

# LAS advisers as virtual tutors: A report on an interactive online writing course for undergraduate students

**Chi Baik**

The University of Melbourne  
[cbaik@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:cbaik@unimelb.edu.au)

**Damian Sweeney**

The University of Melbourne  
[dsweeney@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:dsweeney@unimelb.edu.au)

*Abstract: This year the Language and Learning Skills Unit at the University of Melbourne launched its first tutor-moderated interactive online writing course for undergraduate students. This was developed and facilitated by the Unit's Language and Academic Skills Advisers (LAS) advisers and was part of the University's Academic Interactive Resources portal (AIRport). The course ran over four weeks and consisted of seven modules aimed at helping undergraduate students understand the conventions and processes of academic writing. Each module provided information, examples and interactive exercises on features of academic writing, and gave students the opportunity to submit written tasks to a 'virtual tutor'. The evaluation process involved analysing student submissions, administering an end-of-course questionnaire and obtaining detailed feedback from LAS advisers. This paper explores the issues and difficulties faced by the LAS advisers in developing and conducting the interactive writing course. These issues include: developing accessible materials and activities with a high level of interactivity to promote active learning; meeting the needs of students from a range of disciplines; and providing useful and timely feedback. The paper discusses strategies used by the LAS advisers in attempting to address these issues and it outlines the lessons learned. The key implication is the need to engage in continued professional development in the areas of online materials design and effective online communication. The paper concludes by describing the evaluation process and presenting a summary of the student feedback on the first course.*

**Key words:** *online learning, interactivity, academic writing, feedback,*

## Introduction

The past few years have seen a significant increase in the use of the Internet for online course delivery in higher education (Savenye, Olina, & Niemczyk, 2001; Elgort, Marshall, & Mitchell, 2003), as well as an increase in the demands for flexible delivery of language and academic support services (Kokkin & Stevenson, 2004). In response to this, the Equity, Language and Learning Programs Department at the University of Melbourne has recently launched its Academic Interactive Resources portal ('AIRport'). AIRport contains a wide range of online resources on transition, language and academic study skills. It also offers an online tutor-moderated short course on academic writing for undergraduate students.

The aim of AIRport is to provide a web-based delivery of transition, language and academic skills support that corresponds in quality to that provided in face-to-face settings. One of the main benefits of this type of online support, is that it allows asynchronous provision of services, which is essential for students who have limited time to access resources and who may expect support outside of our traditional office hours (McInnis & Hartley, 2002).

This paper outlines the objectives and key features of AIRport's tutor-moderated online academic writing course. It discusses the issues and challenges faced by the LAS advisers in developing and delivering the course, and it reflects on the lessons learned.

## AIRport: an overview

In order to meet the different needs of an increasingly large and diverse student cohort, AIRport has three portals or 'gates' with different functions and purposes (see Figure 1):

1. Gate 1 consists of a series of stand-alone interactive activities and resources on various aspects of transition, academic writing, and study skills. All the resources in this gate are self-access and provide automated feedback to the user.
2. Gate 2 includes the tutor-moderated short course: 'Developing Academic Writing'. This gate also provides additional resources on essay writing as well as a 'Writing Lounge'.
3. Gate 3, which is currently being developed in collaboration with first-year subject co-ordinators, will contain resources on faculty-specific academic skills.

This paper focuses on the Gate 2 tutor-moderated short course in academic writing.

