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Learning By Doing: The Archaeology Education Program for Middle School

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Learning By Doing: The Archaeology Education Program for Middle School

Abstract

Approached through the disciplinary and theoretical frameworks of public archaeology, the Archaeology Education Program for Middle School was created to better understand how an archaeology education program might be integrated into an existing curriculum and become nationally applicable to middle school settings. Research was conducted at St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School, where seventh grade students, teachers, and administration were involved in the investigation of the program's feasibility and design. It was determined that the objectives of this archaeology education program are to inform students about archaeology through educational tools and exercises that are tailored to different classroom settings, in addition to establishing an interest in the discipline. The students are immersed in a tactile learning experience that makes history come alive and the program demonstrates the ways in which archaeology seeks to create a continuum between past and present human timelines. Through hands-on experiences and a focus on critical thinking skills, the program enhances students' orientation to the career options of historical studies and the importance of material culture. Through this pedagogical approach, the outcome of the week-long program lays the foundation for the public's understanding of archaeology in an accurate and effective manner.

Keywords

archaeology, public archaeology, education, public engagement, social studies

Disciplines

Archaeological Anthropology | Curriculum and Instruction | Other Anthropology | Secondary Education

Comments

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Project Overview

As a part of my public archaeology class, we were required to create a project that would meaningfully address the ways in which archaeology can reach the public in a more democratic and authentic manner. Knowing that the topic of education was already significant to me personally, I decided to design my research project to investigate how archaeology can reach classroom settings. I narrowed down my focus by conducting research at a middle school to better understand how an archaeology education program might be integrated into an existing curriculum and, based on my findings, designed a program titled “The Archaeology Education Program for Middle School”.

Approached through the disciplinary and theoretical frameworks of public archaeology, it is applicable to the education of children in middle school, between the ages of eleven and thirteen, across the United States within their social studies curriculum. The objectives of the project design are to inform students about archaeology through educational tools and exercises that are tailored to different classroom settings, in addition to establishing an interest in the discipline. The students are immersed in a tactile learning experience that makes history come alive and the program demonstrates the ways in which archaeology seeks to create a continuum

between past and present human timelines. Furthermore, the program is molded and oriented to the school's social studies curriculum based on grade-level historical focuses, as well as adhering to instructors' goals and skill levels. There is an emphasis on various archaeological themes, practices, and interpretation processes and how these processes enable an analysis of material culture of the human past, in addition to displaying the legitimate career paths that archaeology can generate. The outcome of such a program is molded to expose middle school children to the significance of material culture in both past and contemporary times and the interdisciplinary crossovers within social studies topics. This will construct an accurate, public-facing representation of archaeology that is relevant to a middle school student's education.

Background Information

Many archaeologists and academics have considered the ways in which public archaeology can legitimately and effectively serve the public according to their specific needs. Public archaeology, in broad terms, takes both theoretical and disciplinary positions through the democratization of archaeological communication and the preservation of archaeological resources for the public's involvement and their overall benefit. One of the most discussed methods of how public archaeology can situate itself is the educational approach, as it studies how methods of teaching are effective and the ways in which formal material is comprehended. Therefore, the goal in this context is to allow middle school-aged children to be informed about archaeology in accordance with their need or desire to be educated about certain historical values through a material culture. This pedagogical approach demonstrates archaeology's significance and how it can be of use in the contemporary world, especially as people construe meaning from the past. Specific to this archaeology program, the educational approach will be adopted for middle school age children because their age range is highly receptive and dependent upon a

versatile school curriculum, which should arguably include an exposure to archaeology. Working within the objectives and framework of public archaeology, this program will be based on past and current approaches of educating the youth about archaeological themes, practices, and careers. From this cultivation of archaeological knowledge, the program demonstrates how the discipline applies to students' own lives and how it will further enhance their understanding of the social studies subject, especially the more tangible aspects of this area of academic focus.

