**BRIDGE Project – Final Report**

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**Identify class level, specify whether core, elective, or major requirement, any other pertinent information on class demographics.**

The course I chose to target for my BRIDGE project is SOC 101 “The Sociological Imagination.” “Sociological Imagination” is, as the course number implies, the introductory survey course offered in the Sociology Department. More importantly, however, it also satisfies the “Social Sciences” distributive education requirement in all the colleges that comprise the university. Consequently, the vast majority of students in the class are non-majors.

During the AY ’14-15 fall semester, the Sociology Department offered ten sections of 101, all with an enrollment cap of 35, and actual enrollments ranging from 28 to 43 for a total of 375 students across the ten sections. This past spring semester, we offered seven sections of 101, all with an enrollment cap of 35, and actual enrollments ranging from 21 to 38 for a total of 219 students across the seven sections. If we assume that this annual enrollment of 594 students is typical, over a four-year period, approximately 2,376 students will take this course. Put another way, approximately 54% of Rider’s 4,400 students will take “Sociological Imagination” at some point during their four years here at Rider.

**What problems or questions about my students’ learning and my teaching strategies did I address?**

The breadth of different students who take “Sociological Imagination” means that two different, although not necessarily contradictory, sets of goals exist. First, Sociology majors must be able to develop the necessary foundation to prepare them for more advanced coursework. This means developing a mastery of the ‘tool-box’ of basic sociological concepts and perspectives that will be built on, developed and employed in future classes.

On the other hand, non-majors (whom I prefer to think of as ‘potential majors’) have no specific interest in these things. This should not, however, be inferred to mean that there is no value in “Sociological Imagination” for non-majors. Sociology is, after all, the study of people in societies; consequently the habits of mind and analytical techniques employed in the discipline can be applied to productive effect regardless of what sort of career a student intends to pursue – from dance to business. The synthesis of these two goals means that, while content cannot be ignored, it should probably be subordinated to developing the habits of mind used by sociologists – the ‘sociological imagination’ referenced in the name of the course – in a fashion that will be equally useful to majors and non-majors.

To facilitate this process, I use a semester-long writing assignment, an ‘ill-structured’ problem that requires students to demonstrate their sociological imaginations. They are asked to utilize three broad-brush theoretical approaches, or lenses, developed over the course of the semester – functionalism, conflict theory and interactionism – to analyze the artificial and circumscribed ‘society’ depicted in a television program of their choice. Thus students are able to apply the abstract concepts they are learning to novel experiences in ‘the field’ without having to deal with the challenges and complications of doing real fieldwork. Students are encouraged to relate their own work to relevant points in class discussions and are provided with topical models of actual sociological research incorporated into the syllabus at regular intervals throughout the semester.

The primary issue I was facing, however, is that students often failed to connect the theories and methods they were applying with the concepts discussed in class. In thinking about this disconnect and discussing the construction of the course project one-on-one with some current students, I realized that many students were seeing the theoretical approaches not as tools or techniques for understanding their observations of the social world, but rather as facts that need to be learned and understood in a context-free vacuum. One student told me that she didn’t realize that the assignment was asking them to “step back” and look at the “definitions” of the “big idea[s]” and to use those definitions to determine “the rules” governing the television program they are writing about. Her statement clarified for me an aspect of my course design that needed more work. What had seemed self-evident to me was not clear to my novice students.

**Did I rethink my course goals?**

My course goals remain the same; I still feel that, as a survey course “Sociological Imagination” must provide both a conceptual and theoretical foundation for students. However, I did rethink the way I would pursue these goals. I concluded that, as stated earlier, it is in fact the *synthesis* of these two goals that should be the focus of the course. With that in mind, I did not *rethink*, but rather *refocused* my course goals to be more explicitly about the synthesis of habits of mind and content than about either one in isolation.

**What methods did I use to gain information?**

I decided to apply some targeted revisions to the course project to help refocus students on the connections between content and application that is was originally intended to develop. Leaving aside the third and fourth phases of the project, which represented thesis development and writing the final paper, respectively, I chose to narrow in on the first two phases of the project, which focused on broadly applying the three theoretical approaches and using them to make observations, as the sections most in need of revision.

