An Instructional Experiment:
Cooperative Learning, On Line Learning and the
Narrative Appraisal

Introduction

Historically the narrative appraisal report in the Real Estate Appraisal course had been
done as kind of a lump sum assignment. Students would receive the assignment at the beginning
of the term, learn about the different steps in the appraisal process during the course of the term,
and then they would be responsible for turning in the completed narrative appraisal report at the
end of the term. This process contained two significant shortcomings. First was the time
management problem, and second was the quality control problem.

Despite being told that the appraisal report itself is a substantial assignment, in the
neighborhood of fifty pages, students tended to put the entire report off until shortly before the
due date, much the way many researchers do prior to a conference presentation! The students
are given the contents of the appraisal on the first day of class and it appears as follows.

- Title Page
- Letter of Transmittal
- Table of Contents
- Identification of Property Ownership
- Legal Description
- Objective of Appraisal
- Rights Being Appraised
- Definition of Market Value
- Regional Analysis
- Neighborhood Analysis
- Site Data
- Highest and Best Use
- Market Value of Site
- Subject Property Improvements
- Cost Approach
- Income Approach
- Sales Comparison Approach
- Reconciliation
- Appraisal Certificate
- Assumptions and Limiting Conditions
- Qualifications of the Appraiser

To assist the student with their time management problem portions of the appraisal are
given due dates throughout the semester. Six different sections of the appraisal, the Regional
Analysis, the Neighborhood Analysis, Site Data and Description of the improvements, the Cost
Approach, the Income Approach, and the Sales Comparison Approach are each given due dates
one to two weeks apart during the term. Each of these five sections is then treated in a
group/cooperative learning environment, which gives the student a unique way to improve the
overall quality of their appraisals while at the same time bringing other positive externalities into
the appraisal project.
Literature Review

Much has been written in the education literature, as well as in the literature of functional business areas such as accounting and finance, regarding the benefits of cooperative learning, which at various times is also referred to as group learning or active learning. One of the early references to cooperative learning put forth the concept as an effective instructional alternative to competitive and individualistic learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1980). One of the characteristics of cooperative learning is the creation of groups of students working together to understand or master a given topic (Moorman, 1994). The indicated benefits from this type of learning are said to include increased retention, the use of a higher level of reasoning, improved view and acceptance of others, positive attitude, increased self esteem, and greater social support among others (Johnson, 1980 and Slavin, 1991).

Cooperative Learning

According to Johnson and Johnson (89), cooperative learning has very positive results on student achievement, interpersonal interaction and social support when compared to individualistic learning and competitive learning. Individualistic learning is defined as the situation where students work by themselves to achieve their own goals, disregarding other students’ needs or learning. Competitive learning is defined as the situation where students try to compete with and do better than their classmates. Cooperative learning sees students working together to maximize their own, as well as their classmates’ learning. The authors stated that at that time, over 375 academic studies had indicated that cooperative education had produced superior results, in comparison to individualistic and/or competitive learning. These included studies based on student achievement, interpersonal interaction, and social support.

Johnson and Johnson (89) refer to five different basic elements that are contained in, and result from, cooperative learning situations. The first of them is positive interdependence, which is a sense of group, or working together, that can be achieved through this type of active learning. The second basic element is the interaction, often face to face, that is promoted with the activity. Another element is the individual accountability that is necessary for the cooperating learning activity to be successful. The fourth basic element is the category of social skills. The final basic element stressed by the authors is group processing. These five elements, and how this experiment touches on each of them, are contained in Table I later in this paper.

One of the major components of a cooperative learning assignment is that of promotive interaction. The promotive interaction achieved through this group, or cooperative, learning assignment is characterized through a certain set of actions and benefits for the participants. The players provide each other with efficient and effective help or assistance. The group may be exchanging needed resources such as information or materials, or it may simply provide a means of processing that information in a more efficient manner. The group may provide feedback to its members allowing them to improve subsequent performances. The members of the group may challenge each others’ conclusions or reasoning forcing them to rethink their current or former position. Certain cooperative opportunities call on group members to exert effort toward a common goal, possibly through influencing the effort of the other members (Johnson & Johnson 1989).
In order for cooperative learning to be successful the instructor must do several things, including assuring for individual accountability, teach collaboration and interdependence, and structuring activities to match academic goals (Goor & Schwenn 1993, Waldron 1995, Morgan, Whorton and Gunsalus 2000). None of these is new to the active faculty member.

