

BRIDGE Project 2009-2010
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Course Information:

The class I chose to focus my BRIDGE efforts on is Fundamentals of Management and Organizational Behavior (MGT 201). This course is a part of the core business curriculum and is also required by an increasing number of non-business degree programs (e.g., Communications/Event Planning). This course is primarily comprised of second semester Sophomores and Juniors, with a typical enrollment of 30+ students. The general purpose of this course in the curriculum is to ensure that all business students are exposed to the basic principles in the fields of Management and Organizational Behavior. During the 2009-2010 academic year, I taught 3 sections of this course.

Course Goals:

My primary goals for this course are: (a) to introduce students to the fields of Management and Organizational Behavior by exposing them to the major theories, concepts and issues in this field, (b) to show students how the materials presented in class are relevant to their own future experiences in the working world, regardless of their major or field of study, and (c) to help students develop analytical and problem solving skills that are relevant to the field of management.

Focal Issue Being Addressed:

My BRIDGE efforts in this course were focused upon the group project that students are required to complete as a part of this course. This project involves having students complete a series of job-related surveys that provide them with information about the good and bad aspects of the job of one of their group members. Their task is to take this information and utilize it to identify the critical issues present in this job and determine how they could improve their job (i.e., make it more satisfying and motivating) using the concepts, theories, and materials discussed throughout the semester. This project was designed in part due to my dissatisfaction with the content of most textbooks written in this area. The vast majority of these textbooks simply focus on presenting students with an exhaustive list of concepts and theories in the field, without any mention of how this information is relevant to students or how this information could be applied to solve real world problems. Although presentation of these theories and concepts is certainly important, my feeling was that focusing exclusively on this content without addressing the issues of relevance and application gives students a very limited perspective on this field.

I targeted this project based upon my observation that, although the project has generally “worked”, every semester I encountered a significant number of student groups that were not necessarily approaching this project from a critical analysis and problem solving perspective. Instead, their “solutions” were oftentimes not realistic (e.g., too expensive or disruptive), were developed with little regard to the survey results, or did not utilize any techniques or concepts taught in class. In some cases, students simply copied text directly from my class PowerPoint presentations and pasted this information into their own presentations. In addition, while I find that Management majors and Human Resource Management majors generally take this project seriously, students from other majors (especially non-business majors) do not always fully engage in this project or fail to approach this project from an analytical or problem solving perspective.

Based upon these observations, I decided to focus my BRIDGE work on exploring how I could make changes to this project to help all students develop and apply the analysis and problem solving skills that can be critical for successful management in organizations.

Theory/Debate That Framed My Inquiry:

The theory of learning that framed and helped to develop my inquiry was Perry's framework outlining the various modes of thinking displayed by college students (dualism, multiplicity, contextual relativism, commitment), as well as the transitions that they must make to move between modes (perceiving uncertainty as real, perceiving opinion as insufficient, joining values and analysis). Nelson's presentation of this framework clearly mirrored my efforts to get students to think critically and successfully apply course materials to real world situations, rather than simply focusing on trying to find the "right" answer or assuming that any opinion on how to change a job is a valid opinion. Beyond simply outlining the struggle I was experiencing in getting students to engage in critical thinking and problem solving, Nelson outlined several key support factors that facilitate the movement to more complex modes of thinking that I integrated into my coursework. More specifically, the changes I made to my course and the project (see below) were closely aligned with Nelson's suggestions including structured small group discussion, rehearsals, and increasing accessibility of the material to students.

Changes Made to Course/Project:

To address the issues outlined previously, I made several changes to my course and group project across the two semesters:

1. Pro-Con Grid (Fall and Spring): I began employing the Pro-Con Grid (CAT #10) in class whenever we covered a technique that could be utilized by managers to improve satisfaction or motivation (and therefore could be used in their projects). For some of these instances, I divided the students into groups and assigned different groups different perspectives (employee, manager, company owner) when evaluating the focal technique and then brought the groups together for class discussion that focused on comparing and contrasting the different perspectives. A sample of this activity is:

(For group assigned to take the employee's perspective)

"Assume that you are working in your current job and your manager has just informed you that the company is going to start using job rotation. How would you feel about this? Would there be any benefits for you that result from the job rotation process? Are there any negative outcomes for you that might result from participating in job rotation?"

Students were resistant to this activity at first, despite my discussion of how this type of thinking was directly relevant to their projects. Once students accepted that I was not going to give up on this activity, the next hurdle faced was that students generally had a hard time taking any perspective other than that of the employee. To date, this is still a struggle, although some students have been very successful at taking these new perspectives.

2. Analysis of fictional jobs (Fall and Spring): To help students become comfortable with the process of observing a job, identifying problems present in that job, and ultimately coming up with a series of actions designed to improve the job, I began asking the students to watch video clips in class that depicted clearly dissatisfying or demotivating jobs (e.g.,

Peter Gibbons in “Office Space”, workers from the television show “The Office”). For each example, students were broken up into teams and asked to provide a list of problems present in the job and actions designed to address each of those problems.

