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Breaking the Ritual: Getting Students to Participate in Discussion-based Tutorials in the Social Sciences

Ben Habib

Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia
habi0015@flinders.edu.au

The challenge for tutors in avoiding the pitfalls of the ritualised tutorial and facilitating a positive tutorial learning environment is threefold: First, less confident students should participate in class discussion. Second, confident students should be managed such that they do not monopolise class discussion, and third, students should take responsibility for their efforts in class to avoid the tutorial becoming another lecture. To do this the tutor should foster a positive learning environment and implement a class structure that facilitates wider participation by all students in the class. To participate effectively students need to be familiar with key concepts from the topic reading material. The intervention had two primary components: First, a large portion of the initial tutorial was devoted to introductory activities in which the students got to know each other. Second, subsequent tutorials began with a paired warm-up activity to get the whole class talking immediately, after which each student raised a prepared question for class discussion. Students perceived the intervention as a success in developing a positive tutorial learning environment, which helped them engage with the course content.

Keywords: tutorial, student-directed learning, deep learning.

Tutorials are the primary hands-on component of topics in international relations, within which students should develop a greater understanding of the course material through discussion with their peers. At its best, the tutorial is a place where students can cultivate a grasp of complex issues and learn to challenge accepted ideas in a reasoned manner. Yet often tutorials become ritualised monotonous lectures of little educational value. Students need to feel comfortable in their surroundings before venturing an opinion, free from fear of judgement by peers and tutor. Students often don't get to participate because one or two of their peers dominate the class. Confident students can monopolise a tutorial, turning it into a dialogue between themselves and the tutor at the expense of the rest of the class. Tutorials like this do little to help students come to grips with complex course material and give them little incentive to read the core readings, or to obtain further information beyond the set reading list.

The challenge for tutors in facilitating good tutorials is threefold: First, less confident students should participate in class discussion. Second, confident students should be encouraged not to monopolise class discussion, and third, students should take responsibility for their efforts in class. To do this the tutor should foster a positive learning environment and implement a class structure that facilitates wider participation by all students. To participate effectively students need to be familiar with key concepts from the topic reading material.

I have trialled an intervention in tutorials for the second year undergraduate course *Peace and War*—an international relations topic at Flinders University—which attempted to address these issues. The intervention had two primary components: First, the initial tutorial was devoted to introductory activities in which the students got to know each other. Second, subsequent tutorials began with a paired warm-up activity to generate class interaction, after which each student raised a prepared question for class discussion. Asking good questions can enhance the ability of students to understand complex information (Biggs, 1999, p. 61) and provides incentive for them to read the set material without resorting to coercive measures such as weekly tests, which tend to impact negatively on student enthusiasm (Schank, 1995, p. 106).

Student Engagement and Deep Learning

Kuh *et al* (2007, p. 2) and Carini *et al* (2006, p. 19) report that student engagement has a positive impact on student grades, gleaned from research based on results from the annual *National Survey of Student Engagement* in the United States. The intervention aims to increase student engagement with this in mind, based on three underlying premises. The first premise draws on a model of a tutorial built around class discussion, within which the tutor is a facilitator of class participation, inviting students to assume some control over their learning in the tutorial (Lublin, 1987, p. 6). Building an environment conducive to class discussion as a matter of process—how learning is facilitated—rather than of content (Gibbs, 1992, p. 23; Bertola & Murphy, 1994, p. 8-10). A comfortable class environment can help the tutorial become a venue for students to make judgements about the topic matter, to examine the relationships of core ideas to one another, and to perceive their world in a new and different way through dialogue (Mezirow, 1990, p. 354; 1997, p. 10).

The second premise centres on *student-directed learning* as a process whereby students are able to take the initiative in their learning, without the external direction of others in identifying their learning needs and formulating learning goals (Knowles, 1975, p. 18; Brookfield, 1985, p. 9-10; Candy, 1991, p. 6). Candy (1991, p. 9) describes student-directed learning as such:

It is perhaps useful to think of teachers and learners as occupying positions of a continuum extending from teacher-control at one extreme to learner-control at the other, where the deliberate surrendering of certain prerogatives by the teacher is accompanied by the concomitant acceptance of responsibility by the learner or learners.

This description is useful because the tutor does not abdicate control over the tutorial, but rather gives the student a degree of autonomy within a well-defined class structure.

