



Historical Association

The voice for history

Shavington Academy: Our Quality Mark Journey

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Although I didn't know it at the time, the turning point came when we appointed a second in department. Before then, I had gained a vague idea of what the Quality Mark was through the pages of *Teaching History*, and had formed the impression that it might be a nice award for some schools or departments, but it was "not something for us".

Now, with a passionate and knowledgeable accomplice to lead the department, we wanted to reach beyond the immediate pressures of the whole-school. How do you accurately identify your own strengths and weaknesses? What should a well-meaning History department be focusing on? Is our time on curriculum development well focused? To help us to reflect thoroughly on these and other questions, we chose to use the HA's Quality Mark Criteria as a guide for self-reflection.

It was brilliantly helpful: together we celebrated our strengths, and identified some priorities. Great. Job done. Let's go home... and then Steph suggested we go beyond using it for self-reflection, and actually apply for the Quality Mark process. "Maybe a good idea" I said, and quickly rushed away to order more gluesticks.

Fast forwards three years, with a now familiar story of pandemic, disruption, new challenges, births, deaths and staffing changes... and this time Garreth, as a new second in department, suggests we should apply for it. I'll be honest, I thought it was naïve – he didn't understand the necessary workload, pressure or expectation that might come as a result. After all, there were probably more important things to do like ordering more glue sticks. Fortunately, he convinced me to apply and our journey really began!

Initial reflection

Before we made a formal application, we chose to thoroughly self-assess ourselves against the Quality Mark criteria first. Although this is not necessary, and you can apply before you have begun to consult the criteria, we wanted to feel confident that we understood what was involved. It was worth it – it was motivating to see written phrases that we felt clearly applied to our own department, and of course there were obvious areas for development.

The final decision to apply relied on approval from the Head (who readily agreed to pay for it), and the rest of the department. After all, it was going to involve them! At our next briefing, the two Chris' barely batted an eyelid when we explained what was going to happen, and this calm, confident, supportive approach from our teachers was essential in the year ahead.

Initial conversation with the assessor

Having registered with the HA, we were soon linked to an assessor and a friendly email exchange led to a phone call. Almost an hour later, I had a very long list of notes! With detailed description, all of which was based on an understanding of History departments around the country, this conversation was a CPD opportunity in its own right. Our assessor painted a very clear picture of the difference between gold and silver, and if we thought that we "might be gold" in some areas, then we now couldn't avoid the feeling that we ought to set our bar a little higher! Although we had recently been used for a subject deep dive in an Ofsted inspection, and had received high praise from the inspector at the end, we had felt somewhat underwhelmed by the subject expertise of our inspector, and lack of quality, challenging, subject-specific feedback. This was clearly not going to be the case with the Quality Mark! Furthermore our Quality Mark Assessor assured us that while the process may look similar to the Ofsted inspection on paper, and the evidence base was similar, the role of a Quality Mark assessor is developmental and supportive.

Development

We now had up to twelve months to work on developing our own portfolio of evidence, before submitting it to the assessor and inviting him to visit. After four months, a review showed little progress: were we really improving as a department, or just going through the motions? This was a moment where the Quality Mark process really paid off – we had a time limit that could not be talked away! 12 months was ticking down and we wanted the process to be worthwhile, so a new set of actions and a new time frame was introduced.

As the next few months went by we were able to move through a number of the criteria, improving our practice and capturing evidence as we went. Around 7 months after registering, we knew that we had made progress. It was time to start collating our evidence for each criteria. Now, feeling secure on some of the larger themes, we identified a number of smaller areas to prioritise. Many of these were "quick wins" – often isolated examples of good practice that with just a little thought, we could roll out to have a greater impact. Finally, we had to select only the strongest items of evidence for each criteria – and this was challenging! Fortunately our assessor had given us some useful advice on how to present the evidence, which eased the process somewhat.

Although this stage of development, review, and repeat did put a weight on our shoulders, and often meant that we were working on departmental tasks that were additional to whole school priorities, it has led to many significant improvements in our practice that would otherwise not have happened.

For example, we recognised that although we had many high-quality discussions with parents and parents' evenings, none of these were formally analysed and we provided no opportunities for parents to give us structured feedback. A range of questionnaire and survey opportunities were created, electronically, and shared with parents, and lo and behold we received a large number of constructive comments. With some analysis, and some sharing of findings with the departmental team and SLT, we then identified some actions that have further improved our provision – most of which we would not have identified or prioritised without carrying out the parent voice.

Similarly, although we had engaged frequently with opportunities to collaborate with our local network of schools, we pushed ourselves to provide more opportunities for teachers, educators, pupils and the wider community of interest to work together. This has led to moments of joy, great opportunities for our pupils and personal connections for adults. Thanks Quality Mark!

Assessment visit

The visit itself was much like an Ofsted inspection in some ways: learning walks, conversations, and pupil voice. However it allowed for much more meaningful dialogue than we had got with the Ofsted team. This allowed us to justify our decisions, to locate further evidence and to discuss potential improvements with the assessor. All teachers in the department were involved, as well as the Head, a TA and pupils from all year groups. The Headteacher was impressed as apparently no other Quality Mark assessor for any other subject/area had ever asked for such a thorough interview with her!

Post-assessment

Following the assessment, we spent a few days in further dialogue with the assessor providing extra evidence and confirming several queries from the visit. After a wait while the report was moderated, we were delighted and surprised to be awarded the Gold Award. I cannot imagine a more thorough visit from a trusted and experienced subject specialist who is able to question, challenge, and support appropriately. The written report is a really rare document that allows us to celebrate our strengths as a team, with precision and understanding.

Most importantly, this award applies not to one person but the department – all teachers and teaching assistants, past and present, have contributed to improving the department, alongside senior leadership, administrative staff and of course the pupils themselves. This process has been developmental and leaves us with clear guidance, as well as reassurance, for our future as a team.