**Mark Promislo**

**BRIDGE 2012-2013**

**Final Report**

The experience of participating in BRIDGE has been a wonderful, life-changing experience. The exposure to new ideas, the intense (and often playful) discussions, and the amazing smorgasbord of readings all contributed to a dramatic change in my views of teaching and learning. Although I feel that BRIDGE has enabled me to grow significantly as a teacher, the process of improvement and change is never-ending. I certainly haven’t found the “answer” to great teaching, and of course that is one of the best lessons to emerge from BRIDGE; the idea is to keep asking questions and not be afraid to try new things. Being open to novel, even scary approaches is essential. How many times in life do we get to play in a sand box with a bunch of brilliant minds (for an entire academic year no less)? In short, thank you Arlene and Anne for creating this opportunity, and thanks to all of my BRIDGE partners for your support and feedback this past eight months.

1. I worked on *MGT-201, Fundamentals of Management and Organizational Behavior*. This is a sophomore-level business class that is required for all Rider business students, although a small number of students from other disciplines take the course as well. Enrollment is typically between 25 and 32 students per section.

The course’s purpose in the curriculum is a “survey” class that exposes students to a wide range of topics within the fields of management and organizational behavior. Thus the course sacrifices some depth to achieve breadth (a frustrating aspect that I address later in my discussion of Craig Nelson’s article). MGT-201 is foundational in nature because several of the topics in the class are further developed later in the curriculum (for example, management skills and team management). However, only management majors are likely to enroll in those classes. I have four overarching goals for the course: (1) help students appreciate the value of good management and that it is critical in all types of jobs and industries; (2) develop management skills that they can (should) utilize when they graduate; (3) navigate the differences in individual behavior that contribute to the complexities and challenges in management; (4) prepare students to respond to controversies/trends in management that will have an impact on their future careers. For the most part, I still believe in these goals, but my work in BRIDGE led me to realize that my teaching approaches did not always support these objectives as well as they should have.

1. The main problem that I sought to address in BRIDGE was a tendency for my students to focus on recall of information rather than applying that information to real-world situations or thinking critically about it. I also wanted them to demonstrate this critical thinking during class discussions. Admittedly, my teaching strategies likely reinforced some of the students’ lower-level cognitive processing (Marzano, 2000). During BRIDGE I came to realize that the true value of this class is in being able to use management concepts *outside* of the classroom, challenging one’s existing views on managing people, and synthesizing those management concepts with material learned in other courses (new goals for the class! – see question 3 below).

Before BRIDGE began, I had some sense of the issues that needed to be fixed, but it was only after participating in this project that I began to appreciate that effective teaching requires a very strategic and holistic approach. I was making some choices in the classroom that were counterproductive because I had not given enough thought to the process of *how* I wanted my students to learn.

I think I also sometimes fell into the trap of believing that if students were engaged in class, then they were learning. It turns out that while engagement may be a prerequisite for learning, it is not sufficient on its own. Discussing and experimenting with techniques such as scaffolding led me to conclude that I needed to give my students more opportunities to build their knowledge along the way.

1. I kept my existing goals for the course but added to them (see response to question 2 above).
2. This past semester I used several different methods to get information on what my students were learning and what I might need to change in my approach. These methods fall into one of two categories: Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo & Cross) that were generally short and completed in class; and developing new assignments.

Examples of CATS Used:

* *Minute Paper*: Starting mid-semester, I asked students to briefly respond to this question: “What important question remains unanswered about the topic today?” The results were substantive and helped me refine my lesson plan for the following class (see question 5 for an example).
* *Documented Problem Solutions*: On several occasions I posed management problems to the students in class and required that they “show their work.” For example, one problem focused on decision-making and was intended to reinforce the concept of “rational” decision making:

*You have been put in charge of selecting a car that all sales representatives for your company (a pharmaceutical manufacturer) will drive. This purchase involves 3,000 cars. The cars will need to hold boxes of drug samples that the sales reps hand out to doctors’ offices. What steps should you take in your decision-making process to reach the optimal decision?*

* *Pro and Con Grid*: In a class focused on the different ways in which companies “go global,” I presented a mini-case of a toy company in the U.S. and asked students to prepare a grid listing the pros and cons of each approach. This material is often difficult for students to grasp because they have little experience with it. For example, one method we discussed was forming a strategic partnership with a company in a different country. Students had to think about and articulate the advantages and disadvantages of that approach. By forcing them to think through the process, the pro/con exercise helped them to understand the material much better than simply copying down lecture notes. In another class I used a Pro and Con Grid for having employees work in teams rather than individually.

New Assignments:

* *Excel Analysis*: I wanted to reinforce students’ previous learning about Excel by using a case concerning a simple restaurant that serves hamburgers. The case includes financial information on revenues and expenses, along with certain assumptions about growth in future years. Students are asked to compute the annual profit for three different locations and then write a memo summarizing their results and making recommendations to management.

Drew Procaccino provided terrific suggestions for improving the assignment, including having the students merge the data for the three restaurants and also calculate additional financial measurements. I tested the assignment with one section in spring 2013 (before Drew’s enhancements) and it seemed to work well overall, although I saw a wide range of quality in the work. In the future, using Drew’s suggestions, I hope to work one-on-one with students who still struggle with the software program.

* *Case Analyses*: After being frustrated with the limitations of the textbook, I realized during BRIDGE that I needed to expand my students’ reading by using outside sources; these additional readings would hopefully allow students to make real-world connections more explicit and require them to apply their knowledge to specific situations.

