ll let these [homeless] humans stay out there!” That was one of those strong lines that I actually used for my I-Search paper; that really hit me; she was right. I mean if you put a dog out there, someone will call animal control for letting your dog freeze outside in the snow.

This understanding of the dialogic nature of knowledge would make students more assertive in stating their perspective in relation to others. I also find that this tendency is strengthened by the I-Search assignment which places a greater emphasis on students’ perspective. Since, as reported in chapter 2, students may have a false folk psychology (Bruner, 1990) about the nature of knowledge (that is, the belief that knowledge is fixed and cannot be changed; Macrorie, 1988; Wagner, 2008), this emphasis on the “I” in I-Search can help students replace this false folk psychology with an understanding that in academic discourse, knowledge is socially constructed and dialogic. With this accurate understanding, the students at the case study site showed a greater willingness to apply their own perspective to others’ perspectives and thus contribute to knowledge construction. Now students have a desire to contribute their perspective to their knowledge inquiries, and they also have a need for grammar and essay structure instruction in order to write their I-Search papers.

**A functional grammar.** The literature and English 60 faculty both report that writing grammatically correct sentences is a pressing challenge that many basic skills English students experience. This challenge was popularized by Shaughnessy (1977) in
the 1970’s and confirmed by Grubb & Gabriner’s (2013) examination of basic skills instruction in California community colleges nearly forty years later. Corroborating this research, many faculty of Pine College similarly reported grammar instruction as a pressing challenge. Very few instructors, however, reported best practices to help students overcome this challenge; that is, faculty reported difficulty in presenting a functional grammar that is reflected in student writing.

Initially, students reported that English grammar remained an enigma to them and that their secondary education failed to prepare them for college-level writing. However, students at the case study site reported having an understanding of grammar at a functional level in that they reported understanding not only how to write grammatically correct sentences (or where to put the comma, as Walt emphasized) but also how to use grammar instruction to effectively communicate their ideas. Alice’s comment during her interview is representative of this theme:

When I was writing—because I really like to write short stories—and when I look back at my stories, I think, ‘Oh, that’s a fragment. Okay, none of that makes sense. I used absolutely no live nouns in there. That helped me make my writing a lot better, and it helped me understand it more. It was easier for me because when I write, I am everywhere, like scattered.

This comment reflects many elements that were representative of the classroom culture. The data suggests that students were able to not only identify grammatical errors but also understand why. I observed that when Sam placed students in homework groups to go over their grammar, students often took time to explain the ideas to their classmates, and other students were open to their explanations. This suggests students understood
grammar at a foundational level, thus increasing the likelihood of transferring it to their own writing. Students in addition to Alice reported that grammar instruction helped them communicate their ideas. This was most evident in the concept of live nouns, specific and proper names of people and things which usually require a capitol letter and accompany specific details. Students in addition to Alice reported how live nouns helped readers relate to and understand their ideas. Consequently, students at the case study site made the connection between grammar instruction and its communicative purpose.

**Writing process and the English 60 exam.** An unexpected theme that emerged from the data was that students perceived that I-Search instruction helped them pass the final; in fact in the words of Alice,

> I was definitely nervous [to take the English 60 exam], to say the least. I was *super scared*, you know!... But it really helped because I remembered everything that I learned – well I didn’t remember everything that I learned, but I remembered a lot. Right when I got [the prompt], I came up with my own pre-write. That really helped me. Even though we couldn’t do research on it, it still help me a lot because I was able to know, “Okay, I need to include this, this, and this, and I need to have both these types of support.” Honestly I feel like I would have failed if I did not write an I-Search paper.

I found that two points about this quote offered insight into the case study class culture. (1) Even though Alice was “nervous” and “super scared” about the final, she was able to perform and execute a writing process to the extent necessary to pass the final. (2) She also reported that she understood the structure of an essay well enough to anticipate what instructor graders expected and included that in her essay. When I synthesized this fact with other data from the case study class, especially the fact that all seven students who took the final passed it, I concluded that students likely had a foundational understanding
of both academic essay structure and the writing process that they can adapt for other writing tasks.

This led me to the following question: Why did students in the case study class form this foundational understanding of academic discourse when many basic skills English students, as represented by the attrition statistics (CCSSTF, 2011; AACC, 2012; CCCCO, 2014; CCCCO, 2012), don’t? The data suggests that because students are engaged with genuine, authentic knowledge inquiries, instruction was contextualized in that students were more likely to make the connection between I-Search instruction and its communicative and/or rhetorical purpose. As such, students are more likely to make a connection between the writing process and its communicative purpose, expressing their ideas to readers. I found this important because Grubb and Gabriner (2013) describe one part of the remedial pedagogy as including prescriptive processes without references to how those processes are used in whole literacy acts.

The data suggests that I-Search helped students analyze and expand on ideas for the final; this is especially important because as an impromptu final there are only very minimal opportunities through the background information for students to compare their perspective with others. For instance, on 10/1 the following exchange took place that illustrates how one student came to the understanding that “expounding on ideas” is an essential part of academic discourse:

Walt. So that’s how the Ph. D. and the master students come out; they expound on something that’s already there. Is that what that means? Is that what they do?
Sam. In certain ways, definitely. That’s what writing a research paper is. Exactly. That is what researchers do. In a lot of ways: you bring your schema, and then you add onto your existing schema or correct something you see is incorrect.

In this sense, Walt’s use of the word “expound” suggests that he has arrived at an understanding of an elementary skill in academic discourse, analysis or a breaking of an idea into component parts in order to better understand how that part works and how it relates to the whole. This “expanding” on an idea really helps students generate ideas to express in their essays. Andy additionally reported a similar finding in his interview:

Through I-Search, you really learn to take a little bit of information and just kind of expand on it, keep thinking about it, and use it to its full potential. [For the English 60 final], it helps quite a bit because you only have a little bit of information and only so much to go off of; it really helped.

Since both of these students have arrived at a foundational understanding of analysis, they are more likely to flexibly adapt analysis for other writing tasks. For instance, since the final is conducive toward personal examples, students can break those examples into their component parts and “expound” and “expand” on them to meet the grading instructors’ expectations. This foundational understanding of analysis can help students flexibly adapt analysis for other papers in addition to I-Search and the English 60 final.

Another prominent theme to emerge from the data is the use of meta-cognition, or students reflecting on and evaluating their writing processes in order to successfully complete literacy tasks. Metacognition was a term that the instructor repeated at least 26 times throughout the observation period though the actual number may have been higher. For instance, Sam encouraged students to use metacognition to evaluate their writing
processes: “I’ve said this before and I really mean it: if you try a writing strategy and it doesn’t work, leave it at home. Don’t do it. But I want you to try it first.”

Metacognition not only encourages students to be flexible with their literacy processes but also develops critical evaluation skills that are essential for academic literacy tasks. This flexibility can help students transfer instruction to other environments (Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000), especially other college-level courses where they have to write. Metacognition is a practice that can empower students to become aware of and refine their processes in order to give them the best chance of success. Students’ use of metacognition can strengthen the belief that they can exert the effort necessary to successfully complete academic literacy tasks.

**Student’s Adoption of Academic Cultural Values, or Integrated Regulation.**

The data paints a picture that students did indeed adopt academic values, and that academic values had become a prominent characteristic of the classroom culture. As argued previously, students exerted more effort toward their I-Search paper, and this extra effort is representative of independent learning; that is, students are taking the initiative to learn the information that is necessary to write their I-Search paper instead of depending on the instructor. This can also be seen as the beginning of the convergence of students’ home and academic culture; that is, since students are applying academic cultural values to better understand their home culture, students can begin to see how the two cultures relate.
The question still remains, though, why did students in the case study classroom adopt the instructor’s cultural values and beliefs while many other basic skills English students don’t? Niemec and Ryan (2009) provide some intriguing possibilities with their ideas of relatedness and integrated regulation, or the tendency to synthesize others’ beliefs and values into the self. As argued previously, SDT theory posits that one of the basic, inherent psychological needs of individuals is relatedness, “the extent to which [individuals] feel connected to others in a warm, positive, and interpersonal manner” (Deci & Ryan, p. 235). A sense of relatedness can tap into many of the affective needs that an individual has when interacting with the environment, and a sense of relatedness can also serve as a precursor for integrated regulation, “those identified regulations [that] have been synthesized with other aspects of the self” (Niemiec & Ryan, p. 138). Integrated regulation can account for why I found that students in the case study classroom adopted the instructor’s academic cultural values and beliefs. Students felt warm and caring relationships with the instructor, and this would make them more open to synthesize his values, which reflect academic culture, as their own. Moreover, because the instructor stressed the importance of mesosystem connections, students are likely to perceive how academic culture’s values and beliefs can be applied in other environments along the mesosystem.

Validation. Another strong theme to emerge from the data was both the instructor and students validating each other. Rendon (1994) developed Validation Theory to describe how educators can help nontraditional students overcome anxiety and
achieve college success. She found that when institutional agents go out of their way to show that they care for students as individuals, that students have something of value to contribute, and that their success as college students matters, students often respond by believing they can be successful in college and engage actively. This sense of validation may be especially crucial for basic skills English students; the fact that they tested into basic skills English courses may confirm their suspicions that they are not college material (Cox, 2009) and stigmatize themselves as inadequate. However, validation is something that can potentially counter this belief. Validation can persuade students that their home culture and values are indeed compatible with college; in fact, validation can persuade students to perceive that their home culture and values can enrich academic culture (Gay, 2002). Validation can then positively influence affective issues such as perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), interest (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ballenger, 2009; Dewey, 1913) and motivation (Verhoeven & Snow, 2001), thus leading to the exertion of greater effort.

Validation emerged as a prominent characteristic of the English 60 classroom culture. The instructor modeled validation by complimenting students on their efforts in class, and students followed his model; in observation protocol and classroom transcripts, I counted 24 non-duplicated instances of validation though the actual number may be higher (see Table 10). These instances included 16 from the instructor to students, 7 from student to student, and 3 from students to instructor. Even if students are completing their assignments correctly, this validation can alleviate many students’ fears
Table 10.

Representative Sampling of Validation in the Classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor to student validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ [Responding to a student comment] Wow! Wow!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ You guys are understanding this; you’re getting the basic idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Bam! We got it right, every one of us!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ You turned [your draft] into a stronger piece of writing through revision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ That’s another great way of looking at it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ I think you guys are getting it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ That’s a really great choice you’ve made to include that in your essay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ You guys give good peer response from what I’ve seen; you’re pretty good at this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ You guys are taking this so seriously, I really appreciate that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student to student validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Thank you for your explanation; I understand it now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ That’s a good interpretation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Ooooh! I like that!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ I’m going to do that in my essay too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ In group work that explanation was so easy to understand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student to instructor validation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ That’s a good interpretation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Before this class, I had no idea what an essay was. I now do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ That activity was very fun!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and anxieties (Cox, 2009). As such, validation has the potential to increase students’ competence (Elliot, MacGregor, & Thrash, 2002; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996) and perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The comment below stands out as a strong sample of validation. When the instructor was going over the parts of an introduction, the following exchange occurred on 10/27:

**Sam.** It’s hard to get started writing an essay. Knowing the parts and pieces of an essay is a really good way to get over writers’ block and jump in. I know I need some kind of hook or attention grabber, even if it’s cheesy, to start my essay with.

**Walt.** I’m glad you said that because mine is so cheesy…
Sam. It’s a little corny.

[Laughter in the class.]

Walt. It sure is; it’s corny…

Derek. Hook, line, and sinker.

Sam. Hook line and sinker, there you go. If that helps you to remember, go with it [pointing to the PowerPoint] – hook would be the attention grabber; line would be background information; sinker would be thesis statement…. I love it; I’m going to steal it. I’m going to use it when I teach a class. Is that okay with you?

Derek. Yeah!

Sam. Is that copyrighted?

Derek. No, at least not by me.

In the first part of this example, the instructor validated Walt’s efforts in class in a light-hearted way; that is, by acknowledging that hooks can be cheesy, students know that they can feel better (and even validated) to include “cheesy” attention grabbers in their own writing. Further, the instructor validated Derek’s paraphrasing of the main idea into his own words so that he could understand it more easily. This validation can increase the likelihood that he would state main ideas in both English 60 and other college courses in his own words. As a result, both Derek and other students who use this strategy may be more likely to see an overlap between their home and academic cultures because they are using their home cultural beliefs and norms to better understand academic culture.

Because Derek received validation, other students may be more likely to apply this strategy to instruction. Moreover, the fact that the instructor wanted to steal it is further validation that Derek can make contributions to college. I would extend this benefit to other students as well: by seeing a classmate make a valuable contribution, students will
be more likely to perceive that they can similarly make valuable contributions. Since validation had become a cultural norm of the classroom, students may begin to re-conceive their understanding of the epistemology of knowledge and perceive that they can contribute to knowledge construction as well.

**Competence.** The combination of collaboration with classmates and validation led students in the case study to increase their sense of competence, or the belief that they can effectively interact with academic literacy in a college environment. Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) posit that the need for competence is one of the three psychological needs of the individual, and socio-contextual events such as feedback and response can enhance competence. This feedback and response can affect the extent to which an individual feels that he or she can accomplish their goals and desired outcomes even if the task is perceived as challenging (see also Bandura’s (1997) idea of perceived self-efficacy). Competence relates to this study in that the greater competence an individual feels toward the English classroom, the greater effort he or she will likely exert toward active engagement.

The data paints a picture of a classroom culture where students increased their competence; the data doesn’t suggest that students found academic writing easy but rather that they can exert the effort necessary to successfully write college papers. This classroom cultural belief is best captured by Walt’s comment on 11/15:

**Walt.** I think that’s why I’ve written so many drafts for my past couple essays. When I’m free writing, clustering, talking to myself while I’m walking on the road, whatever it is, I’m thinking about what I want to write. But by the time I get to the fifth or sixth draft, that’s when I start to get focused. At first it’s just
information; it’s scrambled. At first, it’s just on the page, and it’s there as good as I can get it.

**Sam.** I told you guys we would practice metacognition.

**Walt.** Then it grows!

**Sam.** What you’re talking about is metacognition. You’re looking at how this applies to your writing process. And it’s not just you; I would say this applies to all writers whether their process is exactly like yours or not. It gets easier to write a focused sentence the further and further you are in the writing process.

