

Geographers of the future: using the Geography Ambassadors scheme as inspiration

Becky Kitchen's A Level geography students benefited from the department's involvement in the RGS Ambassador scheme, in which university students developed resources, worked with, and enthused, students in the classroom.

It was just before Christmas last year when, in amongst the glossy brochures and memos clogging up my pigeon hole in the staff room, I noticed a letter from the RGS with IBG detailing their 'Geography Ambassadors' scheme. For those who are not familiar with the scheme, it pairs under-graduate and post-graduate geographers, at university or in employment, with schools, to act as positive role models or 'ambassadors for geography'. They would be available to work with small groups of students and to talk to students about studying geography to a higher level. (See www.rgs.org for more information.) The history department at school had taken part in a similar scheme called 'Researcher in Residence' and had had a very positive experience, and so I decided that we would give it a go. I quickly heard back from Kate Amis at the RGS with IBG, who arranged for two third-year undergraduates, Bryony Cox and Nasim Adeli from Queen Mary University, London, to visit in March.

When initially planning the visit, we started from the point that it was a very rare situation to have four 'expert' geographers available for a lesson with 15 year 12 students, and consequently we wanted to maximise this opportunity. I was also fortunate to have a supportive department as well as a keen PGCE student, Claire Sharratt, in tow, all of whom had a wealth of ideas. The

students had got to the part of the AS syllabus on flooding, and we decided that the students should carry out an enquiry-based piece of work so that they would have two clear flooding case studies for their physical geography paper, but would also be practising skills and techniques which would be invaluable for the synoptic paper in their A2 exam (Edexcel syllabus A).

Using two photographs, one of the Lynmouth flood and the other of the Boscastle flood, we wanted the students to come up with their own enquiry question, break it down into a series of key questions and then select a handful of resources from a list of over 20 to help them to answer their question. (see the PowerPoint presentation and resource list at www.geography.org.uk/journals). They had to think about which resources would be useful for them to use and justify their decisions. We would also build in a couple of transition sections and provide students with the opportunity to select additional resources to add more detail to their answers, as shown in the lesson plan (Figure 1).

Preparation for the ambassadors' visit was not onerous. We e-mailed the lesson plan to Bryony and Nasim and sent them a pack of the resources that we were planning to use so that they had a little prior warning. The only other piece of planning required was to drum up support from the year 12s (and a handful of year 13s and 11s) to come to the talk that our ambassadors were going to give at lunchtime about studying geography at university.

On 6 March Bryony and Nasim duly arrived and were whisked into their first year 12 lesson. We had split the class into mixed-ability groups of three or four, and each was assigned an 'expert' (Claire, Bryony, Nasim or myself). The students immediately warmed to our ambassadors, and were quickly asking questions and thinking critically about the resources which they thought might be useful in answering their enquiry question. Bryony and Nasim, in turn, were comfortable asking the students challenging questions in order to get the most out of each resource. In reality, it took much longer than anticipated for the students to choose the five resources which would be useful to them. However, it did generate important discussion about the use of each resource and how it would help them to answer their key questions. Consequently, there was only time for one transition but, despite selecting very different resources, most groups found their first five resources gave them the majority of the information they needed and used their subsequent choices to add additional detail. One group in particular had spent a considerable amount of time annotating their resources in detail so that it was easier for them to pull out their conclusions from the evidence.



Photo: © Becky Kitchen.

Flooding enquiry

Aim: The aim is to use the 'experts' (class teacher, PGCE student and two geography ambassadors from QMUL) to work with small groups of year 12 students on an enquiry into flooding. They are studying this for their AS exams (Edexcel A) and it will also provide them with skills needed for the synoptic paper.

Starter: Students will be split into groups of three or four and given two photographs, one showing the effects of the Lynmouth flood (15 August 1952) and one showing the effects of the Boscastle flood (15 August 2004). They will have five minutes to use these photos to come up with an enquiry question. This should be challenging. A good example might be:

Was anything learnt from the Lynmouth flood which could have been applied to Boscastle?

Task 1: Students will then be given a laminated sheet with a selection of basic sources of evidence listed on it. They should annotate the list to show which sources of evidence they will use to answer their enquiry question and why. They can select only five pieces of information. They can also cross off any pieces of evidence that they don't think are relevant or useful. (5 minutes)

Task 2: Students will be given a grid which they will need to complete. They should come up with a number of key questions which should form their route of enquiry. These key questions are likely to include:

1. Where did the floods take place?
2. What happened?
3. Why did this happen?
4. What were the effects or consequences?
5. Was anything learnt from the Lynmouth flood which could have been applied to Boscastle?

They should use the evidence which they have selected from their resources packs to come up with some conclusions, and they should also highlight where they found this evidence.

Key question	Conclusions	Evidence
Where did the floods take place?		OS maps Newspaper article
What happened?	Both were flash flood events	Hydrographs

'Experts' should be available to the students. Their role is to guide (without telling the answer!) and to provide in-depth explanation if required. (20 minutes)

Transition 1: Students need to suggest five additional sources of evidence which would be useful. They will then be issued with some more sources of evidence which they can use to extend their initial conclusions. (15 minutes)

Transition 2: Students may then make a free selection of resources which they can use to extend their conclusions. (10 minutes)

Plenary: Why did they choose their initial five resources? Would they have made different decisions in the light of what they have now discovered? (5 minutes)

Homework task: Students will be provided with a photocopy of their table. They should use this to write a two-sided report of their enquiry findings for the Environment Agency.

Figure 1: Flooding enquiry lesson plan.

The lesson was a real success. The students went away with two relevant case studies on flooding and had all engaged in an enquiry question which they had selected. They had also chosen and justified their choices of evidence – something which we pulled together in the plenary. The lesson would not have been possible without

our ambassadors as it enabled the students to work intensively in small groups using higher-order thinking skills, and asking and answering higher-order questions.

Following their work in two year 12 lessons, Bryony and Nasim then came along to our lunchtime geography study session to do a presentation on

studying geography at university. While this was mainly aimed at the year 12s who had yet to make their choices, there were also a handful of year 11 students who were interested in studying geography at A level and some year 13 students who had already made their decision to study the subject. Bryony and Nasim had prepared a PowerPoint presentation which covered a variety of topics from 'Why have you decided to study geography?' to 'Modules you are studying' and from 'Fieldtrips' to 'Social life at university'. While there was a focus on studying geography in London, and particularly at Queen Mary University, they covered topics generally and were comfortable fielding questions from an interested audience. It came as a bit of a surprise to me afterwards when Bryony informed me that this was the first geography ambassadors presentation which they had done, as they had both seemed very comfortable and pitched their tone at just the right level. The students enjoyed the session and were particularly excited by the 'I ♥ Geography' pencils that Bryony and Nasim distributed!

I cannot praise the Geography Ambassadors scheme enough. Bryony and Nasim were professional and organised, and it meant that we could carry out activities in lessons which we wouldn't have otherwise been able to do. They gave geography a human face and helped the students to see themselves as geographers rather than as students who just happened to study geography. The exciting aspect for us as a geography department is that this is just the beginning. In the short term, we would like to invite Bryony and Nasim back in the summer term to work with the same students, after their AS exams, on our independent learning programme, and maybe ask them to mentor students who wish to apply to study geography at university. In the longer term, we would also like the ambassadors to work with our younger students by leading workshops and fieldwork. It is also important for us, as a geography department, to remember that we need to inspire the students of today to be the geographers of tomorrow, and the Ambassadors scheme is a useful tool to have in our toolbox. ■

Acknowledgement

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