



Interviews with GIFT 2013 participants

In this edition of GeoQ, dedicated to the EGU 2013 General Assembly, we interview two teachers about their experiences taking part in the GIFT – Geosciences Information for Teachers workshop at this year's conference.

Ana Sousa, Portugal



Teacher Ana Sousa at the registration desk of the EGU 2013 General Assembly. (Credit: Ana Sousa)

Could you introduce yourself and let us know a bit about your work as a teacher in Portugal (Azores)?

My name's Ana Sousa and I'm a 36-year-old geography teacher at Ribeira Grande High School, in the São Miguel Island, Azores. I have been in the Azores since 2001 and I really love living and teaching here because of the breathtaking nature and the endless sea. I teach 12–18 aged students and my school is situated on the north coast of the island, in Ribeira Grande. With almost 1500 students and over 150 teachers and 60 caretakers, this is a big school, and its population is somewhat heterogeneous... In our daily routines we face the normal problems schools face nowadays, but my school is a very dynamic one, with teachers developing several projects beyond classes, interacting not only with students but also with the local community. Apart from teaching, I also belong to a small group of teachers, psychologists, nurses and doctors, who develop several activities related to our students' health and well-being. I really enjoy what I do because it gives me the opportunity to learn new things all the time and to get to know many interesting people everywhere! I think this comes from the several teachers who influenced me, specially my high school geography teacher, who taught me to see the world eagerly, i.e., wider and deeper. My parents also had a big role in my quest to learn new things, by travelling with me

around the country and by filling the shelves of my childhood home with books and encyclopaedias!

How did you hear about the GIFT workshop at the EGU General Assembly and why did you decide to take part?

I first heard about the GIFT workshop through Helder Pereira, an enthusiastic and very dynamic biology teacher who I met some years ago in a national contest about Charles Darwin. Last October, he sent me an e-mail mentioning not only the GIFT workshop, but also sharing his previous experience, encouraging me to apply for it. I had never heard about this workshop before but, as soon as I looked through its website, I realised it would be an excellent opportunity to get very close to real science, real scientists and new ideas! When I received the confirmation by [the Chair of the EGU Committee on Education] Carlo Laj that I was accepted to GIFT, I couldn't believe that I was really going to Vienna! I felt very happy and special for being one of the GIFT workshop attendants.

How would you describe your experience attending the GIFT workshop in Vienna?

The four days at the GIFT workshop were of intense learning about 'Natural hazards' (the topic of this year's event) but, above all, it was an opportunity to meet new people and find out about different ways of teaching, of working, of encouraging new learning possibilities. It was very stimulating to get to know all of the members of the EGU Committee on Education, whose dedication and enthusiasm are very contagious. Their perseverance and, at the same time, their regard to each of us, school teachers, during the GIFT workshop were priceless. I feel really grateful for the opportunity we were given to grow, both in terms of our knowledge of natural hazards and our enthusiasm for teaching. It was also very stimulating to experience the General Assembly and to get in touch with so many scientists. Carrying an EGU badge made me such a proud teacher and human being!

What talk or activity at the workshop did you find most stimulating and why?

All lectures were much diversified, yet very interesting. I felt closer to the ones about volcanology because in São Miguel, a volcanic island, such natural hazards happen on a regular basis. Therefore, I really enjoyed listening and having the opportunity to change ideas with Professor Franco Barberi, who spoke about this topic. I also cannot forget the afternoon of hands-on activities GIFT teachers took part in – such an incredible work the Committee did in preparing all those materials and organising the activities! I also attended the study visit to the Danube Island, a very an interesting place where I had the opportunity to get to know how flooding is controlled. I also loved the guided tour of the Vienna Natural History Museum, where I'll have to go back with more time. The

poster session was, however, the most stimulating one as it gave me the opportunity to learn from other teachers and to exchange ideas with them. I realised, once more, that extra-curricular events promote and encourage children and teachers to go way beyond the basics... And by doing that we, teachers, are helping to raise future scientists and conscious citizens!

In your opinion, how important is it for teachers to learn about science directly from the scientists?

I find it very important to learn directly from scientists as they are familiar with the latest scientific discoveries, as well as the biggest gaps in scientific knowledge. They are great examples of people who are always questioning everything and aiming to know more. With workshops like GIFT school teachers have the opportunity to gather information that we would otherwise only come across much later, once the new scientific discoveries are published in textbooks.

Will you change any aspect of your teaching based on what you learnt during the GIFT workshop? If so, in what way?

Being part of the GIFT network made me feel like a ring of an international 'geo chain', as if the world and science can only be better if we're all connected. This chain is only possible through the positive contribution and motivation I experienced at the GIFT workshop. It will encourage me to keep on being the enthusiastic teacher I've been so far. I'm sure my words will be meaningful to the ones I'll talk to, either to students, or to my peers. Thus, by reaching them, I'll reach myself too, daily.

The GIFT workshop was a much-needed breath of fresh air, as we are currently facing very difficult times in Portugal due to the national (and international) economic crisis. So it's inevitable that we teachers feel the the negative mood and the needs of the school kids and their families, which affects our daily life, routine, and motivation. I learned new ways of teaching, new ways of learning, new activities that can be done in the classroom at low cost, among many other important issues. I now tell my students that we, in the Azores, are very well prepared to deal with natural hazards (due to the work we do all year long), which is very important for their self-esteem. I tell them that they should study because we need many geosciences scientists to help the world grow better! And I tell them that they need to learn new languages to go abroad and meet new, interesting people like I did. Seeing different landscapes, breathing new air, tasting new flavours, listening to different sounds are goals to be aimed for. I know this may seem commonplace but, to my students, many who have never left São Miguel, it is very difficult to imagine the world of possibilities beyond the boundaries of this island... For the breath of fresh air and renewed enthusiasm I got from four days in Vienna, I can only thank the Committee on Education.

