

When Great Furry Beasts Roamed the Land

Teacher Background

Very little evidence remains from the Paleo-Indian period, but the projectile, or spear, points that archaeologists have discovered tell us quite a bit about Paleo-Indians. They were careful and skillful craftspeople, and the projectile points that they made had definitive styles. Paleo-Indians fashioned the points from stone from specific sites, often far from where archaeologists actually found the points. These discoveries suggest that Paleo-Indians were highly mobile and that they had contact with other groups as well.



Vocabulary

Paleo-Indians
mammoth
mastodon
paleontologist
glacier
in context
spear points
distinctive
fluted
femur
paleontologist
intact

Objectives

- ◆ To reinforce the importance of analyzing objects in context.
- ◆ To build an understanding of the importance of leaving artifacts in context at an archaeological site.

Activity 1: Context Clues

Overview

It's important to reinforce the point that artifacts must remain in context to provide the most information possible about a given site. The warm-up is designed to facilitate contextual thinking. The activity itself allows the students to practice the analytic skill of classification in conjunction with context-building. You can use the discussion to help students arrive independently at the conclusion that context clues help us understand more about the lifeways of peoples—past and present.

Skills and Strategies

Brainstorming, classification, problem-solving, analysis, discussion, cooperative learning

Materials

- ◆ Six index cards for each group of three or four students
- ◆ Pencil and paper for each group
- ◆ Preselected groups of artifacts for warm-up

Procedures

1. Bring in several bags filled with five or six artifacts from a given space in your home or school building—for example, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, brush, mouthwash; hammer, nails, screwdriver, pliers, wrench; measuring cups or spoons, empty cereal box, empty can or frozen food container, fork, spatula. Students can guess the context. Reinforce the concept that the more things found together, the simpler it is to hypothesize correctly about the identity of the environment from which they came.
2. Divide students into groups of three or four. Each team will think of a particular environment and keep it a secret among themselves. This can be a natural environment, like a rain forest, or a built environment, like a church or gas station.

3. Give each team about fifteen to twenty minutes to develop a story about the inhabitants of the imaginary site.
4. Give each group six blank index cards.
5. From their story, each team will choose six artifacts, features, or a combination of the two, that make the site they have chosen distinctive. One group member writes each one of these “clues” on a separate index card. For example, if a group wrote a story about a gas station site, it might make one card for a gas pump, one for a cash register, one for a drink machine, one for a tire, one for an air hose, and one for a squeegee. All of these should appear in their story as well.
6. The group will also design a symbol for the team and place it on the opposite side of the card.
7. Groups will exchange cards, with each team trying to identify and describe the mystery site of another. A group recorder writes down that team’s hypothesis about another team’s site, and then the cards shift again.
8. Return cards to original groups. Each group should share its hypothesis about one of the mystery sites and then have one of the team members from that site read the story aloud to the class and see how far off interpretations were from the original.
9. Variation: Each time the cards pass from one group to another, have students remove one card, so that fewer and fewer clues remain. When all cards have been exchanged, students will see that those groups that had more clues were able to hypothesize more accurately about the site, reinforcing the importance of context in archaeology.

Closure

In discussion, let students tell you what they have learned about the significance of context. If an archeologist found your classroom a thousand years from now, what artifacts are likely to give him or her clues about the lifeway of the classroom? How would knowing the nature of the site help? You could ask for students’ ideas for a hypothetical time capsule of ten articles that they think will be the greatest help in explaining what goes on in your class.

Extension

You can bring in an artifact with which the students would not be familiar, like a coffee percolator or an adding machine, and have the students hypothesize how people may have used this artifact. This activity and discussion should help students understand the difficulty that archaeologists sometimes have in interpreting unfamiliar objects.

Activity adapted from *Intrigue of the Past: A Teacher’s Activity Guide for Fourth through Seventh Grades*. By Shelley J. Smith, Jeanne M. Moe, Kelly A. Letts, and Danielle P. Paterson. Washington, DC: United States Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 1993.