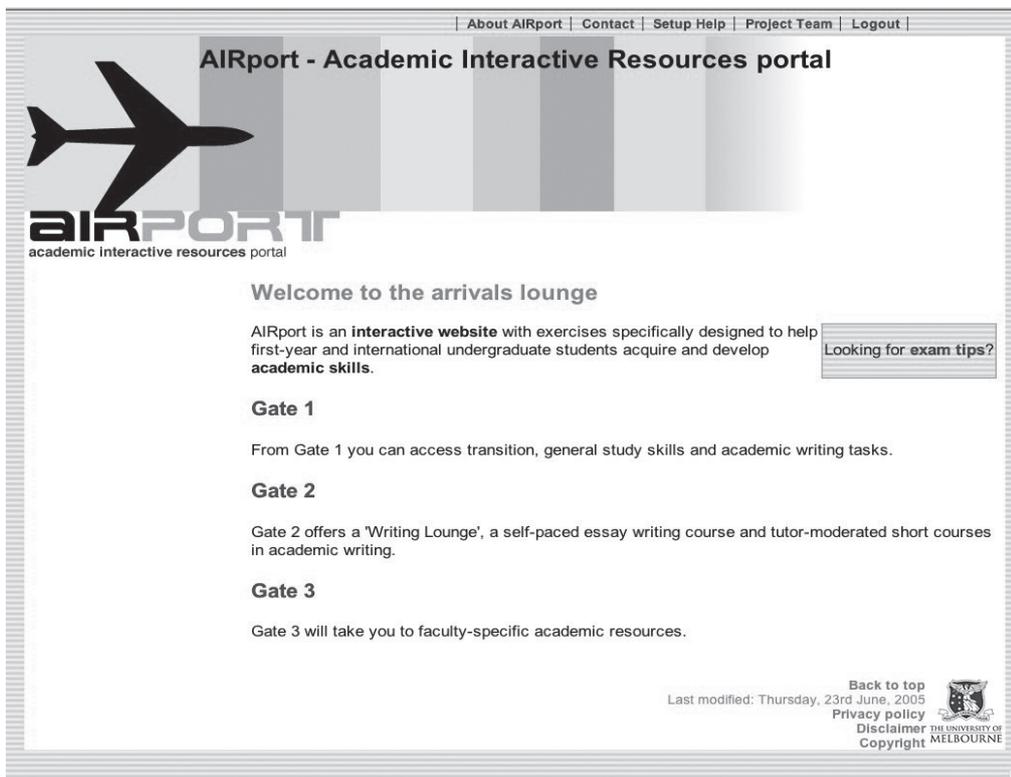


Figure 1: Academic Interactive Resources portal home page

The tutor-moderated writing course offers two streams: 'Developing Academic Writing' and 'Developing Academic Writing (ESL)'. Students are required to enrol in the course and then complete a series of lessons over a four-week period. Although the structure and topics covered in the two streams are the same, they differ slightly in content to cater for the different needs of the two target cohorts: NESB and ESB students. Both streams are moderated by LAS advisers, with an English language specialist being assigned to the NESB stream. At the time of writing, the course had been delivered twice in 'pilot mode' with 14 students participating in the first pilot and 26 students participating in the second.

The topics for the seven lessons in the course are:

1. Features of academic writing
2. Planning to write
3. Critical analysis
4. Structuring your writing
5. Effective use of paragraphs
6. Incorporating and acknowledging sources
7. Revising and editing

Each lesson begins with an introductory screen providing a brief explanation and orientation to the particular aspect of academic writing being presented. Our aim in the introductory screen is to provide students with sufficient context to see 'the bigger picture' and to encourage them to think critically about where this particular aspect of writing fits within the process of writing an academic assessment task. In most lessons, short authentic

examples with text commentary are provided followed by an interactive exercise with automated feedback. To complete a lesson, students submit a written response to an extended text exercise, where they further practise the skills introduced in the lesson. This text is then emailed to the relevant tutor who provides individualised feedback to the student via return email. Figure 2 shows an exercise from lesson three ('Critical Analysis'), in which students are asked to compare two paragraphs and identify examples of analytical language.

The screenshot shows a web interface for 'GATE 2 - Short courses and writing lounge'. At the top right, there are links for 'Feedback' and 'Logout'. A 'BOARDING PASS' graphic is visible in the top right corner. The main content area is titled 'Lesson 3 - Critical analysis' and 'Exercise 2. Identifying critical analysis'. Below the title, there is a paragraph of text explaining critical analysis. The exercise prompt asks students to identify which paragraph demonstrates critical analysis and to explain why. Two text boxes, 'Text 1' and 'Text 2', are provided for comparison. A navigation menu on the left includes links for 'AIRport Home', 'Gate 2 Home', 'Writing Lounge', 'Essay Writing Course', 'Developing Academic Writing', and lessons one through seven. The bottom right corner of the page notes 'Adapted from O'Shea (1996)'.