**Walt.** I believe I never thought about writing or any of that prior to coming to this class. Like I told you, I didn’t care where a comma went. But since I came to this class, I believe that there is nothing I can’t write about or get my point across given enough time… I really like doing it too.

In my observation protocol, I made the following comment:

>This is a great testament to not only the power of metacognition, but also a testament to how writing instruction can be more than structural, can be more than where to put the comma, it can really influence students’ belief that they can write. I really think it’s affecting their belief that they can write that will motivate them to write to the extent that is necessary to become a better, a good, and an expert writer.

In this comment, Walt acknowledges that effective writing is very difficult, but he also stresses that he can exert the effort necessary to successfully navigate academic writing; he suggests that this effort comes in the form of multiple drafts. I found this perspective important because the literature suggests that students sometimes have a false-folk psychology of the writing process that expert writers write only one draft perfectly without the help of others (Macrorie, 1988; Perl, 1980; Sommers, 1980). Walt’s comments, corroborated by other students both during class discussion and student interviews, more closely aligns with the beliefs of their professors: writing is a messy process that involves multiple drafts before a writer can get his/her point across to readers.
This belief can give him momentum to engage in more academic literacy acts in other content area courses, and further develop academic literacy skills (Sternglass, 1997; Shaughnessy, 1977). Andy extends Walt’s comment by applying it to essay structure: “I actually understand how to write an essay now; well at least the base of an essay. Whereas before I didn’t know at all I would just throw stuff together on paper and call it good. It helps a lot.” The end of this comment suggests that he initially felt academic essay writing was difficult because he didn’t understand essay structure. He acknowledges that he may still have difficulty because he will have to write other types of essays, but I-Search helped him develop the confidence that he can adapt the basic essay structure for other types of writing. I found these statements typical of the class and classroom culture; while students found parts of the class difficult, they had faith that they could persevere with effort and eventually achieve success. The classroom environment then would provide students with support and help as each student individually persevered.

**Development of bi- and multicultural identities.** I feel the finding of students perceiving a convergence between home and academic culture important because too many basic skills students perceive a chasm between these two cultures. Instructor Pam describes this chasm as “the inability [of English 60 students] to even perceive themselves as writers. Students… just can’t imagine it. They’ve been told for 12 years that they’re basically terrible English students, and it’s not even in the realm of imagination.” In order to socialize students to academic discourse, instructors must
confront this chasm and deal with the negative affective issues that this chasm might cause.

Even though students may have adopted the academic value of social constructivism, they still may struggle with the conventions of academic writing, especially essay structure and integration of academic sources. This is evidenced by students’ struggles to master thesis statements and difficulty integrating sources. Bartholomae (2002) would attribute their struggles to students inventing the university: because students’ home culture may differ from academic culture, students must invent the university by “assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the
requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand” (p. 74). As Walt attests, even if students have solid essay structure in their writing, and even if students do an adequate job of integrating sources, students may still perceive academic writing conventions as difficult and perplexing because it is different from their home culture; this perception can negatively influence engagement. Consequently, the instructor strove to create a classroom environment that directly addressed affective issues.

Several other pieces of evidence suggest that validation helped students overcome their challenges to better understand and begin to apply academic cultural values and conventions to their own academic essays. All seven students who took the English 60 final had passed it: six had passed the final outright and the other passed it on appeal. Since a majority of English 60 instructors report that a primary purpose of the English 60 exam is to test students’ understanding of essay structure and their ability to write an essay individually, it can be reasoned that students have a foundational understanding of essay structure. Moreover, the case study instructor reported that students were ready for English 1A: “I just finished reading [the 1st drafts of] their I-Search papers, and I think the students by and large are ready for English 1A. That’s a pleasant surprise!” This perspective carried a lot of weight with me since he also teaches freshman composition and literature courses; I feel he is a good gauge of the requirements of freshman composition. Students also reported that they felt they had a foundational understanding
of English, and they could exert the effort necessary to write transfer-level college essays.

Andy’s comment below is representative of this theme:

> I don’t really like [English] too much; I’m not going to lie; it’s hard for me, which is why I took [this class] first... I’d much rather get it out of the way,… [but now English is] actually much easier; I was thinking about that today. I can actually write an essay now and have it be all right. I can go over it and over it and over it until it gets better.

However, one limitation of the current study is I didn’t collect students’ I-Search papers as data. If I had, I could’ve analyze them for elements of academic discourse much like Muchmore, et al., (2001) did. Even though this would’ve allowed me to make this claim more boldly, I still feel I can assertively conclude that students began to form bi- and multicultural identities.

As students actively engage with literacy acts in other disciplines, the perceived convergence of their home and academic cultures may increase. Consequently, I am concluding that students at the case study site are beginning to develop what de Anda (1984) calls bi- and multicultural identities, a personal identity allows students to transverse across two or more cultures. I found this evidence in Andy’s statement when he described the end results of completing this class: “[the class is] really going well. I actually had a lot of fun; I’m going to be taking three more courses because of it. If I hadn’t had as much fun as I did, I wouldn’t really be as enthusiastic about taking more [classes]. Yeah, I’m definitely going to be expanding.” As this response suggests, Andy was on the fence about college because he may have perceived college culture different than his home culture. However, I-Search instruction seemed to assuage his fear and
anxieties and led him to perceive an overlap between the two. This was true of other students’ comments as well: students perceived that they can exert the effort in class (and outside the class for those students I interviewed), and this seems to suggest that students are beginning to form bi-and multicultural identities.

But I must stress that this is just the beginning. The experience in this class will push students to persevere and grapple with other academic literacy acts increasing in complexity. With each literacy act, students will likely increase their competence and their internalization, thus increasing the likelihood of using academic literacy skills and strategies for personal and professional purposes as well.

**Part III: Scaffolding for I-Search Challenges.**

Since one purpose of this dissertation is to help practitioners in the basic skills English trenches, this last section will address the following research question: “How can instructors scaffold I-Search instruction to meet students’ needs and lead to the development of academic literacy?” To answer this question, I drew upon the literature, my observations, and student and instructor data to infer the challenges that participants experienced or may experience and how they might be overcome. The findings of this section can then assist basic skills English practitioners who consider incorporating I-Search (or research) instruction into basic skills English courses.

**Choosing a relevant and impactful topic.**

The literature found that students choosing any topic they like can sometimes be intimidating (Minnick & Aungst, 2007; Assaf, et al., 2011; Klausman, 2007; Luther,
2006). Even though students have many interests, some students wonder if their topic is “academic enough” or how to frame their topic in a way that is “academic” (Luther, 2006; Klausman, 2007). The other challenge that the research reports is that students can have too many choices. This can leave students changing their mind several times and sometimes undecided about their topic as the due date approaches (Minnick and Aungst, 2007; Assaf, et al., 2011). Since the benefits of I-Search instruction are contingent upon students choosing a relevant and impactful topic, class time dedicated to this crucial step in the case study classroom proved valuable.

Even though the instructor reported that the case study students did not have difficulty choosing a topic, and even though Alice had chosen a topic relatively easily, the participants responded that this can be difficult for basic skills English students. For instance, Sam reported that,

The open ended nature of the topic can be intimidating, but, based on my experience on assigning similar tasks in other classes—when I assign a similarly open-ended prompt in English 60—I didn’t see that in this class. I didn’t have a single student come up to me and say, “I don’t know what to write about! What, I can write about anything? What do you mean?” It was more like, “Oh great, we get to write about something we care about!”

These comments corroborate my own observations as well as the students I interviewed. Thus, the activities of the case study classroom offer some promising practices that can serve as models for instructors who might adopt I-Search instruction.

The first theme that emerged from the data is to offer students several general categories to help them choose their topics. Andy’s response reflects this solution to the challenge of choosing a topic:
choosing what you’re going to write on. There are so many things… Maybe have five or six categories to choose from… That will definitely cut a lot of things down for students. They can still feel like they’re choosing their own topics, so they’ll still be into it. But it also helps narrow down what they’re going to do. I think that would help.

By having five or six general categories to choose from, students will be given a starting point. On 10/6 for instance, Sam engaged students in conversations about how they might write about the following general topics: “medical issues, animal abuse, relationship problems, and problems in future careers” (PowerPoint slide). As a participant observer, I worked with Sam to generate this list since these were the general topics that students often chose in my piloting of the curriculum. Since this list was based on past students’ topics, students were more likely to relate to it and perhaps choose a topic that is personally meaningful and impactful for them. Then since choosing a topic can be difficult and intimidating, conversations generated from this list can give students momentum to choose (and limit) their topic.

These conversations about choosing a topic also allowed students to feed off of and support each other. For example, when the instructor introduced the I-Search assignment on 10/1, he encouraged students to pick a relevant and impactful topic: “When you define the problem, you’re going to use what you already know about the problem, which should be something you care about, something you are facing… You’re going to use your experience to connect to what you’re reading.” Then, when the instructor asked students to share topic they were considering, the following exchange took place:
Alice. In South America, a lot of the donkeys aren’t treated well because their pack mules; all of their hooves are super messed up. They’re talking about hoof care. I went to a donkey conference at UC Davis; that’s the only reason I know about that...

Mary. It’s the same thing with horses if you don’t take care of their hooves.

Alice. You would think they would take better care of them, because that’s what they rely on, but they don’t.

April. Mexico too.

Sam. Why does that personally appeal to you if I might ask?

Alice. I have 6 donkeys! I got 6 donkeys because my neighbors are in their 80’s, and they have something like 23 donkeys total. So they keep giving them to us so that they don’t end up with more. We went [to the conference] to know how to take better care of them. They were like, “Oh we have a new donkey. Name it, it’s yours.”

Sam. Obviously because you know the animals, you care about them.

Alice. Oh yeah! He’s my best friend. I keep him in the house….  

This exchange illustrates many of the advantages of students engaging in conversations about potential topics. First, Alice models how to choose a relevant topic; because her miniature donkey is her best friend, this topic has the potential to be relevant and impactful. Essentially she provides a concrete and tangible example that her classmates can relate to. (However, I must note that Alice eventually chose cyber bullying and suicide because that topic was even more impactful than miniature donkeys.) Second, this exchange is dialogic in nature. In this exchange, Alice introduces the topic but both Mary and April were able to add to it, noting the similarities between horses and donkeys. Thus, students are likely to perceive their classmates as resources to help them choose their topic, and students are empowered to consider their knowledge about the topic as an asset (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Lastly, this sharing of strong mesosystem
connections can strengthen the sense of community in the classroom. Because the increase in student engagement is dependent upon students choosing a relevant and impactful topic, students sharing potential topics can increase the likelihood that students will choose such a topic.

**Limiting the Topic.** However, once students choose a relevant topic, their job is still not done. Students still need to limit their topic to something that they can write about with the detail necessary for academic writing (Ballenger, 2009). Alice pointed out that this could be challenging for students:

> It could be hard to find a topic because you have to narrow it down so much. That’s the only problem. If you want to write about videogames, what do you want to write about videogames? Do you want to write about how they’re good? Do you want to write about how they’re bad? Or do you want to write about how they’re addictive? Or how they’re fun? That could be the hard [part of choosing the topic].

Limiting the topic is a crucial step for all research assignments; a limited topic helps students focus their research and time (a limited resource for community college students) on their search without overwhelming themselves. A limited topic also allows students to examine and analyze their topic to the depth necessary for academic writing. In other words, limiting a topic is a crucial first step that makes all the other steps in I-Search possible and much easier.

To help students limit their topic, Sam used classroom discussion to model the limiting of general topics, something that is encouraged by the literature (Luther, 2006; Assaf, et al., 2011; Johns, 2006; Klausman, 2007; Rubin, 2002). For instance, Luther (2006) first engages the class in discussions about how they can limit the subject, and
then has students free write to catch students “in the act of thinking” and limiting their topics. Similarly Sam engaged students in conversations about limiting the general topic of “medical issues” on 10/6:

Stan. Causes of broken arms.
Alice. Kidney failures treatments.
Sam. Can you narrow that even more?...
Mary. Waiting list for kidneys.
Sam. What about that might be a problem?
Mary. How long that takes, or how people are placed.
Sam. Sure, what qualities do they look at when placing someone on that list.
Alice. I was going to say that you could look at different states because my dad lives in California, and his waiting list is five to ten years. But living in Pennsylvania [he waited] for three years, he got it there that fast [fingers snapping].

Sam modeled two questioning strategies—“Can you narrow that further?” and “What about that might be a problem?”—that students can ask themselves as they limit their topics. Similar to the generation of relevant and impactful topics, students were able to provide concrete and tangible examples for their classmates; these examples demonstrated how students can limit personally meaningful and relevant topics. These exchanges were also dialogic in nature in that students fed off each other’s ideas. Consequently, the instructor planted the seeds of limiting a topic, and students were more likely to begin the process of limiting their own topics.

With this scaffolding, students are now ready to begin the work of limiting their topics. Similar to Luther (2006) who strives to capture students in “the act of thinking,”
Sam had students fill out a limiting the topic worksheet that allowed students to write their ideas down. The limiting the topic worksheet included the following instructions and questions:

2. Please free-write about a story involving that problem…
3. a. Who is one group of people (ex. students, parents, teens) that you think this problem might apply to? How do you think this problem might affect this group of people?
   b. What do you think are some of the causes of the problem?
   c. What do you think are some of the effects this problem has on people?
5. What is your first limited topic you’re thinking of writing your I-Search Problem essay on? Why do you want to write about this limited topic?

(Please see Appendix #6 for the entire worksheet.) This worksheet can potentially benefit students in several ways: first, it offers students several ways to limit their topic, thus increasing the likelihood that students will limit their topic in a way that is relevant and impactful; second, because students wrote down their topics, they objectified their thoughts and are more likely to view them from different perspectives (Klausman, 2001); third, the instructor has an opportunity to review the worksheet and evaluate the “writability” of their topics, thus preventing students from exerting a lot of time and energy towards a topic that is difficult to write about. And since the instructor offer students an opportunity to talk about the limited topics, students also received help from their classmates. These steps, with others, increased the likelihood that students made strong mesosystem connections with their topics and positively perceived the classroom.
Integrating and citing sources.

