

## Trends and Issues

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### Back to School with Best Practices!

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# Interpreting the Present as an Archaeologist:

## An Introductory Social Studies Activity

Laura Jeanette Dull

In two very different classrooms—one at a training college in Ghana, West Africa, and another a ninth grade global studies class in a New York City public high school—I started the year with a group activity in which students imagined they were archaeologists from the year 3000. I gave groups of three to five students several everyday items to examine and asked them to pretend that they had never seen these “artifacts” before. The objects included a teddy bear, a credit card, a ruler, a wooden horse, a belt, toilet paper, ice cube trays, and jewelry—teachers are free to choose whatever they wish. Students were instructed to imagine the possible uses and meanings of the object to the people who used them and what these objects revealed about the society. Because there was no right or wrong answer to their interpretations, students were very engaged in the activity and eager to share their “findings.” In both classes, students came up with fascinating, comical, and inventive uses for the objects. For example, some students in New York interpreted the wooden horse as a sacred object. A group in Ghana said about the belt, “If a person was feeling shy, they could shape the belt into a heart to express their feelings.”

In this activity, I wanted students to begin thinking about how individual perspectives can lead to many different interpretations. In our discussions, we also considered the limits of archaeology and history—artifacts can tell us some things, but we need other sources of evidence in order to verify our conclusions. In other words, students were introduced to fundamental practices of historians and social scientists—the analysis of multiple sources of evidence and the recognition of bias and perspective.

**Lesson Aim:** Are some interpretations more valid than others?

**Objectives:** Pretending they are archaeologists from the year 3000, students will imagine different uses and meanings for everyday objects in order to: 1) Recognize that there can be different interpretations of the past; 2) Consider why some interpretations are more valid than others; and 3) Recognize that interpretations can change over time.

**Introduction:** What do archaeologists do? After discussing this, the teacher should display an antique object and “interpret” it with the students: What were the uses of the object? What did it mean to people? What did it say about the people and society? (For example, can we interpret anything about their economic status from the object?)

**Activity:** Tell students to imagine they are archaeologists in the year 3000 and have dug up various objects from a society called the United States. Give groups (3-5 students) several items to look at. They are to:

1. Imagine as many possible uses and meanings of the objects to the people of the US as they can.
2. Explain what the object says about the society and the people.

**Closure:** After students present their findings to the class, teacher will lead a discussion:

- How many interpretations of each object did you come up with?
- Which interpretation is “right”?
- How could these interpretations be validated?

- What does this tell you about the field of archaeology and history?

The teacher should emphasize that the job of historians and social scientists like archaeologists is to find evidence from the past, interpret it, and consult other sources of evidence to support their interpretations. Sometimes, new evidence can change old interpretations—for example, when documents (such as presidents' diaries or communist archives are opened to the public) become available to scholars. These interpretations can also change depending on the interests and concerns of the time—while Woodrow Wilson was lionized as a great diplomat in the past, more recently scholars have focused on his racism (Loewen, 1995, pp. 18-36; Lerner, 1995, 125-147).

While learning to recognize perspective takes time and practice, this activity provides an engaging start toward achieving this essential understanding (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998, 53-55). By having students act as archaeologists, this activity makes the “work of history visible” and allows for thinking and creativity, not just regurgitation, in social studies classrooms (Holt, 1990, 15).

## References

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*Laura J. Dull is currently an assistant professor and coordinator of the secondary social studies education program at SUNY New Paltz. She was a public school teacher in New York City for seven years and also taught at a training college in Ghana as a volunteer for Teachers for Africa.*