

Technically speaking!

I have been involved with the Salters' Chemistry Camps now for over five years at Sussex University, and they have always been an enthralling experience.

Preparation usually begins about a month before the camp, with the focus on making solutions, refilling chemical bottles, and most importantly, looking through any new experiment that we might not have done before. The requirements lists provided by Salters are usually exhaustive and very thorough, but occasionally there might be alterations to be made and agreed with the course organisers. We may test out some part of an experiment, and I try and let a student on work experience go through the procedure, to give the process some authenticity!

The next major thing to happen is the arrival of the six or seven huge boxes from Salters a week or two before the course begins. It may seem an odd detail, but the badges and scripts with our names on them are important in two ways. Firstly, you can see that someone else also has an astute eye for detail and cares deeply about the Chemistry Camps, and secondly you really know that this is going to happen now!

So finally, the day arrives and the camp begins. No one is lost or comes late; a few will not have lab coats or glasses and most will have decided who to work with within their group in the laboratory.

Usually, when the experiment is running it is a quieter time for the technical staff, dealing with issues like breakages and more materials.

For a group of 15 year olds, the laboratory is extraordinary well disciplined and I am sure that is down to the Teacher Mentors who so effectively oversee the course and this helps the technical staff, especially when the experiment is over and equipment needs clearing.

The next thing to do is to clear away the previous experiment and put out the next.

I have a complex list, which has all the equipment for each experiment on it in detail. Every item has a different colour, and in this way, when you look at the list, you can tell not only where the piece of equipment is needed next, but also how urgent it might be to get it washed up too, if it happens to be needed in the next experiment.

Lunchtime offers a welcome break and a chance to talk with the student helpers before the last experiment in the afternoon.

On the last day here there is usually a fun experiment for the campers to do. Anything from karaoke to making slime or the egg experiment!

After two and a half days, and four experiments, the students get to go home and what we have just done has now to be repeated for the second cohort....we do love it, but we are all thoroughly exhausted by the end of the week.

On reflection, the success of the Camps at Sussex lies in the time spent with the preparation and an eye for detail, but it is not quite as simple as that, as I feel Sussex has, through the help assistance and enthusiasm given by our Academic, Postgraduate, Undergraduate and Conference Office staff made the Camps here a wonderful success.

The most important thing though is the experience the students have, to have spent time with others who are just as enthusiastic as you are about your favourite subject, chemistry, within an academic environment at a University is for many, I hope, a life changing one, and is not just about experiments you did in the laboratory, but also the connections you made when you shared your enthusiasm with others.