Dealing with the new GCSE specifications

Following discussions with fellow Physical Education teachers, it is clear that the biggest concerns with the new GCSE specifications are a) the increased percentage value of the written exams and b) the apparent increase in the complexity of extended response questions. Not only are these extended responses appearing to get harder and longer, but it now seems that success or failure here will have a greater impact on a student’s overall grade. In the vast majority of schools, our PE cohorts are not filled with A*/9 grade English students. The ability of most candidates to deliver an extended response that targets the question directly and accesses all of the marks available is a concern. Understandably, we are therefore looking for methods that will assist students in getting to grips with these extended responses so that they are less of a barrier to success.

Many teachers have good methods for delivering indicative content in engaging ways, which enable students to understand concepts quickly and effectively. Furthermore, there is a growing range of exciting revision games and techniques available to help students recall that information ahead of the exam. The final piece of the jigsaw is providing students with the exam techniques they need to target mark schemes and be rewarded with high marks.

Engaging students with Assessment Objectives

The first thing I would suggest, especially for middle and high achieving students, is to take the time to educate them about the Assessment Objectives (AOs) that are being examined. If students have some understanding about the AOs linked to a question, they should be more comfortable unpicking it. In the ‘GCSE PE: Top ten teaching tips’ video that OUP made recently, shortly available as part of the Kerboodle package, I discussed the importance of students de-coding exam questions. By identifying ‘command words’ and ‘triggers’, and linking triggers to key words and phrases, students should be able to answer short answer questions, which mostly examine knowledge/understanding (AO1) and application (AO2), more accurately.

When it comes to extended responses, students need additional techniques, so that they can include knowledge/understanding (AO1), application (AO2) and analysis (AO3). Extended response questions are where exam boards are gathering most of the analysis (AO3) marks. If we use the Edexcel specification as our example, the Assessment Objectives across the written exams are laid out: AO1 25%, AO2 20% and AO3 15%. While knowledge and understanding carries the most marks, it is clear that students who struggle to tackle AO2 and AO3 questions will struggle to do well. Knowing this is really important, as not only will it impact how we deliver information, but also how we teach students to structure answers, particularly to extended response questions.

Understanding the mark scheme

In Edexcel’s Sample Assessment Materials (SAMS), the command word ‘evaluate’ is used most often in extended response questions, which are worth nine marks each. At first sight, a nine-mark question looks daunting. The sheer number of answer lines provided can be intimidating to a student, especially a lower ability student. However, when we study the sample mark schemes, we see that those nine marks are broken down into three marks for AO1, three marks for AO2 and three marks for AO3. To a lower ability student especially, this can be viewed as three three-mark questions, which should appear to be a far simpler task.

Under these circumstances, it should be easier to train students to structure answers so that their chances of scoring higher marks increases. Even the lowest ability students, who may lack analysis skills completely, can be taught to target the six marks linked to AO1 and AO2. Gaining three or four marks out of nine is clearly far better than them ignoring the question completely or producing a response that is wholly inaccurate.
This brings us to the biggest decision that we will need to make with our students when it comes to answering extended response questions. Should we look towards an integrated or a separated AO method when planning and answering extended response questions?

I will continue to use the Edexcel specification and SAMs for examples, although the strategies can be adapted for use across other boards by studying the way marks are allocated to AOs in the sample mark schemes provided.

An integrated AO approach

Most of you will be familiar with PEE (Point, Evidence, Explain) or PEA (Point, Evidence, Analyse) paragraph structuring. In English lessons nationwide, students will be encouraged to use one of these to add structure to paragraphs and improve their clarity. Using a similar strategy when answering extended response questions in a PE exam will lead students towards an integrated AO response. By using PEA, students will make a knowledge/understanding point (AO1), apply that knowledge by giving an example (AO2) and then analyse the link between the two (AO3). If they do this successfully three or even four times throughout their extended response, they will be targeting all of the nine marks available.

This method allows students to produce responses that are fluent and impressive, integrating the three AO elements throughout and using a writing style that is desirable for later A Level study.

For example:
The second type of practice is variable practice. This is where a skill is practised in different settings with changeable conditions. Such a practice method could be used by a pro football team, as they practise passing the ball out of defence and through midfield with opposition players trying to stop them. This is useful because the movements and decisions made by the opposing players will change the situation that the team in possession is working with. This replicates a game situation, where the skills are open and affected by a changing environment. This type of practice is therefore better for improving these skills than other practice types.

While this may be a method that works well for our high achieving students, it may be unattainable for our lower achievers. Attempting this method with these students could result in jumbled responses, which in turn fail to hit any of the AOs accurately and increase the likelihood of dropping marks.

A separated AO approach

A separated AO approach, which has been used in the sample answers to exam-style questions in the Kerboodle package, is potentially a safer option for lower ability students who may struggle with AO3 because of their shallower levels of understanding.

This method involves students providing all the key content that they know on the concept in paragraph one (AO1), applying that knowledge to any examples in paragraph two (AO2) and then attempting to analyse the links between the two in paragraph three (AO3). The thinking here is that if students write two relatively good paragraphs and access some of the AO1 and AO2 marks, they could secure a good chunk of the total marks available before having a go at the complex analysis part, which they are likely to find most challenging. In my experience, asking a lower ability student to write everything they know about something, then asking them to give me some examples, then asking them to detail why these link together, bears more fruit than asking them to do all three at once, which results in confusion.

Deciding what’s best for you and your students

The biggest challenge for us, as teachers, is whether to teach all our students the same method or to individualize the process. Individualizing would appear more logical, but clearly this is challenging to do in a classroom full of students with different needs. This question can only be answered by you, as you know the make up of your classes, the relative number of low, middle and high achievers and their varying literacy levels. However, by considering these extended response questions carefully in our teaching teams and discussing them with our students, we can develop techniques that will increase the chances of success for students across the full ability range. If a student’s chosen method is practised and engrained, then they will know exactly what to do when confronted with a question in an exam. Hopefully, they will not panic and will plan and write a response that earns sufficient marks to assist them in hitting or surpassing their target grade overall.

Best wishes

Matthew Hunter

Find out more about Matthew’s work with Oxford on our new GCSE PE resources. Visit www.oxfordssecondary.co.uk/pe for details.