

# TO DIG OR NOT TO DIG?

*One of the oldest public outreach programs has experimented with numerous alternatives—and reached a firm conclusion*

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Excavation is the part of archaeology that is most familiar to the public. It also is appealing to teachers as a high-interest, hands-on educational tool. As a result, it functions as a “hook” for getting students involved in archaeology. The Louisiana Division of Archaeology (LDA) has explored many types of student excavations, both simulated and real, and has had experiences that run the spectrum from disastrous to exemplary. In our experience, the primary factor that leads to a positive educational experience is direct and intensive leadership by archaeologists. Therefore, we now discourage any type of excavation, even a simulated one, unless a professional archaeologist is involved.

## *DIG 2: Simulated Excavation*

In the early 1980s, when our outreach program was in its infancy, we explored various avenues for working with teachers. We wanted to build on successful existing activities while introducing new ones. Local teachers who already included archaeology in their classes often mentioned two types of activities enthusiastically. The first was going on actual collecting trips led by non-archaeologists; the other was conducting simulated excavations using a commercially available activity called *DIG!*, which was revised and renamed *DIG 2* in 1982 (Lipetsky 1982).

Dismissing collecting expeditions as inappropriate, we examined the *DIG 2* project, which the teacher’s guide summarizes in this way: “In *DIG 2*, competing teams create secret cultures. Artifacts are made that reflect these cultures. Each team buries its artifacts for the other team to excavate and reconstruct. A final confrontation reveals the accuracy of each team’s reconstruction and analysis.”

Among our goals in introducing archaeology to students is to teach what archaeology reveals about people, and how archaeologists collect data and draw conclusions. Additionally, the overriding goal is site protection and archaeological ethics. We assessed how well *DIG 2* accomplished these goals. We noted that *DIG 2* does a good job of teaching social studies concepts and helping students grasp ways in which certain aspects of culture can be expressed at archaeological sites. However, it emphasizes creative representation of cultural universals through a mural, a Rosetta Stone, a central symbol, and a secret tomb, also referred to as a “cursed” tomb.

In representing the “how” of archaeology, *DIG 2* presents an introduction to metric measurement, grid system, tools, site numbers, site forms, mapping, and recording observations. It introduces archaeological terms and refers teachers to excellent published books about archaeology. Yet it also mentions the “thrill of finding mysterious artifacts” and fosters an image of archaeologists being primarily concerned with digging up symbolic and ceremonial artifacts.

The lab aspect focuses on reconstructing artifacts and

preparing label cards for an open house, which may reinforce the stereotype that the point of archaeology is to provide objects for museums. However, the cards do include interpreting artifacts to figure out what they reveal about the culture.

As for ethics and site protection, the guide emphasizes context and that “archeology is much more than collecting arrow heads and mummies.” It also points out that “anyone who calls himself/herself a professional archeologist is expected to write a final report.” Conservation, however, is not a theme of the activity.

The *DIG 2* activity intrigued me, and the enthusiasm of teachers using it impressed me. I decided to modify the activity to represent archaeology and sites found in Louisiana more accurately. Another goal was to decrease the wildly creative aspects of the project, replacing them with an emphasis on realistic detailed recording, analysis, and interpretation. In retrospect, I know that this decision to make the simulation more like real archaeology ultimately backfired.

## *Mystery Culture Excavation Simulation*

We included the result, called “Mystery Culture Excavation,” in the first edition of *Classroom Archaeology*, published in 1984. As in *DIG 2*, students were divided into two teams, and each team described a group of people, created a site, excavated the opposing team’s site, and interpreted the site. Like *DIG 2*, students described cultural aspects such as technology, dwellings, food, art, and religion. However, I omitted many traits used in *DIG 2*, such as values, ethics, and rites of passage. These cultural components rarely are represented (or recognized) at Louisiana sites. Mystery Culture Excavation had no Rosetta Stones, murals, or tombs, but it had plenty of instructions about excavation, mapping, and labeling. It also showed how to construct screens and how to build frames for raised excavation units.

Some teachers reported that they needed a shortened version of the activity. So, for the 1987 revision of *Classroom Archaeology*, I added instructions for creating a late prehistoric circular house and a historic two-room house. This allowed a class to skip the steps of creating cultures, manufacturing artifacts, and burying artifacts. It also made it more likely that the sites for the project would be similar to sites found in Louisiana.