The next challenge reported by the literature and case study participants was finding sources for students’ I-Search papers. Sam offered the most thorough explanation of this challenge:

> College-level research is sometimes more difficult than college students perceive it to be… students are either overly confident and find out they are not as capable in the research process as they thought: they cannot find the types of resources they need and then realize they need to work on their research skills, or it can come in the form of students finding resources that are not credible or not really appropriate, or they don’t understand the difference between the gated web database and what Google is.

This challenge was reiterated by Andy and his difficulty in finding sources about Isis, a current event dominating news coverage at the time he wrote his I-Search paper: “The only really bad part about that is they don’t have too many [resources] on current events, at least ones that are reliable. I really wish they had more of that, especially with Isis being a current issue.” This may actually be a good challenge to have. This challenge actually mirrors the reality of many students; living in the information age, individuals will have tons of information available at the press of a button (Wagner, 2008; Prensky, 2001). Directly addressing this challenge with instruction has the potential to transfer to many other environments along the mesosystem.

To overcome this challenge, the instructor offered two suggestions: (1) have the instructor and the reference librarian available to help students. The case study instructor had cut the traditional hour and a half long library orientation into two separate orientations and offered the last 30 minutes for students to start searching for sources.
This allowed students to begin searching for sources while the orientation was still fresh in their mind and allowed students to ask questions if they needed help; I feel this is especially crucial for basic skills English students. (2) Instructor Sam also reported that a library worksheet he assigned helped avoid the problem of finding non-credible sources. The library worksheet required that students find sources that are essential for college-level research—newspaper and magazine articles, reference articles, books, and scholarly journals—that come from gated databases. Sam then scaffolded instruction to help students better understand the structure (or textual schema) of different types of texts and strategies on how to read them, especially scholarly journals. This knowledge helped students evaluate the credibility of their sources and the extent to which they agree or disagree with them; this ability also helped students frame their ideas with others’ ideas. By requiring sources and providing scaffolded instruction, students reported that they made mesosystem connections to other college environments that require research, thus encouraging students to perceive instruction as relevant and exert more effort (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995).

The next challenge reported by the literature and the case study participants is integrating and citing sources. This can be challenging for students because they have to use higher cognitive strategies such as synthesis, evaluation, and application in order to integrate sources. The literature has found that this was true of transfer-level students (Johns, 2006; Luther, 2007; Klausman, 2007; Macrorie, 1988). Several practitioners reported that they had the whole class go over material and texts collectively as
scaffolding to develop these higher cognitive skills that they can use when they collect sources individually. For instance, Luther (2007) shows students Spurlock’s (2004) *Supersize Me*, a documentary about how Spurlock eats McDonalds every day for a month and records its effects on his health, to carefully analyze Spurlock’s hypotheses and how he tested them; students then evaluated his ideas and arrived at the idea that “knowledge is persuasion” instead of truth. While the case study instructor did not do anything as elaborate as Luther, he did have students apply critical thinking skills to smaller texts.

For instance, the instructor told the story of the Cracked Pot (please see Appendix #5 for the transcription of the story) and the following exchange occurred afterwards:

**Derek**: It kind of paints a picture of how even though there was something wrong with the pot, even though it was not perfect, there was still something of usefulness in it, beauty in it.

**Sam**: What Derek did, whether you know it or not, was make a schema connection. You connected new information to what you already know. What else did you learn about the story?

**Mary**: She was doing her own thing… She was being her own person.

**Sam**: That’s a big part of this story, being yourself, being true to yourself, and about having your imperfections and owning up to it... I thought it was a really interesting story myself.…

In this example, students were able to empathize and consider the story from the heroine’s perspective. This sense of empathy could help students consider other people’s perspectives in their I-Search paper. Such instruction is important because students have to use high cognitive skills to make sense of and interpret these whole texts. This activity is contextualized in that students are more likely to connect the skills and strategies used in analyzing the story to its communicative and rhetorical purposes. As a result, students
are more likely to internalize and transfer the skills and strategies to other environments (Browning, Bransford, & Cocking, 2000), especially when looking for I-Search and research papers’ sources (Macrorie, 1988).

Once students apply critical thinking skills to the reading, they still must apply these skills to their own writing. This can be a daunting task for basic skills English students because they do not have a persistent exposure to reading academic texts (Batholomae & Petrosky, 1986; Stanovich, 2000; Goen-Salter, 2008). To help students integrate sources, Sam introduced students to the idea of quotamples on 10/8,

I want you guys to understand the idea of a quotample, which is a quotation with an example used for support in your essay. I also like this phrase because it emphasizes the “ample,” which means abundant and plentiful, support for your writing. It’s one way to remember why it’s important to have evidence in your writing. Primary support one is the quote, and primary support two is an example of the quote… This is really a point by point, sort of a paint by numbers, kind of way to use a quote. But this is something that students really struggle with. In the writing center all day long, I see papers where students don’t do this; they don’t do quotations properly; they just dropped the quotation in the middle of a paragraph and say, “Here’s my support!” You’ve got to follow some kind of formula at this level.

He later introduced summamples which is a summary accompanied by an example. Quotamples and summamples are an accessible strategy for basic skills English students to contribute their perspective. Because Sam presents quotamples and summamples as a formula, it is an accessible way for students to integrate quotes in their own writing (see also Graff & Birkenstein (2007) for other ways to incorporate formulas into academic essays). This formula can then become a foundation as students modify or adapt it for more complex knowledge inquiries. Andy, for instance, reports that quotamples and
summamples “allow [me] to really let the reader know what I’m thinking and my opinion of whatever it is, whether it’s Isis or bullying. It also allows me to throw in some stories or anecdotes of my own personal experience, which connects me to my reader.” As Andy reports, it is a way to connect the writer to readers, thus enhancing a sense of audience awareness that is crucial for college-level writing. This sense of audience awareness will make it easier for Andy to adapt or modify this strategy for more complex literacy acts. Because academic discourse is something that Andy and other basic skills English students are unaccustomed to (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 1986), this strategy will make it easier for students to contribute their perspective.

The last challenge to emerge from the data was citing sources. Alice stated this challenge quite bluntly: “The thing I did NOT like the most was the page citing, the parentheses thing because that was the first time I learned it. What’s that called?... [Parenthetical citations]...That’s what I did not like at all, but I’m getting used to it. It still sucks though.” Walt expressed a similar frustration:

It was hard to understand exactly what [MLA] wanted, especially when I was pulling articles out of the newspaper. It was my ignorance on the whole process; it was just a learning curve: how to write down whether “The News” newspaper or the author? Or how to write that in there exactly? I'm still not 100% sure, but I'm getting better at it.

This may be quite a perplexing challenge because there is neither rhyme nor reason for the rules; students just have to follow them. To overcome these challenges, Sam required students to do MLA citations in their own papers. As Walt alluded, they will be difficult but it will get easier with time and experience and prepare them for transfer-level writing.
Instructors can also assign grammar exercises for students to complete using in text MLA citations (which he did in the case study classroom) and perhaps even works cited exercises (as he reports doing in his English 1A courses). This instruction will offer students a head start as they begin to write essays for other transfer-level courses.

**Sam’s Advice for Implementing I-Search in Basic Skills English Courses.**

The remaining advice is from Sam and this would be applied directly to instructors. For this section, I will quote him extensively because I do not want to add anything to his perspective. First, Sam stresses the importance of trusting students, especially when they choose topics that they have more knowledge about than the instructor.

This is a tough one, but trust the students, let them lead the way, and get comfortable with that because these are adults… The vast majority of students are nominally adults, at least they’re 18 or over. So we should treat them like adults. Make it as equal as much as you can; make it an interchange of information and not sage on the stage style pedagogy. Get comfortable with that, and that’s a challenge; it’s a daily challenge to let students lead the way and accept that since students are doing the research on their own topics, they might know more about that topic than you do. [Instructors] should encourage that instead of resist it. While at the same time, using your knowledge and hopefully expertise as an educated person, make sure that course discussion is at least collegial, accurate as possible, and generally productive because you get strong opinions with I-Search. This can be tough because basic skills instructors, including myself, sometimes… think of students as “remedial,” or somehow not sufficient. It’s a mistake that I try to avoid, but I sometimes fall into.

The call of Sam reminds me of Freire’s (2011) problem-posing pedagogy: instructors can perceive themselves more as co-learners with students rather than, as Sam calls it, “sage on the stage” depositing information into students’ minds. This can encourage students to not only learn academic discourse but also non-cognitive strategies that they can use to
solve their problems (Farrington, 2012). Sam later adds during the interview that, “We sometimes treat [English 60 and English 1A students] like their worlds apart, but in reality it’s just a matter of assessment, which is sometimes arbitrary.” I similarly can relate to this statement. Even though I myself was a basic skills English student, and even though I consider myself an advocate for basic skills English students, I find myself falling into this trap as well. I think when students are defined but what they are unable to do (that is, read and write at the college level), it is too easy to focus more on what students can’t do instead of what they can. However, as Sam alludes, the I-Search assignment has the potential to shift this emphasis back to what students can do.

To avoid this trap, Sam reports striving to find some sort of balance between teaching the basic elements of English 60 and the higher cognitive demands of I-Search.

The last bit of advice is about the balance between remedial instruction and the higher cognitive skills demanded of research… how to effectively integrate and discuss research… making sure students do learn about essay structure and some of the more fundamental or basic aspects of writing while they are, at the same time, also engaging with writing that demands high cognitive and critical thinking skills. So in other words, keeping it basic enough while allowing for those higher cognitive skills, that I find, and what I think students also find, more interesting topics and types of writing….

Finding this balance, in my opinion, is a combination of the instructor’s personal teaching philosophy and the students staring at the instructor. Instructors have to determine how they can lead their basic skills English students to write an I-Search paper in a way that matches their personal beliefs and values and meets students’ needs. Simply put, this will be different for every instructor and every basic skills English course, but it is something instructors should consider to increase student success.
Conclusion

Overall I-Search instruction at the case study site was more successful than I had anticipated or hoped for. I began this study with the assumption that students would more likely have a positive perception of the classroom that would lead to increased engagement and achievement of learning outcomes. Simply put, students in the case study class engaged more actively than the classes with which I piloted the curriculum; moreover, the fact that all seven students who took the final passed it and the course suggests that students had achieved the learning outcomes. While engagement is a complex process influenced by several interdependent factors—such as the small class size, the likability of the instructor, the use of technology, etc.—I found that because students continually made and shared strong mesosystem connections with I-Search instruction, and because these connections led students to perceive the classroom environment positively, I-Search instruction facilitated student engagement. In fact, the data from the case study classroom confirms the assumption stated above.

I also wanted to examine how the case study class fit into the larger culture of basic skills instruction at Pine College. The findings of the case study class were more successful than I had anticipated and hoped for. First, I found that I-Search instruction has the potential to address the non-academic challenges that faculty perceive their students as experiencing. I purposely use the word “potential” because I could not determine if the non-cognitive strategies that students learned from their I-Search papers allowed them to solve their problem or prevented them from dropping out. Future
researchers can examine students who complete the I-Search curriculum longitudinally to determine if such a relationship exists. I further found that the I-Search curriculum also efficiently addressed many of students’ academic challenges that English 60 faculty perceived. I have concluded that I-Search instruction contextualizes instruction in that students experience a genuine, authentic need for instruction in order to not only write their I-Search paper but also solve their problem. Thus, students are more likely to make the link between instruction and how it serves their communicative and rhetorical purposes and transfer it to other environments (Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000). As will be further examined in chapter 5, I find that I-Search has potential for increasing the abysmally low rates of success for basic skills English students (CCCSSTF, 2011; CCCCO, 2014; CCCCO, 2012; AACC, 2012).
Chapter 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Every day basic skills English students crowd community college classrooms eager to learn the skills and strategies to help them succeed in both college and professional careers. In *College Fear Factor*, Rebecca Cox (2009) describes the experience of many community college students who often sacrifice great amounts of time and energy in the short term for the possibility of achieving a career goal that is both financially supportive and personally rewarding in the long run. For many, college is the best route to actualize these perceived selves (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989; Markus & Nurius, 1986) and achieve academic and professional success. Although there is great diversity among basic skills English students, many of them experience doubt and anxiety when they think of their chances for success. For some, they are the first in their family to go to college, and they were raised in communities and cultures sometimes vastly different than academic culture (Rendon, 1994). For others, they’re returning to school after many years in the workforce to receive training for a new career. For still others, they have a learning disability which requires them to exert more effort to their studies than others. Cox (2009) describes how this sense of anxiety and fear is experienced most profoundly as students prepare to turn in their first writing assignment. This one act represents a risk that students take that could potentially confirm their suspicions that they’re not cut out for college, leaving them no opportunity but to give up on their dreams and return to unsatisfying jobs.
The statistics about the success of basic skills English students paint a sobering picture of many programs’ inability to reach their students. Since freshman composition is a requirement for an overwhelming majority of educational goals, these numbers represent the fact that too many students are falling through the cracks. This suspicion is confirmed when one looks at the success rates of students who test into basic skills English and/or math courses: only 40.5% of these students successfully achieve their educational goals (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO), 2014).

The question remains, “Why do so many basic skills English programs struggle so mightily to prepare students for transfer-level English and help students achieve their educational goals?” Grubb and Gabriner (2013) offer an intriguing answer to this question by describing what they call “the remedial pedagogy.” In their exhaustive examinations of basic skills education in California, which included 169 observations of basic skills courses and 325 interviews of administrators, teachers, and staff, they found...
that instructors tend to break complex acts into sub-skills, or component parts, which are often presented in decontextualized exercises without reference to how it is used in meaningful contexts. In basic skills English courses, students are often presented with decontextualized grammar exercises and/or simplified, prescriptive processes that fail to resemble the types of literary acts that they’ll be required to do in transfer-level courses and professional environments. As the number above suggests, the traditional, remedial pedagogy doesn’t work, and basic skills English programs are in desperate need of a new paradigm.

