



## Context-based chemistry: the Salters approach

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Table 1: Main storylines and chemical ideas in the first five units of the course

Storyline	Chemical ideas used
The Elements of Life is a study of the elements in the human body, the solar system and the universe.	Amount of substance Atomic structure Atomic spectroscopy Periodic Table: periodicity, Group 2 Chemical bonding Shapes of molecules
Developing Fuels is a study of fuels and the contribution that chemists make to the development of better fuels.	Reacting masses and molar volumes Thermochemistry Homologous series Alkanes Structural isomerism Catalysis Entropy (qualitative)
From Minerals to Elements is a study of the extraction and uses of two elements, bromine and copper.	Ions in solution Reacting masses and molar concentrations Electronic configuration (s, p and d orbitals) Types of reactions (redox, precipitation, acid-base) Group 7 Molecular and giant (network) covalent structures
The Atmosphere is a study of two important chemical processes, the depletion of ozone in the upper atmosphere and the greenhouse effect in the lower atmosphere.	Interaction of matter and radiation Rates of reaction (qualitative) Halogenoalkanes Reaction mechanisms: nucleophilic substitution, radical reactions Chemical equilibrium
The Polymer Revolution tells the story of the development of addition polymers, many of which were the result of 'accidental' discoveries.	Addition polymers Alkenes Reaction mechanisms: electrophilic addition Alcohols Geometric isomerism Intermolecular forces Properties of polymers in relation to structure

Table 2: A map of the unit, The Elements of Life (EL)

ACTIVITIES		CHEMICAL STORYLINE		CHEMICAL IDEAS	
EL1	How do we know the formula of a compound?	EL1	What are we made of?	1.1	Amount of substance
EL2.1	How much iron is in a sample of iron compound?	EL2	Take two elements	2.1	A simple model of the atom
EL2.2	Making the most of your study of chemistry			2.2	Nuclear reactions
EL3.1	Investigating the chemistry of Group I and Group II elements	EL3	Looking for patterns in elements	1.2	Balanced equations
EL3.2	How do the physical properties of elements change across a row on the Periodic table?			11.1	Periodicity
EL3.3	Check your notes on The Elements of Life: Part 1			11.2	The s-block: Groups I and II
EL4.1	How do we know about atoms?	EL4	Where do the chemical elements come from?	2.1	A simple model of the atom
EL4.2	Isotopic abundance and relative atomic mass			2.2	Nuclear reactions
EL4.3	Investigating a spectroscopic technique			6.1	Light and electrons
EL4.4	Radon in the rocks			2.3	Electronic structure: shells
EL5	Balloon molecules	EL5	The molecules of life	3.1	Chemical bonding
EL6	Check your notes on The Elements of Life: Part 2	EL6	Summary	3.3	The shapes of molecules

**Captions of tables:**

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Table 2: A map of the unit, The Elements of Life (EL)

For Peer Review Only

## Context-based chemistry: the Salters approach

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### Abstract

This paper describes briefly the development and key features of one of the major context-based courses for upper high school students, Salters Advanced Chemistry. It goes on to consider the research evidence on the impact of the course, focusing on teachers' views, and, in particular, on students' affective and cognitive responses. The research evidence indicates that students respond positively to the context-based approach adopted in Salters Advanced Chemistry, and that they develop levels of understanding of chemical ideas comparable to those taking more conventional courses. Finally, issues to do with the development and evaluation of large-scale curriculum projects are considered.

### Introduction

1  
2 This paper has three principal aims: to describe the development of a context-based  
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4 course, Salters Advanced Chemistry, to draw together the research evidence on the  
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6 effects of the course, and to identify some of the issues raised for the development and  
7  
8 evaluation of large-scale curriculum interventions.  
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14 Context-based approaches to the teaching of science have their origins in the early  
15  
16 1980s. If longevity is one mark of impact, then the notion of using contexts as the  
17  
18 starting point for the development of scientific understanding must be one of the major  
19  
20 movements in science education of the last part of the twentieth century. The 'Salters  
21  
22 story' itself already spans over two decades, and has not ended yet! The story began in  
23  
24 1983, when a group of teachers and science educators met at York to discuss ways in  
25  
26 which chemistry might be made more attractive to students in school. At this meeting, a  
27  
28 decision was made to develop five context-based chemistry units for middle high school  
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30 (13-year old) students. Now, over twenty years later, a whole 'family' of courses, the  
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32 Salters courses (named after the sponsor of the original project, and co-sponsor of  
33  
34 subsequent projects), has been developed, covering biology, chemistry and physics for  
35  
36 the high school age range (11-18) in England and Wales. Moreover, many of the  
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38 courses have been adapted for use in other countries, including Belgium, China (Hong  
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40 Kong), New Zealand, Russia, Scotland, Slovenia, Spain, Swaziland and the USA.  
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50 In writing about the Salters courses, we have increasingly come to realise that there is  
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52 more than one 'Salters story' to tell. At the time when the courses were being  
53  
54 developed, particularly in the early years, there was very much a feeling of trying to  
55  
56 make what seems a good idea in principle work in practice. During this period,  
57  
58 relatively little direct reference was made to educational theory or theories about the  
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1  
2 process of curriculum innovation, though steps were taken to incorporate key findings  
3  
4 from educational research into the materials where appropriate. Thus one ‘Salters story’  
5  
6 can be told about events as they actually happened.  
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10  
11 With the passage of time, and the success of what has now become the Salters ‘family’  
12  
13 of courses, it has become increasingly important to reflect on what has happened and to  
14  
15 locate what we have done within wider perspectives on theories and ideas about  
16  
17 teaching and learning in science, and more generally about managing change in  
18  
19 education. This forms part of the second ‘Salters story’. Moreover, the success of the  
20  
21 Salters courses has resulted in both teachers and others engaging in research studies to  
22  
23 explore aspects of their effects. Thus, over a period of several years, we have been able  
24  
25 to gather systematic evidence about the impact of the courses, particularly on students’  
26  
27 understanding of science ideas and their attitudes to science. This evidence also  
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29 contributes to the second ‘Salters story’.  
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37 This paper forms part of the wider reflection on one of our most successful Salters  
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39 courses, Salters Advanced Chemistry. This course is one of six Salters courses. These  
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41 are:  
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- 43  
44 • Chemistry: the Salters Approach (for students aged 14-16, developed in the mid  
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46 1980s);  
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- 49 • Science: the Salters Approach (for students aged 14-16, developed in the late  
50  
51 1980s);  
52  
53
- 54 • Salters Science Focus (for students aged 11-14, developed in the early 1990s);  
55  
56
- 57 • Salters Advanced Chemistry (for students aged 17-18, developed in the early  
58  
59 1990s);  
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- Salters Horners Advanced Physics (for students aged 17-18, developed in the mid to late 1990s);
- Salters Nuffield Advanced Biology (for students aged 17-18, currently under development).