The third premise is that an appropriate class structure fostering a degree of self-directed learning is likely to translate into a process described by Gibbs (1992, p. 2) as *deep learning*: “The student attempts to make sense of what is to be learnt, which consists of ideas and concepts. This involves thinking, seeking integration between components and between tasks, and ‘playing’ with ideas,” resulting in a more thorough and complex understanding of the subject matter. Schank (1995, p. 123) describes the process as one of *learning through failure*. Students are often road-blocked by knowledge failures in their education, where they realise they need new information to progress. The learning experience comes through acquiring new information to overcome the knowledge failure. Another variation on the same theme is Mezirow’s transformative learning through the *disorienting dilemma*, where classroom situations put in place by the teacher lead students to re-evaluate their perspective on the subject matter (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168). All three paradigms describe a learning

process leading to enhanced understanding of given information, for which the intervention described in this paper is a trigger. It is more likely to occur if students are situated within a positive emotional and motivational learning environment (Gibbs, 1992, p. 10-11).

Structured Intervention

(1) Introductory activities in the first tutorial

Students generally need to get to know their peers before they feel comfortable in sharing their opinions and taking intellectual risks. The class needs to be a safe place within which they have the confidence to share and view class discussion as a collaboration of ideas instead of a submission to judgement (Maslach, Silver, & Pole, 2001, p. 72).

Students engaged in several introductory activities in pairs during the first tutorial. Their initial task was to discuss with their partner a positive tutorial experience from previous topics. They then introduced their partner to the class, sharing their positive experiences. It is often easier to introduce someone else to a group rather than yourself, which removes some of the apprehension of a first-time meeting (Bertola & Murphy, 1994, p. 13). This activity also got the students acculturated to listening to their peers and made them more aware of the diversity of the group. Two more paired activities were conducted, in which students were asked to find a new partner and discuss a new set of questions. Answers to both questions were discussed with the whole group.

The first tutorial was largely devoted to establishing a comfortable class atmosphere instead of spending excessive time on administrative issues. One introductory activity provides only a superficial opportunity for peer bonding and is not enough to establish a comfortable environment. Investing time in the first tutorial for peer bonding activities creates an ongoing dynamic for participation in subsequent tutorials, which is an important foundation for the successful implementation of structured class activities throughout the course (Gibbs, 1992, p. 9-10; Knowles, 1975, p. 71).

(2) Short paired activity to begin each tutorial

Subsequent tutorials began with a short paired activity in which students discussed a set issue from the readings, with the aim of re-establishing a relaxed class atmosphere and getting them intellectually warmed up for the class discussion to come. This activity allowed the group to identify key points for each week's topic. Having identified the key ideas, students could move on in class discussion to their application in real-world scenarios.

(3) Each student prepares a question for class discussion

Students were instructed to each prepare a question for class discussion based on the core readings or a current event related to that week's topic. In leading the discussion students could get the answers that *they* wanted from the group. Each student would raise their question and give their opinion first, leading into an open discussion. There were two goals here: (1) to regulate class discussion to ensure that all students got to participate, and (2) by creating their own question, the students engaged more deeply with the subject matter than they otherwise would by only reading the set course materials.

Results and Student Feedback

Student perceptions of the effectiveness of the intervention were measured through two survey data sets, taken from my tutorial cohort: The first was compiled mid-semester, while the second data set was compiled through the university's official Student Evaluation of Teaching survey (SET). One dataset from the SET survey covers student respondents from all tutorials in the course, with a second dataset covering student respondents from my tutorial groups.

The Mid-Semester Survey graph (Figure 1) indicates that all students surveyed felt encouraged to participate, showing that the structured intervention of getting each student to ask a question in class discussion was well received at that time. 74 percent of students *strongly agreed*, and 22 percent *agreed*, that they felt comfortable asking questions in our tutorials, while all students broadly agreed that the tutor responded to their needs. These latter figures indicate that students felt comfortable in the learning environment that was established, vindicating the ice-breaker activities in the first class and the weekly introductory exercise.

