

Olympiad Teacher Voices

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

I think it's an aspirational type thing, where students can pit their wits against other students in the country and see how they do. I always tell them that the questions are going to be really hard, because they are, and tell them to have a go and just see how well they can do. How well can you use your chemistry in real life situations?

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

To be able to pit their wits against other people and see how they're performing. It is a competition after all, so it is that competitive element.

As I have quite a big cohort here, I invite my top students to take part. Straight away, the fact that they have a personalised invite motivates them – I've said to them, 'I think you're good enough to do this,' and that motivates them.

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

They get how difficult chemistry can be and how what they're doing at A-level is only the tip of the iceberg - there's a lot that they could go on to learn.

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

I tell the students that there are past papers, but there is no expectation for them to do any and most of them just have a go. They don't revise for it. It's a case of, 'Let's just see how we get on as a one-off.'

How do you prepare for round 1?

They just give it a go – and with the pressure of doing their A-levels I don't want to give them any extra work to do really.

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

They find the organic the hardest bit. I think that's mostly due to the timing of when we do it, because by the time they do the paper they have covered quite a lot of the A2 physical chemistry content and the inorganic, whereas the organic bit is the last bit we do.

I also think that the specifications, whatever specification you follow, doesn't necessarily get them to problem-solve so much in organic, it's more about doing the functional groups that they need to know rather than going beyond that. And I don't get them over that hump really, I just tell them to have a go and try and use the knowledge that they have got.

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

I would say you need to select your students to do it, because they are hard questions and I think by doing that selection process you're saying to the student, 'You know what, I think you're good enough to do this,' and therefore you get their participation. I personally wouldn't go massively into prepping them for it because it's an added bolt-on really. Obviously you can tell the students that there's stuff available for them to have a look at, but I think that the questions are so diverse each year that it would be very difficult to actually revise for it. So I would just say to have a go.

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