Thus the family of Salters courses spans the whole of the secondary and pre-University age range in England and Wales. Schools can choose which courses their pupils follow, generally from a choice of between three and five alternatives. All courses have to meet externally-specified criteria in terms of scientific content, and almost all Salters courses have a dedicated assessment system with its own examinations.

We have been asked by the editors of the special issue to write this account with reference to a particular model of curriculum development proposed by Goodlad (1979) and Van den Akker (1998), and modified slightly by the editors of the special issue. In essence, this model sees curriculum innovation as incorporating six dimensions (in Van den Akker's terminology: 'representations'):

- the ideal curriculum represents the original vision, basic philosophy, rationale or mission underlying the curriculum;
- the formal curriculum where the vision is elaborated in a curriculum documentation;
- the perceived curriculum describes the curriculum as perceived by its users, especially teachers;
- the operational curriculum describes the actual instructional process in the classroom;
- the experiential curriculum describes the actual learning experiences of the students;
- the attained curriculum describes the resulting learning outcomes of the students.

1  
2 In writing any account of a large-scale curriculum intervention, it is of interest to assess  
3  
4 the extent of the ‘fit’ between any proposed model and what happened in practice.

5  
6 Thus, towards the end of the paper, we will examine the extent to which the model is  
7  
8 helpful in characterising Salters Advanced Chemistry.  
9