Figure 2: Lesson 3 Exercise 2: Identifying critical analysis

Although the online writing course encourages a sequential path through the lessons, this sequence is not enforced. This gives the student flexibility and control in how they approach the lessons. In fact, there have been several students who have completed the entire course in one sitting, while others have used the full four weeks. Comments and feedback from students suggest that they value this feature of the course; however, some advisers have expressed concern that allowing students to complete all the exercises at once leaves little time for reflection between lessons. This issue is discussed further in the section 'Issues and Challenges'.

## Developing the online writing course

The course materials were developed by a small team of LAS advisers in close collaboration with an instructional designer. Although most of the materials and tasks were written specifically for the online course, some of our text examples were taken and modified from The Macquarie University's 'Writing Gateway' under a mutual agreement of

resource-sharing. In all stages of the development process, we considered two important factors in effective online learning: interactivity and accessibility.

### **Interactivity vs. Accessibility**

It is now widely recognized that interactivity is a key factor in effective online learning (e.g., Clerehan, Turnball, Moore, Brown, & Tuovinen, 2003; Hedberg, 2003; Khoo, 2004; Lander, 1999). Interactive exercises allow learners to engage actively with the materials and assume some control over their learning. Interactivity also involves decision-making and thus a deeper approach to learning (Manathunga, 2002). In trying to make our writing course highly interactive, we were concerned with how we could best design and structure the course material to encourage active student participation and engagement (Hedberg, 2003). We aimed to do this by ensuring that the course materials and activities:

- support learner engagement;
- are relevant to the learning context – that is, reflect the types of language and academic skills students would have to apply in studies at university;
- challenge students to build on their existing knowledge and develop their own understanding; and
- provide practice and opportunities to learn from feedback (Boud & Prosser, 2002).

In addition to interactivity, the other equally important consideration in course design and development is the issue of accessibility. The term ‘accessibility’ implies the ‘global requirement for access to information by individuals with different abilities, requirements and preferences, in a variety of contexts’ (Stephanidis, Akoumianakis, Sfyarakis, & Paramythis, 1998, p.3). It is important to note here that accessibility problems are not confined to users with disabilities, but can also arise from the nature of the tasks, as well as the technological platforms and devices used to access information.

In developing the materials for the AIRport short course, our focus was to produce materials with the highest levels of accessibility. To achieve this, we made a design choice to create a text-based site. This meant that we were restricted in the types of visual elements we could include in the material (e.g., diagrams, charts, arrows, shading, etc.), and this caused considerable frustration among the writing team as these types of visual elements had frequently been used to great effect in our face-to-face teaching.

The writing team was also restricted in the types of interactive ‘tools’ we could use for our activities. These included ‘pop-ups’, animations and roll-over buttons. According to our instructional designer, animations can present accessibility problems for students who do not have the correct plug-in or who have slow internet connections, and roll-over buttons which rely on JavaScript can cause problems for certain browsers.

These restrictions raised concerns amongst some LAS advisers who argued that without the ‘flashy’ interactive tools and animations commonly used on the Internet, AIRport would be visually unattractive and unappealing for students. This issue was discussed in numerous development meetings, and questions were raised about whether we should ‘relax’ some of our restrictions to make the site more ‘inviting’ to students.

Although the discussion has remained open, we have – at least for now – decided to continue with the highly accessible text-based site. There are two important reasons for this: firstly, as equity of access for students at the University is part of our Unit's remit, we should strive to be the standard bearers for accessible interactive content within the University; and secondly, it is possible – albeit very challenging – to develop engaging, useful materials that are both interactive and highly accessible.

## **Issues and challenges**

### **Content issues**

Linked to the issue of accessibility, a major challenge in writing materials for the online course was the requirement to develop materials in 'viewable chunks of information' (Savenye et al., 2001, p.377). Given that young students do not like reading long texts on the web that require frequent scrolling (Nielsen, 2005), we had to ensure that our text examples were not only engaging, but concise and succinct as well. One strategy in dealing with this challenge was to present an outline of the text (e.g., main points of each paragraph), or part of the text (e.g., the introduction and conclusion of an essay), and provide a link to the full text. Students could then decide whether to read the longer, complete text or move on to the next activity.

