
Lesson 1.1

WHY IS THE PAST IMPORTANT?

Subjects: science, social studies, language arts.

Skills: knowledge, application, evaluation.

Strategies: brainstorming, discussion.

Duration: 15 to 30 minutes.

Class Size: any; groups of 3 to 4.



Spear point from Montgomery County,
North Carolina, 6000–5000 BC.

Objectives

As an introduction to the study of North Carolina's archaeological heritage, students will use personally owned object to:

- share the importance of their past;
- connect this importance with reasons why the human past is important.

Materials

Students bring to class an object, photograph, or drawing of an object that represents their past.

Vocabulary

Archaeologist: a scientist who seeks to understand past human cultures by careful study of the artifacts and other evidence from archaeological sites.

Archaeology: a method for studying past human cultures based on material evidence (artifacts and sites).

Artifact: any object made, modified, or used by humans; usually this term refers to a portable item.

Culture: the set of learned beliefs, values, styles, and behaviors generally shared by members of a society or group.

History: the study of past events and cultures using written records, oral traditions, and archaeological evidence as sources of information.

Prehistory: the period of human experience prior to written records; in the Americas, prehistory refers to the period before Europeans and their writing systems arrived, covering at least 12,000 years.

Site: a place where human activities occurred and material evidence of these activities was left.

Background

Sites and *artifacts* can be messengers from the past. If we know how to read their messages, they can tell us about the people who made and used them and then left them behind. Although the owners of the artifacts and the inhabitants of the sites may have lived hundreds or even thousands of years ago, they undoubtedly had many of the same needs and concerns, hopes and fears, joys and sorrows that we have today.

The messengers from the past belong to everyone. Everyone has a right to know how the world came to be and to know his or her place in the world. Material traces and their context play a universal role “in providing *cultural* continuity and perspective, and hence in linking past, present and future within the experience of any given human generation” (Lipe 1984, p. 2, emphasis added).

The link to the past is provided through scientific analysis as well as through traditional heritage values placed on *archaeological sites* and artifacts. For example, Old Salem in Winston-Salem provides a tangible link to the colonial *history* of North Carolina, and it is valued for that reason. By examining Old Salem’s historic buildings, objects, and residents’ journals, archaeologists hope these items will provide scientific information about the lives of the Moravian people who lived there. Similarly, the *prehistoric* sites throughout North Carolina represent aspects of the heritage of American Indians and are valued accordingly. These sites are also capable of providing scientific information about the history of the region.

Setting the Stage

This lesson sets the stage for Part 1. It will help students begin to discover *why* we study the past. The remainder of Part 1 explores *how* we study the past.

Assign students to bring an object (artifact) or photograph from home that tells something about their own or their family’s past. If the object cannot be brought to class, a drawing or description will suffice.

Procedure

1. Share background information and vocabulary.
2. Working in groups of 3 to 4, students tell one other what the object conveys about their past.
3. In a class discussion, ask the following questions:
 - Is it important for you to know about your past? Why or why not?
 - Is it important to know about the human past? Why or why not?
 - Humans have lived in North Carolina for at least 12,000 years. Is it important to know about their lives? Why or why not?
4. What can we learn from the past? The students brainstorm ideas. Some examples: how humans lived in the past and how and why human cultures changed over time.

Closure

Emphasize that the students’ past and their families’ past is important; that their past helps define who they are. Ask each student to spend five minutes writing an explanation of the artifact he or she brought to share. The student should include in the narrative why the artifact is important to his or her family history and tell why it is important to know about the past.

Extension

Repeat this lesson again at the close of your study of archaeology to demonstrate that students have broadened their understanding of archaeology and the past.

Sources

Lipe, William D. 1984. “Value and Meaning in Cultural Resources.” In *Approaches to the*

INTRIGUE OF THE PAST

Archaeological Heritage: A Comparative Study of World Cultural Resource Management Systems, edited by Henry Cleere, pp. 1–11. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Shelley J., Jeanne M. Moe, Kelly A. Letts, and Danielle M. Paterson. 1993. *Intrigue of the Past: A Teacher's Activity Guide for Fourth through Seventh Grades*. Washington, D.C.:

Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Department of the Interior. [This lesson is adapted from “Why is the Past Important?” on pp. 9–10, courtesy of the Bureau of Land Management.]

Ward, H. Trawick, and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. 1999. *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. [The image in this lesson's main heading is taken from Figure 3.8.]