

Classroom Archaeology

Letting Students Dig Up the Curriculum

Miriam Sicherman

An unexpected study of old coins, extinct candy brands, the history of our school building, and the discipline of archaeology: it all started with a ten-minute break. This year, the lunch period for my fourth grade class was later in the day than ever, so students were in class for a solid four hours before they got to eat and play. It quickly became clear that this was not going to work—by the last period before lunch, my students were distracted, hungry, and fidgety, and didn't get much work done. So I decided to carve out ten minutes in the middle of the morning in which they could eat a snack and just relax. As long as their behavior was safe and school-appropriate, they could do what they wanted. I was delighted to find that this respite was really all they needed in order to be productive throughout the morning—and it gave me a much-needed moment of down time as well, improving my own stamina for both teaching and management.

Soon after I added the break, I began to read aloud the memoir *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*.¹ This book for youth is a collection of 12 autobiographical stories by Santa Clara University professor Francisco Jiménez who, at the age of four, illegally crossed the Mexican border with his family in 1947. I decided to use this book during a fourth-grade unit of study on the experiences of children from migrant farmworker families. In the chapter “To Have and To Hold,” Jiménez describes his hobby of collecting pennies and how important these coins became to him, a child with very few possessions. My student Bobby was captivated by this idea and began to wonder if there were pennies lying in the dark and dusty gap in our classroom closet.

The Classroom Closet “Dig”

Our school building, in the East Village of Manhattan, was erected in 1913, during a time when this neighborhood was densely populated with thousands of new European immigrants arriving through Ellis Island. Different schools have rotated through the building over the years, and it is now home to three elementary schools, including our own, the Children's Workshop School. Though some renovations have been made, many classrooms still have old wooden closets with floors raised several inches above the classroom floor. Sliding doors move on



Archaeological dig site: the gap in the floor along the front of the old closet.



runners that are fitted into a gap about an inch wide along the length of the closet (perhaps 15 feet, some of which have fixed doors with no gap). When you glance into the gap, you get a dim glimpse of a few pencils and seemingly endless balls of dust.

Around January, Bobby began poking around in the gap, using colored pencils like chopsticks to try to extract what he could. With a special interest in coins, Bobby didn't pay much attention to whatever else might be hiding. And the coins started coming: some recent, but, soon, they became like a backwards timeline: 1970s, 60s, then the "wheat pennies" starting in the 1950s (with a shaft of wheat illustrating the obverse), and onward, all the way back to one coin dated 1914. Bobby took the coins home and researched them online and quickly became conversant on related topics, from metal alloys to coin design changes. (Our oldest coin, an 1881 penny, was later found by a different student in another classroom.)

Then, other children became curious about what was going on down there in this mysterious crevice. Bobby's best friend, Lizardo, started poking around as well, and others began to cautiously stick pencils, rulers, and scissors into the gap to see what they could retrieve. One day, early on, Kaya found a piece of a very old baseball card, for a player named Charles "Gabby" Street. She and I looked him up online and learned that he had played for the New York Highlanders (the Yankees' former name) in 1912 only. This card dated from that season. Olivia found a crumpled wrapper for Collins caramels, 6 for 1¢. We were hooked!

The Project Grows

I'm a big history buff, and I've been working on a master's in history for the past couple of years. So I was thrilled when historically interesting objects began to appear in our own classroom, even if that meant giant balls of dust all over the floor and a lot of broken colored pencils. Later, when a reporter for the *New York Times*² came to learn more about our project, he asked Bobby if he had ever worried that I would tell the kids to stop poking around in the dirty, dusty closet. Bobby looked at him as if he were nuts and replied, "No! Because Miriam thought it was really interesting, too!"

As more and more kids got involved in this "archaeological dig," I had to manage many challenges. One, paradoxically, was my own interest in what the kids were finding. I could see that my curiosity was motivating to the kids, but I knew that if I simply took over the project and started directing it and doing lots of digging and research on my own, I would kill their sense of ownership and discovery. I had to support their work without stealing it. I thought about this balancing act constantly throughout the rest of the spring semester.