While there are many “boutique” programs that have been found to have a great deal of success for small pockets of students (California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force (CCCSSTF), 2012; American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2012), reform conducted at scale remains desired yet elusive (Coburn, 2003; Quint, et al., 2013). The value of academic freedom in higher education combined with the prohibitively expensive cost of professional development leave many reform efforts focusing on instructors and curriculum but leaves students’ perspectives inexplicably left out. However, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model can provide a conceptual framework that places students and their experience at the center of reform movements. This ecological framework can help practitioners center reform on the lived experience of students and make the curriculum relevant (Gay, 2002). This type of curriculum has the potential to positively influence affective issues, educate the whole student (American Association of College Personnel (AACP), 1994), and begin to close
the achievement and opportunity gaps that have plagued community colleges (Nevarez and Wood, 2010).

Summary—A Culture of Engagement

This ethnographic case study examines one curriculum that basic skills English programs can consider as an alternative to the traditional curriculum: I-Search. I synthesized Macrorie’s (1988) popular I-Search assignment with Freire’s (2011) problem-posing pedagogy to help increase the success of basic skills English students. This curriculum includes three units in which students first define a core belief and/or value in unit one; define a problem with storytelling and engage in research to understand the nature of the problem in unit two; and lastly propose a solution that can lead to praxis, or humanizing action (Freire, 2011) in unit three. Since Kuh (2008, 2009) argues that culture can facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes, especially how it promotes engagement, I examined the culture of both English 60 instruction at the case study site and I-Search instruction in this case study classroom. I described these cultures by collecting data through survey, participant interviews, and audio recorded classroom observation. To describe the case study program and classroom culture, I then identified the most common, salient themes repeated multiple times and from different data sources and participants and inferred them as part of the culture.

This chapter discusses the findings of chapter 4 in regards to the following research questions:

1. How does the case study classroom reflect the culture of the basic skills English program, especially the department mandated proficiency exam?
2. In what ways does I-Search instruction mediate teaching and learning in a basic skills English class?
   a. How might students apply, internalize, and transfer I-Search instruction inside and outside the basic skills English classroom?
3. How can instructors scaffold I-Search instruction in order to meet students’ needs and lead to the development of academic literacy?

The English 60 instructor data painted a picture of a basic skills English program in transition. (In order to protect the identities of participants, pseudonyms have replaced all names, including those of the case study community college, courses, the instructors, and students.) While I found that the culture was student-centered in that instruction addressed what faculty perceived as students’ greatest challenges, instructors were split about how to best address those challenges. I claim (albeit weakly) that some instructors’ responses to students’ challenges and best practices led me to conclude that they may still cling to the remedial pedagogy described by Grubb and Gabriner (2013). In this culture, the presence of the English 60 exam, a high-stakes, impromptu essay exam, lends itself to faculty relying heavily on the remedial pedagogy in order to provide students with what faculty perceive as the best chance to pass the final. Other faculty viewed the course more through a social constructivist lens, tailoring the course to the requirements of academic writing in both transfer-level courses and professional environments. Lastly, I interpreted the faculty’s perception of the English 60 exam in terms of conflict: faculty had perceptions of the exam that were sometimes complete and polar opposites, with some faculty favoring the exam as a valid assessment while others saw it as perpetuating the failure of Pine College’s most vulnerable students.
Figure 11. The Ecological Model of Student Engagement.
In the case study class that adopted my I-Search curriculum, I found that I-Search presented students with an ecologically rich environment in which students made connections between what is learned in the classroom and how it is applied outside the classroom (see Figure 11). With I-Search instruction, the instructor supported students’ autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), and this autonomy support encouraged students to build bridges between the classroom and the mesosystem—or environments outside the basic skills English classroom with which students also interact (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995). Then, because students had chosen topics along the mesosystem, they perceived instruction as relevant and experienced a genuine and authentic need for instruction, thus leading to a positive perception of the classroom and active engagement. In an ecologically rich environment, instruction is contextualized, and students are more likely to make the connection between literacy skills and strategies and its application. Further, the continual sharing of mesosystem connections fostered the creation of a classroom community which allowed for student collaboration and validation, thus increasing students’ competence. This ecologically rich environment led to students exerting greater effort toward their I-Search papers, and students began to perceive a convergence of their home and academic cultures and to form what de Anda (1984) calls bi- and multicultural identities. All of this data comes together in an additional model, the Ecological Model of Student Engagement, which accounts for how students at the case study perceived the basic skills English classroom and how those perceptions influenced students’ interactions and engagement with the classroom.
In the next section, I explore these findings by synthesizing them with the literature in order to make sense of and interpret them. Following this interpretation, I will present the limitations of this study and recommendations for basic skills English programs, especially how I-Search can be presented as an alternative to the traditional basic skills English curriculum. Chapter 5 closes with recommendations for future research, a reflection on my research process, and a conclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

In *Policy Paradox*, Debra Stone (2012) uses the analogy of the market and the polis (or city) to describe public policy. In the market, people are utility maximizers who make decisions based on what is in their best interest. Decisions in the market are based on what Stone calls Rational Choice Theory, which posits that individuals are rationally motivated to maximize their own self-interest. For example, people in the market will trade with each other to improve their situation; since both parties involved in the trade are looking to improve their own self-interest, trades for the most part are considered fair. On other hand, Stone contrast this with the analogy of the polis, or the city. Unlike the market which is based on self-interest, people in the polis are often guided by conflicting values: their own self-interest, the good of the community, loyalty, equity, justice, etc. Trades in the polis, for example, might be considered unequal because one party usually has greater power than the other, trades may be done for the benefit of the group instead of the individual, and decisions might be based on factors such as loyalty. Hence, when public policy based on Rational Choice Theory of the market is implemented in the polis, there is great opportunity for perverse effects, or unintended consequences.
The analogy of the market and the polis is similar to this study in many ways. I used market logic to create the I-Search curriculum presented in this study. This curriculum is based on the assumption that students genuinely want to improve their situation and are willing to exert the effort necessary to do so. I then used the latest theory and research to create a curriculum that can best direct students’ efforts toward their studies in the most efficient manner possible. For instance, since people have a natural propensity to learn and achieve optimal challenges (Deci and Ryan, 1985, Bollinger, 2009; Dewey, 1935), I’ve incorporated autonomy support into the curriculum in order to direct students’ intrinsic motivation towards active engagement with I-Search instruction. Since research suggests that students can accomplish more in small groups than individually (Bruffee, 2002), I created the curriculum to be conducive to the creation of a community of learners who collaborate and support each other. Since some students may perceive that their home culture is different than academic culture, students can be provided with opportunities to use the values of academic culture to better understand their home culture, or students may have opportunities to use their home culture’s values and beliefs to enhance academic culture. At the risk of seeming arrogant, the I-Search curriculum presented in this study should work at a theoretical level because it is based on the latest research and theory.

However, similar to the polis, when the curriculum is implemented in a real classroom of real students who experience real-life problems, the results of the curriculum may be different from my own and the instructor’s intentions. Students’ personal/home/work problems may get in the way of their studies. While students may
genuinely want to be academically successful, affective issues such as fear and anxiety may conflict with those desires (Cox, 2009). Further while faculty may want to prepare students for transfer-level writing assignments, curricular elements such as proficiency exams may exert pressure on faculty to focus more on simplified instruction at the expense of higher cognitive demands required of college-level courses (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Consequently, a purpose of this section is to compare what both I, as the creator of this curriculum, and the case study instructor intended to students’ perceptions of the classroom. While I did find some divergence from our intentions and students’ perceptions, a vast majority of the data suggests that students did perceive instruction as the case study instructor and I intended.

This section looks for the relationship between the relevant literature that informed my I-Search curriculum and the most salient features of the department and classroom culture. This allows me to situate my findings in the literature of basic skills English instruction to determine the relevance and impact of the current study. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model of Human Development provides a frame for interpreting the data and explaining how instruction relates to the lived experience of students. Since the I-Search assignment presented in this study is a synthesis of Macrorie’s (1988) I-Search with Freire’s (2011) problem posing pedagogy, the findings draw upon culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002) and, while the case study was not an accelerated program, literature on scale reform (Quint, et al., 2013; Coburn, 2003). This interpretive section will include an examination of how my I-Search curriculum can not only provide students with academic literacy instruction but also
provide students with non-cognitive strategies (Farrington, et al., 2012) that can help them confront negative affective issues. I will then conclude with how an additional model, the Ecological Model of Student Engagement, can have implications for basic skills English courses.

**A basic skills English program in transition.** To begin, I distributed surveys and interviewed faculty who teach English 60 in order to describe the culture of English 60 instruction at Pine College. The findings of this section answer the research question below:

Research Question #1: How does the case study classroom reflect the culture of the basic skills English program, especially the influence of the department-mandated proficiency exam?

The findings for this section describe an English 60 culture in transition with the data suggesting that some instructors still cling to a traditional pedagogy, and others, albeit a smaller portion, are embracing an alternative pedagogy based on a social constructivist paradigm that more closely resembles transfer-level writing assignments. The traditional pedagogy has been found to lead to a stagnation of unacceptably low rates of success (CCCSSTF, 2013; AACC, 2012). Of students who test into basic skills English courses, only 46% of students who test one level below transfer, 34% of students who test two levels below transfer, and 27% of students who test three levels below transfer progress to and successfully complete their transfer level English course (CCCCO, 2012). Because freshman composition is a requirement for a vast majority of, though not all, educational goals, this suggests that too many students are falling through the cracks.
Traditional basic skills courses have been described as the “remedial pedagogy” by Grubb and Gabriner’s (2013) exhaustive examination of basic skills education in California. The authors describe the remedial pedagogy as a tendency for basic skills instructors to break complex acts into sub-skills (or component parts) and present them in decontextualized exercises without reference to how it is used in more meaningful contexts. Basic skills students often experience these exercises as difficult and fail to make connections between what is learned in the classroom and how it is applied outside the classroom. Rose (1980) adds to this by suggesting that instructors, who genuinely like students and want to see them successful, often assign simplistic narratives to increase students’ confidence. However, these simple narratives differ too greatly from the types of writing that students must do in transfer-level courses. Since the skills and strategies necessary to complete transfer-level tasks remains underdeveloped, this type of instruction can be seen as a false generosity that actually perpetuates students’ struggles and failures (Freire, 2011).

The findings of this study seem to suggest that some of the faculty who teach English 60 cling to a traditional pedagogy. Many of the faculty reported students’ main challenges as local sub-skills: grammar, parts of speech, lack of understanding a five paragraph essay, etc. Since they didn’t report best practices that contextualize instruction, I assumed (and I acknowledge the danger of assuming this) that instruction would include elements of the remedial pedagogy. However, because I didn’t observe instructors using a traditional curriculum, I can only make this claim very weakly and with much reluctance.
Moreover, the nature of the English 60 exam, in which students must write an impromptu essay in a two hour (and sometimes three for learning disabled (LD) and second-language learner (L2) students) time frame lends itself to elements of the remedial pedagogy. Since the only reading component of the English 60 exam is a prompt with two paragraphs (one background information and the other the writing task), any instruction on reading and other higher cognitive tasks must, out of necessity, take away from preparation for the exam. The exam also lends itself to simplistic, prescriptive writing processes. For instance, I have heard several of the instructors, in addition to myself, use the three reasons why strategy: if a prompt ask students for ways to promote a healthy body image for women (the prompt of Fall 2012), I would have students ask, “What are three ways to promote a healthy body image for women?” While this strategy can definitely help students generate ideas for writing an essay in a two or three hour timeframe, it does encourage students to make simplistic, black and white statements that would be frowned upon in transfer-level writing assignments. The skills and strategies that students need for transfer-level writing remain largely underdeveloped. If programs want to improve success rates, basic skills English programs are in desperate need of a paradigm shift.

I interpreted the responses of a portion of faculty to be social constructivist in nature in that the instructors strove to resemble their assignments to the types of writing that students will need to do in transfer-level courses and professional environments. These instructors are meeting the call of Rose (1980) who argues that basic skills writing assignments should resemble transfer-level assignments but with more scaffolded
instruction. For example, Kutz, Groden, and Zamel (1993) suggest a curriculum in which students conduct research by orally telling a story, writing the same story, and then comparing the difference between the two. Such an example is likely to have several benefits for students. First, since students will have to use higher cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, students will be better prepared for transfer-level courses. Second, because students are engaged in genuine, authentic literacy tasks, instruction is more likely contextualized, and students will be more likely to make the instruction-skill-application connection, thus increasing the likelihood that students will internalize and transfer instruction. Lastly since students are likely to experience the literacy act as challenging, students are more likely to increase their competence that they can successfully complete other transfer-level writing assignments.

The findings of this study suggest that many instructors had implemented curricula that were social constructivist in nature. A metaphor I’ve heard three times (once in an interview and twice in department meetings) was a baseball metaphor used by a program called Acceleration in Context: in the minor leagues, a coach would never tell a player to only bunt, and keep on bunting until he or she has mastered the skill of bunting. Instead, coaches would have that player do everything that he or she would do in the majors, but he or she is just not as good as those in the majors. (By only focusing on sub-skills without reference to how it is used in meaningful contexts, the traditional basic skills English curriculum sometimes too closely resembles the player in the minor league only bunting.) However, some of the faculty reported a curriculum like the actual minor league in that students do everything that they would need to do in transfer-level
English, but only they provide more instruction and support to complete the tasks. In order to resemble transfer-level assignments, faculty reported that they assign whole literacy tasks and then scaffold instruction to include reading and critical thinking strategies to complete these literary acts. Students are likely to be more engaged with such a curriculum because it is likely to be perceived as relevant and positively influence affective issues such as interest (Ballenger, 2009; Dewey, 1913) and motivation (Verhoeven, 2001).

Because of the presence of both responses conducive to the remedial pedagogy and social constructivist pedagogy, I am interpreting that the basic skills English program at Pine College is one in transition that is striving to meet the call of the CCCSSTF (2012) for basic skills English reform implemented at scale. Because of pressure from the Student Success Scorecard (CCCCO, 2014) and the student equity plan mandated by the CCCCO, basic skills English programs are now considering reform that can be implemented at scale. In order to strive to meet this call, the department has used an infusion of Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) and Student Success and Support Programs (SSSP) funds to invest in programs that have not yet been implemented at scale. Of particular interest to the current study is two types of scale reform—culturally responsive pedagogy and accelerated programs—in which I-Search is one curriculum, among many, that instructors can consider implementing on Monday (or Tuesday) morning.