Mid-Semester Survey Results

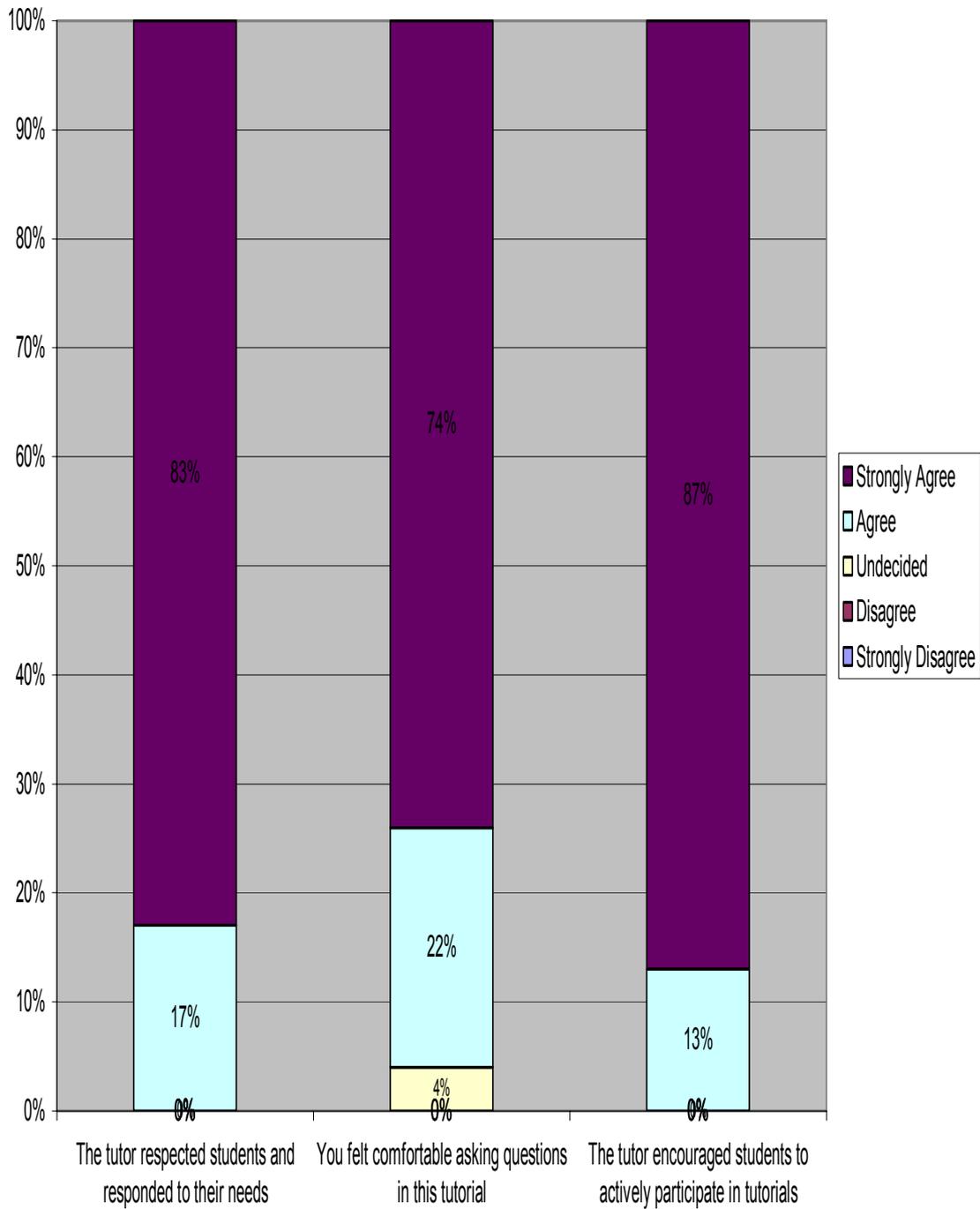


Figure 1: Mid-Semester Survey Results

SET Survey Results (Entire Course)

