

Annual Student Writer Competition

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readers, and winning a great prize?

Winners will have their articles published in *The Psychologist*, and will also get an expenses-paid trip to the Society's London or Edinburgh Lectures or Annual Conference (UK travel, hotel and registration fee).

There are two categories – **undergraduate** and **postgraduate**. We are looking for writing which **engages** and **informs**: maximum of 1500 words.



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1. Send three copies of your article to: The Psychologist Annual Student Writer Competition, The British Psychological Society, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR, to arrive no later than **TUESDAY 31 JANUARY 2006**.
2. **Do not** put your name on the article itself – the judges will work blind.
3. On a separate sheet please list **all** of the following: name, address, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail, departmental address, name of head of department/supervisor, word count, and which category you are entering.

See the August issue of *The Psychologist* for this year's winners and the judges' report. Also visit www.thepsychologist.org.uk and click on 'Write for The Psychologist' for more information.



Associate Editor: Nicola Hills

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

Sitting comfortably? Then let's talk!

BY HEATHER JACKSON

WE are all used to classrooms and lecture halls with the usual row-and-column layout of desks and chairs, and we all know those students who sat at the back so the teacher wouldn't ask them any questions. But what about when students want to ask questions? Does the way you sit affect if or when you will ask questions?

Research has demonstrated that children who ask questions and engage in discussion (on-topic of course!) exhibit improved academic performance (Hughes & Westgate, 2004). Others like Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the importance of interaction with others to create a 'zone of proximal development' where a perhaps less experienced or knowledgeable student could learn and develop. Modern classrooms are increasingly designed with interaction in mind (see tinyurl.com/4ku9k).

So how do we increase discourse in classrooms and lecture halls, when many students may be reluctant to express their ideas? Research by Marx *et al.* (2000) looked at factors that can affect discourse in classrooms, specifically the physical characteristics of the room. Their work centred on the idea that the seating arrangements could impact on the amount and type of on-topic discourse. They focused on primary-age children, assigning them to a semicircle seating arrangement for two weeks, and then a row-and-column arrangement for two weeks. They found that children asked more questions in the semicircle layout. Is the same true of students of other ages?

My MSc research in child development looked at these two seating layouts with A-level students, but found that, contrary to Marx *et al.*, question asking did not increase significantly in the semicircle layout. However, the amount of on-topic

discourse the students engaged in almost doubled in the semicircle layout. One reason for the different findings could be developmental shift – older students using comments rather than asking direct questions.

So why should merely changing the seating lead to such a dramatic difference in discourse? Marx *et al.* interpret the increase in question asking in their study as a result of face-to-face contact with the teacher and other students. Additionally, it has been found that students in a semicircular setting, because of unobstructed eye contact, may feel obliged out of courtesy to pay attention and show interest. This increases the amount of 'on-task' discourse, and perhaps even contributes to the absence of non-task discourse. A second factor that may contribute to increased discourse in the semicircular setting may be that students find this arrangement less stressful, because their subjective experience of 'crowding stress' is reduced, and therefore they find it easier to interact.

However, one concern for all teachers would be that a perceived 'informality' of the seating arrangements and the 'novelty' value of the semicircular layout might lead students to be less task-oriented and more disruptive, engaging in more off-task discourse than before!

At a time when development of independent thought and discussion is encouraged as the key to successful future learning (especially in an undergraduate degree), it is important to promote this in as many ways as possible, particularly for those students who are quiet or find it difficult to have a voice. Crowding stress

may be experienced in many formal undergraduate lecture theatres, where there are often over a hundred students in one room, few of whom you know and feel comfortable speaking in front of. While it may be possible for lecturers to build in time for questions, this does not guarantee that students will feel confident in asking them. Also, sitting at the back of the theatre reduces eye contact with the lecturer, perhaps reducing the likelihood that an engaging two-way interaction will take place. Changing the seating in a room intended to accommodate many students is a challenge, but in promoting academic and social development, it may be a valuable way forward.

What do you think? Is lecturer–student interaction beneficial? Is there enough of it? What do you find encourages it? Send your comments to psychologist@bps.org.uk, or contribute to the forum via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

■ Heather Jackson is a primary mental health worker with children in Wiltshire, taking an MSc in psychology at the Open University.

References

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Don't forget our Annual Student Writer Competition! See opposite for details.