

Olympiad Teacher Voices

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Why do you, as a teacher, like to take part in Olympiad round 1?

It gives the students an opportunity to do something away from the constraints of the A-level specification. The students can get a little bit too focussed on getting exactly what the exam board want, they're not learning chemistry so much as learning chemistry A-level, so it's nice to get away from that. It frees them to explore different topics that they won't have covered before. Quite often it's a bit of a springboard - they'll do a question on the Olympiad that makes them interested in something and they'll go away and do a bit more reading themselves.

Why do your students want to take part in the Olympiad?

We have about 80 students each year that do A-level and we probably get about 25 of them on average that will do the Olympiad. A lot of them are very keen and they want to do extra things, because they like a bit of a challenge. You get the odd one that will only do it for their UCAS form and I try to discourage that a bit, but most students are doing it because they want a bit of an extra challenge.

They can be a bit nervous about it and say, 'But what if we get it all wrong?' so I say, 'That doesn't actually matter because everything you do get right is a bonus, it's not like doing an A-level.'

I'd say the motivation is that they're interested in chemistry and they want to do something a little bit different.

What do your students get out of taking part in the Olympiad?

It provides a bit of a springboard - they'll read about something that they're interested in and they'll move off to go and do it themselves. I think the questions are well tailored, they usually have a little bit of a background story to them, which helps.

It gives them confidence as well. They're given a question and they don't know anything about it. They have to read the information in the question, apply the knowledge that they've got so far, make a bit of a leap in the dark and then they actually get it right. Or if they don't get it right they get close to the answer. I think that's good for their confidence and makes them a bit adventurous, makes them willing to take a calculated risk sometimes.

Do you use Olympiad past paper questions in any of your preparation or classes?

We put them on our internal site so that it's easy to get hold of them. I'll occasionally use them with a whole class when we've finished a topic, just to do something a little bit different.

How do you prepare for round 1?

In preparation for the Olympiad we do lunchtime sessions for anyone who wants to come. During lunchtime sessions we'll do past paper questions. We start doing that usually at the end of Year 12, in June when there's a bit more freedom. Our students nearly always take it in Year 13, but we have had the odd really keen student who does it in Year 12.

What do your students find most challenging and how do you overcome this?

The things they find the hardest are the organic synthesis questions I have to say. They're not very used to using skeletal formulae, though they're getting more used to it now the A-level has started using it a bit more. It takes a bit of getting used to. They don't always think of working backwards - they want to work forwards in a logical sequence. But sometimes you can't do that, you've just got to start at the end and work backwards, then make a guess and fill the bits in.

If it's mathematically based then that's usually quite accessible, and there are a lot of questions on energy - Hess' Law type things - which are more difficult and they've never done them before but they can usually find their way around them.

What advice would you give a school that was thinking of taking part in Olympiad round 1 for the first time?

I would say use the past papers. Be fairly judicious in the choice of questions, start with a few quite easy ones first so that you don't put people off. Emphasise that it's not about getting it all right, because at A-level you want to get as many marks as possible, but it's different to that. Here if you get anything it's a bonus and you'll get some benefit from that. And I'd probably start preparing for it at the end of Year 12 when you've got a bit of time.

Anything else you'd like to say?

It's a really good competition and we've been doing it for around 12 years.

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