WebCT

WebCT is a software product that allows faculty and students to share a learning environment on the Internet. There are several competing products, but the basic features are similar. We include a description of the features of the software not to sell you on it, but rather to explain how we conduct the activities that contribute to the students’ active learning and thus to a better narrative appraisal.

WebCT includes features for the learner and the instructor. Learner tools include some Web browsing capabilities, asynchronous sharing, synchronous sharing, and student tools. Instructor features include course tools, lesson support tools, and both student/grading management tools. The standard tools, for which there are icons on the home page, are Course Content, Bulletin Board, Private Mail, Some FAQ, Calendar of Course Events, Online Quizzes and Surveys, Course Tools and Other Useful Links, General Tools and Other Links, Syllabus, Password, and Group Talks. The instructor can choose to use as many or as few of these tools as they think are needed.

Registrants in the course receive a user ID and password to use entering the course home page. Once there they can check out course content or share information via the e-mail and bulletin board functions. The bulletin board is threaded and searchable. Students can also participate in real time sharing through a whiteboard and chat rooms. The chat room conversations can be saved and read later by the instructor. WebCT also provides students with study skill tools including on line quizzes, progress tracking, and descriptive statistics on their grades versus the whole class.

Instructors have access to numerous support tools. The most valuable is the ease of building an interesting course home page with little knowledge of html. The home page can include useful links to URL references, course content materials, the course syllabus, announcements, and a way to change your password. Changing course content is easy from one term to the next. Lesson support tools provide templates for some common course elements. The software also allows instructors to post quizzes for a specific period of time. The data management features enable instructors to not only post grades in a secure manner, but to analyze and track student activity on the site. While the instructor may view the whole class, students only see their own grades.

Residential Appraisal, FIRE 484

All real estate majors are required to take the Residential Real Estate Appraisal course and several students from other majors choose to take it. The prerequisite for the class is the
Real Estate Principles course. One of the requirements for the appraisal course is the completion of a narrative residential appraisal report. The subject property for the appraisal can be either a house of the students choosing, or one assigned by the instructor.

The Narrative Appraisal Assignment

The report itself is a fully self-contained appraisal report and typically ends up to be a fifty plus page document at its completion. This task does keep some students from enrolling in the course, however, it is the most useful portion of the class. The finished appraisal report has been the entry into many job interviews for the program’s grads, and has also been the reason many have received job offers.

A copy of the table of contents for this appraisal report is contained in the introduction of this paper. When this is presented to the student on the first day of class they realize the magnitude of the project. To help them manage their time and to insure that they don’t put it off until shortly before the due date, parts of the project have due dates throughout the semester. The regional analysis is due at the end of the fifth week of the fifteen week semester. Then the neighborhood analysis is due at the end of the sixth week, the Site Data and Description of the Improvements is due at the end of the eighth week, the Cost Approach at the end of the ninth week, the Income Approach at the end of the tenth week, and finally the Sales Comparison Approach is due at the end of the eleventh week. The total appraisal is due at the end of week fourteen.

Setting these six periodic due dates not only forces the student to get started on the project in a timely fashion, but it also results in a higher quality appraisal report for each of the students. This higher quality comes from not being under a time crunch to complete the entire report in one sitting, and from the benefits of the cooperative learning portion of the assignment. This quality improvement not only enhances their employability but also reflects positively on the Real Estate program at SCSU.

Cooperative Learning in the Assignment

At the six interim due dates the student is to bring in the appropriate completed section of the report. As an example, at the end of week five the student brings a completed regional analysis to class. The class is broken into groups of four to five students each. The group members are chosen to create groups that are as diverse as possible. The diversity hopefully crosses many lines: male/female, real estate major/non-major, international/domestic, and so on. Working in groups not only facilitates the work to be done in this particular project, but it also prepares the student for working in groups, or teams, in today’s business community.

Each group member will read the papers, or appraisal report sections, of each of the other members in their group. If there are four people in a group each member will read three other papers. After reading another group member’s paper, the student will write three supportive or positive comments about that paper. They will then write three constructive comments on how that paper might be improved. The improvement to the students’ papers will come in two ways. First of all they will receive at least nine constructive comments from their group members on
how they might improve their paper. Secondly, they will have read three other papers and possibly seen as many as nine ways that they might have treated their topic differently. Both of these inputs should allow the student to improve upon their initial effort.

