

Reading the Ceramic Record: Using Modern Ceramics to Teach about the Archaeological Process

One of the most important sources of information on an archaeological excavation comes from the ceramic record. Pottery discovered at an excavation site is useful in that it helps to establish chronology as well as provide an understanding of human activity. Pottery discovered at a prehistoric or historic site is one of many types of artifacts that provides practical information on its respective culture, and its study may be used as a representation of the archaeological process as a whole. Ceramics are one of the most frequently discovered types of artifacts at an excavation site; modern examples can easily provide a hands-on lesson in the classroom demonstrating how to look at, record, understand, and analyze archaeological materials. The proposed paper will not only offer ideas for using modern materials to physically demonstrate archaeological methods, but also ways for students to develop descriptive and analytical skills. A discussion of artifacts is not only important in a class focused on art history or archaeology, but also is relevant when examining prehistoric or historic cultures in any context and in understanding how we know about these cultures.

One of the greatest challenges in teaching about the importance of archaeological objects is that, in most cases, such materials are unavailable in the classroom and active excavation sites are not easily accessible to groups of students. Given the general paucity of ancient artifacts that may be used as teaching aids, modern ceramic materials may be utilized instead as a tangible way to teach students how archaeological research and analysis is conducted. The development of a lesson plan using modern ceramic fragments is flexible based on classroom needs and the age of the students; it has proven successful with students ranging in age from middle school to undergraduates, regardless of major. The materials needed for this kind of classroom activity are

also easily accessible to the teacher, consisting mainly of modern broken pottery fragments as the primary teaching aid.

The proposed pedagogical paper provides ideas for the use of modern pottery to demonstrate archaeological methods. Working in teams, students will not only be able to physically manipulate three-dimensional objects, but will also get to practice piecing together ceramic fragments for a greater understanding of their original form. The examination of pottery of different sizes and shapes and with varying types of decoration also offers the context for students to develop descriptive skills based on tangible and visible attributes. A close investigation of ceramic fragments also demonstrates the usefulness and necessity of measurement-based scientific drawing. Only a few teaching aids are needed to outline the process for drawing ceramic objects, including a diameter chart, a few examples of illustrations, and grid paper.

Not only may modern ceramic materials offer students practice with expressing descriptive information, but they also provide the opportunity for the teacher or professor to discuss how this information may be applied towards analysis. An analysis of the object explores the relationship between form and function, a connection easily observable in both ancient and modern cultures. In this context, students may be given the opportunity to draw parallels from their own experiences. There are numerous examples of modern ceramic objects that students use in their own homes that have very specific functions based on decoration or form. The discussion of personal examples from the students' own lives parallels the information that ancient objects may provide to the archaeologist; this allows them to connect the archaeological process with their own world outside the classroom. In this paper, the above-mentioned discussion of form and function will be presented in the context of the Greek ceramic record,

with examples provided of Greek vase forms and decoration. Ancient forms of Greek pottery may sound exotic and alien to new students (i.e. kylix, hydria); however, upon closer inspection, the ancient pottery illustrates how the association between certain forms and very specific functions is continued in and parallels modern examples.

Archaeology and the study of the material remains of the human past is physical by its very nature. The proposed paper here offers a way for students to explore the process of investigating and analyzing tangible evidence, rather than just understanding archaeology and ancient cultures through photographic or textual representations. Students learn in a variety of ways and this paper offers ideas for teachers to encourage the physical investigation of objects to help students understand archaeology and how they can relate the study of artifacts to their own experiences.