**Department mandated proficiency exams.** While there is relative agreement about students’ challenges and best practices, faculty’s perceptions of the English 60 exam represented a conflict zone with perceptions at polar extremes. These perceptions
match the literature about proficiency exams. White (1995) argues that proficiency exams are an assessment that provides colleges with information to help make decisions. As such, a carefully constructed proficiency exam can determine a baseline competency level that students must meet before they can progress to other English courses.

Proponents of proficiency exams often use market-like logic to argue that proficiency exams can be an adequate assessment of students’ writing ability and that faculty can objectively evaluate proficiency exams with a high degree of reliability. However, others, and this would be the majority, use polis logic to argue that proficiency exams are harmful for a variety of reasons: simplification of instruction, test anxiety, an inequity for certain groups of students such as L2, LD, nontraditional students, etc. Opponents to proficiency exams often argue that there cannot be an objective assessment; the nature of the proficiency exam would favor some students, especially those whose home culture is more similar to academic culture, over others; they argue that faculty who grade the final cannot objectively assess students’ writing ability; and that students’ performance on proficiency exams are not a good indicator of the type of writing that students will do in transfer-level courses. The biggest complaint is that these tests lead instructors to simplify instruction as they teach to the test.

All in all, this study’s interpretation of the data can be explained with Stone’s (2012) analogy of the market and the polis. Faculty who supported the final often viewed the final in terms of the market logic: faculty can determine a minimal competency required for transfer-level writing, design a final that measures whether students meet this competency, and then train instructors to reliably assess the final. Moreover, they found
that the final would motivate students to do their best work, thus increasing their motivation and the amount of effort they exerted toward exam preparation. On the other hand, some faculty focused on the logic of the polis to argue how implementation of the final affected their classroom. They found that they had to accommodate their instruction in order to give students the best chance to pass the final. Instruction created to help students pass the final often came at the expense of helping students develop higher cognitive skills such as synthesis, analysis, and critical evaluation that students will need in transfer-level courses. Further these responses also tended to focus on how the exam might be inequitable to certain groups of students such as LD and L2 students who may need more time to write an essay than the time allowed.

Consequently, I feel that since English 60 culture is a culture in transition, now is a perfect time to reevaluate the efficacy of the English 60 exam. Practitioners can first determine what they feel are the skills most necessary for transfer-level writing courses, and then determine the best ways to assess those skills. This can also be an opportunity for faculty to center the curriculum around the lived experience of students and directly link the academic challenges that English 60 students experience with an assessment that measures those challenges more accurately. For instance, Pine College can consider implementing a portfolio assessment for which instructors assign topics similar to transfer-level courses; Pine College can even consider making research a part of the curriculum with I-Search as a sample assignment.

**The benefits of an ecologically rich learning environment.** In this section, I compare the literature I used to inform the creation of the I-Search curriculum to the
findings of this study. I used the logic of what Stone (2012) calls the marketplace to design the I-Search curriculum so that students may receive the benefits that I believe will help them develop academic literacy skills and strategies. In this section, I compare the benefits that I, as the curriculum creator, and the case study instructor intended to the actual benefits that students reported. This will help me determine how the curriculum is implemented in what Stone (2012) calls the polis, or real-life contexts, and only then determine the contribution that this study can make to the literature, if any. This section will examine the research question below.

Research Question #2a: In what ways does I-Search instruction mediate teaching and learning in a basic skills English class?

After analyzing and interpreting the data, I found that the case study classroom did receive many of the benefits that I had anticipated from the literature and that I, as the curriculum creator, and the case study instructor had intended. I found that the I-Search curriculum did present students with an ecologically rich learning environment; in this environment, students continually made links between what they learned in the classroom and how they’ll use it outside the classroom. I attributed this ecologically rich environment to at least the three characteristics in the classroom culture. First, the case study instructor created a classroom environment where students were continually encouraged to make mesosystem connections. These mesosystem connections, which included environments where students will use academic writing as well as environments in which students experience a problem, led to students perceiving the microsystem classroom as more relevant to their lives and presented students with a genuine and authentic need for instruction. Second, the I-Search curriculum was also conducive to
students forming a strong community of learners; the data suggests that the instructor and students had a strong sense of relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000) that led to a classroom culture where collaboration and support were the cultural norms. Then, even though students were writing their own I-Search papers individually, students received the help and support necessary to persevere and complete parts that were difficult. Third, the classroom culture was one where validation was the cultural norm; the instructor modeled validation, and students commenced to validate each other. Then, because students were examining their home culture using the values and beliefs of academic culture, and because students’ efforts were validated in an academic setting, students were more likely to feel competent enough to exert the effort necessary to successfully write their I-Search papers. In essence, the data suggests that students were in the beginning stages of forming bi- and multicultural identities (de Anda, 1984), and that as they continue to engage with academic literacy tasks, they would strengthen these bi- and multicultural identities.

**The initial mesosystem connection, or initiating student engagement.** I created the I-Search curriculum to support students’ autonomy so that they are more likely to choose a topic in a mesosystem environment that is the most impactful to their lives. This curriculum draws heavily upon the ideas of Dewey (1913), Ballenger, (2009), and Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000). Dewey and Ballenger both argue that students have an innate curiosity to understand the world, and instructors seldom tap into this curiosity with instruction. They argue for inquiry-based learning so that students are more interested in their topics and exert more effort. Deci and Ryan add to this by creating the
psychological reasoning for this increased effort with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT begins with the assumption that people, who innately desire to feel volition and seek initiative, seek to continually learn and overcome optimal challenges. SDT then describes the socio-environmental characteristics that can either encourage and nourish or thwart and undermine this natural propensity. In order to achieve this state, SDT argues that people have the need to feel autonomous, or volitional and the originators of their actions. When individuals feel autonomous, they tap into their intrinsic motivation, or motivation inherent in the act itself, and exert more effort. The I-Search curriculum incorporates many elements to help students choose a topic that can tap into students’ innate curiosity toward the world and direct it toward active engagement.

This turned out to be the case at the case study site. The instructor had supported students’ autonomy when he encouraged them to “pick something you care about and state it as a problem that bothers you in the world, something that you’re aware of, or something you have personal experience with.” Students responded by choosing topics along mesosystem environments that were the most impactful for them. In fact, the three students that I interviewed had chosen topics along the chronosystem (the system that incorporates the element of time; Bronfenbrenner, 1995), to choose the one environment that was most impactful: one student had chosen a past environment in order to understand and resolve lingering effects of cyberbullying; a second student had chosen Isis, a current event which he discussed with others; and a third student had chosen a future potential environment in order to prepare for a career in law. Because students had chosen an environment that was the most impactful to them, they perceived their I-Search
paper as relevant to their personal life as well as their college career and experienced a genuine and authentic need for instruction. These perceptions tapped into students’ Developmentally Instigative of Characteristics (DICs)—the characteristics of the individual that either encourage or thwart engagement with the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993)—and directed them towards active engagement with the classroom.

These findings corroborate some of the literature about I-Search. A major theme found in the literature is the importance of students choosing a topic that they are curious about and direct that curiosity towards active engagement. Researchers such as Macrorie (1988), Klausman (2007), Luther (2006), Rubin (2002), and Assaf et al., (2011) all stress the importance of students choosing a relevant and impactful topic; in fact, Macrorie argues that the topic should choose students. Many of the benefits that students derive from I-Search are contingent upon students picking relevant and impactful topics. This study suggests that instruction at the case study site similarly encouraged students to choose a topic that they were passionate about and/or that was relevant to their life. As a result of their topic choice, the data paints a picture of students exerting more effort toward their I-Search papers.

This study however adds to the research in two ways. First, I pose that Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1993, 1995) Ecological Model can be used to better understand the importance of choosing a relevant topic; in fact, the current study added an additional Ecological Model of Student Engagement as a means for accounting for how this crucial first step leads to engagement. While other studies have implied it, this study explicitly
argues that a relevant topic that students feel passionate about can encourage students to make strong mesosystem connections to other environments. These strong mesosystem connections can then lead to greater engagement in the classroom because instruction is more relevant to the lived experience of students (Gay, 2002). Second, the current study also underscores how the choosing of a relevant topic presents students with a genuine, authentic need for instruction. Students are not only writing an I-Search paper but they are also trying to solve the problem in the mesosystem. This need then contextualizes instruction, increasing the likelihood that students will internalize and transfer instruction to other environments (Bransford, Browning, & Cocking, 2000). This perceived relevance and experience of a genuine, authentic need then make students more open to instruction and lead to greater active engagement, as will be examined in the next section.

**Active engagement in the microsystem classroom.** I drew heavily on Kuh’s (2008, 2009) idea of engagement as I created this curriculum. Kuh argues that engagement mediates instruction and the achievement of learning outcomes in the classroom and that college culture can either encourage or thwart engagement. I based this I-Search curriculum on the assumption that I-Search can create a classroom culture where students exert more effort and engage more actively with instruction. First as referenced above, I-Search instruction taps into students’ innate curiosity to learn about their topics and directs that curiosity toward active engagement (Macrorie, 1988; Rubin, 2002; Assaf, et al., 2011).

That engagement can come in the form of collaboration, or students accomplishing more together than they can individually (Kazcyke & Krueger, 1995).
Collaborative learning was championed by Bruffee (2002) who examined intern doctors making decisions: he found that interns made more accurate decisions more quickly when they were in small groups of three or four rather than individually. In small groups, the stronger people can not only help the struggling ones (to the benefit of the stronger student as well) but also all participants can support each other. In order to create a community of learners, SDT suggests that students benefit from experiencing a sense of relatedness, a sense of warm, affectionate relationships with others in the environment (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000). A sense of relatedness can focus on the commonality that can unite students together as a collective whole and a community. Even though everyone is writing a separate I-Search paper, students can come together to help and support each other. Further, a sense of relatedness can create an environment conducive to integrated regulation, the synthesis of others’ goals and values as an individual’s own (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009). This is important because students’ I-Search papers are essentially written for a grade, a form of extrinsic motivation; with integrated regulation, students can begin to synthesize the instructor’s goals and values, which reflect academic culture, with their own and make the writing of their I-Search paper more intrinsically motivating.

The I-Search assignment is conducive to students creating a sense of community to help and support each other. Macrorie (1988) added “resource day,”—a day when students sit in a circle and share their topics with each other while their classmates share ideas and potential sources—to the I-Search curriculum to offer students an opportunity to help and support each other. Further, Assaf, et al. (2011) found that students in their
case study class similarly came together to help each other not only find sources but also generate interview guidelines. Kaszyca and Krueger (1994) adds to this by sharing how peer response on students’ I-Search papers helped them objectify their audience and helped students meet reader’s expectations. The data clearly paints a picture of students coming together to help and support each other to write their I-Search papers. Even though students reported that writing their I-Search paper was difficult, students helped and supported each other so that they could write their I-Search papers successfully.

Both I and the instructor perceived that the class had formed a strong community, and even though students didn’t call it a community, students’ description of the classroom easily fits this description. I was very impressed with how on task the group projects were. Even when a group went off tasks, which happened rarely, the instructor was able to bring the group back on task by enforcing the structural norms and rules of the class (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In both group projects and whole class discussions, students often explained ideas to each other in ways that were very accessible. All three sources of data—the researcher, the instructor, and students—perceived that students were very supportive of each other; in fact, the case study instructor reported how students from different walks of life met together outside of class to support each other. This strong sense of community culminated in students experiencing the classroom as “fun,” something that all three students emphasized during their interviews. Even though students had found academic literacy difficult, the classroom community empowered them to engage, to grapple, and to sometimes even struggle with academic literacy so that they could write their I-Search papers.
This study also adds to the literature by extending this help and support beyond the actual writing of the I-Search paper and toward grammar instruction. I believe there were several factors that accounted for this extension of collaborative learning. Because students at the case study site had reported a genuine need for grammar to write their I-Search papers, I observed and students reported that students were more open to grammar instruction, and this openness extended to receiving help from classmates. Also the formation of a tight and cohesive community in which students perceived they were at the same level was conducive to this collaborative learning. Lastly, the instructor strove to create a safe classroom environment where students took the risks necessary for learning. Thus, I conclude that the benefits of help and support extended beyond writing instruction and toward grammar instruction as well.

**The macrosystem, or building sociocultural bridges.** The macrosystem is of the utmost importance to composition instructors because composition instruction can be seen as the socialization of academic discourse, especially how that discourse reflects the values, beliefs, and norms of academic culture. Consequently, the research question below refers to the ability for students to internalize academic beliefs, values, and norms and apply them to their writing.

Research Question 2b: How might students apply, internalize, and transfer I-Search instruction inside and outside the basic skills English classroom?

The I-Search curriculum presented in this study was created to address a main challenge of many basic skills writers, a perceived difference between students’ home and academic cultures. Bartholomae (2002) begins by suggesting that transfer level students “invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some
compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand’ (p. 74). This approximation of academic discourse becomes obvious when one looks at longitudinal studies of students’ writing at the beginning and the end of their college careers (Shaughnessy, 1977; Sternglass, 1997). This approximation becomes exacerbated when basic skill students come to college perceiving differences between their home and academic culture (Rendon, 1994; Ferdman, 1990; Attinase Jr., 1995). When students feel that their home culture is different than academic culture, they often feel they are in the position to choose one culture or the other (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Ogbu, 1983; Ferdman, 1990, Rendon, 1992). Thus, students can sometimes look for evidence such as a bad grade or an instructor comment that can either confirm or refute their suspicion that they are not cut out for college (Cox, 2009). In order to introduce students to the conventions and values of academic culture effectively, instruction should not only address the conventions of academic discourse but also cultural disconnects that students may perceive (Rendon, 1994; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Gonzalez, et al., 1995).

