

Why Teach Archaeology?

by Society for American Archaeology, Public Education Committee



What is archaeology? Why are teachers interested in using it in the classroom? To make the best use of archaeology in education, one needs to appreciate the purpose of archaeology and the benefits of making it accessible to the general public—especially to teachers and young people.

What is Archaeology?

Archaeology is the scientific study of nonrenewable and often fragile material remains of past human activity. Archaeologists excavate on land and under water to recover evidence with which to reconstruct and describe bygone culture, technology, and behavior. They also try to explain how populations adapted to, or were changed by, different natural environments or social circumstances. Archaeology reinforces the concept of a shared human heritage and provides modern people with perspectives on their own place and time in history.

Usually taught as a subdivision of Anthropology (the study of humankind) or the Classics (the study of ancient Greece and Rome), archaeology draws knowledge from many other disciplines, such as geography, biology, art, mathematics, and engineering. Because it is a profession like law or medicine, its practice should be conducted or guided by trained individuals.

Why do Teachers Want to Teach Archaeology?

Archaeology is an effective teaching tool because its multidisciplinary basis enables focused or holistic approaches. It can be used to teach critical thinking skills, problem solving, and citizenship, and it enhances small group and cooperative learning. It is an excellent way to promote cultural awareness and sensitivity, which leads to an understanding of multicultural perspectives. Studying the past allows one to examine and project the consequences of human behavior and decision making.

What Should Students Learn about Archaeology?

Exploring this discipline can be an adventure for students, providing them with information and opportunities that can enhance their lives. By understanding that they are part of the continuum, they can better appreciate why people are the way they are today. Students also should learn that archaeological resources are a nonrenewable, irreplaceable part of American (and world) heritage and thus require protection and preservation. By assuming a role as stewards of the past, students will be better informed, more thoughtful, and more responsible in their behavior toward cultural resources.

Why do Archaeologists Want Archaeology in the Classroom?

Not only do the results of archaeological research enhance students' appreciation for other cultures, but they also apprise students of the fragility of archaeological resources. When students are aware of the methods and issues of the discipline, they understand that archaeology is a scientific process that must be conducted or supervised by trained personnel, and that sites often are protected by laws. The sense of stewardship that they acquire makes them sensitive to all types of cultural resources.