This particular assignment addresses most of the basic elements of cooperative learning mentioned earlier in the paper. First of all there is a definite positive interdependence associated with the exercise. Each of the group members is dependent on the other members of the group to provide them with constructive relevant feedback that they can then incorporate into their appraisal reports. There is promotive interaction between group members, both face to face and via the use of the WebCT bulletin board. There is individual accountability in that when each set of comments is posted on the bulletin board, the name of the name of the person posting, the date and the time are all included in the post. The group members’ social skills are tested and hopefully enhanced through the process. It takes a certain amount of diplomacy to make both positive, supportive comments as well as constructive comments aimed at specific improvements that could be made in the report.

Using the WebCT in the Assignment

The Internet is utilized in the process through the posting of the comments that the students have written about each of their group members’ papers. SCSU provides access to WebCT through the university’s home page. One of the elements of WebCT is the bulletin board function. If one’s university does not have access to WebCT, many if not all of the benefits of this project can be satisfied using a similar bulletin board function.

The student goes to the class’s WebCT home page and clicks on the bulletin board icon. The instructor has preset areas within the bulletin board for each group, so if a student is in Group 1 they go to the Group 1 area of the bulletin board and post their comments about the papers of each of the other students in their group. This posting must be accomplished by a certain critical “due-by” time in order for them to receive full credit for the assignment. The bulletin board lists the time and date of each posting to create a permanent record.

The student may then go back to the bulletin board after that critical due-by time to read the comments that were made about their own paper. If the student is a “grade maximizer” they may well read the comments made about other group members’ papers as well as those made about their own. In fact there is nothing to prevent them from reading all of the comments made regarding the papers of every student in the class. Indeed, they are encouraged to do that. To put it in Dale Carnegie terms, “If you could find a way to improve your paper, you’d want to do that, wouldn’t you?”

The Links Between Cooperative Learning, On Line Learning and the Narrative Appraisal

Table I below indicates the link between Cooperative Learning, On Line Learning, and the Narrative Appraisal assignment. More specifically it illustrates how the assignment tasks, both the group work portions and the on line portions, address the basic elements of cooperative learning and promotive interaction. Each task in the assignment leads towards at least one of the basic elements of a cooperative learning exercise and at least one characteristic of promotive
interaction.

Table I- The Links

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Tasks</th>
<th>Basic Elements of Cooperative Learning</th>
<th>Promotive Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Read papers</td>
<td>Positive interdependence</td>
<td>Effort to achieve mutual goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read group postings</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Exchange resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postings timed and dated</td>
<td>Individual accountability</td>
<td>Acting in trusting and trustworthy ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Critiques</td>
<td>Social Skills</td>
<td>Provide feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read all postings</td>
<td>Group processing</td>
<td>Challenge the conclusions of others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implications

Adapting the narrative appraisal report writing process in the previously stated manner has provided students with additional feedback on their writing and has also benefitted them by getting them to task on their appraisals earlier in the term. The author believes both of these positive results have brought about the third desired result, that is a more well written appraisal report. The use of the WebCT Bulletin Board has also given students an example of how technology can work to their benefit as a tool, rather than as the focal point of an assignment.

The positive results of this experiment in a Real Estate Appraisal class have positive implications for writing assignments in other classes. The cooperative learning, or group work, aspect of the assignment is excellent preparation for the working world. Once these students graduate and get on the job, much of their work will be done in teams. Assessment surveys done of college of business graduates indicate this should be a major thrust within the college. The tactic of having pieces of the paper due for reviewal at intermittent time periods during the semester can have a positive result for the student, as well as the faculty member. The student is not able to put the entire paper off until the end of the semester, resulting in a more well written paper. This particular benefit can be applied to those papers that are of substantial length but would not apply to a shorter paper assignment. In a shorter assignment the student can be told to provide a rough draft of the paper due two days before the final paper is due. The groups can then get together and make comments on the drafts of these papers, allowing the students to make improvement for the final paper, which is due two days later. The constructive comments made by group members should allow the student to make improvements to the paper that they did not initially include. The supportive comments made by group members can have a positive effect on the student’s self esteem. Finally, the group work helps create greater classroom cohesion which can lay groundwork for greater participation in future classroom discussion.

The WebCT, or Internet bulletin board portion of the assignment, allows students to see comments on other group members’ papers in addition to the comments that are made on their own papers. From this they can see what is making, or can make, the papers of every class
member a good paper or a better paper. They have the ability to use the critiques of the four papers in their group as well as the critiques of all 35-40 papers in their class. Another benefit to the student is that they see an example of the increased use of technology as a tool. They sometimes feel that technology can only help them in technology or systems type classes.
References


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