One manifestation of this cultural disconnect is a false folk psychology—“a system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transaction with the social world” (Bruner, 1990, p. 35)—of academic discourse. Macrorie and Wagner (2008) offer an intriguing explanation as to why: some students believe that knowledge is fixed, that once knowledge is created it cannot be changed, that knowledge is the objective truth. However, English instructors often have a very different notion of knowledge: they believe that knowledge is socially constructed through conversations
and/or dialogues. This misunderstanding of knowledge orientation leads students and faculty to misunderstand each other (Cox, 2009). For instance, many practitioners lament over the traditional research paper where students engage in prescriptive processes, such as writing bibliographic notecards and gluing disparate parts of their research together in a hodgepodge fashion (Macrorie, 1988; Muchmore, et al., 2001). Needless to say, research papers such as these will likely fail to meet instructors’ expectations.

Even though students reported struggling, sometimes mightily, with academic discourse, I-Search instruction at the case study site was conducive to presenting students with an epistemology of knowledge more in line with academic culture. The case study instructor introduced the social-constructivist and dialogic nature of knowledge through the use of Kenneth Burke’s (Pare, 1991; Henderson & Williams, 2001) analogy of parlor conversations. He introduced research as conversations that were taking place at a parlor, a semi-formal event in which attendees are in hot debate; first, students had to listen to what people were saying about their topics and only then could they contribute their perspective. This led students to perceive the “I” in I-Search as requiring more than just quotes and summaries but rather students contributing their perspective to conversations already taking place. Then because students had reported that they had chosen topics they felt passionate about and wanted to make contributions to, they experienced a genuine and authentic need for instruction.

This genuine and authentic need then led students to not only be more open to instruction but also engage actively with it. This need manifested itself at least two ways. First, because students reported struggling with essay structure, especially MLA citations,
students exerted great effort to understand these staples of academic discourse. Because all seven students who took the final eventually passed it, this suggests that students understood essay structure at a rudimentary level. Second, students exhibited a need to not only understand but also apply grammar instruction to their writing. These helped students not only write grammatically correct sentences but also use grammar instruction to effectively communicate their ideas. This was important because the English 60 faculty at Pine College reported that a functional grammar such as this was a struggle.

The data seems to suggest that even though students at the case study site reported that they were unfamiliar with the conventions and values of academic discourse, they reported developing enough of a foundational knowledge so that they could exert the effort, and sometimes a great amount of effort, to successfully complete academic writing tasks. The data paints a picture of students struggling with academic discourse. Two of the students just out of high school reported that their secondary English instruction did not prepare them for the rigors of college, much like Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (1998) reported in their study. The third student was returning to college after twenty years away from the classroom and reported difficulty in trying to keep up with the younger students just out of high school, much like Andrejack (2011) reported. These students reported trouble with not only writing grammatically correct sentences but also how to use grammar to effectively communicate their ideas. Additionally students expressed difficulty understanding essay structure, especially the thesis statement and MLA citations. In the traditional classroom, these challenges would sometimes lead students to give up before exerting the fullest amount of effort (CCCSSTF, 2011; AACC, 2012;
Grubb & Gabriner, 2013; Cox, 2009). However, even though four students in the case study site did drop out of the class, the remaining students grappled with instruction, especially the three students whom I interviewed.

I have concluded that a prominent value of the classroom culture was hard work; the instructor stressed this by arguing that writing is never easy and sharing his own struggles with academic discourse. Students responded by exerting great effort and hard work toward classroom activities and the writing of their I-Search paper. This led me to conclude that the I-Search assignment is conducive to hard work and exertion of effort necessary to begin the development of academic literacy. Even though students probably would have had a strong work ethic if they were in the traditional class, the nature of the I-Search assignment led them to exert just a little bit more effort to learn about their topics. This extra effort at the case study site led to students developing a strong enough foundational understanding of academic discourse to persevere and grapple with other academic literacy acts.

Thus I have concluded that the combination of the foundational understanding of academic discourse and a more accurate understanding of the epistemology of knowledge has led students at the case study site to begin the development of bi- and multicultural identities. de Anda (1984) describes how students with bi- and multicultural identities can navigate between their home and academic cultures sometimes effortlessly. Similarly, the data suggests that students now have enough knowledge and understanding of academic discourse to grapple with knowledge inquiries. With greater exposure to
academic literacy, students will strengthen their development of bi- and multicultural identities (Shaughnessy, 1977; Sternglass, 1997).

This study corroborates other studies’ findings about the formation of what I’m calling sociocultural bridges. In a comparative analysis of traditional research papers and I-Search papers, Muchmore, et al., (2001) found that students who wrote I-Search papers had included more complex analytical reasoning and exhibited more evidence of learning than students who wrote the traditional research paper. Further several studies (Macrorie, 1988; Klausman, 2007; Assaf et al., 2011) had found that students’ I-Search paper had led students to apply the ideas learned in their I-Search paper to their own life. Again, this represents a higher level of learning because students are applying the ideas to their own lives. Further Luther (2006) suggests that the I-Search assignment helps students perceive “knowledge as argument” instead of truth and that instruction can begin to introduce students to a more accurate folk psychology of knowledge (Bruner, 1990). Similarly, the data paints a picture of students building socio-cultural bridges through their I-Search papers. Students reported using complex reasoning, especially in critically evaluating ideas and uncovering biases, applying the ideas they learned in their I-Search papers to their own lives, and having an epistemology of knowledge more in line with academic culture.

This study suggests that I-Search (and research) instruction was appropriate at the case study course, and individual readers can determine if I-Search or research instruction is appropriate at their institutions. The nature and structure of the I-Search paper have scaffolding naturally built into it. First, since students pick their own topics, students are
likely to pick a topic that they already have some knowledge about, thus incorporating students’ assets into instruction (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Second, since students actively choose a topic that is relevant to their life, students are more likely to perceive that I-Search is more than just a research paper; it can be seen as an opportunity to explore a problem that students are currently experiencing or feel passionate about and exert greater effort toward their I-Search papers. Lastly, I-Search presents students with a genuine authentic need for instruction, especially instruction that relates to academic discourse. Even though the results are not generalizable, it is possible that other basic skills English students can similarly complete an I-Search or research assignment.

This study adds to the literature in at least two ways. First, this study suggests that I-Search can be an appropriate assignment for basic skills English courses, especially at the community college level. The current research has tended to focus on either transfer-level college or college-prep high schools courses. The two exceptions to this are John (2006) who teaches I-Search to a studio course at San Diego State University and Arnold (1989) who writes a rather terse one page article about how she adapts the I-Search assignment to focus on bad habits for basic skills English students. Second, even though Luther (2006) argues that I-Search helps students understand that “knowledge is argument,” the results of this case study suggest that students also perceive that they can contribute their perspective to the knowledge construction process. Because students are more likely to choose a topic that they feel passionate about, they are likely to feel strongly enough (and to feel competent enough as well) to contribute their perspective.
This finding is important because basic skills students are often reticent to contribute their perspective to their knowledge inquiries.

**Scaffolded instruction.** Another purpose for this study was to determine what challenges students experienced when writing their I-Search papers and determine how instructors can scaffold instruction. The last part of this interpretive section addresses the research question below:

Research Question 3: How can instructors scaffold I-Search instruction in order to meet students’ needs and lead to the development of academic literacy?

Unlike the previous section where I focused on the literature more generally, in this section I felt it was appropriate to narrow the focus to literature about I-Search.

There are two main student challenges found in the research that students typically experience in I-Search: choosing a topic and finding and integrating sources. Klausman (2007) and Assaf, et al., (2011) report how students may find the task of choosing a topic daunting: some students have no idea what they can write about while a much smaller portion of students may have too narrow of a topic. Similarly, the instructor at the case study site reported that students can find choosing their own topic daunting as well even though case study students didn’t report this challenge.

Both the research and this study pose some solutions for this challenge. Minnick and Aungst (2007) report that students can create clusters with various branches that represent general topics that students can write about: interest, careers, hobbies, sports, etc. One of the students at the case study site similarly reported that instructors can provide students with general topics. This can give students struggling to find a topic a place to start, especially if the general topics reflect the I-Search papers that past students
have written. Further, Klausman (2007) describes how he engages students in classroom discussions about potential topics; for this lesson, students share topics that they are leaning toward and then the class talks about how appropriate the topic may be and how to limit it. This was a strategy utilized successfully by the case study instructor as well. Students were able to help each other limit their topics as well as provide models of limited topics; students were able to provide help and support for other students by sharing resources and ideas for each student’s individual I-Search paper.

The other challenge reported by the literature is the difficulty students have in finding and incorporating sources (Macrorie, 1988; Klausman, 2007; Johns, 2006; Muchmore, et al., 2001). For instance, Johns found that students spent more time collecting sources than writing their I-Search papers. This perspective was reinforced by the case study instructor who felt students were either overconfident and chose inappropriate sources, or lacked confidence and felt overwhelmed by the huge number of sources to choose from. The instructor’s solution at the case study site is worthy of consideration by others. He shortened the traditional library orientation and then offered students an opportunity to search for sources immediately after the orientation; both he and the librarian conducting the orientation were available to help students overcome any challenges they experienced. This allowed students to find sources that were appropriate and increased the likelihood that students would ask for help when they experienced a challenge, which two of the students I interviewed attested. Lastly the instructor had students fill out a library worksheet with different types of texts: magazine, newspaper, reference, and scholarly articles as well as books. This helped students better understand
the different types of sources and helped them include diverse sources in their own papers.

The next challenge reported by the literature is how to incorporate sources; the literature suggests that students tend to just quote and summarize ideas without analysis or adding their own perspective (Macrorie, 1988; Luther, 2006; Johns, 2006; Muchmore, et al., 2001). To overcome this challenge, Johns had the class go over sources together to model the type of critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate them. Students can use similar strategies and think similar thoughts to critically evaluate the author’s ideas; this can help students frame their ideas with others’ ideas. The case study instructor used this strategy (though not nearly as extensively as Johns), but he also used a paragraph development construction called quotamples and summamples (a quote with an example, or a summary with an example respectively). Quotamples and summamples provided students with one way to contribute to knowledge construction: applying the ideas of others to real-life situations. These conventions can then pave the way for students to understand other inquiries which require greater cognitive complexity. Further, because students experienced difficulties in using MLA, the case study instructor had also engaged students in MLA grammar exercises. These exercises provided students with opportunities to teach each other citations in groups, as well as opportunities for struggling students to receive help from their classmates.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study that practitioners should consider before deciding to base actions on this study. As a qualitative study, the findings are only true
of the case study site and not generalizable; it is the job of individual readers to determine similarities between the case study site and their institutions and only then consider actions to take, if any at all. While I took great pains to make sure the findings of this study were as valid as possible, it should be noted that every class is made up of unique students who have different strengths and needs.

The case study class may not necessarily be representative of mainstream basic skills English courses. The case study site was experiencing declining enrollments and only had eleven students at census and seven at the end of the semester. Descriptions of the classroom’s strong sense of community and student-to-student validation would inevitably be influenced by the small class size, the likability of the instructor, as well as the I-Search curriculum. However, even if the class would’ve formed a community regardless of the curriculum, my analysis suggests that the I-Search curriculum served as a conduit that encouraged students to quickly form a strong sense of community.

Even though I didn’t collect any data on the race or ethnicity of students (to ensure efficient passage by the Institutional Research Board (IRB)), the case study site may not have been representative of the diversity of California. I understand that inferring racial and ethnic identity based only on observation is science-fiction at best, but I would infer that students were of a white ethnic identity. It would then be up to readers to determine if students in a diverse classroom more representative of California would have similar benefits as the case study. While I may be biased, I would predict that because basic skills students have the flexibility to choose topics that are either relevant to their lives or that students feel passionate about, a diverse class would
similarly benefit from I-Search instruction. However, this is a matter for each individual reader to decide for him- or herself.

There are some data collection deficiencies of the study that prevent me from making assertions about the case study as strongly as I would like. First, I could only make the assertion that some faculty cling to the traditional and/or “remedial” pedagogy (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013) weakly and with great hesitation. I had made this assertion based on what faculty had reported as students’ challenges and their responses for best practices. Since the faculty who had reported local issues such as grammatical errors, parts of speech, and simplistic five paragraph essay structure as students’ challenges but did not report any best practices that I interpreted as the contextualization of instruction, I only made this inference with great hesitation but made it based on past research. In order to make this assertion more boldly, I would’ve had to observe some “traditional” classrooms as well, but I had neither the time nor the resources to conduct such an exhaustive examination.

Even though I concluded that the English 60 culture at Pine College is student-centered in that faculty address what they perceive as students’ greatest challenges with instruction, I failed to collect data on what faculty perceive as students’ assets, or strengths and competencies. I feel a truly student-centered classroom would also build on the assets that students bring to the classroom (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). If I had collected data about instructors’ perceptions of students’ assets, I could’ve made stronger inferences about the relationship between faculty perceptions of student challenges, students’ assets, and instructional best practices.
I could’ve made the claim that students began the formation of bi-and multicultural identities more strongly if I had collected students’ I-Search papers much like Rubin (2002) did in her study. I based the inference on the development of academic literacy on the instructor’s perceptions that students who had done the work were ready for English 1A, the fact that all seven students who took the final passed it (six outright and one on appeal), and student survey and interview data that they had increased their competency (or perceived self-efficacy) to exert the effort necessary to successfully complete academic literacy tasks. However, if I had collected students’ I-Search papers, I could’ve analyze them for features of academic discourse, such as students framing their ideas in relation of others’ ideas and evidence of high level reasoning, much like Muchmore, et al. (2001) did. Further, I could’ve looked for evidence about how students incorporated elements of instruction in their writing, but such analysis was prohibitively demanding of time and resources.

The last limitation of the study was my own personal bias in that I created this curriculum; I have a bias to see it be successful. However, my desire to make a contribution to the literature that benefited other practitioners outweighed my desire to see my curriculum successful. I sought to make “the familiar strange and strange familiar” (Geertz, 1983; Kaomea, 2003) and purposely sought evidence that suggested the curriculum was ineffective. In spite of my purposeful search for evidence to the contrary, a clear majority of the data suggests that my curriculum was successful. The data suggests that an I-Search curriculum helped students learn the outcomes deeply and
increased the likelihood that instruction was internalized and transferred to other environments (Bransford, Browning, and Cocking, 2000).