My first attempt was to find a book about a specific company that would act as a common reader throughout the semester. I thought having a single organization to discuss would be a great way to “bind” class discussions. I explored several options but found that none of the books were ideal for this purpose because they inevitably included too much information that was off-topic for my class (marketing, etc.).

So ultimately I made the decision to select cases from a book titled “Cases in Organizational Behavior” by Seijts (2005). This volume has a number of very relevant cases that are diverse, understandable, and make for excellent writing assignments and class discussions. I developed an assignment and tested it during the spring semester; this particular case centered around personality types and organizational change. Overall I was very pleased with the response from students and the connections they were able to make to management concepts.

1. During the spring semester I tried to document as much evidence as possible from student work. Here are a few examples that are connected to the assessments I noted above.

* For a Minute Paper, one student wrote that:

“We talked a lot about different personality types today and how they can affect job performance. But we didn’t talk about how the organization itself also plays a part. If we take someone who is doing well at SAS [Note: I had just played a video clip about this company) because he is cooperative and laid-back, but then put him in a very competitive company like Goldman Sachs, he probably won’t do very well.”

This student demonstrated a key piece of understanding with this topic, namely that one’s personality may be associated with certain organizational outcomes, but this relationship can be changed by other variables such as organizational culture (moderators!). In the next class I made sure to follow up on this point and discuss other potential moderators.

* For the Documented Problem Solution:

One student correctly realized that the first step was to make a decision regarding buying or leasing the vehicles. Once that choice is made, the manager must develop a set of decision criteria. Many students incorrectly tend to jump to looking for various alternatives for the car. This student created a set of ranked criteria, including cost of the vehicle, fuel efficiency, safety record, and storage space.

1. Many of the readings we discussed in BRIDGE framed and/or illuminated my inquiries about teaching and learning. It would be overkill to document all of them here so I chose to focus on three that had the largest impact on me:

* Bransford et al., "How Experts Differ from Novices," was illuminating in several ways. One key I took from this article was that I had been assuming that many of the “mental shortcuts” that I use as a management expert were readily available to my students as well (if they just tried a little harder, darn it!). This reading made clear that experts are able to think differently from novices because, among other factors, they *notice* certain things that novices do not. So I now try in my classes to be more explicit about information that I find important, and *why* that information is key. For example, in discussing organizational culture one day, we talked about how even the CEO’s smallest decisions can have an impact on a company’s culture. This seemed obvious to me but, thinking about the article, I realized that this was probably not the case for “novices.” Thus, I took time to outline some of the ways that a CEO’s actions affect organizational culture (e.g., does the CEO eat in the same cafeteria as the rest of the employees? Does he/she keep the office door open? Does he/she work until the wee hours of the night?).
* Hirsch’s article titled “You can always look it up – or can you?” was fascinating because it debunked the common belief that, in this electronic age, information is always at the ready and so one doesn’t need to memorize facts. Yes, the data is available, but understanding it is a different matter! And even knowing what to “look up” is problematic without a basic understanding of the material. Actually this reading reinforced some of my fears about the current generation of students. I have had students submit papers on job satisfaction in which they cite Webster’s dictionary with a general definition of satisfaction instead of simply citing our Management textbook that gives a clear definition of the term! So I have witnessed this inability to know where to turn to get basic information. In response to this issue I have tried to help students make more connections between management concepts and problems outside of this discipline. For example, in a class discussion I asked students how satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with a consumer product affected their buying habits. They were then better able to think about how job satisfaction might lead to positive or negative outcomes. I believe this ability will reinforce the deeper meaning of the material so they are not in a position of frantically “looking it up” while writing a paper or articulating an argument in class.
* Willingham’s “Critical Thinking: Why Is It So Hard to Teach?” explained many of my frustrations with students not being able to think critically. Previously I had assumed that a student’s inability to engage in critical thinking may have indicated a “lazy” mind or unwillingness to engage in the class. Not so, argues Willingham. Even students who understand that critical thinking is necessary for a particular problem may be unable to do so because of a lack of knowledge and experience. This then becomes an issue of learning, not motivation. My conclusion was that scaffolding is critical in this process. Willingham argues that students need knowledge and practice in order to think critically, so perhaps I was not giving them enough “substance” (or reinforcing it) before expecting them to be more reflective and able to evaluate various theories or arguments. Hopefully the assignments I developed during BRIDGE and the changes I have made to the class will provide this additional substance.

1. Some of what I learned in BRIDGE concerns attitudes that professors bring to teaching rather than specific approaches. Specifically, I saw a lot of passion in our meeting room – a passion for teaching, for learning, and for inspiring students. When I would encounter difficult days in the classroom (as all professors do on occasion), thinking about my BRIDGE cohorts would always re-energize me. I will carry with me this sense of energy and enthusiasm in my work. Some other lessons that stood out were:

* “Covering” material in the classroom is not enough. In fact, it is usually best to cover less material and to spend more time delving deeply into the material that is assigned. By covering less, students actually learn more.
* Effective teaching requires a lot of work and planning! Most of the improvements that the BRIDGE group was able to attain resulted from hours of careful thinking about assignments and learning objectives. There are no shortcuts available for these changes because they require concentration, patience, and perseverance. However, the end results are well worth the time invested.
* No matter what discipline we teach, we all face many of the same challenges in the classroom. Sharing our experiences, frustrations, and successes with each other was an enlightening experience. We need to keep learning from each other!