

# geographychampions

## a glimpse behind the Ning



The Geography Champions network is a nationwide support mechanism to promote rigorous, exciting and do-able primary geography. It is just one part of the GA's work for the second phase of the DCSF-funded Action Plan for Geography initiative (jointly run by the GA and the RGS-IBG).

At the heart of the Champions' network are the 40 GA-appointed Champs. These individuals are tasked with developing local networks of primary teachers and supporting them in ways that are tailored to local needs. The Champs offer free CPD twilight sessions and also communicate via the Ning – an online professional networking site.

To date, more than 1000 teachers have been reached via the Champs network, although the target is to contact 1500 by 2011. In the 14 months since it was launched the Ning has attracted 700 members, some of whom have also attended local meetings with Champions. Some teachers who have attended meetings, however, do not participate online. This is fine as the Ning is just one aspect of the Champs support network.

Anyone can join this free community of practice, whether they are a GA member or

not. Many participants are not geography specialists and welcome opportunities to develop their subject knowledge in enjoyable ways through contact with a range of other professionals and schools.

But what kind of professional conversations and opportunities occur on the Ning? When *GA Magazine* editor and Primary Champ Anthony Barlow suggested an article based on the idea of 'A day in the life of a Ning', it seemed an ideal opportunity to dig beneath the surface. Here are just some of the musings, recommendations, observations and communications gathered over the course of a day in February 2010...

### A day in the life of the Ning

#### ■ Enthusiasm and potential

Champion Wendy North leaves a quick post on her West and South Yorkshire page to thank Katy for organising a meeting for local teachers at a local primary school. Wendy is a Champ who has been delighted to find a local teacher who, although not a Champ herself, is enthused enough to help organise local twilight sessions. While on

this page I read some comments from people who have found Wendy's online presentation 'Map it, Picture it, Write it' really useful.

#### ■ Meeting feedback

Another post about a successful twilight meeting: Chris Trevor, one of this year's newly-appointed Champs, leaves some comments on the feedback page about her first face-to-face meeting with teachers, supported by another Cheshire Champ, Mark Preston:

*'We have just held our first event as Geography Champions of Cheshire ... Admittedly, only a few people turned up, but those who did really enjoyed the event. (It did help, holding the event in a pub!) The first two people who arrived, didn't know each other, but once the "geography" connection was made, they were involved in conversation, and it was only half an hour later, that they realised that they hadn't introduced themselves to each other! For thirty minutes they had chatted away happily about the Quality Mark etc., without the usual awkward silences which sometimes happen when you meet someone for the first time! The power of geography!'*

The power of geography indeed! Feedback from teachers attending these free CPD sessions has included comments such as 'I have been waiting for something like this for years' and 'Thanks for the meeting on Saturday. Found the activities very useful to put into practice at school'.

I quickly check the events section of the Ning – eight events are on offer in March 2010 alone, with a geographical spread from Somerset to Sheffield. In total, 44 meetings have occurred around the country in the past year – a mix of twilight sessions, whole-day workshops and conference events.

#### ■ Welcome notes

I add welcome notes to the pages of another five people who have joined and am especially pleased to welcome the familiar face of Stephen Scoffham. Stephen is the Editor of the much valued *Primary Geography Handbook* and is currently updating this in readiness for a reprint. I discover that part of his reason for joining was to check out latest ideas and reviews on the site as part of this work.

#### ■ E-mail alert

An e-mail alert tells me that Jen has commented on my blog about a recent residential weekend at Juniper Hall with members of the GA's Early Years and Primary Committee. The highlight of the weekend was a morning of Forest School activities. There is sound endorsement

about Forest School from Jen, who enthuses:

*'it's been a fantastic experience for all children and staff – so much learning about the environment and respect for it from everyone involved'.*

#### ■ Storybook discussions

Wendy contributes to a forum on 'Useful story books for teaching about coasts and rivers' and has some recommendations that include *River Story* by Meredith Hooper and *What If? A book about recycling* by Mick Manning and Brita Granstrom. Wendy also directs us to a case study of Jane Mulligan's use of the story *The Journey* and to a page of literacy reviews, enticing us with an extract of Anne Hamblen's review of *The Great Snake* by Sean Taylor.

There are a further eight responses to this forum throughout the day, with the list of books, concepts, ideas and examples steadily growing. Some teachers respond to the original query while others share professional conversations with each other. Nell writes:

*'I also have a pile of books here that geographers might like – some global perspectives and some more general sustainability books suitable for KS2, so none that fit in these current topics. Should I start a new thread or is that over-egging the pudding?'*

There is a quick flurry of replies urging Nell to go ahead. Meanwhile, Nell has moved on to post on her group page to say she's booked for the GA Conference and would anyone from her local network like to meet up.

It seems discussions around story books are proving popular: on the one about climate change resources, responses are coming in thick and fast. Jackie from Tide~ adds more recommendations and websites, while Tricia picks up on a colleague's suggestion and adds a link to supporting resources. Others soon join in and respond with a wide variety of media links, examples of how they have used books and recommended age groups. This is real time, interactive, professional engagement and support – and it is this that the Ning does best.

#### What lies beneath

The blog and forum posts are treasure troves of resources, ideas and good practice, and are well worth excavating. Musing over previous contributions I rediscover some gems: the 'geography friendly classroom' (exciting ideas gathered by a group of inspired teachers and available to download from the Hampshire group's page), Octavia Chave's article

## <http://geographychampions.ning.com>

'Mapping the British Isles with heart and head' (already earmarked for inclusion in a future issue of *Primary Geographer*) and, on the home page, an interactive presentation called '15 creatively simple ways to teach primary geography'.

Some teachers, uncertain of their new role, ask questions and many responses are given. Comments such as these are typical:

*'I am so pleased to be a member of Champions and hope it will really help my practice as I am really struggling at the moment!'*

*'I am in my second year of teaching and have just been appointed the Geography Co-ordinator and am feeling so useless at the role!'*

*'I just don't know what to do or where to start! I teach in Reception and we do things so differently so I don't feel familiar with any the geography in school ... I would be really grateful for a bit of guidance.'*

The teachers who seek support on the Ning want to do the best job they can, which is why a dedicated community of practice is so important. The Champions is only one aspect of the network of support offered by the GA. By joining the association teachers can enhance their practice further and benefit from a range of different methods of support:

*'In a school in an area where there was no support for geography from the local authority, it was the subject leader's membership of the Geographical Association that was the main conduit for innovation and development.'* (Ofsted, 2009, p. 15).

#### Reference

Ofsted (2009) *Ofsted Survey Inspection Programme: Geography 2009–10 Hiltbury Primary School*. 20 October 2009.

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## Information and guidance about the primary curriculum

The current situation regarding the future of the primary curriculum can be confusing, so we've created an information page on the GA website where we've tried to explain the situation as clearly as possible. It will answer some of the most commonly-asked questions, such as:

- Why didn't some aspects of the Children, Schools and Families Bill make it into Law?
- What aspects of the Bill were lost?
- We've already received our set of new curriculum documents – should we now throw these away?
- The QCDA site still has the new primary curriculum and planning guidance on its site – should I ignore this?

- What is the statutory requirement for us now when planning a curriculum? What do we have to do?
- What about assessment requirements? Aren't there some new Level Descriptions?
- Where can I find out more about what other schools are doing about curriculum development?

Go to [www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/curriculumupdate](http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/curriculumupdate)

Further information is also available from the **Primary Geography Champions Network** pages – see <http://geographychampions.ning.com>



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