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Facilitating active learning with international students: what worked and what didn't

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Abstract

This paper explores the efficacy of applying active learning methods in tutorials for international students. First it looks at the way that tutorials were being conducted and discusses their inadequacies and the need for change. The paper then describes some of the different activities that were used to involve the students in a more active form of learning. The positive feeling of the tutor regarding the change was confirmed by the feedback from the students to a questionnaire. The paper argues that despite the language difficulties and a tradition of rote learning, international students respond more readily to a variety of more interactive practices, but this cannot happen unless the tutor is prepared to make greater efforts to plan more innovative activities.

Dissatisfaction with the Tutor-dominated Tutorial

Many writers (Jones, et al, 1993; Braddock, et al, 1993; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Tsui, 1996; Liu, 1998; Forestier, 1998; Chan, 1999; Kember, 2000) suggest that international students respond best to passive learning since many of them are familiar with that approach in their home countries. Their uncertain grasp of the English language also means that many of them are reluctant to express their opinions freely (Cheng, 2000).

For a number of years, the author had tutored groups of Information Systems Management students at a postgraduate level. These tutorials were composed entirely of international students. The aim of the course is to enlighten students in the way that modern enterprises use information systems to help achieve their organisational goals. The tutorials were based on a number of questions supplied to the students beforehand. Usually the students failed to respond or provided inadequate answers and the tutorials ended up more like a lecture. Consequently the author was dissatisfied and realised he needed to change the way of conducting the tutorials.

Experimenting with the Active Learning Approach

Much has been written about active learning and many attempts have been made to implement it (Kolb, 1984; Gibbs, 1992; Race, 2002; Exley & Dennick, 2004). Different educational theorists and practitioners approach this need for change in slightly different ways, but basically they suggest that there is a need to make students more active in their engagement with their studies so that they have a deeper understanding of what they are learning. People such as Dewey (1938), Piaget (1970), Vygotsky (1978), Bruner (1966) and Bandura (1977) laid the philosophical basis for such an approach. Educational practitioners have based their teaching largely on such theorists. Meyers and Jones (1993) have identified elements of active learning which allow students to clarify, question, consolidate and appropriate new knowledge. Bonwell and Eison (1991) describe the characteristics of active

learning as focusing on developing skills and higher order thinking. Chickering and Gamson (1987) encouraged active learning and stated that students should talk about what they have learnt and relate it to their daily lives. These ideas are supported by Scott (2006) in a report on a survey administered by Graduate Careers Australia which affirms that most students prefer traditional university face-to-face learning and teaching but they also stipulate their appreciation of interactive rather than passive learning.

The question was how to include more active learning activities in the tutorials that would fulfil these requirements as well as increase effective learning and give the students greater enthusiasm. In an attempt to answer this question, a series of tutorials was planned for the whole semester using different active learning activities. Sometimes an activity took one week and sometimes it took more.

For active learning to occur, there was a real need for the tutor to get to know the students better (Creasey, Jarvis & Knapcik, 2009; Witt, Wheelless & Allen, 2004; Frymier, 1993; Bartram & Bailey, 2009). An important factor in providing education by means of a tutorial is that it gives the tutor an opportunity to get to know their students. In a tutorial, each student is more prominent in the eyes of the rest of the group as well as the tutor compared to a lecture-type environment. Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) have suggested that students who report strong connectedness with teachers, at all grade levels, display better learning outcomes and academic achievement than students who have instructors that are perceived to be unsupportive or threatening. The more interested a teacher appears to be in the students and their progress, the more likely they are to respond. Leong (2005) asserts this argument listing the importance of knowing one's students and what they care about as one of the positive techniques to improve students' interest in learning.

To help the tutor to know the students better in these tutorials, copies of student ID photographs were placed on a single sheet of paper, allowing the tutor to identify students until he got to know them by sight. Students were given time in the first few weeks to introduce themselves. For each activity, the composition of the groups was changed so that they had the opportunities to work with different people.