At first, they just did archaeology during the ten-minute break, and kids managed the space limitations on their own. They refined their extraction techniques. Scissors were used to carefully tweeze items out, and they began using rulers to try to sweep items from the hollow space under the closet floorboards. A friend of mine sent in some wire hangers, which turned out

to be great tools for getting things out from further back under the closet. The addition of these tools was the only adult contribution to the practical aspects of retrieving items – the kids identified and figured out how to use all of the other tools entirely on their own. Bobby brought in a couple of flashlights, which helped a lot. Adam wrote, "The techniques for getting out the artifacts [were] very hard...especially if they are huge and the crack is small. Artifacts like a marble are a real challenge." They managed to figure out how to retrieve artifacts of every possible shape and texture.

Pedagogical Challenges

As the interest level increased and spread through the class, we began to run into some problems. There was only enough room for about 8 kids to work at the same time, and 10 minutes began to seem like not enough time, especially if a kid spotted an object and couldn't get it out right away. We needed more time and more space—more closets in other classrooms. Lizardo wrote, "Each time we find something the project gets bigger and bigger and we learn more about history." Kaya wrote, "We learn something new every time we find something new." This was an opportunity we could not pass up.

Still, the decision to expand the project outside the boundaries of the 10-minute break and our own classroom was not simple. I would need to coordinate with other teachers in our school (many, though not all of the classrooms in our building have these closets) and consider whether to try to get into classrooms belonging to the other two schools. A bigger issue was time. After all, I had planned our semester's work already. This project fit most closely into social studies, but I had many projects planned relating to our year's overarching theme of immigration. What would I need to eliminate or adapt to a tighter schedule? Was that even possible?

And if I were going to devote considerable time to this work, it would have to extend beyond getting old stuff out of closets and sticking it in a box. There would have to be some follow-up in terms of organizing our finds, researching their significance, and figuring out how to preserve and display them. Although I've done many complicated social studies projects with past classes, this was something very different, and I was planning it on the fly. I needed help.

Coordinating with Colleagues

One crucial element here was the support of my principal, Maria Velez-Clarke, co-founder of our school in 1993 and principal ever since. Maria has always had a very strong vision for our curriculum that is based on real projects and the real learning that comes from them. She encourages teachers to follow up on our own and our students' interests and recognizes that it is exactly the work that lies outside the standard requirements that often leads to the most fruitful experiences. So, Maria was on board from the beginning and immediately gave me permission to work this project into my existing plans and ask other teachers for their cooperation.

I began sending e-mails soliciting help from archaeologists or other professionals who might have something to offer as I attempted to introduce some more rigorous direction and study into this project. Through another archaeologist I'd worked with on a project about the African Burial Ground in 2008, I was put in touch with Meredith Linn, an archaeologist and professor of anthropology at Barnard College. Meredith was very enthusiastic about volunteering her expertise and wrote me a detailed email with suggestions for how we might document our discoveries. She also offered to visit our class, tell the students about her own experiences and archaeology in general, and answer questions about our artifacts and the field of archaeology itself. We set up a date for a few weeks hence, after her college semester ended.

Documenting Our Discoveries

Meredith's suggestions became the foundation for the research aspect of our project. I read it to my class, and we discussed her ideas. The kids immediately liked the notion of creating a recording sheet for each object that would give basic information about what it was and where and when it was found (and who found it—a very important aspect for my students), and that would provide space for research results. A few kids volunteered to come up with a draft form. After they did so, I typed it up and made a few adjustments. I showed this draft to the class on the Smartboard. Polly, who is a very talented artist, immediately pointed out that there was nowhere on the form to make a drawing of the artifact. This was an excellent point and reminded me of the importance of visuals—something I often forget because I myself am much more oriented toward text. I revised the form to make room for a drawing, and made other revisions suggested by the students. Finally, we had a form to use for research. (I also made a slightly altered form especially for coins, getting advice from Bobby about which websites he found most useful, so I could include that information on the sheet.)

Coordination and Tough Decisions

We began to have social studies periods with various choices in them: archaeology in our own room, archaeology in other classrooms whose teachers had agreed to it, research on the artifacts we'd already found (using our classroom laptop cart), washing coins, and planning our displays. This was a lot for me to manage. I began sending student-archaeologists with re-sealable bags that they would label with their name, the room number, and the date. This helped keep our finds somewhat organized but didn't help keep track of where specific things were, especially when the number of bags quickly reached many dozens. In addition, most bags included a lot of useless objects (like scraps of paper with nothing on them, or recently dropped Legos or cough drop wrappers, and so on) along with the more interesting artifacts.

