

# Olympiad Teacher Voices

**Sarah Savarin**

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

I think it's great for the students – a lot of what we need to do is build confidence. It sounds counter-intuitive – giving them something really, really hard to do that – but you should see their faces when they get there and they're working on it in teams and they say, 'Yes I can do this.' I think it's really important for confidence building.

It's good to let them see what's out there as well. With the A-levels getting harder, the style of questioning is more similar to the Olympiad questions. They're more often expected to think beyond the specification – not just recite their definitions but really problem-solve. So I think if they can have experience in that then that's extremely valuable.

Another useful thing – it's really hard to get work experience in chemistry, so it's nice for the students to have at least something that takes them beyond what they normally do. With all the questions having a context, it gives them ideas about where chemistry is useful.

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

The students are often very competitive – there's a bit of one-upmanship going on there. I have them working in teams, because it is really hard, and they appreciate that, but I think they do like to be top of the pile. Remarkably many of them are actually genuinely interested in chemistry – it used to be that you'd only get A-level chemistry students because they wanted to go to medical school – but more and more there are students who are genuinely interested in the subject material. I think some of them just like the challenge; they're able to cope with all the A-level stuff so they want to know, 'How far can I go?' and, 'How clever actually am I?' They enjoy that kind of challenge.

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

The key benefit is that they experience what it's like to get stuck. Because you're dealing with students who have achieved highly at GCSE and probably been able to cope with everything, all through high school and probably college as well, and they're

going to get to university and they're going to be a bit on their own and they'll have the gauntlet thrown down at them – so if they can experience what it feels like to be confused and stuck in a safe environment, then I think that's extremely beneficial. So that's the main reason I really want them to do it – aside from all the additional stretch and challenge, and it's nice to have the context. But I think the worst thing that can happen to them at university is for them to feel all alone and not know what that experience is like and how you push through, how you break the pain barrier. And how you're able to pick yourself up again. It's the attitude of saying, 'Oh I can do a bit here' because if they can get started on that then they'll be able to pick themselves up at university too.

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

Yes absolutely, right from the first week of September. I pick one of the past paper questions, hopefully on a topic that we've done already in A-level, but not always. I have them working in groups on it, then I release the mark scheme five days later and they can see how they did. I've had to work it out the night before, because I can't do it off the top of my head. I've got to sit down and scratch my head as well. It's really good for me too, it keeps me on my toes. That's the way we run it – they're working in groups of their own arrangement, sometimes just in twos and sometimes in bigger groups. The best thing that can happen is that they can sit down and argue about it. The more they argue, the better they have to defend their position and the stronger their understanding. So if I didn't have those past papers, I couldn't even do this.

It's all about practice, they can see how far they've come and they can build their confidence. I give them ages to do each question, but I've found that it's better to give them a whole hour to do a question and really push through right to the end. Then, when they suddenly have to do five in two hours in the exam, at least they know what it feels like and they can look through and go for the easier parts first. But I like to make them push through as far as they possibly can in the practice. I also appreciate those little hints that you put in the mark scheme sometimes – very useful for the teachers!

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## **How do you prepare for round 1?**

We have an hour every Wednesday afternoon between the first week back in September and the exam in January. It's pretty much anybody who wants to come – I get about 20 coming in the first couple of sessions and then after a few weeks it tends to settle into people who really want to do something with it.

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

Getting started is the trick, and I find that group work is absolutely the way to get them into it. The way we teach at Blackpool College might be a bit less formal than some other schools so they're much more used to mucking in and doing group work. Then if someone has half an idea, then someone else can build on that. And the students that come in are already comfortable with one another, they're already comfortable with making mistakes in front of each other, so I think that's a help.

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

Make sure you've got a teacher who can commit to spending the time in the evenings working through the problems – there's nothing more demotivating than having your teacher scratch their head if you're working on a problem. Choose someone who really wants to do that. That's my position – I grab the Olympiad with both hands and I really wanted to work with those students and do this, I love the challenge of it.

I would say do put aside time for preparation. In the last school I was teaching at they didn't have time to work with the students and the outcomes were just so much worse. It's just about practice, you've got to make that investment I think and an hour a week works well for us. We have a range of students, their target grades range from C up to A, and it is the practice they do that hones the skills they need to give them every chance of success. I think it's committing to regular practice that really makes a difference.

## **Anything else you'd like to say?**

It's a really valuable opportunity, the students do enjoy it. They like to come and get challenged and see themselves make progress.

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