



## STUDENTS

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Short articles (around 600 words), news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions of particular relevance to students are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola\_Hills@hotmail.com

# How I would like to learn about psychology

CHRISTINE HANSON'S winning entry in the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network student essay competition.

It doesn't matter how good the university is. It doesn't matter how good the course is. The best subjects can become more boring than watching last week's cheese slowly going mouldy if they aren't taught with enthusiasm and vigour. Psychologists are lucky we are told. It's a dynamic, multidisciplinary subject, drawing information from across realms to yield an all-encompassing picture of the human mind and behaviour. And, with these promises firmly rooted in the minds of fresh undergraduates, grows an expectation that these qualities will become apparent in the ways they are taught and learn.

The most effective methods of learning do not necessarily have to be new and fresh: rather, interesting but accessible, useful but fun. However, this does not mean to say that the older traditional methods wouldn't benefit from an overhaul. Lectures are an integral part of the university experience, along with the dwindling student loan and acquiring traffic cones, but they are perhaps most at risk for being just plain dull. The lectures that provide the best learning experience are those that are clear and comprehensive, explained first in lay terms and becoming gradually more complicated and specialised throughout. When bombarded with too much information at once there is a danger of students becoming swamped in detail and disappearing in a quagmire of bewilderment and confusion. Clearly organised handouts with discrete sections are invaluable for revision later, and those with short focused revision questions at the end allow the braver students to test their understanding.

Although university requires self-

### Smaller group sizes encourage participation but, if too small, may reduce lively discussion and debate

motivation and commitment to work, learning can be greatly enhanced by peers, not just within a year, but between years as well. It is perhaps regrettable that when entering many psychology departments some form of network isn't systematically laid down connecting the previous years with the new. Such a scheme would strengthen bonds between the years and those seeking support with revision topics, exam techniques and general queries would have an additional source of information who can fully sympathise with their plight.

Within years, the potential to learn through teamwork and discussion is huge. Failing that, the sense of solidarity felt when everyone is lost at sea over the same topic reassures us that we are at least all in the same boat. Perhaps the most fantastic medium for this yet is the online forum hosted by the departmental website. With assessment deadlines looming, the number of people leaving desperate pleas for help starts rising, but most wonderfully, so do the replies. The fear of asking a silly question is removed, and all users benefit.

A stark contrast to this however, is the regular tutor group meeting. An open question to a group of about 12 students, but no takers. Everyone sits there, staring at the floor, 'please don't ask me' radiating from their demeanour. But why? Not inconceivably, large tutorial groups make it easy to hide, or a particularly articulate student may unintentionally dominate the discussion. For a good tutor this might not be a problem, but there are other things that can also drastically improve the tutorial experience. Smaller group sizes encourage everyone to participate, and the chance to contribute without intimidation. This has been demonstrated when splitting larger tutorial groups up for the purpose of presentations for example, yielding a more balanced input from everyone. Equally, tutorial groups don't benefit from being too small, as then this removes the element of lively discussion and debate. Back in the tiny sixth form I left behind the average class size was six, allowing for considerable individual contribution, group work, organised debates, and informative question-and-answer sessions. Although harder to apply in a university setting, there is the added bonus that classes can be shuffled round regularly, adding communication skills, adaptability and flexibility to the list of plus points.

Many courses include compulsory research hours, participating in current research being conducted within the department. Interestingly, some prospectuses fail to mention this and it is hardly surprising to find that students fall into two distinct camps regarding research participation. There are those that see it as an advantage, a useful insight and a valid experience of research from the guinea pig's point of view. And then there are those that reluctantly give their consent and sit there begrudgingly, mumbling about the validity of using psychology students in research. The role of research participation is far too intrinsic to be completely ignored, but perhaps it could be optional, with other alternatives also offered; an extended essay on research methods, additional research tutorials, or seminars?

For other shortlisted entries in the Higher Education Academy Psychology Network student essay competition, see [tinyurl.com/9qrt7](http://tinyurl.com/9qrt7).

To contribute to the work of the Network in improving the psychology learning experience, contact Annie Trapp on [a.trapp@psych.york.ac.uk](mailto:a.trapp@psych.york.ac.uk).

It is important to remember that not all psychology students go on to work in scientific research and the experience is more useful for some than others.

Ultimately left to last: statistics. Seemingly not enjoyed by anyone, bar those people who enjoy knowing the probability that your computer and not theirs will crash in the next exam. The interaction of the poor stigma attached to stats and the dry nature usually adopted to teach it makes it dull and difficult. This needs to be overcome, perhaps with active participation in collecting data, clear succinct summaries, flow charts and diagrams. Something that's easy to dip back into is imperative, as students will be returning to their stats notes throughout the duration of their degree.

In conclusion, the best learning experience for psychology at university is dependent upon the combination of innovative ideas and traditionally proven methods, contributing to an appealing, supportive environment that encourages students to learn. It should start plainly,

becoming incrementally complex, with structured accompanying notes, but always allowing students the freedom of discussion, review and interpretation. Work as an individual, but also as part of a group should be emphasised, and support drawn from a variety of sources, including online assistance. Learning doesn't have to be monotonous. It can be as rich and diverse as psychology itself, and only when the students say it's good is it truly so.

■ *Christine Hanson is a second-year psychology student at the University of York. E-mail: cdh105@york.ac.uk.*

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How would you like to see psychology taught at university? E-mail your views to [jonsut@bps.org.uk](mailto:jonsut@bps.org.uk), or contribute to the online forum via [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk).

## BEHIND THE NAME

by Noel Sheehy

**EDWARD LEE THORNDIKE** raised chicks in his bedroom to use in his psychological studies, and when his landlord disapproved his friend William James allowed him to continue his research in the basement of his own home. In 1897 he moved to New York with two chickens which he planned to breed to test J.B. Lamarck's thesis on the inheritability of acquired abilities. Practical considerations – he realised how long it would take to train and breed several generations of progeny – forced him to abandon the project. His doctoral thesis is the foundation document of modern comparative psychology. He knew it too, writing to his fiancée: 'My thesis is a beauty...I've got some theories which knock the old authorities into a grease spot.'

**Further reading:** Joncich, G. (Ed.) (1962). *Psychology and the science of education: Selected writings of Edward L. Thorndike*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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