Although the definition of public archaeology is broad and often debated, educational programs are typically considered a crucial mode of public engagement. An emphasis on public education has been especially prevalent in museums and at historical sites where the so-called "heritage boom" has influenced more broadly accessible and thought-provoking reconstructions of the past for visitors. These reconstructions are geared towards the public's needs and concentrate on effective engagement and heightened participation at cultural and historical sites. In these contexts, archaeology has been critically reconfigured to promote diverse values of archaeological material and accessibility to the public, which in many cases involves school-aged children. One such example of this reflexive investigation of how archaeology and material resources should be incorporated into formal educational curriculum was completed by the Petrie Museum located in London. It was discovered that the museum's focus on Egyptology collections could be catered more towards school-aged children, with an emphasis on archaeological material. The research process to gather such an insight involved middle school-aged children taking part in questionnaires and a set of interviews involving both children and teachers. These questionnaires and interviews alluded to how an educational curriculum should be molded in accordance with historical interests and what should be emphasized for the students' benefit. Most importantly, results showed that "the survey also suggests that formal

education is more significant than other media or catalysts in laying the foundations for later interest” (MacDonald and Shaw 2004, 128). With this evidence and research from the Petrie Museum, it is reasonable to argue that the youth are highly receptive to topics that involve archaeology, therefore proving that shaping an educational program is feasible and desirable for this population of the public.

While many public archaeology programs align more with educating through community archaeology, applied archaeology, or activist archaeology, there are strong cases of previous school education programs being highly successful endeavors. In many cases, informative involvement directed by archaeologists presented a legitimate instruction of archaeological practices, even as programs still adhered to open discussion and critiques of archaeological methodologies or interpretations. A representative example of a program that this project design complements is the Bowne House Museum Outreach Education Program, where archaeology and historical objects travelled to the classrooms within Flushing, New York. The program provided students with a hands-on experience and allowed them to understand the relevance of history parallel to their own identities. While my archaeology project does not associate with a specific museum, the Bowne House Outreach Education Program is commendable because it works directly with teachers to provide a supplemental and experimental learning approach to place historical materials in the hands of students. This allows students to confront primary sources as interpretative tools of the past and address larger societal issues outside the classroom. Termed as the “box and binder” approach, the objective is that “media of the program, and the ‘learning by doing’ approach of archaeology, provide a visual and tactile basis for learning about change...as a way for students to ask questions about the historical basis for their modern environment” (Moyer 2004, 98). A similar educational program was created at the Farnsley-

Kaufman House in Louisville, Kentucky, where sixth-grade students were involved in the entirety of the archaeological process to learn about the house's historical significance and archaeology's ability to save the past. As Jay Stottman reports, "students became invested in the work they were doing and in the house, as they became part of what was being saved" through a hands-on experience (Stottman 2014, 185). As demonstrated by these examples, archaeology provided students with a historical "toolkit" and my proposed archaeology program will complete similar goals to enlighten students, broaden their analytical and critical thinking skills, and help them find relevancy to the past through hands-on experiences.

Another large aspect of the educational approach is that these models often take on an "expert voice" and fulfill what Nick Merriman defines as the deficit model, which my proposed archaeology education program recognizes and works theoretically towards. According to Merriman, "the 'deficit model' of public archaeology sees the public as needing education in the correct way to appreciate archaeology, and the role of public archaeology as building confidence in the professional work of archaeologists" (Merriman 2022, 6). This project partially uses Merriman's mindset to argue that middle school-aged children "need" this education of archaeological practices. Students will begin to appreciate archaeology's benefits in historical interpretation and its role as a professional discipline, but also to understand its applicable influence in their lives and the social studies subject. In response to critiques of this top-down approach of the deficit model and the "expert voice", the education program being proposed will be facilitated by teachers who can adapt the program and its objectives to solely meet the students' educational needs. Furthermore, the program is designed to help children engage with the materials to broaden their perspectives and will encourage discussions on such thoughts, therefore allowing for effective knowledge production. So, although created by an expert voice,

the top-down critiques will be fully acknowledged, and this project will arguably be more of a bottom-up approach as the expert voice intermingles with student and facilitators' voices.