Another issue faced by the LAS advisers in developing the course materials concerned the generic nature of the content. Our main challenge was developing generic materials that were not so 'generalised' that students would see them as being unrelated to their area of study and thus irrelevant to their needs (Ramsden, 1992). This would not only affect the level of student interest and engagement with the materials, but also their motivation for continuing the course. The writing team tried to address this issue in some exercises by providing students with a choice of topics from various disciplines. For example, the submission exercise in Lesson 2: 'Planning to Write', includes topics in Anthropology, Media/Cultural Studies, Economics, Health, History, Education, Psychology and Science.

This issue will hopefully be resolved by 'Gate 3' of AIRport. This gate, which is currently in the planning stage, will provide discipline-specific resources for students and will be developed in close collaboration with first-year subject coordinators from various faculties.

### **Pedagogical issues**

As mentioned earlier in the paper, concerns have been raised by several LAS advisers about the pedagogical integrity of allowing students to complete all seven lessons in the writing course in one sitting – that is, before receiving any feedback from the tutors. This seems to be a valid concern considering that one of the recognized advantages of asynchronous modes of communication is that the time delays that are allowed – between a message being received and a response being generated – enables time for reflection on the topic being discussed (McLoughlin & Luca, 2000; Jackson, 2000). By allowing students to complete all modules at once, without waiting for tutor feedback, are we in fact inadvertently encouraging bad, non-reflective learning behaviour? Should we be insisting that students only move on to the next lesson once they have received the tutor's comments?

Some argue that online learners should be given control over the 'pace, sequence and form of the instruction' (Lander, 1999), and that one of the main advantages of the online environment is that students 'find their own paths through materials' (Clerehan et al., 1999, p. 3). In the case of online resources and activities with automated feedback, we agree with this argument, and in fact, this is the theoretical underpinning of Gate 1 in AIRport. However, when trying to meet the needs of first-year university students, we believe that an online writing course which focuses on the process of writing, should be essentially linear in the sense that students are guided or scaffolded in their learning to progress from one lesson to the next (Manuel, 2001). This approach would still allow considerable student control within each lesson and it would still require a high degree of self-directed learning.

### **Communication skills: giving useful feedback**

Another issue that has been raised by several tutors is the extremely demanding nature of 'teaching' by giving feedback to students via email. The first issue concerned the content of our email message. Questions were asked, such as: How much detail should we provide? Should we use questions to elicit a 'better' response from students (as we would in face-to-face interaction)? To what extent should we 'correct' or highlight English language errors? In a face-to-face tutorial, we could point out common errors in language usage or grammar and ask the students to 'self-correct', but this proved to be much more difficult to do using an asynchronous form of communication.

Generally, the length and content of the tutors' feedback depended on the quality of the students' responses, and students were often asked to rethink the problem and 'try again'. Sometimes tutors gave hints to students, especially when it was clear that they needed more support in completing the tasks. We were also mindful of the fact that our feedback should prompt students to think about how they could improve, 'not just what to improve' (Turner, 2004, p. 32).

The second challenge in providing feedback to students concerned the style of our writing. It was clear from the first week of the course that being a 'virtual tutor' required a range of different communication skills (Barker, 2002). As online tutors, we had to be very careful about how we constructed our message to minimize possibilities for misunderstanding (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004). We not only had to consider the possibility that some of our expressions may be unfamiliar to our NESB students, but we also had to consider the tone of our message and the different ways meaning could be interpreted. Added to this was the challenge of providing meaningful feedback – the type that leads to critical thinking and deeper learning – in a concise, succinct and unambiguous way.

Thirdly, questions were raised by the ESL tutors as to how we could check whether students had understood the feedback given: 'How do we know and how can we check whether students have understood our point'? In face-to-face teaching, we check understanding by asking questions and we can often 'read' the students' body language and facial expressions to see if they are confused. In an asynchronous online environment where all communication is done in writing, we could no longer rely on our traditional teaching techniques for checking understanding and clarifying meaning.

## **Time demands and workload**

Linked closely to the challenges of providing useful feedback is the issue of time. The LAS 'virtual tutors' in the two pilot courses commented that providing feedback online was more time consuming than face-to-face interaction. This was particularly the case for the tutors in the NESB stream as they had to take more care in constructing their comments so that meaning was clear and unambiguous.