On the other hand, I hope I'll be able to transmit the same motivation to my peers in the beginning of September when I will convey the main guidelines of the GIFT workshop to all geosciences teachers at my school. This activity will take place at the Azores University and Professor João Luís Gaspar, a volcanology scientist, will be helping me with it by presenting about natural hazards in the Azores. I think it will be a great opportunity to talk about the main theme we discussed at the GIFT Workshop and to share some of the main ideas and activities that I experienced in Vienna, hoping that new seeds of science flourish among us.

Maria Barbera, Italy



Maria Barbera (far left) with other teachers at the entrance to the EGU 2013 General Assembly. (Credit: Maria Barbera)

Could you introduce yourself and let us know a bit about your work as a teacher in Italy?

My name is Maria Barbera and I teach Biology, Chemistry and Geography in a secondary school in Villafranca di Verona, Italy. I teach 14–15-year-old students, who are not always particularly keen on science, in fact, as they attend an economics school where science is taught only during the first two years.

Two years ago I decided to start using my student's interest in foreign languages (English in particular) as a means to catch their attention and occasionally transmit some scientific contents directly in English, in accordance with the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programme that has recently been introduced in Italy, and whose methodologies I'm approaching at the moment. It's a quite demanding job, for my students and for me too, as they have to focus on the language and on the content at the same time, which is a quite unusual task for them. On the other hand, I have to work hard to refresh both my English and my way of teaching, but I think it's a stimulating experience and it's worth it.

How did you hear about the GIFT workshop at the EGU General Assembly and why did you decide to take part?

I received the information by reading the newsletter sent by the ANISN, our National Association of Natural Science Teachers, last October. Immediately, I realised that it would be a great and stimulating opportunity to update my knowledge about natural hazards, the thread running through the workshop, which represent a widely discussed topic during our science classes. At the same time, I was sure that, by participating, I would open my mind and my teaching to a wider, European, dimension.



Packed GIFT room during one of the lectures on 'Natural hazards', the theme of this year's workshop. (Credit: Ana Sousa)

How would you describe your experience attending the GIFT workshop in Vienna?

Some days ago I wrote to [the Chair of the EGU Committee on Education] Carlo Laj, thanking him for organising the GIFT workshop, which represented an extraordinary professional experience for me. It also gave me the opportunity to establish new relationships, with Italian as well as European colleagues. I'm still in touch with teachers from France and England, and I hope these new friendships could bring some form of collaboration in the future...it would be an amazing opportunity for our students, too!

In Vienna the atmosphere was both professional and pleasant – and welcoming too, much thanks to the members of the Committee on Education. I still have Friedrich Barnikel's and Herbert Summesberger's sympathy in my mind and in my heart, Eve Arnold's exquisite kindness, Carlo Laj's warm humanity... and the effective presence of all the Committee members who worked so hard to make this event so special.

What talk or activity at the workshop did you find most stimulating and why?

I can hardly choose among the talks, I really found all of them very interesting and absorbing. If I have to express some preference, I found very clear the talk by Stefano Tinti, who opened our workshop and featured its general guidelines: I think that his talk will probably be quite easy to transmit to my students. I particularly appreciated the presentation by Franco Barberi about the risks related to the

activity of the Vesuvio volcano and the relative planning for protecting people who live on its slopes. I also can't forget the impressive talk given by Bruce Malamud about landslides, their causes and effects. Apart from the interesting content of his speech, he also highlighted how important it's for a teacher to communicate in a brilliant and expressive way to his or her students – what a great scientific communicator!

In your opinion, how important is it for teachers to learn about science directly from the scientists?

It's ...intriguing! When you go around the halls at the EGU General Assembly, meet scientists and have the opportunity to look through the number of posters shown every day, you can feel that you are exactly where science is made and shared, you are somehow a part of it. You know, sometimes teaching consumes your energy... after a while you keep on thinking that you're only a science-teller. You absolutely need to 'come to the roots' to recharge.

Furthermore, I think that all teachers need someone who recognises and appreciates their efforts, especially in my country, where governments in the last two decades declared their intent to improve and support science teaching, but we now have got poorer programmes, less science classes, emptier laboratories... Fortunately we have got opportunities like GIFT to revitalise our enthusiasm and to become aware that scientists (not politicians) still trust in us and believe (yes, they do!) that teachers can still play an important role in leading young people to science.

Will you change any aspect of your teaching based on what you learnt during the GIFT workshop? If so, in what way?

This experience has intensified my purpose to open my teaching to a wider dimension: I'll go on with my studies on the CLIL programme and will try to establish relationships with all colleagues who would like to share their teaching experience with me (so, please, write to me!).

I would also thank François Tilquin, of the Lycée Marie Curie of Echirolles, France, who was kind enough to gift us with one of the equipments he set up for his students to experiment the effects of earthquakes on the ground and the buildings: I'm looking forward to starting using it with my own students!

*Email interviews conducted by Bárbara Ferreira
GeoQ Chief Editor & EGU Media and Communications Manager*



OPEN ACCESS IMAGE REPOSITORY

imggeo

www.imggeo.net