Stakeholders, Methodology of Collecting Data, and Summary of Findings

Initially, to understand how the project should be formulated, the stakeholders had to be identified. A stakeholder is defined as any individual or group that will be impacted by the proposed program. I knew that this would include a group of middle school-aged students, their social studies teacher, and school administration, as these would be the individuals affected and involved with the project design and implementation. After several correspondence and personal connections, I was able to secure an opportunity to involve the seventh-grade students, teachers, and administrators at St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School, which is notably a small, private school in McSherrystown, Pennsylvania. In addition to my own correspondence, I also secured my project's approval by Gettysburg College's Institutional Review Board once the application completed the review phase. This guaranteed that all research could be shared ethically for public review and the intended aim, survey questions, and consent forms were endorsed. So, as I moved ahead with the project, all participants were aware of their anonymity in the process and participation was completely discretionary at all points of the process. On the chosen school day, I had an hour to conduct a pre-presentation survey, conduct an informative presentation, answer relevant questions from the students, and conduct a post-presentation survey with the seventh-grade class, which totaled twenty-two students. After this, I interviewed the social studies teacher and the school principal with a set of questions that I had prepared, while being open to any additional insights of their opinion on the project design. This methodology aided me as I gained appropriate and meaningful feedback of how an archaeology education program should be constructed and how invested participants would be.

Going into this initial assessment, I attempted to anticipate what survey and interview questions would be best suited for my ability to learn how an archaeology program should be molded for middle school settings in terms of activities, historical focuses, and overall outcomes from student experiences. My main objectives were: how will students best conceptualize and find interest in archaeological practices, how important is this program in the overall education of this age group, and what do I want the ultimate outcome of this project to be? With those questions in mind, I created the pre-presentation and post-presentation surveys, with the aim of alluding to how those objectives could be framed within stakeholder needs and interests. The presentation I gave to students also allowed me to observe firsthand if the topic of archaeology was of immediate interest to students. Conclusively, these surveys, observations, and interviews allowed me to assess what direction my educational program should take and the standards that the program should follow in order to align with the needs of stakeholders.

Looking at the answers from students in the pre-presentation survey (Figure 1), a little less than 60% of students believed they knew what archaeology was and, if they choose to add a description, their definitions varied. The common definitions included the study of historical artifacts and events, digging up fossils and bones, digging to find preserved historical items and dating those items, or the study of the ancient history. I was surprised by the number of students that generally understood that archaeology often includes looking at historical objects and how those connect to the objects' historic time periods. However, there was a large emphasis on just describing the act of digging, the "ancient" past, and the allure of fossils, which could possibly have developed from the archaeological perceptions that popular media tend to accentuate. There appeared to be a general grasp on what archaeology is tasked of accomplishing at the start of the process, yet many students appear to lack the knowledge of how archaeology aims to look at

human detritus and the relevancy of that information in the contemporary world. Aligned with some of these results, the teacher and administrator interviews did reveal a general lack of confidence that students would be able to thoroughly understand what archaeology was as a career and the complexity of its processes. My project design would therefore emphasize the elements of human impact, the analysis of a wide array of material remains, the processes of more scientific elements, and how narratives of history are created in interpretation.

Apart from the overall archaeological knowledge students had, their interest in history was also significantly high at about 77% in favor of learning about history (Figure 1). Many students also felt strongly about knowing the history that influenced their lives, with 86% answering yes, and I was able to gather an idea of time periods or historical events of significance to them. From the interview process I did learn that students had learned about Pennsylvania and ancient history in previous grades, with a current focus on general American history. So, the overall themes of past periods that interested students made sense with references to the following: the American Revolution, ancient Egypt and China, Mesoamerica civilizations, the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, and Native American history. For the most part, these time periods could all be adapted into the project's framework in terms of historical focuses, with an emphasis on how these events are relevant to contemporary settings through the archaeological work surrounding them.

