

Trash Talks

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GOALS/GRADE LEVELS

Students in upper elementary through high school grade levels can interpret modern trash to learn about people today in the same way archaeologists use ancient garbage as evidence for people's lives in the past. Students will learn that:

- archaeologists answer questions about a culture by studying the things people used and discarded
- categorizing helps historians and archaeologists interpret evidence
- observations (what we can see) are different from inferences (stories we tell)
- scholars build upon initial facts and solve problems working together

Ideally, students will conclude by summarizing questions still unanswered by their data—questions that will require further research or excavation. For younger students the selection of trash can be kept simple; for older students the trash can be more complex, from multiple rooms and more people, and can leave more questions unanswered.

CULTURAL/HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The science of archaeology includes the study of people's trash! Excavators often recover sherds (broken pottery fragments), pits, seeds, and bones left from meals, old tools, and lost or discarded objects of all kinds. Sometimes these items were intentionally thrown out and are found in trash pits, old wells, and dumps. At other times objects were simply lost or discarded wherever the ancient owner happened to be. It is not as common as one would like for archaeologists to find beautiful, well-crafted, whole objects; their discoveries are often the broken bits and pieces of everyday life that people threw out or abandoned.

Trash can supply many useful clues that archaeologists may use to reconstruct the way people lived in the past. When considered together with associated artifacts from the same time and place, trash can tell us about site population, occupations, activities, diet, travel and trade routes, the environment, and much more.

TIME NEEDED

The time spent collecting trash or gathering materials to use as trash will vary. Once students begin to analyze the collected trash, categorizing it and discussing conclusions should take approximately 1½ to 2 hours, depending on

the size of the class, age of the students, and complexity of the "finds."

REQUIRED MATERIALS, TOOLS, AND PREPARATION

The teacher should collect trash or manufacture it to suit a story s/he has in mind, compiling enough trash for all the groups of students to analyze. S/he can also ask some reliable students to collect trash (with parental assistance) at home or school and to bring it to class for analysis. The collection needs to be carefully monitored to avoid saving anything that is wet, unsafe, or unsanitary (e.g., used tissue or dental floss, sharp cans or broken glass, food remains that could become spoiled). If brought from home or an office, the trash will ideally be from several different rooms (kitchen, bedroom; photocopy room, reception area, office). This diversity of remains allows students to infer what areas it came from, how many people were living in the house or working when the trash was collected, what their ages and functions were, and what they were doing. If the trash is from school, it should come from several different classrooms, permitting conclusions to be drawn about subjects taught and whether adults and children (or both) produced the trash. Trash from different rooms should not be mixed. The teacher may also design a scenario, such as a birthday party for two different children of different genders and ages.

THE CLASSROOM PROCESS

The trash from different rooms may be kept separate for easier analysis, with the goal being for students to identify the function of a room as well as anything that can be inferred about its users. The organized trash mirrors the artifacts an archaeologist might find while carefully excavating the different rooms of a house. For a more challenging project, combine all the trash from different rooms and then divide it into several bags. This trash might mirror the discarded finds all mixed together in an ancient pit or dump. A teacher-designed scenario could be presented in either way (in separate containers of trash from different activity areas, or in containers of trash all mixed together from all areas).

Since professional archaeology is a group activity, having students work in teams makes the analysis more realistic as well as more fun. Different student groups should be assigned the job of becoming experts in particular bags of

trash. First they should categorize the objects to start to gain control over the mess. They may change their minds about how to categorize as they proceed. They should then write down their observations and – separately – the inferences they draw from them. Separating observations from inferences can be difficult for students and adults alike, and should be a high priority. Depending on the nature of the trash or garbage collected (from a kitchen, for example), students might also consider what has been left out for reasons of sanitation, and guess what the missing food might tell about our culture or about a kitchen’s users.

Instructions for Students

Divide the class into small groups of 4-6 students. Give a bag of trash to each group. You may give students rubber gloves if you wish. Each group of students should be instructed to sort the trash into categories. Many different categories are possible, for example:

- material: plastic, paper, metal
- color: red, white, multi-colored
- type: food items, tools, sports equipment
- theme: food-related items, tools
- combinations of the above: plastic tools and food containers.

The point of categorizing is to make order out of a jumble of materials. Students may change their minds about their categories and, if so, should discuss why categorizing was difficult and why they changed their minds.

The compiled data should be considered as the foundation from which students put together their observations and make interpretations about the people who left the trash.

Teachers should first discuss the difference between observations and inferences. Explain that students will put their observations together with their knowledge of modern society to draw reasonable inferences and answer specific questions. The teacher should develop the questions in part based on the trash collected.

Questions can include:

- Who were the people who discarded the trash?
- How many people were there?
- What were they doing?
- What time of year was it?
- How old were they?
- What gender were they?
- How many inferences are based on cultural assumptions that could be incorrect? (For example, does pink always = female?)
- What might be missing from the trash, and why?

When the teacher is satisfied that each group has organized its finds, made reasonable observations, and come to some logical inferences, the groups should come together to present their findings.

Each group should:

- explain how categorizing helped them organize the collection of objects
- summarize their observations
- present their inferences

The end of an archaeological project requires that the investigators think again about what they have found and have NOT found. After the groups have presented their individual conclusions, ask the students to put all the clues from the entire assemblage together and try again to interpret the trash. Are there any additional material remains they would expect (or hope) to find if this were a real dig site and they continued excavating, or that other archaeologists might uncover at similar sites? Students should reach a clearer and fuller understanding of the people who left the trash when they consider all of it together rather than in isolation.

If the trash assemblage has been partially manufactured by the teacher with a story in mind, as a finale tell the students what the actual story is behind the trash they have been analyzing. On a real excavation, there would be no one to tell the story unless the archaeologist found an explanatory text buried with the trash!

ASSESSMENT

Assessment should allow for mistakes. The highest credit should be given for careful observation and helpful teamwork. The ability to distinguish observations from inferences and the realization that there can be several explanations for some data are worth rewarding.

RESOURCES

- Doherty, E. J. S., and L. C. Evans. 1992. *Stones and Bones: Archaeology*. Windsor Hills, CT: Synergetics (P.O.Box 84, East Windsor Hill, CT 06028). (Lesson Plans)
- McIntosh, Jane. 1996. *The Practical Archaeologist: How We Know What We Know About the Past*. New York: Checkmark Books.
- McIntosh, J. 2000. *Archeology*. London: Dorling Kindersley.
- Mississippi Valley Archaeology Center lesson by Carol Spahr on excavating trash: <http://www.uwlax.edu/mvac/PDFFiles/Lessons/SparrTrash.pdf>
- Rathje, William L. 1974. “The Garbage Project: A New Way of Looking at the Problems of Archaeology.” In *Archaeology*, vol. 27, no. 4, 236-241.