I used the simulated excavation in teacher training programs and with students who attended a week-long workshop. It was engrossing, educational, and exciting. I felt that this activity was a success—a good substitute for both the collecting forays at real sites and the unrealistic *DIG 2*. Then reports started trickling in about how people actually used the instructions. The good news was that some teachers liked it and used it as I had imagined. The bad news was that other people liked it, but put a new spin on it.



Students learn about archaeological techniques and site preservation during a field experience at Orange Grove Plantation. Photo courtesy of the Louisiana Division of Archaeology.

### The Treasure Hunt

The "Treasure Hunt" occurred at a major festival in north-west Louisiana. Initially, it was conducted in conjunction with a nearby, professionally led public excavation. Festival coordinators suggested adding a kids'-only simulated excavation, and one of the organizers contacted me about this. I gave her instructions for the Mystery Culture Excavation. We talked about the goals and processes of archaeology and the purpose and details of conducting a simulated excavation. The plan was to simulate a site from the 1800s, which coincided with the age of the real site that was being excavated.

After the festival was over, I heard that all plans to use careful excavation techniques had been abandoned with the first onslaught of children. I contacted the organizer to discuss improvements for the future, such as more supervision and more emphasis on recording artifacts. Nonetheless, the Treasure Hunt went downhill from there. In the following years, all attempts to do anything but find artifacts were discontinued. Actual artifacts were used, which children were allowed to keep. Intervention by professional and avocational archaeologists was ineffective in redirecting the event.

### The Real Excavation Phenomenon

In 1989, LDA sent a questionnaire to recipients of *Classroom Archaeology*, asking about its usefulness. Through this process, we found out about the "real excavation phenomenon." A college student reported that he used the simulated excavation instructions to conduct an actual excavation. A teacher reported, "We carried out three digs [and] this guide was our 'Bible'." As a result, we reprinted *Classroom Archaeology* without the simulated excavation information, but as recently as this year, a teacher planning an excavation on school property noted that instructions were in *Classroom Archaeology*. She was redirected to other instructional activities.

These experiences have led me to oppose providing instructions to teachers or other non-archaeologists about how to conduct simulated excavations. Although excavation can provide a wonderful, in-depth introduction to archaeology, it also can mutate into something unexpected. Since the late 1980s, LDA has avoided classroom digging activities and currently focuses on providing activities that are short, practical, and inexpensive to conduct, that do not require extensive in-service training, and that complement the state curriculum.

### The Orange Grove Plantation Site

Through Louisiana Archaeology Week, LDA has been involved tangentially in several public excavation projects. For example, the project at Orange Grove Plantation site has allowed students as young as 10 years of age to excavate, screen, and record archaeological remains. Archaeologists

from Earth Search, Inc., orchestrate the project, which include excellent late-18th century features on Cytec Industries property near New Orleans. School groups take a bus tour of the chemical plant, then visit the archaeological site. An archaeologist leads a tour of the research in progress, and provides an orientation to archaeology and an introduction to the plantation. Students then observe a technician washing artifacts and examine examples of recovered artifacts.

Discussions at the slave cabin focus on archaeological methods, 18th-century architecture, and slave life. Students walk to the great house and discuss interpretations of exposed features and artifacts. Guides discuss the difference between "digging to answer questions and digging for fun" (Dawdy 1996). They also explain that the student excavation will contribute to the research project as a whole.

Following the introduction, 15 children go to an area unlikely to have features, where they learn about excavation techniques and work for 30 minutes. Earth Search archaeologists supervise the activity and watch for features. If students uncover a feature, they are moved to another location. All recovered materials are washed and analyzed the same way as those from other parts of the site. Approximately 2,000 students from the New Orleans area participate in the project each year, and both teachers and youths report that it is a "wonderful learning experience."

During several other events in Louisiana, archaeologists have invited precollegiate students to excavate. Some experiences have been successful; others have not. The successful ones are tightly organized with intense supervision. The time digging is limited, and the archaeologists emphasize that they conduct a great deal of background research, analysis, interpretation, and writing beyond what the students see.

If dedicated archaeologists are not available to commit the time and effort required to teach students personally, teachers should avoid actual or simulated excavations. Teachers can use many excellent classroom activities without undertaking digging. They can teach about the science and results of archaeology without becoming archaeologists.

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