I was slightly disheartened to see that only nine out of the twenty-two seventh grade students wished to learn about archaeology as a career (Figure 1). This shows me that the students might perceive archaeology conceptually as something other than a legitimate career path or as an academic, professional discipline. However, this does give me further encouragement that an archaeology education program is necessary for this age group to show

the legitimacy of archaeology and elevate their interest in various careers that deal with the past in tactile ways. The principal and social studies teacher also expressed that students would only benefit from this experience because of the educational, hands-on components that allow insight into possible careers and the complexity of determining past experiences. As educators, it is clear that they hope children of this age will come in contact with various career possibilities and to broaden their horizons on this aspect of life. So overall, I knew my project design had to clearly focus on the legitimacy of the discipline as a career and allude to students' ability to explore this career if they so choose.

In terms of learning preferences, there seemed to be a wide variety of interest in different activities whether that be hands on exercises, visual materials, textual materials, presentations from professionals, or visiting relevant sites (Figure 3). Out of all these options, I gathered a consensus that hands-on approaches and visual approaches, like handling historic objects, a "mock" dig, visiting a site, and adding video elements to the project design will be the most favored. Some of the least favored options were listening to someone speak about their own experiences and reading about archaeology, showing me that students prefer very interactive learning mechanisms. The social studies teacher and principal also expressed the need for diversity in materials but with a particular focus on this hands-on approach so that history will become more alive, meaningful, and remembered as an experience. They emphasized showing the "proper" way of conducting archaeological practices as well, which reveals an educator goal of upholding the correct standards of this discipline, not just making activities "fun".

Adding in some of the post-presentation survey results, I also think that these results bolster the creation of an archaeology education program. Although only thirteen out of the twenty-two students wanted to learn about archaeology in school in the future, I think this is still

an encouraging number of students (Figure 2). My general observation from the presentation time and the feedback on the effectiveness of the presentation also bolsters my belief that this area of academic focus in the social studies subject will only be beneficial to these students. Students were attentive and willing to engage when presented with this introduction to archaeology, as well as demonstrating an overall interest in my own archaeological experiences.

Lastly, I discovered that this program can be incorporated into the seventh-grade social studies curriculum based on teacher and administrator responses. They expressed extreme interest and the ability to be flexible with its incorporation into their lesson structure. They proposed it run a week, although they were not completely sure yet at what point in the year to incorporate it. Conclusively, it is apparent that flexibility and adaption of the project can be collaborative with these educators, while also upholding the students' needs and interests.

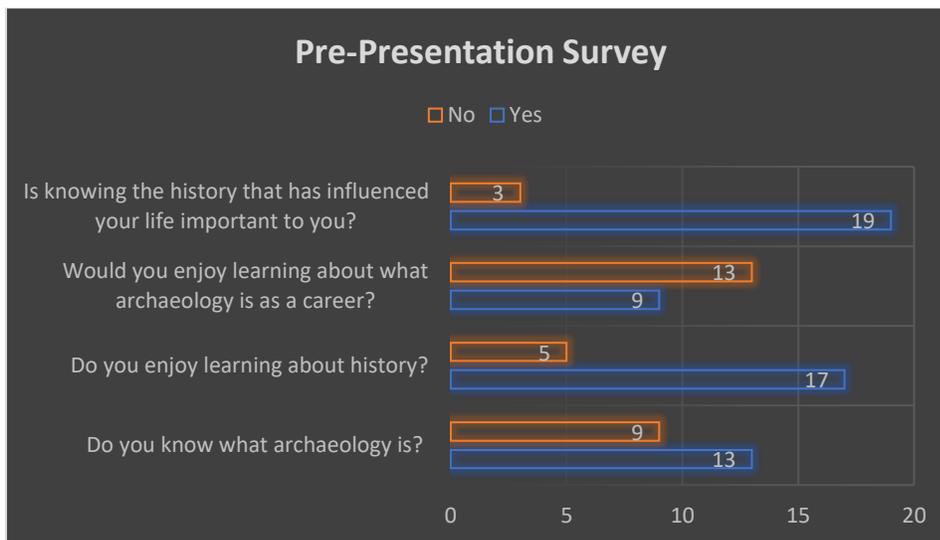


Figure 1. Pre-Presentation Student Survey Questions and Answers (Yes or No)

