

# TEACHING WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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As Kathy Kamp explained in her introductory article (January 2014) in this series on SAA's Seven Principles of Archaeological Curriculum, *Teaching Archaeology in the First Part of the Twenty-First Century*, the SAA Committee on Curriculum is charged with overseeing the implementation of the seven principles (stewardship, diverse pasts, social relevance, ethics and values, communication, archaeological skills, and real-world problem solving). Kathy summarized the committee's efforts to understand if and how the seven principles are used in undergraduate and graduate classrooms based on an analysis of syllabi from across the country. The syllabi were rated on a scale of 0–3, based on the degree of attention shown to the principles. In general, the results suggest that there were some references to the seven principles, but almost all the syllabi lacked an explicit emphasis on these skills. As a committee, we hope to reinvigorate the discussion of pedagogy in archaeology with our series of short articles.

Communication skills are both used and required in every classroom. Therefore, not surprisingly, written and oral communication was one of the principles most often referenced in the reviewed syllabi. Nevertheless, this skill was not explicitly emphasized to the degree that might be expected, given its necessity and wide applicability in any academic setting. Ample opportunities for making detailed connections between reading, writing, and discussion-based assignments are presented when constructing a syllabus and learning outcomes. In this article, I discuss the value of thinking about communication skills in the classroom and emphasizing articulated learning outcomes. I also discuss some of the key issues surrounding the multifaceted topic of communication in archaeology and in the broader professional world.

In Bender and Smith's (2000) original proposal to guide curricular reform for the twenty-first century, Susan Bender described the principle of written and oral communication as follows:

Archaeology depends on the understanding and support of the public. For this to occur, archaeologists must be able to communicate their goals, results, and recommendations to diverse audiences. This goal must be supported by teaching our students how to think logically, write effectively, and speak clearly, all of which are central aims of a liberal arts education (Bender 2000:33).

Bender went on to suggest that the principle of communication may be imbedded in existing curricula and course structures using four topics, including clear writing, clear speaking, public speaking, and computer literacy (Bender 2000:37-40). These four skills are as relevant, if not more so, today as they were 13 years ago. As archaeologists dependent on public support, we need non-academics to understand and value our work. George Smith has argued that "it is more important than ever that archaeology present a balanced and credible account of the past in a way that presents it not as an isolated event detached from the modern world but rather as a building block of modern society" (2008:6). Professional archaeologists and archaeology students alike must be able to communicate motivations, goals, findings, and recommendations with clarity and with an eye to the social relevance of what we do.

The ability to present and explain key phenomena and concepts (individually or in collaborative groups) using both technical and non-technical language is a fundamental skill in our discipline and generally in any scientific endeavor or professional setting. Moreover, as global citizens, skilled communicators who have the ability to adapt their discourse to a variety of contexts are at a clear advantage. Many employers in the business and professional world identify communication skills as a job requirement (Mascle 2013:216). Schools of Business and Education and Departments of Communication often have well-defined and even elaborate curricula focused on teaching students to become better

communicators. There are also many journals in these disciplines that deal with this topic exclusively. Relative to the concerted and clearly defined efforts and goals of the aforementioned disciplines for establishing programs that highlight communication skills, archaeology lags behind. I have drawn several suggestions and insights from their approaches to teaching communication skills, and I describe these below in the context of effective higher education practices.

Educators and employers often classify skill sets of potential candidates into two major groups: hard skills (including the technical expertise and knowledge needed to do a particular job) and soft skills, that is, interpersonal modes of engagement, people skills, and emotional intelligence<sup>1</sup> (Evenson 1999; Sigmar et al. 2012). Communication is among the highest ranked form of all the so-called soft skills (Klaus 2010; Robles 2012). Importantly, soft skills enhance a person's interactions, job performance, and career prospects, and the application of these skills is not limited to a particular profession. Workers today must be able to function and communicate effectively in a "global workplace with its complex informal networks, intercultural issues, and team emphasis" (Sigmar et al. 2012:301). Job candidates who have strong soft skills and excel in written and oral communication are highly sought after in the professional community, in heritage management, and in academia. It has become clear that technical skills are not enough to ensure employment and long-term job security in the contemporary workforce (Robles 2012). Given the demand for talented communicators inside and outside of our discipline, how can we best prepare our students using archaeology?

### Teaching Communication Skills in the 21st Century

Modeling social skills, as anthropologists know well, is an important teaching tool, and we have a long tradition in our discipline of teaching via this mode. While the lecture/modeling approach certainly has value (and may even be the most appropriate method of teaching in large classes), this has been referred to as a passive teaching mode (Smart et al. 2012; Stage et al. 1998). This is because lectures are teacher-centered, where knowledge is delivered from instructor to students, and students are expected to receive and assimilate the knowledge with little contextual understanding or actual engagement with the material. Modern learning theory, however, advocates for teachers to move into the role of facilitators and to allow students to learn within a social context in which students actively construct knowledge, often in groups; this is what is known as a social constructivist approach to learning (Stage et al. 1998).<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to move beyond teaching by showing, and to engage in constructivist approaches, modern pedagogical research has identified teaching methods (such as Problem Based Learning and High-Impact Practices) that map nicely onto the seven principles of curriculum reform in archaeology that Bender and Smith originally identified. Anyone who has engaged in a field school will quickly recognize that, for students, learning by experience is powerful and provides for deep knowledge and understanding. This kind of active experiential engagement is collectively referred to as High-Impact Practices (HIP) by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Kuh 2008). Examples of HIP include: first year seminars, learning communities, common intellectual experiences, undergraduate research, writing-intensive courses, internships, collaborative assignments, capstone projects, and service learning. The learning outcomes associated with PBL and HIP are impressive, suggesting that students who engage in these approaches have higher grades and "retain, integrate, and transfer information at higher rates" (Kuh 2008:14).<sup>3</sup>

