

Every Object Tells a Story

A Lesson Plan for Informal Educators

Written by Meghan J. Dudley and Sarah Luthman
for the Oklahoma Public Archaeology Network

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A Lesson Plan

Lesson Understanding

All artifacts that archaeologists study contain stories about the people who made and (or) used them. As a result, while the objects themselves are inherently fascinating, their real value is the stories they share.

Essential Question

Why are artifacts important to archaeologists and people today?

What Participants Will Learn

- Objects we use every day contain stories about us.
- Artifacts, like our own objects, tell stories about people in the past.

What Participants Will Do

- Draw an object special to them for the sticky note museum, and describe why it is important to them.
- Examine other objects in the “museum” and reflect on what we can learn about the people who donated.

Assessment

Participants will view real artifacts and reflect on the stories they tell us about people in the past.

Target Age of Audience

Ages 8 to 100+

Lesson Duration

10 minutes or less for informal events

Lesson Group Size

3-5 per instructor for informal events

Background Information

Every year, hundreds of sites across the United States and thousands around the world are destroyed when artifacts are illegally removed from them. Although some are taken because they are seen as a cool object, many of these artifacts are taken because they valued monetarily in our society. However, for members of descendant communities – whose ancestors made and used those objects – and archaeologists that study them, artifacts cannot be assigned a price tag; they are priceless. Instead, we value artifacts because of the stories they have to share with us, which we can rediscover by speaking with descendant community members about their oral traditions and histories as well as through scientific analysis.

Inspired by *Project Archaeology: Investigating Shelter* (2009)’s Lesson 2, this brief lesson and associated activity is designed to teach participants to view artifacts as archaeologists do: as sources of stories about people in the past. We have written this lesson to meet the needs of both informal educators (such as public archaeologists or museum educators) as well as

formal educators (such as teachers in K-12 classrooms). For state standard alignments for the lesson, please reference the formal educator's version.

Preparation

Before teaching, read through the entire lesson plan and gather the materials listed below.

Lesson Materials

For the Informal Instructor:

- A “museum” poster or a designated blank space for sticky notes
- 3 to 5 clipboards
- 5 to 10 teaching artifacts or replicas

For the Informal Participant:

- One sticky note
- A pen or pencil

Required Vocabulary

Archaeology: the study of objects made and used by people in the past to understand how they lived their lives

Artifact: an object made or used by people in the past

Descendant community: the modern-day group of people directly related to past people who created and used the archaeological site and artifacts we study

Informal Instructor Preparation

1. Set up your “museum” poster. Make sure the poster is secured and weighed down, if outside. (See Appendix A, page 5, for OKPAN’s “museum.”)
2. Donate your own “artifact” to the “museum,” by drawing an object that best represents or is important to you on a sticky note. Describe the object on the back of the sticky note. (This provides visitors with an example, by scaffolding the activity.)
3. Load 4 sticky notes per clipboard in advance of your first participants. Stash extra sticky notes behind the booth, so they cannot be taken by visitors.
4. Set out pens or pencils for participants. We recommend using writing utensils to which you are not attached. Better yet, use items with your organization’s logo if you have them!
5. Display the artifacts or replicas, safely. If you are teaching at a booth event, make sure these objects are placed at the back of the table, out of reach of small children.
6. Put a smile on your face and get ready to greet people! 😊

Teaching the Lesson

Uncover Prior Knowledge

1. Ask the participant: Have you heard about archaeology before? What do you think archaeology is?

- *Note:* You may get a range of answers, from Indiana Jones to dinosaurs to digs to answers we might give. No matter way what your participant says, be patient and encouraging! If you are condescending now, (s)he will not be inclined to learn anything from you.
2. Ask the participant: What do you think of when you hear the word “artifact”? Why do you think they are important to archaeologists? Why are they important to people today?

Discover New Knowledge

1. Tell participants: Our objects can tell us a lot about the people who use them. To learn about the people who are here today, we are creating a sticky note museum!
2. Give the participant a clipboard and pen or pencil.
3. Tell the participant to draw (or describe in two or three words) an object that is important or special to her/him on the front of the sticky note. On the back, tell (s)he to describe what the object is.
 - a. Offer suggestions if the participant cannot decide what object to share. Suggestions can include heirloom objects, a favorite toy, things related to a favorite hobby, or even something they use every day.
 - b. Show them your sticky note artifact as an example.
4. Tell the participant to “donate” their artifact to the museum, by placing the sticky note in the “museum.”
5. Ask the participant: Why did you pick this object? What do you think it tells me about you?