### 10 11 12 13 14 **The origins of the ‘Salters approach’ and the Salters design criteria**

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17  
18 The ‘Salters approach’ was born in the early 1980s from a concern widely-held by both  
19  
20 teachers and others involved in science education about current practice and its effects  
21  
22 on the uptake of science subjects beyond the period of compulsory study. It was felt  
23  
24 that school science needed to become more appealing, to be more relevant to young  
25  
26 people’s interests and their daily lives, and to involve them in a wide range of learning  
27  
28 activities in which they could actively engage. The ‘Salters approach’ became known  
29  
30 as a prime example of a context-based approach.  
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36  
37 No specific framework of pedagogic or cognitive theory underpinned the development  
38  
39 of any of the Salters courses. Indeed, the development team has argued against the use  
40  
41 of one specific educational theory or theoretical framework when designing large-scale  
42  
43 curriculum interventions (Campbell et al., 1994). In practice, the Salters projects drew  
44  
45 on a number of different theoretical ideas and perspectives. These included ideas about  
46  
47 the selection of curriculum content, ideas about how young people learn, and ideas  
48  
49 about how to promote and support educational change.  
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56 The developments did, however, hinge on two fundamental design criteria, shared by all  
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58 courses in the Salters ‘family’:  
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4 The ideas and concepts selected, and the contexts within which they are  
5  
6 studied, should enhance young people's appreciation of how chemistry:  
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- 8
- 9 • contributes to their lives or the lives of others around the world; or
  - 10 • helps them to acquire a better understanding of the natural environment.
- 11  
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16 Putting this into operational terms, this meant that units of the course should  
17  
18 start with aspects of the students' lives, which they have experienced either  
19  
20 personally or via the media, and should introduce ideas and concepts only as  
21  
22 they are needed. (Campbell et al., 1994, p 418-419)  
23  
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28 These design criteria could therefore be seen as encapsulating what Goodlad (1979) and  
29  
30 Van den Akker (1988) characterise in their model as 'the ideal curriculum'.  
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35 One strength of adopting design criteria which were very broad in nature was that, in the  
36  
37 early stages, they provided general direction without the need to specify outcomes at a  
38  
39 very detailed level. The content decisions emerged during the development, rather than  
40  
41 being specified as the first step. This contrasts with a more conventional curriculum  
42  
43 design following a coherent list of predetermined concepts organised following the  
44  
45 structure of the subject as in a Normal Science Education in the Kuhnian sense (Van  
46  
47 Berkel et al., 2000). Indeed, as the Salters team argue (Campbell et al., 1994), it is only  
48  
49 by engaging in the process of developing materials to satisfy these criteria that it  
50  
51 becomes possible to establish if such an approach is viable. In their words:  
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1  
2 Curriculum development is the process of discovering the detailed aims  
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4 and objectives rather than starting with them. Clearly this view has  
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6 significant implications for the process of development of a national  
7  
8 curriculum. (p 420)  
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14 The design criteria allowed the developers to pose challenging questions about the  
15  
16 science that young people should learn, and drew on the experience and professional  
17  
18 knowledge of teachers in answering those questions to make decisions about curriculum  
19  
20 content, contexts and learning activities. Additionally, the lack of pressure to specify  
21  
22 detailed outcomes at an early stage provided a means by which a variety of different  
23  
24 groups who would be interested in shaping the chemistry curriculum (potential funders,  
25  
26 science educators, scientists, teachers, policy makers and other bodies with a wide-  
27  
28 ranging interest in chemistry, such as the Royal Society of Chemistry) could express  
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30 their views in order to establish common ground.  
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37 The broad design criteria had two other benefits. One of these was that they permitted  
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39 different interpretations of suitable contexts for subsequent Salters curriculum  
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41 development projects. The final benefit concerned the ways in which the courses were  
42  
43 able to draw on the findings of educational research. The decision not to limit the  
44  
45 development to any one education theory enabled the development team to draw  
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47 selectively and where appropriate on a variety of research studies in order to inform  
48  
49 choices about approach and learning activities. For example, there are a number of  
50  
51 points throughout the courses where the ideas which had emerged from the  
52  
53 constructivist approach to learning influenced particular topics, such as in the  
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55 development of ideas about quantitative chemistry, electrical circuits, forces and motion  
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1  
2 and radioactivity. Research has also shown that the use of language by learners, both in  
3  
4 writing and speaking has an important role to play in learning (e.g. Barnes et al., 1969,  
5  
6 Davies & Greene, 1984; Lemke, 1990; Sutton, 1992). This work supports the inclusion  
7  
8 in the courses of activities such as student-student discussion and other individual and  
9  
10 small group activities involving language use. Work on gender and science (e.g.  
11  
12 Harding, 1983; Whyte, 1986) also influenced decisions about the nature of the course  
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14 materials.  
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21 The two fundamental design criteria have underpinned the more specific aims developed  
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23 for each of the courses in the Salters family. Salters Advanced Chemistry has the  
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25 following amongst its intended outcomes:  
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- 28 • to show the ways chemistry is used in the world and in the work that chemists do;
- 29
- 30 • to broaden the appeal of chemistry by showing how it relates to people's lives;
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- 32 • to broaden the range of teaching and learning activities used;
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- 34 • to provide a rigorous treatment of chemistry to stimulate and challenge a wider  
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36 range of students, laying the foundations for future studies yet providing a satisfying  
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38 course for those who will take the study of chemistry no further.  
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### 43 44 **The materials produced for the course**

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49 The second stage of Goodlad and Van den Akker's model makes reference to the formal  
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51 curriculum, or the resources produced for teaching the course. This section briefly  
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53 describes the development of these materials.  
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2 The development of Salters Advanced Chemistry began in 1988 at the University of  
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4 York in the UK, following on from the success of Salters Chemistry, a course for  
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6 students ages 14-16. Salters Advanced Chemistry was originally developed as a two-  
7  
8 year pre-University course for students aged 17 and 18, with an externally-set  
9  
10 examination at the end of the course. Since it was introduced into the curriculum in  
11  
12 1990, Salters Advanced Chemistry has seen a steady rise in the number of students  
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14 taking the course.  
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21 Since its initial development, Salters Advanced Chemistry has been modified in  
22  
23 response to legislation, and is currently offered in both a modular option, with end of  
24  
25 module external assessments, and an examination option with end-of-course  
26  
27 examinations. Additionally, students may now opt to study half the course materials for  
28  
29 a one-year course. It is worth noting that changes in legislation, coupled with much  
30  
31 more detailed specification of the structure and chemical content of advanced level  
32  
33 courses, have reduced the considerable degree of freedom the developers had in the  
34  
35 early stages of the course in relation to content and approach. None-the-less, the most  
36  
37 recent publications have remained true to the original spirit embodied in the design  
38  
39 criteria.  
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47 Salters Advanced Chemistry has three core publications, now in their second edition  
48  
49 (Burton et al., 2000). These are a Storylines book, a Chemical Ideas book, and an  
50  
51 Activities folder. These are supported by teachers' guides and technicians' guides. The  
52  
53 Storylines provide the 'backbone' of the course, introducing the contexts within which  
54  
55 chemical ideas and skills are developed, and indicating where students need to make  
56  
57 excursions to either the Chemical Ideas book or to activities form the Activities folder.  
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1  
2 The Chemical Ideas book systematically draws together the chemical principles from  
3  
4 the individual units and the different parts of the course. Table 1 shows the main  
5  
6 storyline and chemical ideas in the first five units of the course, and Table 2 illustrates  
7  
8 an example of what is called a ‘map’ of a unit (in this case the first unit, The Elements  
9  
10 of Life), showing how the Storyline links to the Activities and the Chemical Ideas.  
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16 *[Tables 1 and 2 about here.]*  
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21 More details of the course contents and structure may be found on the Salters Advanced  
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23 Chemistry website: [www.york.ac.uk/org/seg/salters/chemistry/](http://www.york.ac.uk/org/seg/salters/chemistry/)  
24  
25