Examples of Active Learning Activities Used

A number of different exercises were trialled, partly due to some exercises suiting particular topics, and partly in an attempt to maintain a high level of student interest with a variety of activities. For example, the role of information systems (IS) managers was investigated by comparing information in the textbook with the advertisements in newspapers, magazines and the Internet. Another topic with many viewpoints was dealt with by holding a debate. Some topics lent themselves to research on the Internet provided the students have been previously taught to critically analyse the reliability of websites. Other more reflective topics lent themselves to discussion or storytelling. Some of the exercises used are outlined below.

Using advertisements

One topic was the changing role of IS managers. In the early days of information systems management when this was essentially an information technology (IT) job, the manager merely needed technical skills. Nowadays, such a manager needs multiple skills. Such executives must understand the enterprise's goals and work in partnership with other executives to use IT in such a way that the organisation's goals are achieved. They still need technical skills, but they also need people skills, project management skills, good communication skills, and the knowledge of how business works.

At the beginning of the semester, the tutorial focused on helping students to understand the skills they need to be suitable IS managers or other IS professionals. Students therefore were asked to prepare for a discussion on this topic. They were to do this by bringing to class advertisements from recent newspapers or magazines or the Internet for IS managers so that these advertisements would form the basis for a discussion. The tutorial could then have proceeded in many ways. The activity that was used required the students to present the advertisements they brought and highlight the skills required in the advertisements. From the list of these skills, they were able to see the skills they would need to develop in order to become IS managers. By the end of the tutorial, students were able to see something of the real world in which IS managers worked and thus in a practical way come to understand that IT skills alone were not enough to secure a position as an IS manager.

'Mock' job interview

Harchar (2005) highlights that a mock interview for a position is an important tool for promoting active learning. On this basis, another tutorial took the form of a 'mock' job interview. For this tutorial, the tutor prepared five job advertisements for IS professionals with a range of different skills and responsibilities. These advertisements were given to the students a week before. They were then asked to examine the advertisements to see a suitable position for which they could apply. Thus they came to class expecting that they might be interviewed for one of the positions and would take on the role of an imaginary applicant. The class was divided into groups of six, with two students acting as applicants, three forming the selection panel and the one acting as an observer and later reporting the proceedings to the rest of the class. In making the report, the observer had to justify the appointment or be critical of the decision. In this exercise, students have the opportunities to practise communication skills as an interviewer, interviewee or observer. It also encourages them to develop analytical, critical and creative skills (Harchar, 2005). The interview situation also requires them to adapt their communication according to their position in the situation.

Mini-debating

The importance of enabling students to see both sides of a controversial topic is outlined by Johnson and Johnson (1994). It is important for students to see that there are multiple perspectives on most ideas and that collaborative conflict can be productive (University of Virginia, 2006). Another activity trialled was mini-debating. The topic selected for the debate was 'Should systems designers be influenced by the suggestions of end-users or just proceed according to their own perceptions?'. There was a relevant section in the textbook the students could read, representing both sides of the issue. Students were also given links to Internet sites that explained the process of debating. So they were expected to come to the class with some idea of what debating is and also about the topic itself. To facilitate the debating process, an abbreviated video of a group of students debating was shown to the class. The class was then divided into those who supported the motion and those who opposed it and each group was given time to prepare its case. While they were doing this, another selected student prepared to do the adjudication. To reinforce a balanced view and increase further reflection on the topic, the debate was repeated the following week but with the speakers having to take the opposite view to the one they had taken before.

Storytelling

Another tutorial exercise is an activity that can be called storytelling. The tutor talked with the students about their everyday life and questioned them in order to point out that so many aspects of daily routine these days are influenced by computer systems. Most people do not realise how dependent we are these days on some form of computer systems. When anyone uses a mobile phone or a microwave or purchases a train ticket, they are using an

apparatus with a computer system. From understanding this, students can be led to reflect on how such systems can be improved, how they can be managed, and whether there are any ethical issues involved, and so forth. Students could personalise the influence of computer systems in their own lives.

