



“Engaged Archaeology within Four Walls: A Call for an Experiential Approach to Archaeological Theory in Introductory Courses”



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Submission: November 11, 2017; Published: February 01, 2018

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Opinion

In introductory archaeology courses, instructors often struggle to find ways to expose students to archaeological methods and theories, given the relatively confined space of the lecture hall or discussion group. Frequently, we default to slide shows and lecturing about how archaeologists draw conclusions from their data, at a loss for how to allow large groups of students in a classroom setting to experience this kind of analysis for themselves, even though recent studies show that our students are increasingly interested in more engaged, hands-on forms of learning [1-3].

Perhaps this lack of classroom materials stems from a dearth of literature on anthropological pedagogy, especially books and articles that offer “solid, practical examples that the practitioner can adopt,” but without such practical guidelines, new and developing instructors will be either hampered in their ability to connect students meaningfully to the course material, or may have to reinvent the wheel to do so [4]. However, many basic archaeological methods and theories can be approached in a classroom setting without the benefit of a field site, which many students will never enter and even interested students may struggle to afford. For many students, the activities within the walls of the classroom are as close as they will come to actual archaeological practice and analysis. This makes their time in the introductory classes that much more precious.

In an effort to promote engaged, hands-on archaeological projects and classroom activities, as well as contribute to the expansion of discussions around archaeological pedagogy, I will briefly summarize several short activities which have previously been successful in discussion groups of approximately 25-30 students in an introductory archaeological course. Each activity ties directly into archaeological methods or theories, with the intention that the activity will reinforce their classroom learning. The following are extremely basic activities, offered to other

introductory archaeology instructors as a call to produce more hands-on activities even within the confines of a traditional classroom.

Activity 1: Drawing hypotheses from artifacts

In this activity, students begin to analyze artifacts and, after their initial analysis and formation of hypotheses, use historical information to verify or amend their hypotheses. Students are split into at least three groups, and given the location of a shipwreck along with a basic description of the ship (though not its name) and several artifacts associated with it. They are to draw conclusions about the people on the ship and its time period. The HMHS Britannic, with its reinforced hull (put in place after the sinking of the Titanic), reduced size servant quarters, medical equipment, and mine damage allows students to build interesting theories as to its history, as does the Queen Anne’s Revenge, with its medley of cannons from different countries (pirated from various ships), French and English goods, and 18th century medical implements to treat STIs. Once students draw as much information as they can about the ship, its crew, and its purpose, they are allowed to turn to the internet and become historical archaeologists to see if they can find their ship. We discuss how they formed their hypotheses, if their assumptions were correct, and what testing methods they might have used on the artifacts.

Activity 2: Tools of social control

In studies of state formations, archaeologists have often pointed to three major tools of social control: bureaucracy, standardization, and literacy [5,6]. After examining these tools in a developing state (for example, in the Near East or Egypt), students are given the assignment to go on a scavenger hunt on their campus and take pictures of examples of bureaucracy in action, standardization, and literacy as a management device.

Rather than see these as tools of past or foreign states, this allows students to see the aspects of control that are inscribed in their own society and to which they tacitly agree every day.

Activity 3: Forager vs farmer debate

After having students read Jared Diamond's controversial take on agriculture [7], the class or discussion group is split into foragers and farmers, and allowed to form arguments and to anticipate what counter-arguments they made need. In the debate, one group provides an argument, and the other group is allowed to respond, and so forth until the point has been covered. Then, the other group can offer a point in their favor. When each group has made their points, as the instructor you may step in to create conflict, like the farmer group pushing their farmland into the forager's lands, what kinds of activities the foragers might consider (relocation, raids, conflict, assimilation), and which would be most effective. You may also introduce conflict among the farmers, with one farmer caught hoarding grain and the rest angry with this discovery. The hoarding farmer must decide whether to give up the grain, accept punishment for their actions, try to convince others of their right to hoard the food, or distribute the grain to people who can act as their defense.

The activities listed above are all group activities. While students tend to despise groupwork when grades are involved, when individual participation is the only graded feature, students tend to enjoy these activities and have always overwhelmingly requested more of them. Beyond pleasing students, asking them to work together without the authoritarian pressure of a group grade pushes back against capitalistic "mentalities and practices that valorize individualism above everything else" [8] Instructors may choose to eliminate the grading from these activities entirely for an even less authoritative and emancipatory approach, though grading based on participation tends to gently push students into at least speaking with their group mates, if not to the class as a whole.

These activities are a few, very basic starting points for professors to use, but are by no means the only ways of integrating experiential learning in the classroom. Another professor arguing for more hands-on classroom learning, Mazur-Strommen [4], offers several more activities for introductory archaeology classes. These activities directly apply concepts used in anthropology and archaeology, and more importantly, illumine how such concepts are constructed by archaeologists. "As archaeologists we gain knowledge about the past through observation of the material remains. The knowledge we gain is shaped by human thought [9]." We may not always be able to provide students with artifacts or a site, but we can certainly guide them in developing their thoughtful analysis of past societies, and by extension, society today. Furthermore, if we take

seriously the call for a critical archaeological pedagogy, "then the notion of the 'field' should be expanded and reconfigured, to incorporate, in addition to the site, the survey field and the museum, all present-day locales... including the classroom and the teaching laboratory" [8]. While the field site may provide valuable methodological experience, a great deal of the work of archaeology is in deciphering artifacts and the cultures and structures of past societies. If we focus on this aspect of the discipline with our students, we may aid them in understanding not only other peoples but "the systemic roots of aspects of their lives" [10].

Engaged classroom methods, in my experience, are not merely fun ways of getting students involved in the classroom. Rather, students find that they can better understand higher level theories such as Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" or Geertz's "theater state" through these activities, and can connect them meaningfully to their own lives. Often, students relate to social theories in their later college years or in their graduate level education, but through engaged teaching methods and increasingly experiential learning we can "collapse the divide between teaching and research" and assist our students in getting the "light bulb" moment much earlier [4]. With more classroom engagement and careful attention to archaeological pedagogy, we can not only illuminate archaeological interpretations of the past, but allow our students to critique and challenge their own understandings of the present and the future.

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DOI: [10.19080/GJAA.2018.02.555595](https://doi.org/10.19080/GJAA.2018.02.555595)

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