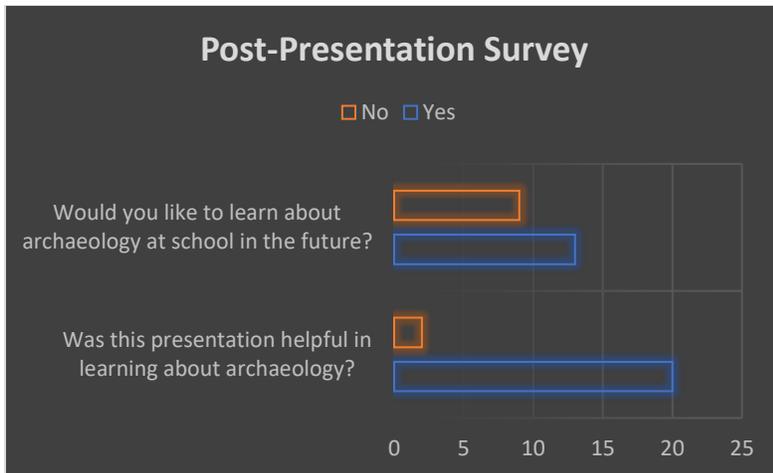


Figure 2. Post-Presentation Student Survey Questions and Answers (Yes or No)

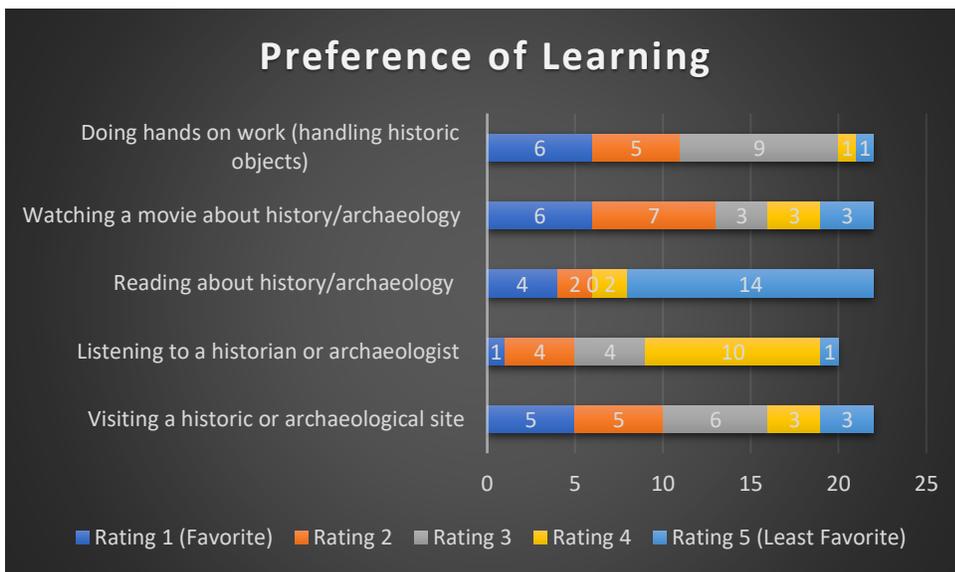


Figure 3. Student Ratings of Learning Preferences (1 being the most favored decreasing to 5 being the least favored)

Proposed Program Design

After taking into account researched educational archaeology models and input from stakeholders at St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School, the Archaeology Education Program for Middle School will be devised to fit into the curriculum of any middle school in the United States, with highly adaptive features for administration purposes. Broadly speaking the program

will be split into five days in a weeklong session during the allocated time for addressing social studies topics. These day activities are designed based on the learning preferences expressed through the stakeholder assessment by both students and teachers to be hands-on, visual, and interactive. Stress on the “proper” or “standard” archaeological processes will be acknowledged by making sure all materials and experiences validate archaeological principles. This will be reinforced by taking both a scientific and historical focus on topics. To easily distribute the materials of the program to the school and administrators, the materials will be organized and categorized in a “box and binder” design with digital components, as it seems to be one of the most favorable educational approaches taken in public archaeology thus far.