Using digital images, animated pictures and video/audio clips

These days there is so much available on the Internet that the tutor can use to stimulate the class and also to clarify difficult issues, as long as copyright rules are observed. Whenever a difficult topic or concept needs to be understood by students, it can be made easier by introducing visual material, such as digital pictures, or video/audio clips. Particularly with students having language problems, they can often understand a difficult concept from a visual representation, rather than an oral explanation. This is not suggesting that a complete tutorial be made of such visual material, but that with careful planning such applications of visual stimulation can be of great use.

Tutor's Observations

As the semester proceeded, students became increasingly interested and active in tutorials. Some students who normally just sat and listened began to express their opinions. It was obvious from this that their understanding of the topics was growing. Attendance became more regular, from 50-60% to nearly always 100%. Students who were unable to attend expressed apologies, something which had never happened before. Each week there appeared to be a feeling of expectation. There was no trouble in getting students to change their groups from week to week. Interaction among the students increased. Because of the nature of the activities, the students became more comfortable with each other and had greater confidence in their ability to express their ideas. Since the student reaction seemed to be so positive, it was decided to seek student feedback on the activities made through a survey.

Student Survey

After discussion with the students about the purpose of the survey and gaining assurance that they were happy to participate, the author obtained ethics approval for this study. The students involved were international students in two separate tutorials, one with 25 students and the other with 21. All the students came from Asia except for one African-born American. They represented 16 different language groups. Most of the students had done some university studies in their home countries. As an average, each student had been learning English for 13 years. However, this varied from 6 months to 26 years.

All the students in both classes took part in the survey in their last tutorial. The responses were all anonymous.

Survey Results

When the students were asked to state their preference for the way of conducting the tutorial, that is, making a choice between their previous experience of tutor-dominated tutorials and one in which the students take an active part, 41 out of the 46 voted for the tutorial with student activity, 3 did not pass an opinion and 2 preferred the tutor-dominated tutorials.

There was a great variety of reasons students gave for preferring the more active tutorial. The answers included the following points:

- Provides greater interest
- Helps build self-confidence

- Offers more knowledge
- Broadens one's thinking
- Widens one's mind by hearing different view points
- Enables the expression of one's own opinion
- Enhances the interaction with students from different cultures
- Suggests practical application of theory
- Develops critical thinking
- Encourages students to prepare better
- Reveals student's problem to tutor

Some comments the students made are shown in Table 1. (Any incorrect language is because this is the actual language that the respondents used.)

Table 1: Student comments

'This style of tutorial gave a chance to the student to feel he knows something and the tutor to understand the student's standard of thinking or grasp of the course'.
'Each student comes up with different views, ideas, and criticisms that will give others a chance to participate and put their views along with the tutor's knowledge'.
'It helps students to gain more knowledge of the subject by having more confidence in speaking individually or in groups'.
'Unless a student takes part and expresses his point of view, he does not know whether he is right or not, and if he is wrong, he can be corrected and gain more confidence'.
'It broadens the way students think. Feedback helps the tutor to know the level of knowledge that the student has. If students take an active part, it builds the confidence'.
'I feel I am important to the tutorial. And if the tutor talks all the time, I may feel sleepy'.
'It helps to develop our communication skills and confidence'.
'Interactive tutorials help the student to grab better notions of concepts and help them relate the knowledge to real life'.

