

DELIVERING, ASSESSING AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK FOR FIELDWORK MODULES: A CASE STUDY FROM ARCHAEOLOGY

VICKI CUMMINGS AND SIMON HAWKESWORTH, UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL LANCASHIRE

Abstract

In this paper we highlight some of the issues surrounding the delivery of fieldwork modules, using archaeological excavation as an example. There are a whole range of issues surrounding the assessment of fieldwork-based modules, and here we detail approaches we have adopted to ensure consistent delivery and assessment methods. In particular, we have written and launched a web resource which can be used to assist with both the delivery and assessment of fieldwork. Finally, we discuss issues surrounding feedback, and suggest a method for enhancing students' feedback on field-based modules.

Introduction

Archaeology is one of a number of subjects taught at university level which involves fieldwork. Every year, all of our undergraduate students are placed on a fieldwork project, usually an excavation project. Although the vast majority of our students will go on projects run by UCLan staff members, a few students will consistently go on projects run by other universities or bodies. Virtually all projects attended by our undergraduates are research-led excavation projects. Since one of the primary ways of obtaining new data in archaeology is through excavation, research is very much driven by excavation. This is very good for our students, but invariably leads to something of a dilemma. On the one hand, as project directors, we have specific things we want to achieve when we run an excavation project, such as a number of trenches we want to complete in a season's work. We use the students as our workforce, so we will want to ensure that enough work gets done during each excavation season. On the other hand, the excavation is also where we train our students in the practical skills they need in order to become archaeologists. We are therefore also obliged to spend a considerable amount of time teaching and training the students. On top of this, students are marked on their performance on excavation: UCLan students spend eight weeks on excavation, and overall this counts as 1/6th of their overall degree grade. Fieldwork is therefore important for students, both in terms of learning skills and achieving grades, but it is also important for staff who wish to fulfil their own research agendas.

This tension between achieving the aims of a research-led project and training the workforce is something that universities teaching archaeology have faced for a long time (see, for example, comments in Croucher et al. 2008). It is fair to say that universities have long assured the quality and consistency of teaching in the classroom, through a variety of means such as internal peer-review processes, subject benchmark statements, training and/or membership of the Higher Education Academy, and the use of external examiners. There are still challenges to face, however, when it comes to delivering quality teaching, assessment and feedback on research-led field projects. The aim of this paper is to run through a variety of different methods employed by the archaeology staff at UCLan, which can be applied to other subjects who use fieldwork as part of their degree.

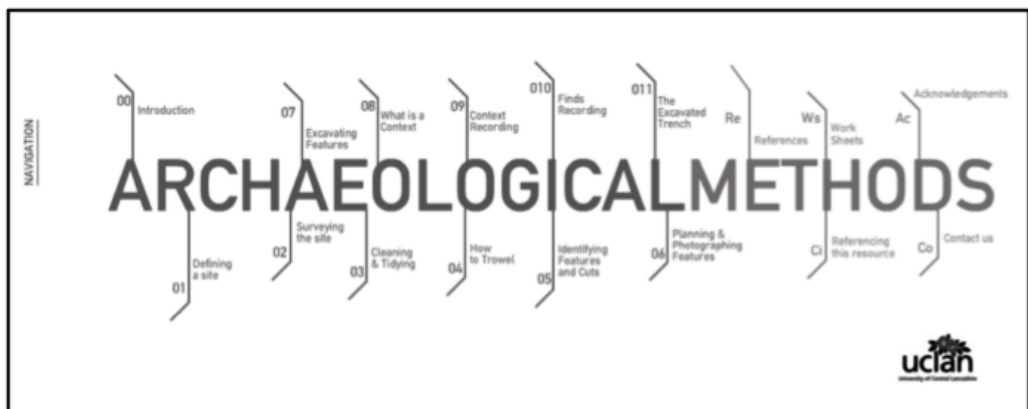
Delivering fieldwork modules on research-led excavations

We have already mentioned above the tension between achieving the goals of a fieldwork project while delivering quality training. An added difficulty is that each excavation project is different. For example, Vicki Cummings recently excavated a 6000 year old chambered cairn in upland Scotland (Cummings 2009; Cummings and Robinson 2011). This was a crucial part of her on-going research and she took a number of UCLan undergraduates there. The students spent the bulk of their time learning how to clean stones (the cairn) and then how to record (draw) that cairn at a scale of 1:20. In contrast, our colleague, Duncan Sayer excavated a 1500 year old Anglo-Saxon cemetery in lowland southern England. Again this was an essential part of his on-going research in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries (Sayer and Williams, 2009), and he took a number of UCLan undergraduates as his workforce. These students learnt a very different set of skills. They primarily learnt how to identify graves and features like wells, and then how to excavate them. The types of archaeology these two excavations produced contrasted considerably. However, there is the added problem that with archaeology we do not know exactly what we are going to find until we dig a hole, and there is always the possibility that we may well find nothing at all.

