

ARWEN JOHNS

M.A. CANDIDATE
ARCHAEOLOGY
DEPARTMENT OF
ANTHROPOLOGY
AJOHNS252@UWO.CA

GREAT IDEAS IN TEACHING 2017
TEACHING SUPPORT CENTER

Seeing People in Things

INCORPORATING FIELD INTERPRETATIONS INTO
THE ARCHAEOLOGY CLASSROOM

Background

This teaching idea came to fruition through building on my experiences both as an undergraduate student in archaeology courses, and as a teaching assistant within the anthropology department here at Western.

There are many reasons why fieldwork cannot be made a mandatory part of any archaeology degree, but myself and my colleagues are continually troubled by the fact that one can graduate with a focus in archaeology having never gained any experience in the field.

This activity seeks to mitigate this issue by providing students with a glimpse of what making interpretations based on data collected from the field looks like.

By “creating” sites within the classroom in a closed, short-term context, students are given the opportunity to exercise their analytical skills in real time while facing the same roadblocks that they would as archaeologists in the field.

This activity allows students the opportunity to practice their critical thinking skills, tackling problems such as working past gender biases in interpretations. Such problems face all archaeologists in the field, and while this activity is no substitute for field experience, it does allow students the opportunity to flex their theoretical and interpretive muscles.

Intended Audience

This activity was designed with first and second year anthropology and archaeology students in mind, who are limited in terms of their engagements in the field.



Critical and Analytical Thinking: Key Activity Concepts

Critical and analytical thinking are essential skills in archaeology and anthropology more generally, but they can be hard to put into practice with limited access to artifacts and issues with logistics in the field for students. Critical

thinking necessitates repeated questioning of concepts and discourses, as well as checking personal biases and assumptions.

This activity was designed to foster these skills in undergraduate archaeology stu-

dents who may not have the chance to practice interpretations in the field. This is important for creating a marriage between theory and practice, something which can be notoriously difficult within the archaeology classroom. (Brookfield, 1991, 2011)



Learning Outcomes

Students who complete the “Seeing People in Things” activity will be able to:

- Apply archaeological and anthropological theory to archaeological site analysis
- Recognize and assess personal bias in archaeological interpretations
- Critically reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of archaeological interpretations



Activity Outline

In small groups (maximum 5 students if possible), students will be provided with paper bags filled with various types of items, all related to a common theme, as well as a piece of paper with instructions. As per the instructions, groups will be separated in the classroom and asked that they not look at their neighboring groups until the activity is completed. Examples of sets of bag contents are as follows: 1) numerous types of beads and different types of string, and the instructions asking individuals to create necklaces or bracelets in their designated part of the room; 2) a bag containing shells, stones, and other beach related items with instructions asking students to create some kind of shrine. All variety of items could be used in bags so there are endless possibilities for instructors who want to mix up the activity.

It should be clear to students that there is no right way to complete the creation of their “site” as long as they follow their group’s individual instructions. Once students have completed the first step of the activity groups will be asked to rotate to another site in the room to fill out analysis worksheets, providing them with guiding questions. The questions are as follows: What do you think was going on at this site? What sort of people do you think were involved in these activities? Can you record any other observations?

These questions appear deceptively simple and are meant to allow students to think about their interpretations relatively free of constraints. Once all groups have taken the time to fill out the answer sheet, the instructor will refocus everyone back as a larger group to discuss all the interpretations from the various sites.

This is a time for the instructor to emphasize to students the need to always be checking their personal bias, and

those of other researchers they may encounter. By having the entire class go over students’ analyses of the archaeological material, instructors will have multiple opportunities to highlight instances where bias can creep into archaeological interpretations. For example, students analyzing the “site” where others were required to create jewelry, may have answered that women were likely involved in the activity, opening up a conversation about studying gender in the archaeological record, as well as the need to check our stereotypes about what we view as “women’s work”.

This site creation and analysis activity can be used multiple times throughout a course, allowing students to see the evolution of their critical thinking skills in their interpretations from the beginning of a course to its end. Giving students the chance to get a feel for archaeological work without having to leave the classroom not only allows for a hands-on expression of students’ critical thinking, but it also allows students to “think like they’re in the field” without having to organize costly and logistically challenging field work opportunities.

Requirements:

Students will need around 5 minutes to complete their sites, and 10 minutes to fill out their answer sheets (this can be adjusted when there are more or less individuals per group), leaving 45 minutes for larger class discussion (1 hour total).

The number of bags required can be determined and altered by the instructor as needed. It is also possible with a larger number of groups to use the same materials more than once if they are spread out around the room.

Works Cited:

- Brookfield, S (1991). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookfield, S (2011). *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools & Techniques to Help Students Question their Assumptions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.