1. From question-answering to question-posing:

As constructed, Phase 1 was prompting a bit too much encyclopedic writing. I chose to employ a modified version of Angelo and Cross’s CAT 13 (Assessing Skill in Synthesis and Creative Thinking: One-Sentence Summary) to apply Bean’s recommended solution to this problem by replacing “question answering” prompts with “question asking” prompts. At the same time, I made more explicit my desire for students to look at the “definitions” of the “big idea[s]” and to use those definitions to determine “the rules” governing the television program they were writing about.

1. Connecting data with concepts:

Regarding Phase 2, I chose to use a modified version of CAT 29 (Assessing Student’s Awareness of Their Attitudes and Values: Double Entry Journals) to make Phase 2 more closely resemble the process of collecting field notes. In addition to making theoretically contextualized and sociologically relevant observations about their programs, students were now asked to relate those observations to specific concepts discussed in the text and in lecture. In this way, I hoped to make more explicit the connections between the content areas we cover in lecture and the application of those content areas to the project.

1. Making the implicit explicit:

In addition to these revisions to the assignment itself, I also increased the amount of time in class spent specifically discussing the assignment. In-class workshops that modeled what students were expected to do were added in advance of due dates and, when assignments were returned, additional class time was spent reading some strong and weak examples and discussing exactly what made those examples stronger or weaker.

**What were my findings?**

To assess the results, I systematically compared the quality of student work submitted under the revised assignment to student work submitted under the previous version. Quality, in this case, was not measured by the grades the work received, but rather by my assessment of how well students engaged in the kind of expert-level disciplinary thinking that I was looking for them to demonstrate. The project asks them to model much higher-level disciplinary processes than are traditionally expected from 100-level survey courses. Therefore, my operationalization of ‘quality’ placed a higher premium on work that struggled to grapple with more advanced disciplinary habits of mind than mere rote responses to questions or cited definitions from the textbook glossary or lecture, even if these were correct.

The initial difference I observed between the two versions of the assignment is that the revised version prompted many more questions from the students and a more in-depth discussion of the requirements of the assignment. Presumably, this difference is attributable to the more “ill-structured” nature of the revised assignment. The previous version asked students to answer a set of questions about a topic that they would select within clearly defined parameters – something that they could easily wrap their heads around and approach without a great amount of thought. The revised version, however, required students to *ask* questions instead of *answer* them, and the lack of familiarity with this sort of thinking presumably prompted a greater need for clarification.

While grading the first two phases of the project, I also discovered that the revised version of the assignment yielded work that that allowed for finer distinctions in grading. The quality of work on the previous version of the assignment tended to be rather binary – either the student did the work as requested or s/he didn’t. The more nuanced requirements of the revised assignment, however, eliminated this “ceiling effect” and allowed me to more precisely assess the students’ level of understanding of the three perspectives.

While this effect was significant primarily in the stronger assignment submissions, it was also evident in distinctions I noticed among the weaker assignments. This is illustrated by two contrasting applications of conflict theory to observations from students writing their papers on AMC’s *The Walking Dead:*

From the previous version:

“…there is an obvious power in the hands of the undead. The undead dictate the actions of the survivors. It appears that the undead will remain in power for a long time because it appears that the living are only starting to cope with the problem rather than solving it. The undead receive their power from their near invulnerability, low tolerance to pain, and massive numbers.”

From the revised version:

“Conflict Theory argues that society is based on this dynamic struggle over power and scarce resources. In the case of *The Walking Dead*, the struggle over resources is what gives people their power. The more resources, the more people will be willing to do what you say… Whenever the group stumbles upon another group, the first thoughts are always “Do they have shelter?” and “Do they have food?”… Resources are extremely important to them. This unfortunately leads to fights with other groups… Finding and maintaining supplies is a life or death situation.”

In both of these examples, the students struggled with understanding exactly how to correctly apply conflict theory to life in a post-apocalyptic society. While the first example misses the point to such a degree that it might be inferred that the student did not take the assignment seriously, it must be clarified that he did exactly what was requested of him in answering the questions posed by the assignment; his problem was that he lacked a more nuanced expert understanding of the disciplinary concept of “power” and substituted a more colloquial novice interpretation. In that context, his application of conflict theory, while almost comically incorrect, is completely understandable and, to a degree, justifiable.