So how do we ensure all of our students on different projects get the same training? Essentially, any single excavation cannot guarantee to cover all elements of excavation that you would need to know if you were to become a professional archaeologist. We do try and make sure that our students go on at least different and contrasting excavations during their time with us. However, in order to further counterbalance this inevitable problem, we have developed an online resource which is designed to work alongside traditional teaching in the field.

There are a growing number of web-based resources for archaeologists, such as the Archaeology Data Service (archaeologydataservice.ac.uk) and the Soil Analysis Support System for Archaeology (www.sassa.org.uk), and issues surrounding web-based resources in archaeology are discussed by many papers in the online journal *Internet Archaeology*. It was against this background that we designed Archaeological methods (Cummings et al. 2010), an online web resource which covers all the basics of archaeological excavation. This can be found at www.uclan.ac.uk/archaeologymethods. The archaeological content was written by Cummings and the website and specific interfaces were designed and implemented by Hawkesworth. It took many hours to write and design, and was financed by a Harris Award. The website is a basic guide to the excavation process, from the methods used in locating a site for a research excavation through to digging, recording finds and drawing. The content is divided into 11 modules (see Figure 1), each of which runs through a component of the excavation process. So for example there is a section on surveying a site prior to excavation, how to trowel, how to identify features and how to draw a feature. Each section must be read in sequential order, but users can look at different modules in any order. This means that students can dip in and out of the relevant sections as they encounter them on a site, and this gives the resource a reflexive element that is reflected in the actual practice of archaeology. The resource is unique in that, unlike a traditional book or article, we have employed multiple colour images, video clips and animations to enhance the content.

Figure 1: The navigation page of the Archaeological Methods website. The excavation process is divided into 11 modules.



Because this resource is available online, it offers a unique and interactive way for students to learn. There is no restriction on how many people can use it at any one time, and anyone with a computer can use it. Students are very rarely away from the internet and with the increase in portable digital technology, sites such as ours can be increasingly accessed virtually anywhere. Students are asked to use this website as part of a skills module before they go on the summer's excavation, so they will already be familiar with the site prior to digging. They can then access it while on a project, and the assessment at the end of each season's work, worth 50% of the overall mark, also encourages the students to use and reference the resource. There are often quiet periods on an excavation when there are only limited tasks to be done, and we could envisage asking students to go and read a particular section of the resource before doing that task in the field, thus filling quiet periods and taking the pressure off the directing staff.

So far, we have had excellent feedback from the students. They can see how such a resource can inform them about all aspects of an excavation, even if they do not get to actually practice that element in the field. It encourages students to take an active part in their learning, highlighting which skills they have, and have not,

learnt, enabling them to make active choices about which kinds of site they want to dig on in the future. At present, we have only developed an excavation methods page, but there is potential to write similar resources on different skills, such as geophysical survey and finds analysis. Other subject areas could also utilise this basic idea, providing online and accessible material to enhance the teaching of their own fieldwork skills.

Assessing fieldwork

The online web resource helps us with the consistency of teaching archaeological fieldwork skills in the field. It also helps us assess the fieldwork component. UCLan students are assessed on eight weeks of fieldwork as part of their degree, and this is the same as around 50% of UK institutions offering archaeology (Croucher et al. 2008). Our students do four weeks of excavation at the end of their first year as part of a second year module, and another four weeks of excavation at the end of the second year as part of a third year module. For each fieldwork module, a student's performance on excavation counts for 50% of the overall mark, the other 50% is via an essay.

The online resource supports the assessment of fieldwork in a number of ways. Firstly, it enables the students to easily assess what they have, and have not, learnt. There are also two assessment forms on the resource, which means that our marking scheme is transparent from the start. The first mark sheet relates to students on their first four weeks of excavation, and the second mark sheet is designed for students undertaking their second four weeks of digging. In order to demonstrate the difference between the two levels, we expect a higher skill level at level three and this is reflected in the criteria on the level three mark sheet. These mark sheets also help ensure consistency in the assessment of fieldwork by staff, essential when students go on different projects.