26  
27  
28 One outcome of adopting a context-based approach is that scientific ideas are introduced  
29  
30 on a ‘need to know’ basis. In other words, the science ideas are used when they are  
31  
32 needed to help develop understanding of features of the particular context being studied.  
33  
34 Thus it is unlikely that any one concept area will be introduced and developed in full in  
35  
36 one particular context, as might be the case in more conventional (topic-based) courses.  
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38 The concept of equilibrium provides a good example of this. It is introduced early in  
39  
40 Salters Advanced Chemistry course in the unit The Atmosphere in terms of reversible  
41  
42 reactions to explain the role of carbon dioxide in the oceans. It is then revisited in The  
43  
44 Steel Story, where redox reactions are introduced. The concept is further developed in  
45  
46 Aspects of Agriculture to explain ion-exchange equilibria and this is where equilibrium  
47  
48 constants are introduced and used. In Oceans, towards the end of the course, the  
49  
50 concept is again revisited and applied to more complex situations such as pH and buffer  
51  
52 solutions. In other words the concept of chemical equilibrium is ‘drip-fed’ through the  
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2 two years of the course. The approach clearly has implications for the way in which  
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4 students' understanding of scientific ideas is developed.  
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9 Draft material for all the components of the course was discussed and developed at a  
10  
11 series of planning and writing workshops held over four years (1998-1992) and  
12  
13 involving the developers, funders, science educators, scientists, teachers and  
14  
15 representative of the Examination Board which would ultimately set the examinations  
16  
17 for the course. The dialogue which took place at these workshops provided a very  
18  
19 important means of establishing the priorities of each group and identifying a course  
20  
21 structure which enabled the aspirations of the developers for their ideal curriculum to be  
22  
23 reflected in a workable way in the formal curriculum. A key element of the earlier  
24  
25 workshops involved the identification of the main storylines for the course. These were  
26  
27 identified through considerable discussion and on the basis that they best met the aims  
28  
29 of the course in relation to showing how chemistry is used in the world of work, and the  
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31 work chemists do, and how chemistry relates to people's lives.  
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40 Later development workshops focused on the assessment of the course. One important  
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42 factor to note in the context of assessment is that national legislation in England and  
43  
44 Wales permitted the course to have its own external examination, provided it met  
45  
46 standards set by an external regulatory body which scrutinised all advanced level  
47  
48 courses and approved those of a required standard.  
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53 Salters Advanced Chemistry is innovative in its assessment in three particular ways.

54  
55 Firstly, in keeping with the context-based approach, the external assessment questions  
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57 (either in the form of module assessment or examinations) use contexts as starting  
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2 points. Secondly, it has an ‘open book’ question, where students are given three weeks  
3  
4 to read and respond to questions on a research paper. Thirdly, the formal assessment of  
5  
6 practical skills is undertaken by the students’ teacher, and based wholly on an individual  
7  
8 investigation designed and conducted by the student.  
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### 11 12 13 14 **Teachers’ responses to the course**

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18 One factor of considerable importance to the development team was that teachers should  
19  
20 be involved in the design and writing of the curriculum materials. The intention was that  
21  
22 the development team as a whole had a closely-shared perception of the aims of the  
23  
24 course, taking into account the realities of classroom teaching and perceived student  
25  
26 interest. Thus the development of Salters Advanced Chemistry was a collaborative  
27  
28 exercise involving over 40 authors and nearly 100 expert advisers. The authors were  
29  
30 mostly either science educators or teachers. The initial materials developed were used  
31  
32 in a two-year trial before being revised into the final publication form, thus allowing for  
33  
34 detailed feedback from both teachers and students to be incorporated into the final  
35  
36 version of the course materials. In some cases, the people teaching the course in the  
37  
38 two-year trial were contributing authors.  
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47 In the later planning and writing workshops, teachers using the materials were  
48  
49 encouraged to share their experiences with the central development team, and these  
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51 informed revisions to the trial materials.  
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56 Teachers’ responses to a course form a crucial element of the perceived curriculum, as  
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58 described by Goodlad and Van den Akker. Much of the evidence of teachers’ responses  
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2 to Salters Advanced Chemistry could be characterised as anecdotal, as it has emerged  
3  
4 from discussions at development and training workshops. However, a recent change in  
5  
6 legislation in England and Wales (Curriculum 2000), resulting in schools having to  
7  
8 make new choices about advanced level courses, provided a timely opportunity to  
9  
10 explore teachers' perspectives on Salters Advance Chemistry (Bennett et al., in press)  
11  
12 and their reasons for choosing to use the course. One aspect of the study explored  
13  
14 teachers' experiences of teaching Salters Advanced Chemistry, as compared with  
15  
16 experiences of a more conventional course. The study gathered data via a questionnaire  
17  
18 from 222 teachers. The average number of years' experience of teaching advanced level  
19  
20 chemistry course was eighteen years, with teachers having between four and ten years'  
21  
22 experience of teaching Salters Advanced Chemistry. The questionnaire sought teachers'  
23  
24 views of the chemistry course they were teaching in six dimensions: student and teacher  
25  
26 motivation, chemical knowledge and development of concepts, learning activities,  
27  
28 assessment, challenge to teachers, and support for students and teacher. Teachers  
29  
30 reported that they found Salters Advanced Chemistry course more motivating to teach,  
31  
32 that their students were more interested in chemistry, in terms of both their immediate  
33  
34 responses in lessons and their increased likelihood of deciding to go to university to  
35  
36 study chemistry. Teachers also felt their students were better able to engage in  
37  
38 independent study and take more responsibility for their own learning. However, they  
39  
40 reported that they found the course more demanding to teach. The teachers believed  
41  
42 that their course gave as good a foundation for further study as more conventional  
43  
44 courses. In other words, they did not have any undue concerns about the effects on their  
45  
46 students' understanding of scientific concepts. They also reported that their experiences  
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48 were significantly influenced by in-service support provided for the course, and saw this  
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50 as central to building their confidence and hence to the success of the course. Taken  
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1  
2 together, these findings provide strong evidence of a good match between the ideal  
3 curriculum as originally conceived, and the curriculum as perceived by those teaching it.  
4  
5 Additionally, the study findings also point to the crucial role played by in-service  
6  
7 support in maximising the match between the formal and the perceived curriculum.  
8  
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### 14 **From the materials to the classroom**