Reflect on New Knowledge

1. Tell the participant to look at other objects in the “museum.” Give (s)he time to look through the sticky notes. Let the participant know that (s)he can pick them up and read the back, as long as the sticky notes are replaced in the “museum.”
2. After (s)he has had a chance to peruse the “museum,” ask the participant: Even though you cannot talk to the person, what does that object tell you about them? Who do you think that person was (e.g., age or gender)? What story does it tell about them?
3. Ask the participant: If you could meet someone who left an artifact here today, what would you ask them? What else do you want to know about an artifact in the museum?
4. Ask the participant: When considering all the artifacts together, what story do they tell about the people who visited today? What sort of person stopped by the booth? What is important to them? What can we learn about people when we view all the objects together?

Assessment

1. Direct the participant’s attention to the real artifacts or replicas you have. Tell(s)he: Just like the sticky note “artifacts” in our “museum” today, artifacts tell us stories about the people who made and used them in the past.
2. Ask the participant to select one artifact they are drawn to. Ask (s)he: What story does this object tell you about the person who used it? How do you think they got it? Who do you think used it (e.g., age or gender)? What do you think they used it for?
 - a. *Note:* Do not worry so much if the participant is right or not. The goal is for (s)he to connect with the artifact as more than just a “cool object” – not whether or not the participant is a professional archaeologist!

3. Tell the participant: It is stories, like the one you just told about this object, that make artifacts valuable to archaeologists or members of descendant communities. Without the stories, they are just an old rock or lump of clay.

Appendix A: Sample Sticky Note Museums

You will need some space designated for your sticky note museum, because, unlike the formal educators, you will not have a classroom space to use! Minimally, you will need a blank space for participants to attach their sticky note. But beyond that, the sky (and funding!) is the limit! Below are some examples of OKPAN's "museum" we designed for our events (Figures 1-2). Enjoy creating your own and have fun with your next event!



Figure 1. We designed our "museum" with a title and brief description of the activity. In doing so, we hoped that, if we had a large crowd, visitors could still participate even if we were unable to explain the activity to them.



Figure 2. Here is an example of the museum at the booth for an OKPAN event. Note the shadow case of artifacts for the assessment portion of the lesson is to the left of the museum at the back of the table.

Appendix B: Want More Archaeology Lessons?

Do you live in Oklahoma and need more ideas for public archaeology events? Look no further! There are several different resources available for you!

Oklahoma Public Archaeology Network (okpan.org)



The Oklahoma Public Archaeology Network, or OKPAN, is a program of the University of Oklahoma devoted to educating the public about Oklahoma's past and archaeology in general. OKPAN's education division offers a "request an archaeologist" program for those wishing to have an archaeologist visit their classroom. Classroom visits are highly flexible to suit your needs and include activities with real artifacts, as well as lesson plans inspired by organizations like Project Archaeology and the Smithsonian. OKPAN archaeologists are willing to collaborate with you to create the best experience for your classroom. OKPAN also offers free lesson plans and other resources for your own use, serving as your connection to archaeology education resources at large.

Oklahoma Archeological Survey (ou.edu/archsurvey)



The Oklahoma Archeological Survey in Norman is a center of archaeological research and outreach in the state of Oklahoma. For years, Survey archaeologists have engaged in numerous types of public outreach and education initiatives. For classroom visits, an option is to take advantage of the Surveys' artifact kits with associated lesson plan to provide students with an interactive, hands-on experience in archaeology. Survey archaeologists are highly knowledgeable in Oklahoma archaeology and are always willing to bring their expertise to the classroom using fun and informative activities.

Oklahoma History Center (okhistory.org/historycenter)



The Oklahoma History Center in Oklahoma City offers a wealth of resources to educators for teaching history. While not focused on archaeological methods and principles, the resources offered by the History Center include a variety of ways to teach students about the state's history. Their website offers plenty of activities for multiple grade levels and resource guides that link with Oklahoma's educational standards. The Oklahoma History Center also loans teaching trunks complete with curriculum guides/lesson plans and objects for hands-on activities.