There were also issues with the timeliness of feedback given to the students. Initially, we set a maximum response time of three days to provide feedback on students' submissions; however, we soon found this to be problematic as there was no way of controlling when the students submitted their responses. We could receive one or two submissions in one week and 18 –20 the next. This created problems with planning and time management, particularly for part-time staff, since online tutoring was only one small part of our work as LAS advisers. In addition to being 'virtual tutors' in an online course, we had other teaching responsibilities in faculty-specific short courses and generic workshops, and we faced continuous pressure to meet the growing demand for individual tutorials.

Since the first two pilot courses, we have tried to address this issue by assigning tutors to students as they enrol in the course, with a maximum number of five students per tutor at any one time.

## **Implications**

### **Professional Development**

One of the main implications of the increased demand for online language and academic support is the need for continued professional development in some of the key online competencies as identified by Salmon (2003, p. 54):

- Understanding of online process
- Technical skills
- Online communication skills

The importance of staff development for online tutors has been emphasized by numerous authors (Salmon, 2003; Bennett & Marsh, 2002; Barker, 2002). This is particularly important for the LAS advisers in our unit, as most of us are new to online tutoring and do not have the 'background as online learners upon which to draw' (Bennett & Marsh, 2002, p.14). What is clear from our experience as tutors in the AIRport writing course is that we cannot simply apply traditional face-to-face ways of teaching and giving feedback to an online environment; we must also consider the teaching and learning processes involved (Bennett & Marsh, 2002).

In addition to this, LAS advisers need ongoing professional development opportunities to improve our skills in writing materials for the online learning environment. Although much knowledge and 'know-how' has been gained through the process of developing and delivering the AIRport writing course, we would benefit from a continued, more comprehensive approach to professional development. Such an approach would address

the issues and challenges that arise in all stages of our work as virtual tutors – from designing materials, to writing accessible and interactive activities, and to improving our online communication skills. After Barker (2002, p.12), we suggest that such training should be delivered electronically to provide more experience and practice in the online learning and teaching environment.

### **Supporting online learning**

Another implication of the increasing demand for LAS advisers to work as ‘virtual tutors’ is the need to explore ways in which we can support students to learn effectively online. This is an important issue considering that the role of a student in an online course is quite different to the role he/she usually takes in a classroom learning environment. In an online course, students are more responsible for their learning (Savenye et al., 2001); they are required to take more of an ‘autonomous stance’ and become- self-directed learners (Manuel, 2001, p. 226).

The LAS advisers in our Unit have tried to support students to develop their independent learning skills by: giving students learning choices; offering ‘tips’ on how to approach the online course materials; providing links to resources on study skills such as time and task management; and referring them to other relevant online resources and activities. While these are useful ways of supporting student learning, we believe that we also need to identify more specific strategies and techniques to facilitate effective online learning. Admittedly, some of us are quite new to online learning and have not paid enough attention to developing our own skills in this area. If we are to provide effective support to students learning in an online environment, perhaps we first need to build our own experience as online learners – that is, participate as a student in an online course. Whilst this would require a considerable time commitment on our part, it would certainly help us to gain a better understanding of the specific challenges and difficulties faced by our online students. This would inform all aspects of our work as virtual tutors – from developing the course materials, to providing useful feedback, and to supporting students to develop their own online learning skills.

### **Evaluations**

Participants in the first two pilot courses completed online questionnaires about the courses. Fourteen students participated in the first pilot course and 26 students participated in the second pilot. Every student who completed the course (about half the cohort) submitted an evaluation. One student completed the questionnaire before finishing the course.

The questionnaire consisted of seven multiple-choice questions and three free-text response questions (see appendix). Tables 1 and 2 show the summaries of the evaluation results from the first two pilot courses.

|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree  | Strongly disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|-----------|-------------------|
| 1. The short course was helpful  | 62.5%          | 37.5% | 0         | 0                 |
| 2. The short course met my expectations  | 37.5%          | 37.5% | 25%       | 0                 |
| 3. The online adviser's comments were helpful                                    | 13%            | 87%   | 0         | 0                 |
| 4. The online adviser identified ways I could improve my academic skills         | 0              | 62.5% | 37.5%     | 0                 |
| 5. I have more confidence in my academic skills as a result of this short course | 12.5%          | 75%   | 12.5%     | 0                 |
| 6. The lessons covered topics that were relevant to me                           | 37.5%          | 62.5% | 0         | 0                 |
| 7. The time available to complete the course was:                                | 75% Right      |       | 25% Short |                   |