Table 2: Activities preferred by students

Mostly-liked activity/activities	No of students
General discussion	11
'Mock' job interviews	13
Organised mini-debates	19
Related newspaper and journal articles	5
Searching the Internet	3
Storytelling	1
Student presentations	2
The tutor lectures	2
Video and audio clips	17
Visiting speakers	2
All the above	2

There was varied enthusiasm for all the tutorial activities that were used, as shown in Table 2, but the organised mini-debate and the use of video/audio clips gained the highest ratings. The least popular were times when students had to listen to longer presentations such as student presentations, visiting speakers and storytelling. There is a strange anomaly here

since mini-debates rated highly. However, students all participated in the preparation for this activity and were familiar therefore with the ideas and terms that were used by those who participated in the debate. There was also a sense of competition, which helped to involve the students.

Most students indicated that they had no problem with these varied activities of presenting tutorials, but there were some criticisms. Many of these could be attributed to problems of language. For example, three students complained that there was not enough time for preparation in order to play their part in the tutorials. Two felt that their shyness made it difficult for them to take part. One student failed to see the connection between the tutorials and the future examination paper and felt that students should have been more specifically prepared for answering the examination questions.

Discussion

Based on students' responses and the tutor's own observation, several reflections are worth consideration.

The plan was to deliver a complete semester of different activities related to topics dealt with in the prescribed readings. In order to stimulate interest, the tutor tried to use a different type of activity each week. Since different people may prefer different learning activities, it was hoped that if one tutorial activity did not appeal to a particular student, then another one might.

When one plans learning activities for a whole semester, it is easy to see that different tutorials can serve different purposes and some fulfil several functions. The tutor was aware of many different ways of conducting active learning tutorials so that no claim can be made for inventing a new style of a tutorial. The problem was to make the style of the tutorial applicable to a particular topic. Many of the different learning strategies used are featured in Scott's report (2006, viii), and are among those regarded as a best aspect of learning by students in the Australia-wide survey. For example, the mini-debate encourages critical thinking as well as effective communication skills (Kennedy, 2007). The 'mock' job interviews develop data gathering skills as well as self-efficacy both in responding to interview questions and also in acting as an interviewer (Harchar, 2005). Searching the Internet also requires information gathering skills as well as using the Internet with caution (Aycock & Aycock, 2008). Storytelling especially on a collaborative basis encourages reflection on life experience and the gathering of information (Mahoney, 2007).

This is not to say that active learning is without its problems, especially in a multicultural situation. A few of the students surveyed said that they really needed more time to prepare adequately for what they were asked to do. Anything involved with reading, writing or speaking requires more time for non-native speakers unless they are specifically more efficient (Tatar, 2005). Group discussions and student presentations generally are difficult for some students in that they are not familiar with the heavily-accented voice such as some international students use. Whereas they may be able to understand a tutor who is familiar with the language, they may have difficulty interpreting what students, relatively new to the language, are trying to say. This was commented on in the survey. Active learning tutorials often demand from the tutor a greater degree of imagination, more reading, and much time spent in searching for materials (Weimer, 2003), as well as maintaining such a process over a long period of time (Fuller et al. 2000).

There was one student who was concerned about whether the tutorial was sufficiently related to the examination or not. This might have been because he or she was interested in the subject only in terms of passing the exam or because he or she was used to an education system that emphasised preparation for the exam as a major purpose (Kolb, 1984; Lee & Carrasquillo, 2006). Four students still felt more secure with the traditional lecture-based tutorial. For the previous five years, prior to these two tutorials, the tutor had taught not less than 500 Information Systems Management students. Over 95 percent of these students had passed the final exam. However, the 46 students in these two tutorials passed with higher grades.

Limitations of This Study

This survey data showed that 41 of these 46 students (over 89%) preferred the active learning approach to the traditional teacher-dominated approach. However, the findings would have been more credible if the questionnaire had asked students to compare the tutorials' methods used with those used in their former studies in their home countries. It would also have been more conclusive if one could have followed the students' progress in later studies and see if they had continued to apply the skills and study habits they had acquired as a result of these tutorials. Fuller et al. (2000) emphasise that whilst the depth of understanding as a result of active learning techniques is difficult to assess objectively, it may accumulate over time with the consistent use of interactive methods.