Finally, I managed to find a day in which I could spend a few hours after school simply going through the bags, taking out the interesting artifacts, and putting them in separate containers and

bags while also recording who had found them, when, and in which classroom. Ideally, students would do this work, but I made the decision that, with the very limited amount of time we had left in the year, it would be more efficient to simply do it myself. (I also spent a certain amount of my own money on display and storage containers, and re-sealable bags of different sizes.) The kids continued to do the research on as many items as we could find out about. Some items, like the Collins caramel wrappers (and butterscotch, also 6 for 1¢, that we found later) or a business card from Galante Custom Hatters (with an address around the corner) had left no trace on the Internet, which was, itself, interesting.

Meanwhile, I was looking closely at our curriculum and figuring out what to cut or condense in our schedule to make room for the archaeology work. We did some creative writing about the artifacts that also integrated information that we learned during our Ellis Island unit because we realized that some of the kids who dropped or hid items in the gaps were probably immigrants who had passed through that entry. I decided to condense our unit on Chinese immigration into fewer lessons. I also decided to change around a project we would do at the end of the year, in which we'd interview five immigrants who were family members of the students. We still did the interviews and made books about them, but I worked out a way to change the assignment to require fewer periods.

Publicity and Reflection

I had become fascinated by many of the finds, from the baseball card, to a 1953 U.S. Marines trading card about the Spanish-American War, to the Snow White chewing gum wrapper that invited kids to send away for a Robin Hood hat or a magic whisper-phone, to the pack of Sweet Caporals with a cigarette still inside. (Later, in the summer, a student emailed me to say that she was reading *A Tree Goes in Brooklyn* and came across a reference to Sweet Caporals, a brand I'd never heard of before we found them in the closet.) I began posting photos of some of the artifacts on my personal Facebook account (without any information about my class or students, of course). Many of the artifacts can be seen at the Instagram account [@closetarchaeology](#). An old friend soon put me in touch with a friend of his, a reporter named Paul Lukas.

Paul came to meet me and a couple of the kids to see some of the artifacts after school one day. He got very interested and pitched the story to the *New York Times*, which immediately accepted it.² We then made plans for him and a *Times* photographer to visit the class for an afternoon for interviews and photos. Although the kids and I were all excited about the prospect of some publicity, I was somewhat concerned that it might be hard to justify the time spent from an educational perspective.

As it turned out, this experience provided a very helpful opportunity for all of us to take a deep breath, pause, and reflect on what was happening. Before the visit, I asked the kids to write about what they felt was important to share with Paul and their general thoughts and feelings about the project. Their writing

showed that they wanted to make sure that the basic facts of the story were told correctly.

Many students wrote comments similar to Daisy's: "I think it is important to tell the reporter that Bobby came up with the idea and plans we have for the project. We should also tell the reporter about the different things we have found. We should tell him about the recording sheet we made."

Millie pointed out that we should be scrupulously honest and make it clear that even very old objects might have been dropped into the closet recently.

Dinah wrote, "I think that we should share a lot of things with the reporter. I think we should tell him what we found. How we became interested in archaeology. Where we found stuff. What we know about it and what we would like to know. And other personal feelings. For example: 'I didn't know I would enjoy archaeology so much. Then when I tried it, it just stuck!'"

During the actual interviews, Paul's insightful questions helped the students articulate their thinking. Jacob told Paul, "I didn't really care about history before. But now I think about it more." Ciara confessed that at first, "I thought it was stupid... But then I tried it and found some stuff." She described researching a silent film star named Alice Terry, whose photo we'd found, and concluded, "I actually want to do more research on these things because it's fun to learn about them. History's more fun with artifacts."

Looking back, I now see these interviews as an important step in the whole process. We all had to take the time to think about what the project meant to us, now and in the long term, and to figure out how to express these thoughts. Happily, the article, which was published in the *Times* on May 26, presented the project in a positive light that made us all feel we were moving in the right direction.