We have also developed four worksheets, which can be used as additional forms of assessment. The worksheets are designed to connect the excavation experience to the rest of the degree, something that can easily be lost as students concentrate on skills and practice (see Hamilakis 2004). The worksheets are not designed as something simply to do after the excavation is over, but we encourage students to engage with these before they go on a project, as well as during the project. The worksheets, of which there are four, highlight the connection between excavation and archaeological theory, excavation and research, and also how participants can assess their own personal development. In this context the website offers a benchmark against which students can reflect and be critical, of the methods they have been taught (see Hamilakis 2004, p. 293).

We have been using these mark sheets now for a number of years, refining them at the end of each season. Our external examiners have been so impressed with these that they have taken them back to their own institutions as examples of good practice. These mark sheets are now available on the online resource, and could easily be adopted for other fieldwork-based subjects (see www.uclan.ac.uk/archaeologymethods).

Reflexive feedback for fieldwork modules

The transparency of fieldwork assessment is something that benefits both the assessors and the students, and the use of the mark sheets has certainly helped with this. However, in the past we have marked a student's performance on excavation at the end of the project, so essentially at the end of their four week placement. Students then came to see the module tutor for individual feedback on their performance. Students were happy with this approach, but the staff were concerned that we were marking students on their 'exit velocity', i.e. how proficient they were as archaeologists at the end of the excavation, not at the start. Last year, however, we piloted a more reflexive approach, with very positive results.

On the excavation that Cummings was directing, she filled out the mark sheet for each student at the end of every week of excavation. She then spent 10 minutes with each student detailing why she had given them a particular mark and highlighting both their strengths and weaknesses in various skills. Each student was then encouraged to work on particular elements over the next week. At the end of the four weeks on excavation, all but one of the student's marks had improved considerably. She asked each student to then fill out a basic questionnaire on the effectiveness of this form of feedback and they resoundingly said they preferred it to getting a single mark at the end. They all felt their marks were fair, and they all said it helped them gauge their own personal development over the course of the excavation. This was such a resoundingly success that we will now be using this style of regular feedback on all our excavation projects. For subject areas who also take students away for sustained periods, we would highly recommend this 'punctuated feedback' style, benefitting both the students and the staff, and resulting in more transparent and accurate marks.

Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined the launch of a new digital teaching resource to assist with the teaching of research-led excavation skills. The resource is widely available, so enables both students and staff to have access to this throughout the year and while on excavation. The resource includes mark sheets to assist with consistency of marking fieldwork, and also worksheets, which can also be marked, which encourage students to reflect on what they have learnt. In addition to this, we are promoting punctuated feedback so that students can improve their skills as they go along.

The future clearly lies with developing a whole range of similar online resources, both in archaeology and in other subject areas. These resources are not only helpful for our undergraduates but can be used by people outside the university. This helps lift the overall profile of the university. However, there are several issues to consider in the development of similar resources. Firstly, the development of this particular resource was a costly and time-consuming process. Additional support (both financial and technical) is needed if we are to produce more of these resources. Secondly, web resources also have an ambiguous role in terms of output, especially with universities placing so much emphasis on assessable research. These are clearly issues which need resolving in the long-term development of these sorts of resources. Nevertheless, we would argue that web-based resources are the future, particularly for subjects with a heavy fieldwork component.

Acknowledgements

This project was primarily funded by the Harris Award scheme. The feedback element was supported by the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Fund. Many thanks to all the archaeology students who assessed the online resource and completed questionnaires on feedback. We are grateful to Rick Peterson, and to the anonymous referees, for comments on this paper.

References

- Croucher, K, Cobb, H and Brennan, A 2008. *Investigating the role of fieldwork in teaching and learning in archaeology*, Liverpool: The Higher Education Academy, Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology.
- Cummings, V 2009. *A view from the west: the Neolithic of the Irish Sea zone*, Oxford: Oxbow.
- Cummings, V and Robinson, G 2011. *The Southern Kintyre Project: exploring interactions across the Irish Sea zone*, Monograph in preparation.
- Cummings, V, Hawksworth, S and Degya, A 2010. *Archaeological methods*. Viewed 1st July 2010, <<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/archaeologymethods>>
- Hamilakis, Y 2004. 'Archaeology and the politics of pedagogy', *World Archaeology*, vol. 36, pp. 287-309.
- Sayer, D and Williams, H (eds.) 2009. *Mortuary practice and social identities in the middle ages*, Exeter: Exeter University Press.