In a classroom setting, Problem Based Learning (PBL) scenarios are effective means to teach writing skills (Smart et al. 2013), and they provide valuable methods to engage students in meaningful discussions. PBL scenarios that emphasize rhetorical principles (rather than content or format) serve to improve communication abilities while motivating critical thinking. In most workplaces, communicators are required to explain new or relevant information to people who are unfamiliar with these ideas and to draw conclusions, solve problems, and make informed recommendations. High-level skills are needed to determine what information and messages are appropriate for a particular audience, context, and purpose. Conversely, traditional academic writing has cultivated an environment where students write for the purpose of illustrating how much they know about a particular topic. This mode provides little room for complex authentic thinking and communication suitable for varied audiences.

Writing-intensive coursework has been found to improve undergraduate perceptions and confidence in their abilities to read scientific literature and communicate about science (Brownell et al. 2013). Researchers have found that popular science journalism can be used to teach communication skills in a process that incorporates peer review, exercises to link ideas from separate disciplines, and critical thinking (Tuten and Temesvari 2013). In archaeology, as in many disciplines, writers often struggle to transfer their knowledge and skills to new and different contexts (Mascle 2013). Many people do not consider themselves to be "writers"; therefore, it is necessary for instructors to foster writing self-efficacy (or

confidence in writing abilities) to ameliorate writing apprehension. Part of this challenge involves providing a range of writing experiences for students to apply their developing skill sets in new contexts. Writing apprehension, and communication apprehension in general, have been found to be serious barriers to student success in academic settings and in the workplace (Blum et al. 2013).<sup>4</sup> Discussions and writing exercises about archaeology, at many levels, in different contexts, and with varied audiences, are essential practices for improved communication. Heather Burke and Claire Smith (2007) have edited a book that provides excellent examples of active learning activities and recommendations specifically for archaeology courses. While communication is not an explicit focus of the text, all of the activities described cultivate enhanced communication skills. Exercises include role playing, games, reflective writing, simulations, and performance, among a wide range of other writing, drawing, and discussion-based activities.

In higher education, there is an increased emphasis on HIP, such as service learning and experiential learning (including undergraduate research), where students engage in real situations in the field and/or in the community that put academic foundational knowledge to use. In these contexts, learners are challenged in new ways and will employ both formal and informal communication skills (including traditional academic forms using professional jargon and discipline specific terms, as well as less formal social-oriented communications). High-impact experiences challenge students to communicate in varied settings and to translate knowledge in multiple ways for different audiences. In the discipline of archaeology, we have great potential to engage students in hands-on working environments (in the field, the laboratory, and in community outreach). These experiences add to the richness and diversity of situations in which students can practice and hone their communication skills. Moreover, communication in informal but academic settings, such as an archaeological field school, brings freedom to explore and adapt, as well as opportunities to express oneself in creative ways—obviously there is great potential for communication proficiency development in archaeology.<sup>5</sup>

In sum, expressing the purpose of archaeology and justifications for our work to a variety of audiences is something that professional archaeologists constantly do in heritage management, in universities, in contract archaeology, in discussions with the public (live and online), and in our everyday conversations with our colleagues, friends, and families. In addition to the ability to communicate effectively, students need to be adaptable and able to translate anthropological and archaeological concepts across multiple contexts. New

technologies have created a great shift in knowledge production and dissemination practices that have already affected our discipline. This shift will undoubtedly continue (Boast and Biehl 2011; Harding 2007; Kansa et al. 2013). The Internet is being used to transform archaeological communications into forms that are more open, inclusive, and collaborative (Kansa et al. 2013). More than ever, we now have great potential to make archaeology a communications instrument for civic engagement, stewardship, global education, social justice, and improved management of cultural resources. These emerging modes of communication in archaeology have created new challenges for practitioners and for students. Nevertheless, this is an exciting time and the situation has stimulated an urgent need for more conversations about the role of communication in archaeology.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emotional intelligence has also been referred to as social intelligence and a person's emotional quotient (Sigmar et al. 2012:302). Emotional intelligence involves interpersonal skills, including communication, that allow people to work effectively with others.

<sup>2</sup> An example of constructivist learning is the Flipped Classroom, where students watch or listen to lectures at home and then engage in collaborative learning in class by working through homework-style problems together, with the instructor's assistance and guidance (for example, see Bergmann and Sams 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, HIP have especially positive learning outcomes for underserved students, including first-generation students, minority students, and low-income students; in these cases, HIP have proved to be transformational for student learning outcomes (Brownell and Swaner 2009:26).

<sup>4</sup> Blum et al. (2013) found that communication apprehension was negatively associated with students' willingness to take on leadership opportunities, multicultural appreciation, and adaptability to new situations. Surprisingly, no significant relationship was found between GPA and communication apprehension.

<sup>5</sup> Reviews of engagement and learning outcomes in HIP settings show strong evidence for improved graduation and retention rates and enhanced academic performance (Brownell and Swaner 2009; Hill and Griswold 2013).