

TEACHER'S CORNER: RANDOM STRATEGIES IN ARCHEOLOGY

- I. To introduce the principles of archeology and the importance of material culture:

A. Have each student, at home, list on a 3x5 card ten of his/her personal possessions which would survive a fire (these can be parts of things, such as the pulls on a chest of drawers, etc.). Do not put names on cards. You might put in a card for yourself also.

In class the next day redistribute the cards at random. Make sure that no student has his/her own card. Have students write a description of the person whose list they receive. Mention such things as: can you tell the age and sex of the person? his/her likes and dislikes? the kinds of activities he/she engaged in? his/her hobbies?

Then have students read both the artifact lists, and their interpretations of them. Discuss with students the accuracy of their interpretations, the nature of the evidence they had to work with, the problems associated with interpreting fragmentary evidence, etc. You might also discuss other sources which could help in interpreting the evidence, such as wills, deeds, census records, public school records, etc.

B. Ask students to suggest definitions of archeology and list these on the board. Then show one of the following films: "Doorway to the Past," "Search for a Century," the Martin's Hundred early 17th century site filmed as it was excavated, (both films issued by Colonial Williamsburg); "Other People's Garbage" (Odyssey film available from Documentary



Educational Resources, 5 Bridge St., Watertown, MA 02172). After discussing the film, have students re-evaluate their original definitions, making changes where necessary.

- II. To get students involved in the techniques and questions of archeology:

A. Divide students into teams. Each team is secretly assigned to a different area of the school grounds (i.e., cafeteria, playground, parking lot, front of school along road, etc.). Each team is to survey its assigned area and come back with:

- a collection of the artifacts they picked off the ground from their area.
- a description of the physical characteristics of the area they surveyed (caution: do not refer to the area by name; only describe).

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Then: exchange team artifact lots and site descriptions. Each recipient group analyzes the evidence from the surveys and tries to guess:

- a. the functional name of the area surveyed.
- b. the kinds of behavior/activities which took place in the area; and
- c. how recently this behavior took place, and how long (time span) it has been going on there.

Follow-up:

1. How did your interpretive group arrive at its conclusions? (method of analyzing the data)
2. What other kinds of information would have been useful to you in arriving at the conclusions or answers to the questions posed?
3. What would happen to your interpretation of the artifacts if the site description were changed?

B. To focus student attention on artifacts and features: Show Part I of the film "The Hunters." Instruct students to view the film from the perspective of an archeologist doing a site survey 100 years from now. Ask them to make a list of the artifacts and features they might find while surveying this site.

C. To sharpen skills of classification and illustrate how evidence can be manipulated to gain maximum information from it:

Take student-gathered artifacts from the site survey; or have each student contribute five dissimilar artifacts from his or her home.

Divide students into groups. Each group takes one assemblage or group of artifacts and develops a system of classification for that

assemblage. (They will probably classify on the basis of the material from which each artifact was made.) Ask them to explain their system.

Then suggest that other systems might be used. An easy one is that of classifying all these items by their function. Another one is by date (i.e., how old) or context (location derived from). Follow-up: Ask students what kinds of questions they might be able to answer by using these systems of classifying:

--material: what kinds of resources were available to the society? what kinds of technology did the society have at its disposal?

--function: what kinds of activities did the people of this society engage in?

--date: how long did the society endure?

D. Excavating a wastebasket:

To prepare: for one day, do not empty your classroom wastebasket (better yet, get another teacher to prepare the wastebasket for you). Instead, compact the material in it after each class or activity period. Then:

Next day: have students "excavate" this site. See if they can reconstruct the previous day's activities.

E. The ultimate: Play "Dig," a simulation, which takes five to six weeks, available from Interact, Inc., Box 262, Lakeside, CA 92040. It asks students to

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create and bury a culture. Other teams of students then excavate the culture using valid archeological techniques.

III. Finale: Judging archeological interpretations:

A. Show the film "In Search of Ancient Astronauts" (an exposition of von Daniken's theories about extra-terrestrial visitors). Ask students to analyze the film:

- what is von Daniken's basic assumption/hypothesis?
- what kinds of evidence does he use to support his hypothesis? (Give reasons for skepticism or belief)

B. Show any of the films listed above in IB and ask the same questions. Which hypotheses are more convincing, given the data?

IV. Field trips and guest speakers in the Washington, D.C. area:

A. Alexandria Archaeological Research Center: Pam Cressey, 838-4399. (speaker or trip)

B. Fairfax County Archeological Survey will take interested student volunteers on historic and prehistoric digs. Call 642-5807.

C. Take students to Turkey Run Farm and Woodlawn (or similar) plantation. Ask them to systematically compare the material culture exhibited by each site. (Woodlawn has a "What is a House?" information retrieval sheet which also can be adapted for Turkey Run Farm .)

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