Conclusion

In this particular situation and with these particular groups of students, the restructured tutorials were effective in that two groups of rather passive students became excited about their learning and anxious to participate in their class activities. This raises the question of whether they actually learned more effectively or whether they just enjoyed themselves more. The purpose of active learning must be more than just having a good time. At a basic level the purpose is to produce more effective learning. Certainly in these tutorials, the students attended well, prepared well, showed intelligent perceptions of the topics in their discussions and finally passed the subject at a higher level.

The students in these tutorials were all from non-English speaking countries, studying in Australia. The length of time they had been using English as means of expression varied and their educational background was different. The problem of the language is real in such tutorials. The students responded better when the language used was relatively simple and when jargon terms were reduced to plain English. This was reinforced by the fact most of the talking in these tutorials was done by students themselves. Their ability to understand each other was made more difficult by the fact the students came from different countries and spoke with different accents. Yet with the encouragement of patience and tolerance, the situation improved as the semester went on.

Not everyone in the tutorials was enthusiastic about this method of learning. Some who came from countries where the emphasis is on rote-learning expressed their dissatisfaction. They felt that they were not really learning unless they were taking notes of what the tutor had to say with the expectation that they would have to regurgitate it in the forthcoming exam. This is not to suggest that there is no place for teacher-directed learning in such tutorials, but it is done for a particular purpose and usually doesn't take very long. If students grew up using a particular style of learning, they can be suspicious and mistrustful of a different approach. They may even be resentful. However, their attitude could change if they find the new method is increasing their interest and understanding and meeting assessment criteria.

There are many different ways to enable students to be more active in tutorials (Revell & Wainwright, 2009). No single approach will suit every individual student. However, by using a range of different approaches, the needs of a variety of students can be met (Healey & Roberts, 2004). The hope is that if one approach does not succeed, then another one will. So the needs of as many students as possible are satisfied.

Satisfying a variety of needs takes time and creativity. Both students and tutors need to be on good terms with each other. Students need to make an effort both to be prepared for the coming tutorial and to play an active part in it. Although the term 'active learning' is used, it also requires tutors to be active as they have to be ready for unexpected situations and questions (Weimer, 2003). Tutors need to consider not only what they are presenting but also how to best present it.

From this experience, the author feels that a greater use of active learning should be encouraged in tutorials. Certainly these groups of students were energised by such methods and grew enthusiasm for and enjoyment of their studies. Surely enthusiastic and interested students are likely to improve in their capacity to learn. However, this is not without effort.

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Appendix - Survey

Questionnaire Relating to Tutorials in 'Information Systems Management'

Answers confidential—your identification will not be revealed in this survey—please do not write your student ID or name down on the paper

1. What is your country of origin?

2. What is the language you speak at home with your families?

3. For how many years have you been learning English?

4. What is your age? Please circle the appropriate age group

- a. 20-25
- b. 25 -30
- c. over 30

5. Where did you obtain your first degree (university and country)?

6. How many subjects (including this semester) have you studied at this current university?

7. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your interest in this subject?

8. Which of the following style of tutorial do you prefer?

- a. The tutor talks much all the time
- b. Students take an active part

Why do you prefer this style?

9. In the following list of tutorial activities, please tick those that you find helpful and put a cross besides those that you find unhelpful.

- a. The tutor lectures
- b. General discussion
- c. Organised mini-debates
- d. Video and audio clips
- e. Related newspaper and journal articles
- f. Student presentations
- g. Storytelling

- h. Visiting speakers
 - i. Searching the Internet
 - j. 'Mock' job interviews
 - k. Any other, please name the style
-

10. From the above list, write down the activity/activities you like most.

11. Write down any activity/activities that you do not like and state why.

12. Do you have any particular problem with tutorials in which students are asked to participate? Please state why?

13. If you prefer student participation, how do you think it helps you and why is this?

14. Make any comments you like about the way you think tutorials in this subject could be improved to particularly attract international students