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18 Studies of curriculum innovation have revealed that teachers rarely use curriculum  
19 materials as intended by their developers (Elliott, 1994; Fullan, 1993; Yager, 1992). In  
20 order to achieve as close a match as possible between the formal curriculum and the  
21 *operational* curriculum (in the terminology of Goodlad and Van den Akker), several  
22 features were incorporated into the design and implementation process. Firstly, the  
23 format of the curriculum materials and the accompanying lesson outlines were detailed  
24 but flexible. Alternative activities and approaches were provided to suit the teacher's  
25 preferred teaching style, the available resources or learners' interests.  
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40 Secondly, through involving teachers in the planning, writing and trial phases, the  
41 project team tried to ensure that the design of the curriculum reflected the realities of life  
42 in the school classroom. It was also hoped that the provision of an in-service  
43 programme of support for teachers throughout the development and implementation  
44 would minimise the mismatch between what was intended and what happened in  
45 practice. This programme enabled teachers using the materials to meet members of the  
46 development team and other teachers using the programme to gain familiarity with the  
47 approaches, and share experiences of use. The nature of the in-service provision was  
48 informed by what the developers felt would be good practice. Reflecting back on the  
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2 process at this point in time, and with reference to more recent research literature, it is  
3  
4 clear that the in-service programme shares all the desirable features of effective in-  
5  
6 service provision described by Fullan (1993), Joyce & Showers (1995), and Harland &  
7  
8 Kinder (1997) in relation to the nature of the support provided. For example, Joyce &  
9  
10 Showers showed that a crucial aspect of successful implementation of a new process is  
11  
12 providing teachers with the opportunities to attend workshops where they can learn  
13  
14 about and practice new skills, and reflect on their performance, and these formed major  
15  
16 components of the Salters in-service provision. The teachers' perception of the  
17  
18 significance of support and workshops also resonates with the two key factors identified  
19  
20 by Harland & Kinder as essential to the success of a new programme: the gaining of  
21  
22 new knowledge and skills, and the opportunity to move towards value congruence, i.e. a  
23  
24 shared perception of good practice between developers and teachers. Both the  
25  
26 flexibility of the curriculum materials and the extensive in-service support helped in  
27  
28 linking the formal curriculum (of the documentation) and the operational curriculum (of  
29  
30 the instruction process).

### 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 **Students' responses to the course**

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44 No formal large-scale evaluation programme was designed for Salters Advanced  
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46 Chemistry, as all the funding was tied to the development to the course materials.  
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48 However, a number of research studies, both at masters and doctoral level, now exist on  
49  
50 aspects of the use of courses in the Salters family (for instance, Banks, 1997; Barber,  
51  
52 2001; Barker & Millar, 1996; Borgford, 1995; Cudd, 1999; Fraser, 1999; Key, 1998). It  
53  
54 is interesting to look at the focus of these studies. In the courses developed for students  
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56 aged 11-16, the emphasis has been on studies of student motivation and attitudes,  
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2 reflecting the widely-held concerns of teachers about these aspects at this age (for  
3  
4 instance, Borgford, 1995; Cudd, 1999; Fraser, 1999). Far fewer studies have explored  
5  
6 aspects of students' understanding of scientific ideas. In contrast, most of the studied of  
7  
8 Salters Advanced Chemistry have focused on students' understanding of chemical ideas.  
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10 The most likely explanation for this is that students following Salters Advanced  
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12 Chemistry have made a positive choice to do so, and questions of motivation and  
13  
14 attitude are therefore not paramount in teachers' minds.  
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21 One study which has gathered information on both motivation and understanding is that  
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23 of Barber (2001). Data were gathered from two groups of students at a large post-16  
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25 college, one following Salters Advanced Chemistry, and another following a more  
26  
27 conventional advanced level chemistry course. There were 60 students in each group,  
28  
29 spread over four teaching sets and three teachers. The students had had a free choice  
30  
31 over which course to take. The data were gathered via a short self-developed  
32  
33 questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire used a mix of fixed  
34  
35 response items, free response items and agreement/disagreement scales. These items  
36  
37 explored a range of areas including students' reasons for choosing to study chemistry at  
38  
39 advanced level, what they found easy and what they found difficult in their course, and  
40  
41 their views on how interesting and varied they felt their course to be.  
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49 The questionnaire data revealed that students' primary motives for choosing chemistry  
50  
51 related to interest and career intentions. Within this, however, there were noticeable  
52  
53 differences between the two groups of students, with 45% of students on the  
54  
55 conventional course citing career choice as the primary factor and 31% citing interest.  
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57 In contrast, 40% of students taking Salters Advanced Chemistry had chosen it for  
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1  
2 interest, with only 20% mentioning career intentions. Salters students expressed higher  
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4 levels of interest in the course and commented positively on the wide range of activities,  
5  
6 such as small-group discussions, internet searches, role plays and project work. Salters  
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8 students expressed more concern than students on the more conventional course about  
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10 their abilities to cope with revision and tests.  
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16 Interviews were conducted with a subset of five students in each group to probe the  
17  
18 questionnaire responses in more detail. Again, the Salters students reported very high  
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20 levels of interest in their course, and commented positively on the variety of activity and  
21  
22 flexibility of approach. In contrast, students on the more conventional course valued its  
23  
24 straightforward nature and found it 'comfortable' to study – they liked the predictability  
25  
26 of a topic-based approach and fairly traditional teaching. The interviews also revealed  
27  
28 that student interest and motivation was maintained at a higher level across the two-year  
29  
30 course in Salters Advanced Chemistry than in the more conventional course. In  
31  
32 contrast, students on the more conventional course reported a decline in interest across  
33  
34 the course, particularly towards the end. This higher level of interest in Salters  
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36 Advanced Chemistry appeared to be reflected in greater numbers of *Salters* students  
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38 going on to study chemistry or chemistry-related courses at university.  
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47 A particular feature of the Salters Advanced Chemistry course is that students are  
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49 required to make a visit to a local chemical industry. Key (1998) looked at how  
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51 students' perceptions of the chemical industry varied during the two years of their  
52  
53 Advanced Chemistry course in England. Her sample group consisted of 1200 students,  
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55 spread amongst three conventional Advanced level courses and the context-based  
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57 Salters Advanced Chemistry course. Students who gained this firsthand experience  
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2 demonstrated greater insight into the role of the chemical industry and an increased  
3  
4 appreciation of its importance compared to those learning about the chemical industry  
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6 in other ways. This increased appreciation was most noticeable in the students who had  
7  
8 followed the context-based Salters course.  
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14 Clearly these findings are limited to two studies. None-the-less, they support a  
15  
16 considerable quantity of anecdotal data which indicate that Salters Advanced Chemistry  
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18 is successful in stimulating and retaining students' interest in the subject in lessons, and  
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20 influencing decisions to go on to study chemistry at university level. Thus the  
21  
22 experiential curriculum is very much in keeping with the aspirations of the developers as  
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24 envisaged in the ideal curriculum.  
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### 30 **The development of chemical understanding**

