Olympiad Teacher Voices

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

Firstly, it gets the students to apply their knowledge to different situations and it challenges them, particularly the bright ones, above and beyond what they have to know for their A-level studies. I also really like the context of the Olympiad questions, they are usually linked to a context that the students can actually relate to in some way, which is really nice. As a teacher, I like doing it because it keeps me sharp, and keeps my knowledge up to date. We also use it a little bit to encourage the students to go back over what they've done in Year 12. More and more it seems that it's a useful tool for getting them to be thinking about chemistry from Year 12 as well as what they're currently studying, so that's quite a nice link as well.

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

Some of them do it because they've got interviews coming up for Oxbridge or medicine, where they know they're going to have to be sharp and quick on their feet with mental agility. Some of them do it because they want to go on to do chemistry and they know that it gets them to apply their chemistry in different situations and link the different bits of the course together. And others – this year I actually have got two who are doing it as a revision tool. It encourages them to sit down and think about what they've done so far. It is a social activity as well for them – they just get to talk chemistry with their friends.

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

It's probably again the same. It's about seeing how chemistry relates to everyday life. I think it certainly creates an enthusiasm for the subject, perhaps more than just the normal A-level does. And particularly the organic questions where they have to synthesise a drug that they know, they like those. They find them really challenging, it's a real challenge above what they get at A-level and they like that side of it.

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

What I've done over the years is put together collections of the questions into topics. We sit down each week and do Olympiad after school, and we'll do three questions that have Hess' cycle in them. Then the next week we'll do three questions that are organic. We use some of the more straightforward ones in our schemes of learning, for example as extension tasks for when we're teaching Hess' cycle. We'll say, 'Well you can do the normal ones dead easily, here's the challenge, go and try this one.'

How do you prepare for round 1?

We have a voluntary session once a week after school. Anybody can come, but usually it's the students who are getting As and Bs that come. I don't think I've ever had anybody who got a C that came along because I just think they'd find it too hard. And we just sit down, and we go through probably two or three questions in a session. The students are essentially doing them and I'm just prodding them in the right direction when they get stuck. Or I'm doing them alongside them and they explain to me where I've gone wrong!

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

Interpreting the information. And there's always some complicated unit conversion somewhere I would say. With the Olympiad, all of the information given usually has a point to it so they really need to make sure that they've read every bit and carefully thought about why it's there. I think interpreting the question is the biggest challenge. They tend to overcomplicate it – they think it's the Olympiad so it must be really hard and overthink the situation.

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

Give it a go. Don't be intimidated by it. Don't promote it as just for the top end; the questions are actually quite accessible to most students if they break it down. And enjoy it, enjoy the chemistry, they are really good questions.

Anything else you'd like to say?

I think it's good for improving the cohort's results, not just the top end, because if you can get a little group of students that are all enthusiastic for your subject, that then transfers into the classroom. So I think that working with a small group of students can actually improve the performance of the whole cohort because the enthusiasm rubs off.

The Chemistry Olympiad is the leading chemistry competition for students in the UK. To find out more about this opportunity to challenge your chemistry students visit **rsc.li/olympiad**

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