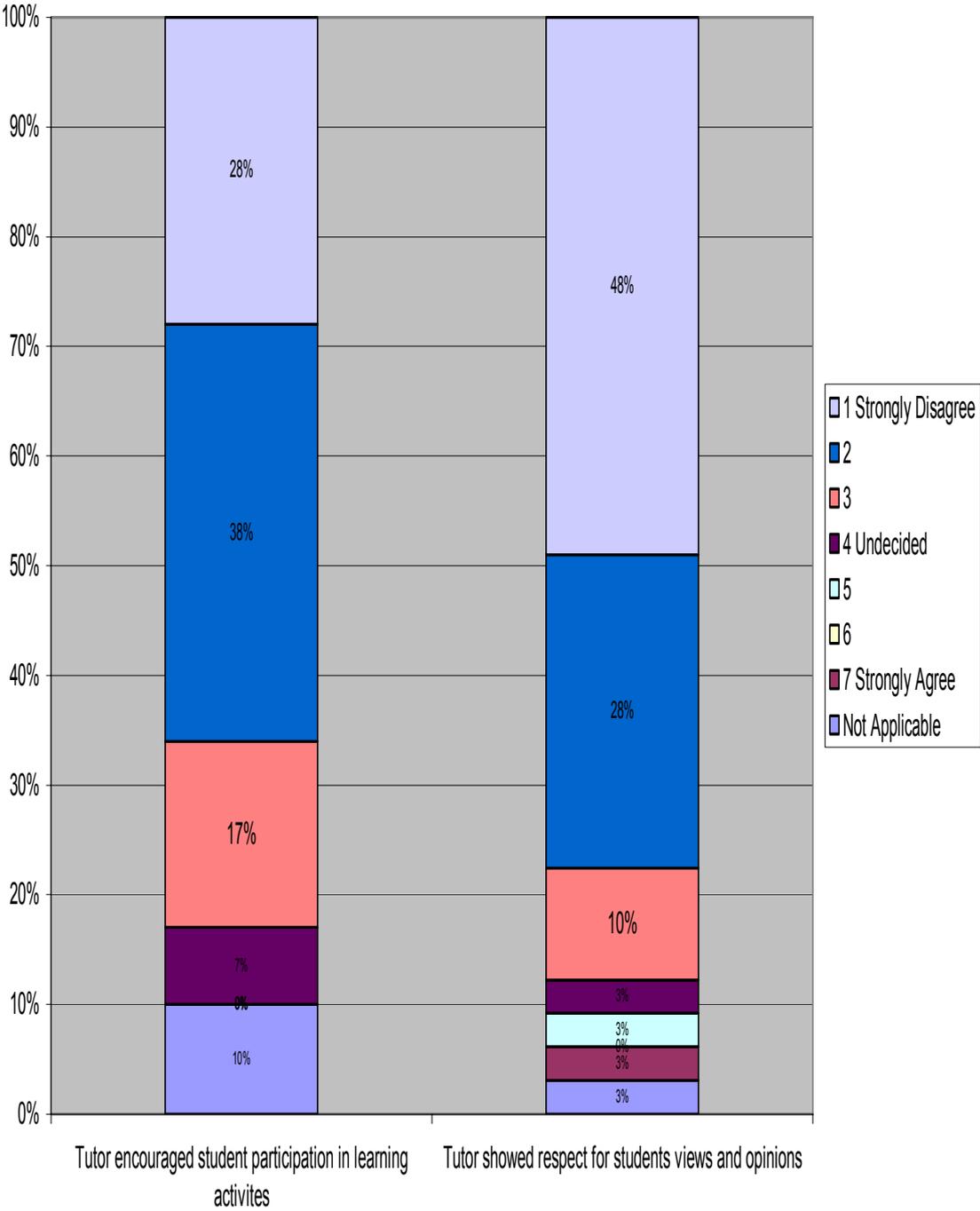


Figure 2: Student Evaluation of Teaching Survey Results – Whole Course

SET Survey Results (My Student Group)