To overview this weeklong schedule of the program, I will explain the topics and activities that will consist of this five-day period with each day taking one to two hours total based on a class’s allotted time. To make this layout simple and explained effectively, I will explain each day in depth below.

1. **Day one** of the program will consist of the introduction to archaeology through videos created in collaboration with professional archaeologists and a collective group of middle school social studies teachers. Through this collaboration, the videos created will be easily understood by students as the videos teach what archaeology is and why it matters to historical research or sites. The videos will be cut into five- or ten-minute bursts with pictures or recorded visuals of what the voiceover is explaining, with an input of text where it applies to provide definitions or clear procedures. Between each video, children will use a packet of interactive worksheets on which they will have the option to take individual notes or answer created questions based on the video content. This packet of worksheets will keep students engaged and thinking through what archaeological lessons

the videos are imparting. While these videos and worksheets have yet to be created, they conceptually will fulfill the pedagogical approach and objective of exposing middle school children to the basic knowledge of archaeological practices and themes.

Furthermore, the students will be encouraged to take the worksheets and their notes home to continue working through some of the topics discussed in class that day.

2. **Day two** will consist of students breaking into groups of three to five students based on the class size to discuss what they learned from the previous day's lessons and to go over the questions they answered. The facilitator will be encouraged to go around to each group to keep students focused on the discussion at hand and encourage them to truly think about archaeology's significance. After this fifteen-to-thirty-minute discussion time, students will engage in a hands-on activity to introduce them to the archaeological procedure of excavation. Each group will be given a kit that consists of a small, clear sand box comprised of three color-differentiated stratigraphy layers with various artifacts placed at different locations within the layers. These artifacts will reflect common objects representative of modern trash such as soda cans, safety pins, bottle caps, and toy figurines. Students will carefully "dig" for these model artifacts using spoons, while noting down what layer they found each object and the physical description of the object, which will be similar to a real field record of an archaeological excavation. Recognizably this procedure is not utilizing the true tools of archaeological practices like trowels and sifters, but it nonetheless is created to orient students to the methodology of recording artifacts based on context specific to stratigraphy. Students will be made aware of the true nature of these tools, materials, and contexts on day one, but they will be utilizing this methodology because of its manageable design for a classroom period and because it will

allow students to conceptualize what taking field notes is like for archaeologists. If time permits, the students should assemble these artifacts into visual assemblages or categories based on “type” for day three’s activity.

- a. As an important consideration, this activity will be recommended to take place outside and may take longer than other activities within this program. Therefore, it will be up to the facilitator to negotiate how long and where this should take place.
3. **Day three** will continue from the excavation activity with a class discussion of what each group found in the three stratigraphy layers and what could be interpreted from these assemblages of material. This will take place as a guided discussion with an outline of terms and concepts provided for the teacher facilitating the conversation. Students will be encouraged to discuss what these materials show about human life and how one can interpret a narrative from a collection of the given material. Furthermore, they will be asked to consider what they think is representative of their own life and whether this would be seen as significant or insignificant in its value if discovered by an archaeologist in the future. They will also be asked to consider what other historical time periods would create a material culture that contrasts to a more contemporary one, which the teacher is encouraged to connect to the history being taught at that current grade level. This discussion led activity will end with a short video (similar to those on day one) that explains the analysis and cleaning process of artifacts, with an emphasis on how this upholds scientific methodologies.
4. **Day four** will continue with the importance of interpretation and creating humanistic narratives of material culture. Each group will be given some common object around the

classroom such as a textbook, a pencil, a bookbag, or a trash can. They will be asked to think as future historians and consider what story this common object could show about human life. Students will also be asked to consider the details that could be misinterpreted since archaeological records are usually fragmented and how long the object would survive based on its material composition. This activity is meant to foster critical thinking and each group will give a short presentation of the interpretation they collaborated on.

