

USING POSTERS

Jonny Griffiths expands on his RISP article by telling us why he uses posters and showing us some examples produced by his pupils.

A recent questionnaire amongst my students revealed that posters were something of a guilty pleasure. They (especially the brighter ones) scored poster activity highly for enjoyment, but less well for usefulness. Were they being unduly harsh?

Posters work well where there is a large range of prior learning. Take my AS statistics group on measures of location and spread. Some will have done the bare minimum of GCSE maths data handling, while others will have an A* in GCSE statistics already under their belt. With careful group selection to mix abilities, the knowledgeable ones can enjoy teaching the uninitiated, and those new to the subject can have fun learning from their peers, so much better than boring the strong ones whilst going too fast for the strugglers. I find that often more able students are mathematically cautious, while weaker students can be real risk-takers; a poster utilizes this dynamic well.

The great thing about posters is that they stimulate discussion; and let's face it, students are likely to learn far more from this than listening to me. With a poster lesson, there is a clear sense of direction towards a finished product. It provides a natural way for groups to feed back to the class as a whole. That time limit can be a blessing and a curse – what of the students who fail to meet the deadline? You have four groups finished and one that is 90% there – is there a teacher in the land who has never applied the finishing touches after the lesson to a poster that cannot realistically be revisited next time? (Students are always grateful for this in my experience.)

At their best, posters can be a wonderful activity, but there are pitfalls. Students may spend ages concentrating on the extraneous bits – the drawings of cars, the names, the colouring. Some of those discussions will be more maths-centred than others. And then at test time, you may see some surreptitiously peeking at posters to pick up helpful formulas. (But if they've got the wit to notice what's on the walls of their classroom, more power to their elbow.)

It can be also said, I think, that a poster lesson is usually a less stressful one for the teacher. If you have a non-stop day including four full-on lessons, then to plan a poster for the fifth seems to me just plain sensible.

The final problem with posters is what to do with them all – it takes very little time spent on this to generate acres of wall-space. But then, that is a nice problem to have...

Jonny Griffiths teaches mathematics at Paston College, Norfolk.