In contrast, the second example, while also evidencing an incomplete understanding of how to apply conflict theory, made it much more difficult for the student to go off in a completely inaccurate direction. The structure of the revised assignment prompt served to funnel the weaker student in the correct direction and submit work that, while not perfectly on the mark, was at least reasonably close.

It is also worth noting that there was not a great deal of difference between stronger examples of work on the two versions of the assignment; students who really understood the material got to the same place with their work regardless of how the assignment was structured. This seems to imply that the different versions of the assignment are both moving students towards the same objective, but are using different methods to get there.

That said, the revised version of the assignment seemed to facilitate these stronger students in moving more deeply into the process of inductive hypothesis generation. This is illustrated by two contrasting applications of conflict theory to observations from students writing their papers on Netflix’s *Orange is the New Black*:

From the previous version:

“… those who have the most leverage are those who have the power. The inmates who have the connections to get others what they need are respected and feared… Red, being an older woman in the prison, took a few troubled girls under her wing and as repayment she made them swear loyalty to her and that they do anything she asked them to do.”

From the revised version:

“In Season 1, Red is the head chef who controls when and what the inmates consume; she is a respected, powerful female who is supported by her trusty sidekicks. However, in Season 2, she struggles to main her position of power when Vee turns Red’s girls against her. Vee and Red’s relationship reinforces the notion that there can be only one person in a position of power.”

While the first example demonstrates a perfectly reasonable and well thought out application of conflict theory to the social organization within a women’s prison, the second example takes that application a bit further. The last sentence could serve as a thesis statement for a final paper.

**What theories or debates about learning frame or illuminate my inquiry?**

The development of my BRIDGE project was greatly influenced through my investigation of many of the core texts and concepts in SoTL. Theories of particular note include Herb Simon’s concept of the ill-structured problem, Barbara Walvoord’s ideas about assignment scaffolding, Gerald Graff’s discussion of the disjunction between “expert” and “novice” approaches to disciplinary thinking, and Randy Bass’s general thoughts on how the way we teach influences what exactly it is that our students learn.

**What have I learned (or what new hypotheses have I developed) so far?**

My BRIDGE experience served very effectively to reinforce the importance of the craft of assignment design. My preliminary data very clearly illustrate the impact that subtle changes in the phrasing of an assignment prompt can have on the work submitted by students. Students will, by and large, give their instructors exactly what is requested of them. However, the key problem is that, as disciplinary novices, they often lack the ability to properly contextualize what is being requested of them. This can, and often does, result in students submitting work that they ardently believe is exactly what was requested of them, but that simultaneously leaves the instructor dismayed as to how they could have misunderstood an assignment that was, to his or her expert eyes, completely self-explanatory.

Owing to this chasm between the perspectives of disciplinary experts and novices, it is incumbent upon instructors not only to exercise the utmost care in the phrasing of assignment prompts, but also to maintain an awareness of this gap in evaluating consistently unsatisfactory work. The correct question instructors need to ask is not “Why can’t the students give me what I ask for?” but rather, “How am I being unclear in what it is that I am asking the students for?”

**Where will I go from here?**

Based upon the preliminary findings of my BRIDGE project, I intend to continue to refine the revised version of my assignment and, in Fall 2015, conduct another comparative analysis of work submitted under the revised assignment prompt versus work submitted under the pre-BRIDGE version. Additionally, I intend to begin a systematic quantitative analysis to determine if there are any statistically significant differences between the final grades students are receiving, as well as grades on individual exams and the final project, based on the version of the course project students completed. The revised version of the assignment attempts to more explicitly replicate the kinds of thinking required on the exams and, if it is more effectively accomplishing this, there should be some measurable difference.

I will also collect some interview data from generally good students who struggle to submit quality work on one or more of the phases of the assignment. I suspect that it may be helpful to find out exactly what it is that they are not understanding, not merely for the obvious reason helping to clarify it for them, but also to help improve my understanding of exactly how it is that novices understand, not only the requirements of the assignment, but also discipline of sociology more broadly. Gaining a more precise insight into the specific differences between expert and novice thinkers in sociology can only help make me more effective in bridging that gap.

Long term, I feel that there may be multiple publishable SoTL articles that can come out of this work as well as potential conference presentations. It is my intention to pursue this line of inquiry in addition to my more discipline-specific research interests.