**Implications, or Creating Ecologically Rich Classroom Environments**

Even though this is a qualitative study and the results are only true of the case study site, this research does have implications for basic skills English instruction. It is up to individual readers to determine similarities between the case study site and their institutions and which implications may be appropriate there. The implications described in this section focus on two general themes: revising basic skills English curriculum to reflect the types of writing that students will do in other content area courses and creating an ecologically learning environment in basic skills English classrooms.

**Revising traditional curriculum.** The findings of this study suggest that the basic skills English program at the case study site was in transition from a more traditional curriculum to one based more on social-constructivist principles. The funding of SSSP and the creation of the equity plan required by the Chancellor’s office suggests that other California community colleges can be in or about to experience a similar transition. Consequently, this study suggests the following recommendations for basic skills English programs in the state of California specifically but also across the nation generally.

This study suggests that basic skills English programs can revise curriculum to better reflect the type of writing that students will do in content area courses, especially research. At the case study site, all students had a negative perception of the English 60 exam, an impromptu and high stakes essay exam, and most, though I cannot say all, case
study students had a positive perception of the I-Search assignment. Further, students reported that I-Search instruction had better prepared them for academic writing, including preparation for the English 60 final. As a result, it might be in the best interest of both Pine College and other English departments who have a proficiency exam to reevaluate the exam. Basic skills English departments can determine what learning outcomes they want students to learn and then match those outcomes with an assessment. For instance, curriculum can be revised to include research writing, and English departments can use a portfolio assessment to gauge the quality of students’ research papers. Research can more closely resemble the type of writing that students will do for transfer level courses; when instruction is scaffolded to meet students’ needs, it will also be preparing them for transfer-level writing assignments. This change can make the basic skills English courses more relevant to students’ academic and possible professional careers, thus increasing engagement.

Secondly, this study can potentially inform departments considering some form of scale reform, especially culturally responsive and/or accelerated curriculums. Even though the case study wasn’t participating in scale reform, the I-Search curriculum implemented by the case study instructor can potentially be implemented by instructors participating in both scale reforms (see Quint, Jaggars, Byndloss, & Magazinnik (2013) for a summary of colleges implementing relevant and accelerated reforms at scale). If the practitioners see similarities between the case study and their institutions, then this study can provide at least one possible answer to the question: how can practitioners implement scale reform on Monday (or Tuesday) morning in the classroom? I-Search may be one
answer. The findings of this study suggest that I-Search instruction presents a classroom environment conducive to learning. Since students made strong mesosystem connections, students at the case study site perceived instruction as more relevant because it not only helped them learn academic discourse but also solve problems in mesosystem environments. Further, because students experience a genuine and authentic need for instruction, instruction is contextualized, and students at the case study site reported making the instruction-skill-application connection. Lastly, because case study students chose personally relevant and meaningful topics, they were more likely to contribute their perspective toward their knowledge inquiries. Practitioners considering an I-Search curriculum can determine if their students will receive benefits similar to the case study site students.

**An ecologically rich basic skills English classroom.** The findings of this study can indirectly serve as an exosystem environment for other basic skills English departments and practitioners. I believe that other instructors who teach traditional basic skills English courses can consider adopting an I-Search curriculum, especially if they have a department-mandated proficiency exam. Even though this study strongly argues against mandated department proficiency exams, some practitioners must still teach to them. These practitioners can determine if the benefits of contextualized instruction at the case study site would be similarly true at their site. This could potentially ease a conflict they may have that research (or I-Search) instruction can detract from preparation for the final; that is, the findings of this study suggest that instructors can teach both research (or I-Search) and prepare students for department-mandated finals.
simultaneously. In fact since students write an I-Search paper which may be considered complex, an impromptu timed final may be considered comparatively easy.

This study underscores the importance of presenting students with an ecologically rich learning environment. Renn and Arnold (2003) stress that the ability for students to navigate between microsystems within a mesosystem determines the quality of their interactions. Students in the case study classroom similarly formed strong mesosystem connections, and these mesosystem connections led students to perceive the classroom as relevant and presented students with genuine authentic needs for instruction. Instructors can make their classrooms ecologically rich in at least two ways. First, instructors can strive to make connections between the basic skills English classroom and other content area courses that students take or will take (Rose, 1980). For instance, since the research paper is a staple of transfer-level courses, basic skills English curriculum can assign and provide scaffolded instruction to help students write them. This can help students feel like they are doing “real college work,” as English instructor Tom called it, and perceive the classroom more positively. Second, instructors can make assignments where students explore environments outside the classroom, especially environments where students experience problems. This can contextualize instruction to not only academic literacy but also other non-cognitive strategies (Farrington, et al., 2012) that students can use to solve their problems. As a result, basic skills English instruction can not only introduce students to the conventions and values of academic discourse but also positively influence affective issues such as interest, competence, and motivation. The combination of resembling content area courses and incorporating other environments with which
students interact can positively influence students’ perception of the classroom
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993, 1995; Lewin, 1935) and lead to greater student engagement
and achievement of learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008, 2009).

I present the implications that the current study has for the classroom; more
specifically, I’ll argue that an additional model, the Ecological Model of Student
Engagement, can be used as a heuristic to help practitioners make their classroom
ecologically rich. First, instructors can encourage students to make strong mesosystem
connections between the classroom and other environments with which students interact:
instructors can do this by supporting students’ autonomy, modeling mesosystem
connections, and validating the mesosystem connections that students do make. Second,
this model suggests that instructors can strive to create a sense of relatedness in the
classroom by establishing and encouraging warm and caring relationships. This sense of
relatedness can create an environment conducive to students forming a community of
learners who collaborate and support each other. Lastly, the sense of relatedness also
makes the classroom more conducive for integrated regulation, or the synthesis of the
instructor’s goals and values, which likely represent academic culture, as students’ own,
thus making students more open to instruction and academic values. In the end, an
ecologically rich environment can persuade students to perceive an overlap between their
home and academic cultures, thus beginning the formation of bi- and multicultural
identities (de Anda, 1984).

**Recommendations for I-Search instruction.** Lastly, this study has implications
for instructors implementing an I-Search curriculum in their classroom. First, since the
benefits of I-Search instruction depend upon students choosing a relevant and impactful topic, instructors can include conversations about topics that students could possibly write about as well as worksheets to help students limit their topic. This will offer students help to limit their topics, as well as offer students an opportunity to help and support each other.

Second, instructors can include instruction to help students find and cite sources. The practice of having two shorter library orientations and offering students an opportunity to collect sources at the end of the library orientation is promising. Further, I-Search can teach students the dialogic nature of knowledge; instructors can consider using Graf and Birkenstein’s (2007) *They Say, I Say* as a text that offers students accessible ways to contribute their perspective to knowledge inquiries. Instructors could also offer students sample paragraphs that integrate sources, especially quotamples (a quote with an example) and a summamples (a summary with an example.) Lastly, instructors can require students to use and include instruction on MLA (or APA) citations. These steps can better prepare students for the type of writing they’ll be required to do in transfer-level courses.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study contains some methodological weaknesses that future researchers can address. As a qualitative study, the results are only true for the case study site and not generalizable. Consequently, future researchers can collect quantitative data about I-Search, especially if I-Search is implemented as part of scale reform. The large number of participants in quantitative research can control for qualities such as the personality of
the instructor and a sense of community in the classroom to determine the true efficacy of I-Search instruction. This may be especially helpful if the department is more ethnically and racially diverse than the case study site.

The current study only examined I-Search for a short period of time, ten weeks; consequently, I couldn’t determine if the non-cognitive strategies introduced in the curriculum actually helped students solve problems and improve their grades and outcomes. Future researchers can follow students longitudinally and determine if the non-cognitive strategies that students learned were internalized and transferred. Such research can also determine the extent to which the skills and strategies of academic discourse are similarly transferred to other environments.

When I described the culture of basic skills English instruction at the case study site, I had asked faculty to report on students’ challenges, best practices, and the influence of the department proficiency exam. However, I failed to ask participants for their perspective about students’ assets, or the strengths and competencies that students bring to the classroom (Boykin & Noguera, 2011) and/or how instructors perceive that they can help students overcome their challenges. Future ethnographic researchers can determine these perspectives and look for the relationship between instructors’ perceptions of students’ challenges, students’ assets, faculty-student relationships, and best practices to describe the culture of basic skills English programs more richly.

I had not collected students’ I-Search papers as part of the data for this study. If I had collected students’ I-Search papers, I could have made stronger inferences about students’ development of academic literacy; that is, I could have analyzed students’
papers for elements of academic discourse. Future researchers can include I-Search papers as part of the data, much like Muchmore, et al., (2001) did in their comparative analysis of traditional and I-Search papers. This will allow researchers to claim that I-Search instruction led to the development of academic literacy more boldly than I was able to.

Lastly as the creator of this study, I do have a bias and a personal interest in seeing this curriculum successful. Even though I took great pains to make sure that my bias limited the influence of the findings as much as possible, future researchers can seek to replicate and/or emulate the findings of this study. Each time this study is replicated or emulated, a more accurate picture of I-Search instruction can be created.

Reflections on the Research Process, or the Research to Practice Connection

I described in chapter 1 how the impetus of this study was my frustration at simplifying instruction in order to prepare students for the English 60 exam, a high-stakes impromptu essay exam. I had always felt a qualm of consciousness because I felt I could better prepare students for transfer-level writing in other ways. But since I had genuinely wanted students to pass the course, I found myself resorting back to simplistic, prescriptive practices that helped students pass the final but did not, in my opinion, prepare them for transfer-level writing.

In my doctoral program I was introduced to some persuasive ideas that led me to change course. In Wagner’s (2008) book Global Achievement Gap, I learned about exemplary schools that refused to teach to the test but still continued to experience high test scores. This planted a seed in my mind that I can teach tasks that require high
cognitive skills while at the same time preparing my students for the English 60 exam. It was at this point that I had decided to teach research to my basic skills English students. I then read Freire’s (2011) seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed and was introduced to the idea that simplified instruction may actually be a “false generosity” that perpetuates students’ struggles; he instead argues for a problem-posing pedagogy in which instructors engage in dialogues with students about their problem in ways that can lead to praxis, or humanizing action. This then led me to incorporate elements of problem-posing pedagogy so that I can not only introduce students to strategies to write academic essays but also introduce non-cognitive strategies to solve their problems. I was then reminded of Macrorie’s (1988) I-Search assignment, which taps into students’ innate curiosity to learn and directs it towards active engagement with their I-Search papers. This led me to synthesize the ideas of Freire and Macrorie to create the I-Search curriculum presented in this study.

In the courses in which I piloted my I-Search curriculum, I found that I only had a slight increase in student success for the final, but that students were much more confident in their ability to write research and be successful in writing other transfer-level assignments. This led me to examine this curriculum in greater detail: (1) Why did students experience only slightly greater success in my I-Search curriculum than in my traditional courses? (2) Would other faculty teaching an I-Search curriculum receive similar benefits as me? (3) Could I collect data to present to the English department to argue that we don’t need the English 60 exam anymore? If we do change the curriculum, what should take its place?
As my questions reveal, I am clearly biased, but I tried to rein in this bias as I collected data so that I can describe the department and classroom cultures as objectively and accurately as possible. I took great pains to ensure that the results were as valid as possible and could contribute to the literature. Since I myself was a basic skills English student, I feel passionate about this topic. I am equally passionate in my desire to help other practitioners who may feel handcuffed by restrictive curriculum and feel that they must either teach a simplified curriculum or high cognitive skills but cannot teach both. I hope that this study persuades them that they can, indeed, do both.

I conclude this study feeling hopeful. While some faculty still remain entrenched in the safety of a traditional or “remedial” pedagogy (Grubb & Gabriner, 2013), I feel my study provided even stronger results than I had anticipated. I hope that this study could provide other departments and practitioners an opportunity to reconsider their beliefs and values and only then choose an alternative curriculum. Even if it is not an I-Search curriculum, I hope it is one that increases student success rates.

Conclusion

I began this study singing the Sugarland song “Something More” as I was teaching a simplified curriculum to help students pass a department mandated proficiency exam. This song was a lament to the fact that I received a Master’s Degree in English Composition just to teach simplified practices as the three reasons why strategy: for example, what are three ways to promote a healthy body image for women? While such strategies help students generate ideas for a two (or three) hour impromptu essay, they do encourage students to make black and white, declarative statements looked down upon in
academic discourse. I-Search then was my “Little more bliss,” a curriculum that not only helped students pass the final but also allowed me to teach students academic literacy skills required in transfer-level courses. Based on both my experiences piloting this curriculum and the data from this study, I-Search has potential to be “bliss.”

The data from this study provides a stark alternative to the traditional pedagogy that has plagued basic skills English classrooms. It was only 35 years ago that Rose (1980) called for basic skills English programs to create curriculum that more closely resembled transfer-level courses; the only difference would be that basic skills English instructors offer students more scaffolding in order to successfully complete these literacy tasks. However, as evidenced by Grubb and Gabriner’s (2013) exhaustive examination of basic skills education, too many instructors still cling to the “remedial pedagogy,” and too many students are falling through the cracks.

Basic skills English programs are in desperate need for a paradigm shift in how they go about the business of educating basic skills students. Now, however, I see that this imperative is greater than ever. In this age of data driven decision-making (Mandinach, 2012), the public will be watching the success rates of basic skills English students and expecting results. If basic skills English programs fail to offer results, the chorus of voices arguing for the transfer of basic skills education from community colleges or four-year institutions to adult basic education programs will only get louder (Soliday, 2009). It is in this backdrop that basic skills English programs must change.

However, I do see hope. With the Student Success Scorecard published by the California Community College’s Chancellor’s Office (2014), and the demand for reform
that can be implemented at scale (CCCSSTF, 2012), the environment may be just right to initiate this paradigm shift. Basic skills programs can use funds from the diminishing Basic Skills Initiative and the increasing Student Support and Success Programs in order to invest in new programs that can be implemented at scale. English instructors now have the opportunity to pilot new curricula with the potential to address the success and opportunity gap (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). The winds of change might be felt throughout basic skills programs in California.