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35 For all curriculum interventions, it is very important to look at what students have  
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37 learned as a result of the intervention, or, in Goodlad and Van den Akker's terms, the  
38  
39 attained curriculum. This is a particularly pertinent issue for context-based courses. As  
40  
41 has been described earlier in this paper, context-based courses introduce scientific ideas  
42  
43 on a 'need to know' basis to help explain and enrich understanding of features of the  
44  
45 particular context being studied. This 'drip feed' or 'spiral curriculum' approach clearly  
46  
47 has implications for the development of students' understanding of scientific ideas. At  
48  
49 worst, the 'drip feed' approach of context-based courses might hinder the development  
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51 of understanding of key chemical ideas.  
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2 Two studies have yielded evidence on students' understanding of chemical ideas.  
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4 Barker undertook a large-scale, comparative, longitudinal study of 400 upper secondary  
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6 level students at thirty-six schools in England following A Level chemistry courses,  
7  
8 including Salters Advanced Chemistry (Barker & Millar, 1996). The study employed a  
9  
10 series of diagnostic questions on key areas of chemical understanding, administered at  
11  
12 three points over an 18-month period. Statistical analysis of matched responses found  
13  
14 no significant differences in levels of understanding between both student groups. In the  
15  
16 case of the topics of chemical bonding and thermodynamics, the context-based approach  
17  
18 appeared to produce slightly better results in students' understanding. In a smaller-scale  
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20 study, Banks (1997) found that the context-based approach to teaching ideas about  
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22 chemical equilibrium appeared more effective than the conventional approach.  
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30 Because students taking Salters Advanced Chemistry take a different examination to  
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32 those following more conventional courses, direct comparisons of achievement are not  
33  
34 possible. However, interesting and relevant data come from a study by Barber (2001),  
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36 who used a range of added value performance indicators to compare predicted and actual  
37  
38 grades in Advanced level Chemistry examinations for two groups of students, one taking  
39  
40 Salters Advanced Chemistry and one a more conventional course. Her study indicated  
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42 that there was no particular disadvantage or advantage to students in either course in  
43  
44 terms of the final examination grade they achieved. Although students took different  
45  
46 examination papers, all examinations have to meet externally imposed standards, so the  
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48 study provides some additional evidence to indicate that the learning of students on  
49  
50 context-based courses is comparable with that of students on more conventional courses.  
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52 As part of her study, Barber also used standard questions from the Royal Society of  
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54 Chemistry (RSC) annual survey test. This survey of the performance of pre-university  
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2 students in several major chemical concepts has suggested that students following  
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4 context-based courses achieve lower marks than those following conventional courses.  
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6 Barber's study confirmed these findings. However, students at her college following the  
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8 Salters Advanced Chemistry course obtained slightly better grades overall in their  
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10 Advanced level examinations than the students taking a more conventional course. As  
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12 the examinations for both courses are matched for conceptual difficulty, this suggests  
13  
14 that students' achievement is linked to the design of the assessment items. The RSC test  
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16 has a better 'fit' in terms of style of questions for students following conventional  
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18 courses than those following Salters Advanced Chemistry, so the former group of  
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20 students obtained better marks. The better grades of Salters students in their Advanced  
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22 level examination demonstrate the close link between the formal and the attained  
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24 curriculum.  
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### 33 **Conclusions**