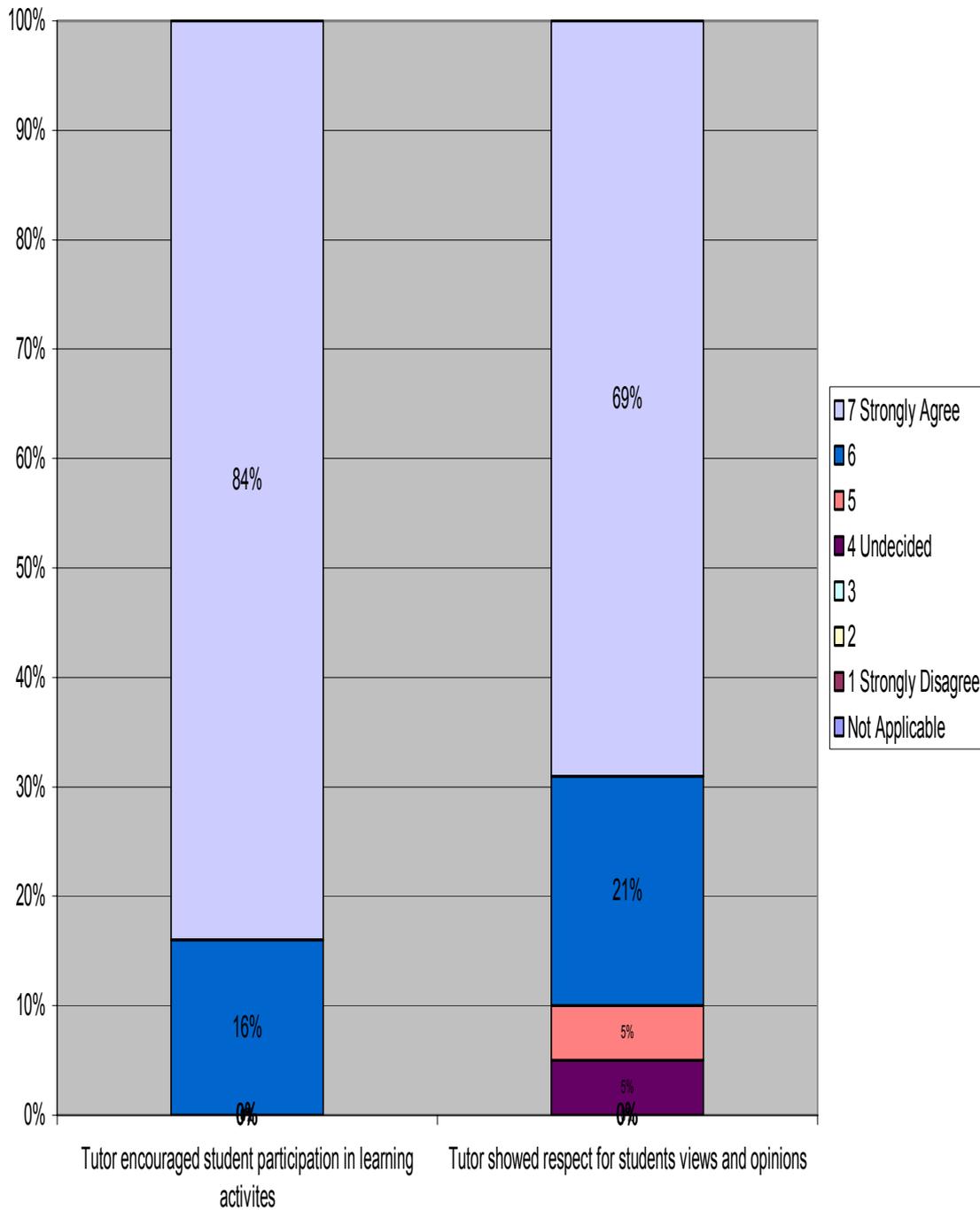


Figure 3: Student Evaluation of Teaching Survey Results – My Student Group

The SET Survey results are more revealing, as the responses of my students are compared with the student responses from the course as a whole. 28 percent of students in the whole course *strongly agreed* and 38 percent *agreed* that they felt encouraged to participate in learning activities. However, 84 percent of respondents from my student cohort *strongly*

agreed and 100 percent *broadly agreed* that they felt encouraged to participate in learning activities. 90 percent of respondents *broadly agreed* that the tutor showed respect for their views and opinion from my student group, a 14 percent increase from the overall course score for the same question.

The survey data indicates that the intervention put in place to foster a comfortable learning environment and encourage universal participation was perceived by the students as a success. In response to the question “what were the best aspects of the tutor’s teaching,” student feedback in the SET survey included the following endorsements of the intervention:

“Making sure everyone prepared a question ensured tutorial participation.”

“Encouraging us to ask questions and stimulating a discussion in tutorials.”

“He encouraged great conversation in tutorials, both relevant and interesting.”

“The tutorials were awesome as they were like an open debate, which I found really helpful as we got to hear everyone’s opinions.”

“Getting everyone involved in the tutorial by organising a question based on the readings (ensured I did the readings).”

Key Findings

The problem of getting all students to participate in discussion-based tutorials is the bane of tutors in the social sciences. Designed to move tutorials beyond the common ritualised monologue, the intervention was based on three premises: First, the quality of the tutorial as a learning experience for students would be improved by implementing a facilitative structure to classes. Second, within this structure, students would become more engaged if they could exercise some control over their learning experience. Third, the structure of the class would increase the likelihood that students could engage in a transformative learning experience.

Some students were initially resistant to preparing a question each week, but soon most realised the exercise improved their enjoyment of the class. The intervention decreased the disparity in class participation, giving the less confident students a space to contribute and be heard, while dominant students were compelled to allow space for the less confident students without having to compromise their natural flair. Through devising a question for discussion, the students generally always read the assigned readings and had to think more deeply about each week’s topic than they otherwise would have. Thus the intervention itself, involving ice-breaker activities in the first class, paired warm-up activities at the beginning of subsequent tutorials, and getting students to prepare a question for each class, were perceived by both students and myself as a success in developing a positive tutorial learning environment, which helped them engage with the course content.

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