In contrast to the Pro-Con Grid, students embraced this activity right away and became relatively adept at analyzing and remedying these jobs in a short period of time, although the remedies were not always realistic.

3. Revision of project instructions (Spring): To help the students more clearly understand what I was asking for in the project presentation, I revised my project instructions significantly. Originally, the instructions for the project were contained on a single page of instructions and a single grading form (to illustrate how the projects would be graded). Prior to the start of the Spring semester, I created a new set of instructions in the form of an 11-page PowerPoint slide show that elaborated upon the initial instructions considerably and walks the students through the process of completing the course project. Perhaps most importantly, this presentation also provided the students with behavioral examples that corresponded to the highest rating they could receive on each graded dimension of the project (rated on a scale from 1 to 4). To illustrate, one of the dimensions students are graded on is “Did the group evaluate how costly/feasible the proposed changes would be for the organization?” For this dimension, students were provided with the following information: “To receive a 4 on this dimension, a group must provide a thorough evaluation of the cost of implementing each of their suggested changes (in terms of both time and money) and explain why they think these changes are worth it for the organization.”

Students reacted quite positively to the new instructions and in general, seemed to experience less confusion during the course of the project. In some cases, students reported using the PowerPoint slides as a checklist to evaluate their finished project to ensure they received a good grade on the assignment.

Observed Results:

In the Fall semester, my evaluation of the group projects indicated that my efforts and changes to the project helped some student groups, but not others. Over half of the projects exhibited the problematic behaviors mentioned previously (5 out of 8 student groups), while the remaining 3 groups approached the project from the critical thinking perspective I was asking for and clearly utilized the information we generated in the activities discussed above (pro-con grid, analysis of fictional jobs) when creating their presentation. To give these numbers some context, in past semesters there would generally be 1 (perhaps 2) student project teams (out of 8 or 9) that took this critical thinking approach to the project. Although this improvement was modest, it was nonetheless encouraging, especially given that many of the students in this section were not Management or Human Resource Management majors.

This semester, I observed 16 group presentation across 2 sections of this course and was extremely pleased with the majority of the projects presented by these students. Out of the 16 project presentations, I observed 8 that clearly met every one of my expectations for this assignment. In fact, several of the groups went well beyond my expectations in their assessment of the cost of making their suggested changes to the job. More specifically, three groups provided a “break-even” analysis in which they showed how long it would take a company to

recoup the cost of the suggested changes through the dollar value associated with improvements in productivity and morale.

Based upon these observations across the two semesters, my general conclusion is that the changes made thus far to this course project have been beneficial to the students and have helped me come closer to achieving my goals for the course. However, it is worth noting that even in the latest iteration of the project and project instructions, there were still 3 groups that displayed the problematic behaviors I was trying to avoid in this assignment (e.g., copying and pasting materials from my PowerPoint slides, making suggestions that were unrealistic or did not utilize any of the course materials). This suggests to me that there is additional room for improvement in both my structure of the project and my in-class activities designed to prepare students for the project.

Beyond the project grades earned by these students, I think one of the more important pieces of information that I took away from these efforts is that it is possible to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills in students in an introductory course. Although many view this course as simply providing students with a list of concepts and theories as building blocks that will be applied in more advanced courses, this course can clearly provide a broader learning experience for students.

Future Directions:

Given the relative success of the changes made thus far in moving students towards my desired end state or mode of thinking, I plan to continue utilizing these techniques in upcoming semesters. Moving beyond these changes, I plan to incorporate two helpful suggestions provided by other faculty members participating in my BRIDGE cohort. First, when I was discussing some of the early problems I experienced in getting students involved in the in-class activities (Pro-Con Grid, analysis of fictional jobs), one of the other BRIDGE participants suggested that I award extra credit to the “best” answer provided by the student groups. Given that many students are focused on grades, I believe that this may provide additional motivation for students to take these exercises seriously and plan on implementing this in the Fall, 2010 semester.

Second, several members of BRIDGE suggested that I might be able to address problematic projects before the end of the semester. As it stands now, I meet with project teams on a regular basis throughout the semester to determine if they have any questions or are confused about any aspect of the project. However, groups may be reluctant to ask questions or may not have made enough progress on the project to truly understand if they will have difficulties completing the project. It was suggested that I might be able to address the problems with projects more proactively if I required all student groups to turn in an initial prospectus (CAT #27) outlining the major points of the project (e.g., problems with the job, proposed actions to fix the job, benefits of changes being proposed) during the semester. By doing so, I would be able to provide all project teams with clear and corrective feedback to help ensure that they are on track with their project. Given that this idea has the potential to address many of the project problems and issues outlined previously, I will be incorporating this suggestion in the project in the Fall, 2010 semester. My initial thought is to have this prospectus due at the midterm point of the semester, which should provide students with enough time to take action on areas in need of improvement.