

## Archaeo-News

### An Activity for Introductory Archaeology Courses

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*Archaeo-News* involves discussing current archaeology-related media reports in the first portion of archaeology classes. It can be done any number of times, from once only to every class, and can take anywhere from a minute to a half hour or more, depending on student and instructor interest.

There are several objectives of the exercise, including

- encouraging students to become actively engaged in thinking about archaeology
- providing examples and expanding upon course material.
- using funny or bizarre archaeology-related stories for comic relief
- easing the transition, for both students and instructors, into formal learning
- providing ‘teachable moments’

The activity has three basic stages.

1. ***Review archaeology-related stories from the popular press.*** This is quite easy to do. There are several good archaeology web sites that provide links to daily archaeology stories in popular media. Some of these sites are updated hourly. One of the first things I usually do when I get into my office in the morning, is to quickly review the archaeology news on three different sites –
  - *Archaeologica* ([www.archaeologica.org](http://www.archaeologica.org))
  - *Archaeology News from Archaeology Magazine* ([www.archaeology.org/news](http://www.archaeology.org/news))
  - *Archaeology News* ([www.archaeologynews.org](http://www.archaeologynews.org)).

Each of these sites provides links to archaeology-related stories from around the world. On a typical morning, there are usually at least a dozen stories one can choose from. Each web site typically includes a one or two sentence description of the story and a link to take you to the original publication, which can usually be printed. Because the news is from popular sources, the stories are usually quite short. The whole process, including choosing which stories to open the link to and reading them, usually takes only a few minutes. I keep the three web sites in ‘My Favorites’ on my toolbar.

2. ***Start class with a question, such as “Did anything interesting happen in the world of archaeology in the last 24 hours.”***

My experience is that near the beginning of the term, few students respond, but as the term progresses the number of students responding increases. Chances are that if a student has seen an archaeology story in the popular media, then you’ve seen it as well. Ideally, the students and instructor can tie the story in with some aspect of course material, but even if they can’t, at the very least, it has engaged some students, however peripherally, in thinking about the discipline. After a description and discussion of the story, the activity may stop or it may proceed to the third stage

3. ***Report on one of more stories of the instructor’s choice from the internet sources.*** The choice of stories is dependant on many factors including, of course, what the news of the day actually is. Besides that, however, an instructor can choose what she or he thinks is most appropriate. As a broad generalization, I find that stories related to popular culture seem to work best in the first third of the term; stories related to archaeological methods and new discoveries work best in the middle third; and stories related to major ideas (e.g. collapse of civilizations) work best in the latter third of the term.

I think from the student’s perspective, *Archaeo-News* is a nice, gentle, and often fun way to begin the class. I do consciously use it as an effective way to ease the transition into the more formal learning process, but from my perspective, it is much more than that. The exercise encourages students to become actively engaged in thinking about archaeology outside of formal coursework and there can’t be a downside to that. It is a useful method of expanding upon course material, especially with practical applications reported in the media; and funny or bizarre media stories on archaeology can be used to lighten the mood in the dark days of midterms and the doldrums of winter.

Perhaps most importantly, I’ve found that discussions of archaeology stories in the popular media provides many, many ‘teachable moments’ in response to student queries and comments. I’ve experienced more ‘ah-ah’ moments by students while discussing popular media stories than all other components of coursework combined.

I typically use *Archaeo-News* to begin about 50% of my classes during a term (e.g. about 13 out of 26 classes). I have got much positive feedback from students about the exercise, both informally and during formal evaluation processes. An unexpected outcome is that instructors being familiar with popular media stories apparently impresses students.

In short, *Archaeo-News* is a simple and effective way of teaching archaeology