5. **Day five** will require the most attention in terms of planning for a school depending on their physical location and flexibility pertaining to class trips. This day will preferably be taken as a class field trip day, where students will visit a site where archaeology has or is currently being completed. If this is not an option, an actual archaeologist will be asked to come talk to students about their experiences and engage them in the legitimacy of the career. In terms of my work with St. Teresa of Calcutta School and conversations I have had, this day for my initial stakeholders would be very interactive because there are many archaeological excavations going on nearby, or at least at the time this project is being conceived. The Gettysburg National Military Park would be a feasible option due to its archaeological department and concentration on a historic landscape, as well as Gettysburg College where archaeology is being conducted by students and faculty. It has been proposed that the seventh-grade class at St. Teresa could spend the day observing the excavations on site at Gettysburg College and be shown the collections of material in Musselman Library archives. This could then lead the class to Gettysburg National Military Park for a presentation from the active archaeologist there. Notably, this is a hypothetical plan for a school like St. Teresa but, if this program were made into a

nationally applied program, this element would be the most varied based on where the school is geographically and who the school is able to connect with. Due to modern technology, there is also the possibility of online zoom discussions with archaeologists across the nation if a school cannot find local options of active or interested archaeologists. Another consideration is reaching out to a museum that has a high amount of archaeological material in their collections and planning a field trip for an in-depth tour of the significance of those collections. Overall, this field-trip day or discussion tactic fulfills the interactive and experiential component the program aspires towards.

Conclusions and Moving Forward

In its current conception, the Archaeology Education Program for Middle School is grounded in the objective of engaging and interesting students in archaeology nationwide, with a current focus of the schools surrounding the Gettysburg area. Furthermore, it will immerse students in a tactile learning approach that encourages critical thinking and knowledge-based interactions in the classroom setting. Students will have the ability to recognize the significance of material culture of diverse time periods and the interpretative, human narratives that can be conceived from that material. Through a “box and binder approach” and visual elements, this programming will spread across five class periods and relies on the learning preferences that reflect hands-on and interactive components. There is also the underlying concern of overall accessibility to any classroom setting and an attention to teachers’ ranged knowledge of archaeology. For the fulfillment of public archaeology’s service to the public’s needs, the program will provide an avenue that educates and involves students in important archaeological themes and careers, which will demonstrate the continuum of historical timelines within the social studies curriculum.

Rationally speaking, the project has many moving parts at this point in its conception. But with further research, critiques, and input, this program will be further molded to be a nationally applicable archaeology education program. As alluded to previously, an archaeology education program does not exist in every school's social studies curriculum, so this program's conception is important within the framework of what public archaeology works towards to serve the public. While there are isolated, local programs or programs connected to academic societies, one that can be easily adapted into any middle school's social studies curriculum has not yet been formulated. My goal with this project's creation is to fill this void or deficit of the archaeological discipline in mainstream middle school curriculum. Being aware of this, I will also recognize that my stakeholder assessment only addresses a very specific school community, one that is private and with no clear affiliation to the public school system. I acknowledge that a private school's framework could vary greatly from a public school's abilities and interests, so therefore I suggest more research at numerous schools geographically before this is made into a nationally applicable program. But for local purposes and schools within a reasonable distance of the Gettysburg area, this program could feasibly start to be implemented, especially at St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School where the assessment was conducted. In recognition of funding and legal concerns, I would also need to viably consider how easily I could gain support for this project's creation and implementation for it to become nationally applicable. But as of right now, the project design has been created based on my own interpretation of what archaeological themes and practices should be focused on to expose and interest middle school children in archaeology.

In conclusion, the Archaeology Education Program for Middle School is representative of an effective public outreach program with an archaeological focus. It is feasible in the interests

of middle school institutions and can be applicable to the interdisciplinary topics of social studies. This tactile learning experience still has elements that should be further considered yet serves as a foundation because of its proposed objectives and purpose. The past will become relevant to students through archaeological methods and themes, and it will only further enhance students' orientation to the career options of historical studies. Archaeology will become a key part of the national curriculum, and the education program will foundationally lay the framework of the public's understanding of the discipline in an accurate and effective manner.

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

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