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37 This paper set out to describe the development of Salters Advanced Chemistry, to draw  
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39 together the research evidence on the effects of the course, and to identify some of the  
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41 issues raised for the development and evaluation of large-scale curriculum  
42  
43 interventions. Additionally, by structuring the account around a particular model of  
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45 curriculum development, the paper also points to issues about the applicability of the  
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47 model, in particular issues to do with large-scale curriculum intervention projects. The  
48  
49 Goodlad and Van den Akker model of curriculum development is helpful in pinpointing  
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51 these issues, as they emerge from the tension in the 'fit' between the model and reality  
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53 of the development of Salters Advanced Chemistry.  
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These central issues appear to be:

- What role does theory (or theoretical underpinning) play in curriculum development?
- Who is involved in the development process?
- How can evidence of the effects of an intervention be gathered systematically?

### *The role of theory in curriculum development*

Some interventions appear to be much more closely allied than others to ‘theory’. The terms ‘theory’ and ‘theoretical underpinning’ also appear to be used in a variety of ways to cover theories about learning, theories about what science/chemistry ideas should be taught, theories (in a loose sense) about how the science should be taught, and theories about how new programmes should be developed and implemented. As we have argued in the earlier sections of this paper, we are not overly concerned about ‘theory’ in the Salters developments, and feel that there are considerable advantages to be gained by drawing on a range of theories as appropriate.

It seems to us that the Goodlad and Van den Akker model of curriculum development is more likely to have resonance with groups approaching their intervention from a perspective which is allied closely to a research-oriented, theory-based approach. However, there are other interventions, Salters Advanced Chemistry amongst them, which have their origins in a technological problem solving approach. For these interventions, ‘theory’ and ‘theoretical underpinning’ is not seen as a starting point. Rather, the starting point is a problem which has to be solved, using best available evidence from a variety of sources to offer a solution. This results in the identification

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2 of a 'good idea' which, it is hoped, will solve the problem, provided it is possible to  
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4 persuade people to fund it because they also think it is a good idea which should be  
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6 tested out in practice. In these cases, theory is simply woven into the innovation as and  
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8 when the innovation demands, not to justification of the innovation, but to give credence  
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10 to evidence of the good idea working in practice.  
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16 One way in which the Salters courses could be described as having a 'theoretical  
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18 underpinning', is in the links which have become apparent to the theories of curriculum  
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20 development and evaluation now referred to as design experiments. The term has its  
21  
22 origins in the work of Ann Brown (Brown, 1992) and Allan Collins (Collins, 1993) in  
23  
24 the USA. Design experiments draw on the evaluation approaches used in technology  
25  
26 and engineering, which aim to explore how a product, developed to solve a particular  
27  
28 problem, performs in selected situations. This has clear parallels in educational  
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30 contexts, where the 'product' being tested is a new programme, developed with the  
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32 intention of addressing selected problems or shortcomings with existing provision.  
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40 A design experiment in educational contexts involves evaluating the effects of a new  
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42 programme in a limited number of settings. For example, this might involve selecting  
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44 teachers who teach roughly comparable groups, but who have different teaching styles,  
45  
46 and exploring the effects of the new programme on each group of students. The design  
47  
48 experiment would then yield information on the circumstances in which the programme  
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50 is likely to be most successful. Design experiments see the context in which the  
51  
52 programme is being implemented as an important factor likely to influence its success,  
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54 and also acknowledge that those implementing the programme are highly likely to make  
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56 modifications to tailor it to their own particular situations. Thus, it is accepted that there  
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2 may be considerable variation in what happens in practice from one context to another,  
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4 de-emphasising the need for a close match between the ideal and formal curriculum on  
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6 the one side, and the operational and experiential curriculum on the other.  
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11 *Who is involved in the development process?*  
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16 A key message for those involved in curriculum development to emerge from the Salters  
17  
18 experience concerns the central role that teachers play through their involvement in the  
19  
20 planning, design and trial stages of development. The discussion and negotiation with  
21  
22 teachers as 'end users' of the programme results is crucial in maximising the overlap  
23  
24 between the aspirations of the developers and what happens in the classroom.  
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30 A second reason for a close involvement of teachers in the curriculum development  
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32 process is specific to context-based approaches. Teachers have been perceived as those  
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34 who are aware of contexts of interest to their students, and thus are essential in selecting  
35  
36 contexts as the starting points for learning. Mayoh & Knutton (1997) caution against  
37  
38 the assumption that teachers are aware of everyday experiences and interests of their  
39  
40 students and, more fundamentally, Jones (1997) provides evidence that students are  
41  
42 hesitant to share their experiences and knowledge-needs with adults in a formal settings  
43  
44 such as the classroom. More recently, students from around 40 of countries have been  
45  
46 asked systematically about their interests in a range of science-related contexts in the  
47  
48 Relevance of Science Education (ROSE) project based at the University of Oslo (see  
49  
50 website: [www.ils.uo.no/forskning/rose/](http://www.ils.uo.no/forskning/rose/)). Initial analysis of empirical data on student  
51  
52 interests in learning through different environmental contexts suggests that, for instance,  
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54 15 year olds in Norway are more interested in contexts directly irrelevant to themselves  
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2 (such as how energy can be saved or used in a more effective way) than in contexts  
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4 highlighting societal issues (such as benefits and possible hazards of modern methods of  
5  
6 farming) (Schreiner & Sjøberg, in press). The use of such data will provide an extra  
7  
8 student-based dimension to the curriculum development process.  
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### 11 12 13 14 *Gathering systematic evidence of effects*

