

Archeological Grab Bag - Teacher Background

The premise of this project is that you learn to be a social scientist by being a social scientist. Start the class by showing students an “artifact” and discussing possible uses. I often present a homemade “capstone” used in traditional societies to start fires with a bow and straw. We discuss the artifact and how archeology helps historians understand the past when written records may be unavailable. Students also discuss the process of systematic observation, questioning and developing hypotheses.

For the second activity, student teams examine a recently discovered mystery artifact, a United States penny. To make the activity even more realistic and dramatic, the teacher and the archeologists wear plastic gloves and use tweezers and tooth picks to handle the artifacts. Teams complete the “Observe, Think and Speculate” activity sheets, report to the full class, and the class discusses and questions their conclusions.

For the next activity, each student team receives a mystery bag containing five artifacts from a "lost society." Bags can contain dried bones and seeds, shaped rocks, plant fibers, plastic and metal items, coins, children's toys, cans, written items, and so on. All of the artifacts were “found” buried at the the same level in close proximity. As a variation, a team can receive a set of pictures or can explore a culture using internet sites. Teams examine the artifacts, reconstruct the society, and report to the class about their findings. During their reports, fellow archeologists question them about interpretations and possible inconsistencies.

Depending on the amount of time you want to invest in the project, student teams can assemble their own artifacts and construct new societies. When they present these societies in class, they include the "history" of their society, a description of how people have adapted to their environment, and an anthropological discussion of its beliefs and values. Reports can include "maps" and dioramas. Once again, fellow archeologists ask questions about interpretations and possible inconsistencies.

How do archeologists understand the past?

- 1- Observe: Write a description of the artifact
- 2- Think: What else do you want to know about the artifact to understand its function and the people who created it?
- 3- Speculate: Based on what you know about the artifact, history and societies, what tentative hypotheses do you have about the function of the artifact and about the people and society that created it?

Examine the sample artifact and complete this chart.

Observe	Think	Speculate

Assignment: You are members of a team of archeologists. You are presented with a bag of five artifacts from an unknown society. All of the artifacts were found buried near each other at the the same level. Complete the chart on the next page. After completing the chart, write a report describing the culture of the people in this society. Your report should include educated guesses (hypotheses), but it cannot be inconsistent with what we already know about people, societies and cultures.

Artifact Bag # _____ Class _____ Date _____

Team members: _____

Archeological Grab Bag

Observe	Think	Speculate
1)		
2)		
3)		
4)		
5)		