*Table 1: Pilot 1 - Summary of evaluations*

|  | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. The short course was helpful  | 44%            | 56%   | 0        | 0                 |
| 2. The short course met my expectations  | 22%            | 78%   | 0        | 0                 |
| 3. The online adviser's comments were helpful                                    | 22%            | 78%   | 0        | 0                 |
| 4. The online adviser identified ways I could improve my academic skills         | 33%            | 67%   | 0        | 0                 |
| 5. I have more confidence in my academic skills as a result of this short course | 11%            | 89%   | 0        | 0                 |
| 6. The lessons covered topics that were relevant to me                           | 11%            | 78%   | 0        | 0                 |
| 7. The time available to complete the course was:                                | 100% Right     |       |          |                   |

*Table 2: Pilot 2 - Summary of evaluations*

As the evaluation summaries show, the vast majority of respondents were positive about the structure of the course and the feedback from the online advisers. One hundred per cent of the participants 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the course was helpful, relevant, and that the advisers' comments were helpful. Although these initial results are pleasing, we recognise the need to investigate reasons for some students not completing the course.

## What next?

After numerous meetings with the LAS advisers who moderated the first two pilot courses, several changes were recommended:

- Revise instructions to the submission exercises to ensure clarity and avoid confusion. Some students' responses to certain tasks showed that they had not fully understood the task requirements. After the task was explained to them in more detail however, they were able to complete the task;
- Alter the expected response time for feedback from 'a few days' to 'within a week';
- Have a 'rolling enrolment' system so that students can enrol in the course at any time of the year, rather than during fixed periods in the semester; and
- Ensure that students are only able to complete an evaluation form once they have completed the course.

It was recommended that these changes be implemented before the commencement of Semester 2, 2005.

It was also concluded that ongoing evaluation and discussions with students and staff are needed to ensure that the writing course continues to be relevant and useful to the students. We also need to investigate the reasons why students did not complete the course: Were the tasks too difficult? Did the students lack the skills to engage in online learning? Did the content appear to be too generic and thus irrelevant for their discipline? The answers to these questions will inform our decision on what aspects of the course need to be changed or improved to meet the needs of our diverse student cohort.

## Conclusion

Providing online language and academic support for a large and diverse student cohort has been both interesting and challenging for the LAS advisers at the University of Melbourne. We believe that the AIRport writing course is a valuable resource for undergraduate students. It contains materials that are challenging enough to keep students interested and motivated in learning (Hedberg, 2003), and it scaffolds student learning through a range of interactive exercises (Manathunga, 2002). The main challenges in developing and delivering the course have been writing materials with the highest levels of interactivity and accessibility, and providing meaningful and timely feedback. The most important implication for LAS advisers working in an online environment is the need for continued professional development – through participating in an online training program, engaging in facilitated online discussions, conducting research in online learning issues, or by participating in a tutor-moderated course as an online learner – as 'without staff development, nothing is likely to happen beyond pilot schemes' (Salmon, 2003, p.80).

# Appendix

## Online Evaluation form

Gate 2 Home

Writing Lounge  
Essay Writing Course  
Developing Academic Writing  
Developing Academic Writing (ESL)

### Congratulations on finishing the course

Please spend a few minutes to complete the following questions so we can improve the course for future students.

1. The short course was helpful  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
2. The short course met my expectations  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
3. The online adviser's comments were helpful  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
4. The online adviser identified ways I could improve my academic skills  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
5. I have more confidence in my academic skills as a result of this short course  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
6. The lessons covered topics that were relevant to me  
 Strongly agree  Agree  Disagree  Strongly disagree
7. Would you do another online course with a similar format?  
 Yes  No
8. Would you recommend this course to other students?  
 Yes  No
9. The time available to complete the course was  
 Too long  A good length  Too short
10. Please describe the best parts of the course:
11. Please describe the worst parts of the course:
12. Do you have any suggestions for more courses, different content, anything else?

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