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18 No structured programme of evaluation was formally designed for Salters Advanced  
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20 Chemistry because all the funding was linked to the development of the materials.  
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22 However, any curriculum intervention does raise the question of the extent to which the  
23  
24 intervention achieves better outcomes than other approaches. Thus a curriculum  
25  
26 intervention certainly sets an agenda for research whether it is pursued or not. If it is  
27  
28 pursued, a key question has to be the extent to which it is actually possible to gather  
29  
30 evidence from a large-scale curriculum intervention which might conclusively  
31  
32 demonstrate that the intervention is better than other approaches. An exploration of the  
33  
34 ways in which this question might be answered places the evaluation of curriculum  
35  
36 interventions very firmly at the centre of the current debate on the nature of educational  
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38 research. For some (e.g. Hargreaves, 1996; Torgerson & Torgerson, 2000), the use of  
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40 experimental techniques (and, in particular, randomised controlled trials) is seen as the  
41  
42 only way of providing hard evidence of better outcomes. However, such techniques are  
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44 only appropriate if different approaches have the same outcomes. For those involved in  
45  
46 the development of context-based approaches, it is likely to be the case that the intended  
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48 outcomes are different in relation to what seems desirable for students to know and be  
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50 able to do. This makes the gathering of hard evidence of better outcomes very difficult.  
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2 The limitations of experimental techniques for the evaluation of curriculum  
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4 interventions may addressed by adopting the evaluation methods appropriate for the  
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6 design experiment, as described above, as part of a curriculum development approach  
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8 for large-scale, context-based curriculum innovation initiatives. Although the potential  
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10 uses of design experiments has yet to be explored in detail, they so seem to offer a  
11  
12 productive starting point.  
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18 Despite the limitations of research into its effects, Salters Advanced Chemistry appears  
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20 to have been a very successful curriculum innovation, judged by its longevity, its  
21  
22 uptake, and the findings of research studies into its effects on students' interest and  
23  
24 understanding of chemical ideas. There is evidence to suggest that students taking  
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26 Salters Advanced Chemistry are more likely than their counterparts on more  
27  
28 conventional courses to go on to study chemistry or chemistry-related subjects at  
29  
30 university. Certainly key groups of funders have been persuaded by the evidence on the  
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32 effects of Salters Advanced Chemistry, as it resulted in funding for two further  
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34 Advanced-level courses, Salters Horners Advanced Physics, and Salters-Nuffield  
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36 Advanced Biology.  
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Table 1: Main storylines and chemical ideas in the first five units of the course

Storyline	Chemical ideas used
The Elements of Life is a study of the elements in the human body, the solar system and the universe.	Amount of substance Atomic structure Atomic spectroscopy Periodic Table: periodicity, Group 2 Chemical bonding Shapes of molecules
Developing Fuels is a study of fuels and the contribution that chemists make to the development of better fuels.	Reacting masses and molar volumes Thermochemistry Homologous series Alkanes Structural isomerism Catalysis Entropy (qualitative)
From Minerals to Elements is a study of the extraction and uses of two elements, bromine and copper.	Ions in solution Reacting masses and molar concentrations Electronic configuration (s, p and d orbitals) Types of reactions (redox, precipitation, acid-base) Group 7 Molecular and giant (network) covalent structures
The Atmosphere is a study of two important chemical processes, the depletion of ozone in the upper atmosphere and the greenhouse effect in the lower atmosphere.	Interaction of matter and radiation Rates of reaction (qualitative) Halogenoalkanes Reaction mechanisms: nucleophilic substitution, radical reactions Chemical equilibrium
The Polymer Revolution tells the story of the development of addition polymers, many of which were the result of 'accidental' discoveries.	Addition polymers Alkenes Reaction mechanisms: electrophilic addition Alcohols Geometric isomerism Intermolecular forces Properties of polymers in relation to structure

Table 2: A map of the unit, The Elements of Life (EL)

ACTIVITIES	CHEMICAL STORYLINE	CHEMICAL IDEAS
EL1 How do we know the formula of a compound?	EL1 What are we made of?	1.1 Amount of substance
EL2.1 How much iron is in a sample of iron compound?	EL2 Take two elements	2.1 A simple model of the atom
EL2.2 Making the most of your study of chemistry		2.2 Nuclear reactions
EL3.1 Investigating the chemistry of Group I and Group II elements	EL3 Looking for patterns in elements	1.2 Balanced equations 11.1 Periodicity 11.2 The s-block: Groups I and II
EL3.2 How do the physical properties of elements change across a row on the Periodic table?		
EL3.3 Check your notes on The Elements of Life: Part 1		
EL4.1 How do we know about atoms?	EL4 Where do the chemical elements come from?	2.1 A simple model of the atom
EL4.2 Isotopic abundance and relative atomic mass		2.2 Nuclear reactions
EL4.3 Investigating a spectroscopic technique		6.1 Light and electrons
EL4.4 Radon in the rocks		2.3 Electronic structure: shells
EL5 Balloon molecules	EL5 The molecules of life	3.1 Chemical bonding 3.3 The shapes of molecules
EL6 Check your notes on The Elements of Life: Part 2	EL6 Summary	

**Captions of tables:**

Table 1: Main storylines and chemical ideas in the first five units of the course

Table 2: A map of the unit, The Elements of Life (EL)

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