

Seating preferences of medical students in theory classroom - A survey.

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Abstract

Introduction: Seating position is an important determinant of opportunity to learn. The seating preferences of medical students has received remarkably little attention in medical education literature.

Aim and objectives: To determine the present day medical students' preferences towards selection of benches in the classroom.

Methodology: A predetermined and prevalidated questionnaire was distributed to II MBBS students to know their preferences and opinions about their seat selection in the classroom.

Results: Forty eight (36%) out of 133 students preferred to sit in front benches and 86(64%) preferred sitting in back benches with various reasons for preferring or avoiding front or back benches .

Conclusion: Majority of medical students preferred to sit in back benches, the reasons for the same being attributed to their personality trait more than the learning preferences. Front row students showed more preference to learning.

Key words: Seating preference, Front bench, Back bench.

Introduction:

Have you ever observed in your classroom that some of the students occupy the same seat every day? If not the same seat, some prefer to sit at the back, others in front and few students opt to sit in the middle. Is there a reason for their preferences?

The traditional straight-row arrangement of benches in the classroom is prevailing in most teaching institutions, particularly in medical colleges because the pedagogy method of teaching and learning methodology is still existing. Effective two way communication or interaction in the classroom is essential for teaching and learning process.¹ Seating position becomes an important determinant of opportunity to learn and it may influence student's achievement particularly in large size classrooms.² The effect of seating location on learning has received surprisingly little attention in education literature.³ Examining the student's seating position may improve our understanding of what happens in the classroom and that may explain some of the differences in performance among students. Teacher-classroom interactions that aid student learning are often complex processes that hinge on interpersonal and pedagogical awareness.² The place the students

prefer to sit may bring some advantages or disadvantages in terms of learning and participation. Seating arrangements may be a cause for the decline of attention span, concentration, comprehension and the retaining of information can be influenced by where the student chooses to sit.

These days we have observed that the students are hesitant to sit in front benches and front benches are being vacant in the classrooms. This was not the case in earlier days when the students used to occupy front benches by coming early and by prior reservation. This observation prompted us to take up this study which aimed at determining the present day medical students' perception towards selection of benches or choosing the seat location in the classroom.

Methodology:

A predetermined and prevalidated questionnaire was distributed to II MBBS students to know their preferences and opinions about their seating location or occupying benches in the classroom. Students who were willing to participate were requested to answer the questionnaire. There were no questions revealing the identity of students. The questions included the students' preferences to occupy the benches whether front or back and the reasons for the same.

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These students were taught in a gently sloping lecture hall which is wider and with seven rows and four columns and each row with six seats. Most of the faculty used power point presentations for teaching and the distance of the screen is 20 feet from front bench and 52 feet from back bench.

RESULTS:

The class strength was 148 and 133 students who attended that particular lecture consented and answered the questionnaire. Of the 133 students who participated in the study 48 students (36%) preferred to sit in front benches and 86(64%) preferred sitting in back benches. Many students had two or more reasons for the same.

Table I: Reasons for occupying front benches or avoiding back benches [n=48 (36%) students who preferred front benches]

Reasons for occupying front benches	No. of students
To be more attentive in class	29
To take more notes	15
To interact with teacher	5
For good audibility of teacher	21
Short sightedness	5
Short stature	1
Never get caught	1
Reasons for avoiding back benches	
Distraction is more at back benches	35
Teacher not audible	16
Feel incompetent	3
Screen can't be seen	3
More questions are asked to the back benchers	1

Table II: Reasons to preferring back benches and avoiding front benches [n=86 (64%) students who preferred back benches]

To eat	12
Play games/ text in mobile	11
Graffiti on benches	8
To avoid taking notes	10
To lean back and sit	21
High in stature	15
To be with friend's circle	24
To avoid questions by teachers	19

Reasons to avoid front benches	
Feel shy to sit in front benches	17
Afraid of being targeted	25
Avoid taking notes	11
Avoid questions by teachers	17
Not comfortable	3
Can't sleep	3
Avoid stress	3
Inferiority complex	3

DISCUSSION:

Teaching is a profession that requires specialized skills and knowledge to impact significantly on student learning. One factor associated with improved achievement among learners is the position at which they sit in a classroom. Student seating location has been studied from a variety of perspectives. One area of emphasis is seating preference, which focuses on why students choose certain seats and how it affects their performance.⁴

Teacher-centered (traditional) arrangement is usually given alternative names in the relevant literature, e.g. lined arrangement, usual arrangement, teacher-centered classroom arrangement, conference type arrangement.⁵ Students can be lucky or unlucky in terms of the place they sit. Some authors suggest that students at front and middle rows are lucky in terms of communication and interaction opportunities. It is generally observed by teachers that students sitting at the back rows have less participation and attention and are more likely to display undesired behaviors.⁵

In the present study preferred seating location by most students was back benches (64%). Most common reasons given by the students to prefer back benches were to avoid the teacher (in the form of being out of attention, avoid questions or taking notes) or to complete pending works or to do some distractive works (to eat/ engage with mobile/ paint desk) or to be in their zone of comfort (to rest/sit comfortably/ to be with friends). The reason behind avoiding front benches were issues related to their personality or to avoid the teacher.

According to Ikram, it was found that those sitting in front rows care about the lesson more and are more willing to participate, while those sitting in back rows care less about the lesson. Similar findings were observed in our study. Analysis of the common reasons given by the students who preferred front benches (36%) revealed their interest in learning.

Most common reasons given by them to avoid back benches were due to distractions at back benches or because of logistics. According to Burda and Brooks students who occupy front rows in classroom have high achievement motivation and that they tend to feel positive about their ability to perform well.⁴ According to Pederson *et al*, peers view front-row students favorably, describing them as leaders and academic achievers. The descriptions associated with students who sit in the back row are not positive. Back-row students have been labeled as low in self-esteem, disinterested, introverted, and rebellious.⁴

Teachers struggle with best classroom practices, particularly in an age when electronic devices divert attention from learning.⁴ In our study 8.27% of students wanted to play or text in mobiles.

According to various studies, students seated in the front position communicate more and show different nonverbal behaviours, enjoy learning and are motivated and interested compared to those seated in the back.⁶ Sommer *et al* have reported that on an average of 61% of students from the front and centre location made voluntary statements, in contrast to only 31% from the back benches.⁷

Nandyal SS *et al* have emphasized on the importance of skill learning in performing laboratory tests. Procedural skill learning in practicals helps students acquire psychomotor skills, imitation and practice.⁸ Similarly observing a teacher in the classroom helps students learn communication skill and teaching learning methodology. Seating type may also influence the learning environment by providing more comfort, better visibility, or improved movement. Seating location in front can position a student closer to the teacher, making it easier to see and hear. Seating proximity to the teacher can encourage attentive behavior, classroom engagement, and discussion participation.⁴

According to Angela Jean Hammang, the most effective teaching occurred during teacher chosen seating arrangements where the ability to control the classroom environment was high with highest level of comfort which is usually seen in primary schooling.⁹ Though this may not exist in medical schools, for lectures in classroom teaching, this arrangement still exists during practical classes.

Important point to consider is whether students should be assigned seats or they should be provided freedom to opt their own seats. Freedom in this regard can reinforce cliques within the classroom and students may choose seats that may lead to distraction. On the other hand, allotment of seats can bring about a certain

level of control within the classroom. Pairing of students is done with the hope that they may benefit from each other and also to encourage interaction among all. A rotation system when integrated into the classroom can ensure that students are not categorized as front or back benchers. Everyone is given an opportunity to sit in the front, middle and back. Hence, it is the duty of teachers to wisely select an arrangement that best suits their particular circumstances and classes.

Conclusion:

Majority of medical students preferred to sit in back benches, the reasons for the same being attributed to their personality trait more than the learning preferences. Front row students showed more preference to learning. On the other hand, not all the students can sit in front rows where participation is optimized. The teacher should remove the disadvantages of sitting at back rows by using some suitable instructional techniques based on their knowledge about the attitude of students. Some possible recommendations are using a rotating seating system, walking around in the classroom and engaging all the students without discrimination. Further studies are required to compare the seating location of students with their learning and academic performance.

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