It is in this environment that I hope the results of this study can shed some light of promise. Two of the reforms implemented at scale that are gaining traction are accelerated programs (Glau, 2007; Adams, Gearhard, Miller, & Roberts, 2009; Goen-Salter, 2008) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2002; Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009). I feel that this study can help instructors who are implementing scale reform decide what to do on Monday (or Tuesday) morning: they can implement an I-Search curriculum. First, since students have the flexibility to choose a topic that is most impactful, I-Search can be a form of problem-posing pedagogy that can reach even the most diverse student population. Second, given that the structure and processes of I-Search have natural scaffolding built into them, and given that students can potentially exert great effort toward their I-Search paper, it serves as a great format for students to learn research. It is for the practitioners in the trenches everyday that I hope this study benefits the most.
Appendix #1: English 60 Instructor Consent Form and Survey

You are being asked to participate in a research study which will be conducted by Nathan Conkle, a professor at Pine College and a student in the Doctorate in Educational Leadership program at Sacramento State University. The purpose of this study will be to capture instructors’ perceptions of teaching English 60.

You will be asked to complete a survey and answer some questions about your perceptions of teaching English 60. The survey may require up to 20 minutes of your time. Some items in the survey may seem personal, but you don’t have to answer any question that you don’t want to.

As a researcher, my job is to protect your anonymity, and your responses to the survey will be anonymous. Only pseudonyms will be used and any identifying descriptions and/or information will be removed.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study, and your participation or nonparticipation will not affect your treatment at Pine College.

You may gain additional insight into factors that affect success in English 60, or you may not personally benefit from participating in this study. It is hoped that the results from the study will be beneficial for Pine College and other community colleges.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Nathan Conkle at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or NConkle@PINEcollege.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, please contact the Sacramento State University’s Office of Research Administration, 916-278-5674 or irb@csus.edu.

Your completion and returning of this survey indicates that you have read this page, understand it, and agree to participate in this research study.

If you agree, you may be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview about your perspective teaching English 60 at a later date. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes.

☐ If you would like to be interviewed as part of this research study, please check the box to the left and leave your name and an e-mail address where you can be reached.

name: ____________________________________________
Instructions: Please reflect on your experience teaching English 60 and then answer the following questions. This survey is meant to be treated more like a free-write than an organized paragraph response, so please write the first thing that comes to your mind after you read each question. Your response to this survey can come in the form of sentences, lists, or any other method that expresses your ideas. You may use another sheet of paper if you need more space.

1. Based on your experience teaching English 60, what do you feel are some of the challenges that students experience in the classroom? If possible, please add an example.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. Based on your experience teaching English 60, what activities, lessons, and/or assignments have you found to be successful? Please briefly describe the activity, lesson, and/or assignment. __________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. Based on your experience teaching English 60, how do you feel the English 60 exam affects your students and instruction? If possible, please add an example. ___
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your time. Your response is truly appreciated!!!
Appendix #2: English 60 Instructor Consent Form and Interview Guide

You are being asked to participate in a research study which will be conducted by Nathan Conkle, a professor at Pine College and a student in the Doctorate in Educational Leadership program at Sacramento State University. The purpose of this study will be to determine instructors’ perceptions of teaching English 60. The results from this study can be used to have a greater understanding of instruction in English 60 and offer English 60 instructors an alternative curriculum to implement in English 60.

You are being asked to participate in an interview about your experiences as an English 60 instructor and your perspective as an English 60 instructor. The interview will take no longer than 45 minutes. The interview will be like a conversation with I, the researcher, having a guide with potential questions I may ask.

Interviews will be audio recorded so that I may best capture your response. The questions may be of a personal nature and you may refuse to answer any question. Additionally, you may stop the audio recording or the interview at any time and for any reason.

After the interview, I will transcribe the audio recording. To protect your privacy, I will use pseudonyms and remove any identifying descriptions or information. To ensure confidentiality, the audio tapes will be destroyed as soon as the audio recordings have been transcribed, or within one month after they were made, whichever comes first. Until that time, the audiotapes will be locked in a secure location that only the researcher Nathan Conkle has access to. Further, once the audio-recordings have been transcribed, I will e-mail you the transcription to check for veracity. If you find that any part does not reflect your perspective, you may revise the transcript and your revision will be the final version.

Given that I will remove any identifying names, information, or descriptions, may I quote you directly in my research? Please check the corresponding box.

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You may gain additional insight into factors that may improve instruction for English 60, or you may not personally benefit from participating in this research. It is hoped that the results of the study will improve English 60 instruction and contribute to student success.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study, and your participation or nonparticipation will not affect your treatment at Pine College.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Nathan Conkle at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or by e-mail, NConkle@PINEcollege.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, please contact the Office of Research Administration, 916-278-5674 or irb@csus.edu.
Your signature below indicates that you have read this page, understand it, and agree to participate in this research study.

Printed name __________________________ Signature __________________________ Date ___________

Interview Guide

1. How would you describe your teaching philosophy?

2. What challenges do you feel that English 60 students experience?

3. How do you feel you can help students overcome these challenges, if at all?

4. What do you feel are some of your best practices in English 60?

5. How do you feel instructors can best prepare English 60 students for English 1A?

6. What English 60/N assignments and/or teaching strategies have you found to be effective in the past?

7. Would you consider teaching research in English 60? Why or why not?

8. Do you think there are benefits to teaching research in English 60? If so, what do you think are the benefits?

9. What challenges do you think students might encounter while writing a research paper in English 60? How do you think instructors can scaffold instruction to help students overcome these challenges?

10. How do you feel the English 60 exam influences instruction in your English 60 class? What changes do you feel you have made to curriculum in order to accommodate the English 60 exam?
Appendix #3: English 60 Student Consent Form and Survey

You are being asked to participate in a research study which will be conducted by Nathan Conkle, a professor at Pine College and a student in the Doctorate in Educational Leadership program at Sacramento State University. The purpose of this study will be to determine students’ perceptions of completing an I-Search unit in English 60.

You will be asked to complete a survey and answer some questions about your experience writing an I-Search paper in English 60. The survey may require up to 20 minutes of your time. Some of the items in the survey may seem personal, but you don’t have to answer any question if you don’t want to.

As a researcher, my job is to protect your anonymity. Your response to this survey will be anonymous. Only pseudonyms (or fake names) will be used and any identifying descriptions and/or information will be removed.

You may gain additional insight into factors that affect success in English 60 and transfer level courses, or you may not personally benefit from participating in this research study. It is hoped that the results of this study will improve English 60 instruction at Pine College.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study, and your participation or nonparticipation will not affect your grades or treatment in this class or any other class at Pine College.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Nathan Conkle at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or by e-mail, NConkle@PINEcollege.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, please contact the Sacramento State University Office of Research Administration, 916-278-5674 or irb@csus.edu.

Your completion and returning of this survey indicates that you have read this page, understand it, and agree to participate in this research study.

________________________________________________________________________

If you agree, you may be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview about the I-Search unit and English 60 at a later date. The interview will take no longer than 30 minutes.

☐ If you would like to be interviewed as part of this research study, please check the box to the left and leave an e-mail where you can be reached.

________________________________________________________________________

Please leave an e-mail address if you would like to be interviewed.
Student Survey

Instructions: For this survey, please reflect on the I-Search unit you have just completed and answer the following questions. This survey will be more like a free-write than an organized essay. Please write the first thing that comes to your mind after you look at each question. Your response to this survey can come in the form of sentences, lists, or any other method that expresses your ideas.

1. What is your overall impression of the I-Search unit in English 60?

2. What, if anything, do you feel you learned in this I-Search unit?

3. How do you feel I-Search may have prepared you for English 1A, if at all?

4. Do you feel that I-Search or research should be a part of English 60? Why or why not?

5. What advice would you give an instructor teaching I-Search to an English 60 course?

6. Do you feel this I-Search unit has prepared you for the English 60 exam? Why or why not?
Appendix #4: English 60 Student Consent Form and Interview Guide

You are being asked to participate in a research study which will be conducted by Nathan Conkle, a professor at Pine College and a student in the Doctorate in Educational Leadership program at Sacramento State University. The purpose of this study will be to determine students’ perceptions of completing an I-Search unit in English 60.

You are being asked to participate in an interview about your experiences writing an I-Search paper in English 60. The interview will take no longer than 30 minutes. The interview will be conversation: I, the researcher, will have a guide with potential questions I may ask.

Interviews will be audio recorded so that I may best capture your response. The questions may be of a personal nature, and you may refuse to answer any question. Additionally, you may also stop the audio recording and/or the interview at any time and for any reason.

After the interview, I will transcribe the audio recording. To protect your privacy, I will use only pseudonyms (or fake names) and remove any identifying descriptions or information that can trace a response back to you. To ensure confidentiality, the audio tapes will be destroyed as soon as the audio recordings have been transcribed, or within one month after they were made, whichever comes first. Until that time, the audiotapes will be locked in a secure location that only the researcher Nathan Conkle has access to.

Given that you may stop the audio-recording at any time and for any reason, may I audio-record the interview? Please check the corresponding box.

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Given that I will remove any identifying names, information, or descriptions, may I quote you directly? Please check the corresponding box.

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You may gain additional insight into factors that may result in success in English 60 and/or other college courses, or you may not personally benefit from participating in this research. It is hoped that the results of the study can be used to improve English 60 instruction and contribute to student success.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study, and your participation or nonparticipation will not affect your treatment or grades in this class or any other class at Pine College.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Nathan Conkle at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or by e-mail, NConkle@PINEcollege.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project, please contact the Office of Research Administration, 916-278-5674 or irb@csus.edu.
Your signature below indicates that you have read this page, understand it, and agree to participate in this research study.

Printed name ___________________________ Signature ___________________________ Date _________________

Interview Guide

1. What do you feel English 60 instructors should focus on to prepare students for English 1A?

2. What is your overall impression of the I-Search Unit in English 60?

3. How do you define I-Search?

4. What did you write your I-Search paper on? What did you learn about this topic?

5. What, if anything, have you been able to apply to either other college classes or your life?

6. Tell me your opinion of the following parts:
   - Choosing a topic you feel passionate about or a relevant problem
   - Including storytelling in an I-Search or research paper
   - Collecting sources
   - Incorporating sources in your writing
   - Citing research
   - Peer response for I-Search

7. What do you feel are some challenges that English 60 students might experience while engaging in I-Search?

8. How might instructors help students overcome these challenges?

9. What is your opinion of the use of the following technologies:
   - iClickers
   - Streaming videos and audio
   - Powerpoints

10. How do you think I-Search instruction relates to the English 60 exam at the end of the semester?
Appendix #5: Transcription of “The Cracked Pot” story read in the case study class.

The transcription of the Maidu story “The Cracked Pot.”

“The Cracked Pot”: there was a woman who lived in a village and in the village there was a well; and every day the women of the village would walk down the trail with pots on their head. When they got to the well, they would share stories. They would tell each other about their lives: their sorrows, their joys, their memories, their hopes. They would fill up their pots with water, balance them on their heads, and walk home, being very careful not to spill a single drop because that was all the water in the village.

But our women, the women of the story, walked with a jaunty dance step, and she would spill the water as she walked. This would concern the other women in the village. So one day when they were examining each other’s pots, they noticed that our woman’s, the star of our story, pot had a crack in it, and this was a great concern to them. They said, “Our water is so limited; we are so careful with every drop because it is how we feed our family how we water our plants that we use for food. It’s all of our water. How can you walk around with this crackpot?” Our women responded, “We all have a purpose!” She said it so calmly that the other ladies were taken aback by it. A few days went by and they walked back and forth. One day one of the women got so agitated, she said, “How can you keep walking around with that cracked pot? How can you do it?” Our women smiled and said, “We all have a purpose!” Then the agitated women continued, look explained to me: how can you do this? I really need to know.” The woman responded, “Each of you have a family; everyone in your family has a mouth that needs that water to stay alive. I live alone, so I don’t need as much water. So I can use my water to feed all the flowers along the road.” They noticed for the first time that is they looked down the trail flowers grew along the edge, and they realize that the woman’s water had been watering the flowers. She ended, “your children are your flowers. This is who I give my water to. We all have our imperfections; we all have our purpose”
Appendix #6: Limiting the Topic Worksheet

I-Search Research Proposal and Limiting the Topic Worksheet

Directions: Please answer the following question below about a potential topic for your I-Search definition of the problem essay. The following worksheet will help you choose a topic and begin to limit that topic.

1a. Brainstorm potential problems. To begin, please brainstorm potential problems that you could write about for your I-Search paper. You can write about any problems that involve yourself, others you know, and/or stories you have heard about in the news.

What are some potential problems you might write about? ____________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

1b. Choose a topic. From the list you’ve brainstormed, please highlight or underline the one problem that interests you the most and that you would like to write about.

2. Please free-write about a story involving that problem. The story may involve yourself, someone you know, or people you heard about through the news. Please add as many details as possible using live nouns with your free-write. The point of the free-write is to “dig up” your views on the broad topic by recalling and writing about personal experiences.

What is a story that relates to the problem? What happened? How did these events cause hardships for the person(s)? What are some of the most important parts of the story? ____________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

3. Please start to limit your topic by answering the following questions:

a. Who is one group of people (ex. students, parents, teens) do you think this problem might apply to? How do you think this problem might affect this group of people? ____________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________

b. What do you think are some of the causes of the problem? ________________
c. What do you think are some of the effects this problem has on people? _____

4. Complete a quick internet search. Please take your potential limited topics and do a quick internet search for them on sites such as cnn.com, news.yahoo.com, and Wikipedia.com “to read around” about the sub-topics that popped up in your free-write.

What did you learn about the problem from your search? ________________
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________

5. Propose three limited topics. Looking back at what you wrote for the previous questions, please choose three limited topics that you might write about. (You can choose three limited topics derived from the same general topic.) Then please write down your top three choices below.

What is your first limited topic you’re thinking of writing your I-Search Problem essay on? Why do you want to write about this limited topic? ______
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________

What is your second limited topic you’re thinking of writing your I-Search Problem essay on? Why do you want to write about this limited topic? ______
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________

What is your third limited topic you’re thinking of writing your I-Search Problem essay on? Why do you want to write about this limited topic? ______
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________

6. Questions.

Do you have any questions about limiting your topic? ________________
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________
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