The Profession of Archaeology

Soon after the visit by the reporter, we had our much-anticipated visit from Meredith Linn, the archaeologist. Once again, kids prepared written questions, some of which were:

- What artifacts have you found? (Bobby)
- How long have you been digging? How long have you been

- an archaeologist? (Keiran/Jacob)
- Do you like being an archaeologist? (Ciara)
- Where do you dig? (Noah/Ezra)
- How did you get interested in being an archaeologist? (Lizardo)
- Do you like finding different things? (Ilaria)
- How long does it take to become a professional archaeologist? (Da'Zure)
- What was the oldest artifact you found? (Kai)
- Do you dig every day? (Kaya)
- How do I find information on the pencil I found in the closet? (Dinah)
- How long did it take you to find your first artifact? (Matilda)
- How careful do you have to be to dig up a house? (Millie)
- What is your favorite artifact that you've found? (Daisy)
- How long do you dig each day? (Polly)
- How do you know when you're done with a dig? (Miriam)
- Have you found any coins? (Bobby)
- What was your first artifact? (Adam)
- What time of day do you dig? (Lilyania)
- Did you ever dig up any skeletons? (Lizardo)
- What do you mostly find? (Allie)
- Have you dug up a school? (Joseph)
- Where do you usually dig? (Kaya)
- What's your favorite digging spot? (Da'Zure)
- Do you have rules when you're doing archaeology? (Lizardo)

I sent her these questions a few days before her visit, and Meredith created a Powerpoint presentation about archaeology in general, with a focus on their questions. The kids were riveted by images of places like the Cave of Altamira in Spain, the first cave in which prehistoric drawings were found, which was discovered by an eight-year-old child. She showed us photos of digs she has participated in, such as the Seneca Village excavation in Central Park, and explained many details of the process of organizing, identifying, preserving, and studying artifacts. She explained that archaeologists don't get to keep any of the artifacts they find—even their favorites! This issue of ownership was one that came up frequently and triggered strong emotions (discussed below). Meredith also brought



artifacts from her college’s teaching collection and showed kids some tricks of the trade for identifying ceramics and other items. She looked at some of our artifacts and gave us her best guess as to their time period and any other information she had some knowledge of. It was a wonderful visit; it enhanced students’ sense of themselves as real archaeologists and gave them a much better sense of the practices and protocols of real archaeology.

Numismatics

After the *Times* article was published, I received an email from Peter Sugar, the co-president of the Flushing (Queens) Coin Club. Peter had read the article and was glad to see a new generation of coin enthusiasts arising. He asked if he could visit our class, and, of course, I said yes. Once again, the kids had to think about what we could learn from this expert, and they brainstormed many thoughtful questions in advance. These questions tended to focus on the superlatives of coin collecting: “What is your oldest, rarest, or most amazing coin?” Students also wanted to know where to look for coins. It was clear that they assumed that most coin collectors simply found their coins (the way the students themselves were finding coins); they did not know that most collectors obtain coins by buying them. They were curious about the value of money; they were aware that the face value might not match the value from a collector’s point of view, and they also knew from the prices on wrappers that a penny used to have a lot more buying power. Peter

showed us coins from his own collection and gave each student a “war penny” (among other gifts)—a 1943 cent made of steel because of wartime copper shortages. He was happy to learn that the kids already knew about these coins from their own research. The students now thought of themselves as budding numismatists, as well as archaeologists.

Issues of Ownership

One thing that the kids loved about Peter’s visit was that he gave them a few items to keep: the war penny, a foreign coin (different ones that the kids then traded amongst themselves), auction catalogs, and a small magnifying glass. The issue of ownership came up frequently during this project. In the very earliest phase, when it was just a few kids poking around on their breaks, I let the kids take their finds home with them. This definitely came back to haunt me later, as it sent a clear “finders, keepers” message. When I realized that we had a real and important project on our hands, I had to retract this message and ask the kids to bring their artifacts back to school. Most of the artifacts were returned, and, from then on, we kept everything at school. There was a lot of pushback about this. Noah later wrote, “Almost everyone thinks it’s unfair that we don’t get to keep the artifacts that we work hard to find.” I sympathized with their feelings and also felt strongly that the artifacts needed to stay at school where we could study, display, and keep track of them.

The students also developed a very strong sense of ownership over the project as a whole. It quickly became clear that

Resources about Archaeology

There seem to be plenty of books for kids about the archaeology of ancient sites, like the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Mayans, etc. I didn’t end up using these books with my class because the artifacts, techniques, and findings are so different from our project, but if I’d had more time I probably would have tried to make that connection. There are very few resources out there about the archaeology of more recent times.

Duke, Kate. *Archaeologists Search for Clues*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

This is a good basic introduction to archaeology for elementary students. It covers how archaeologists find sites, perform excavations, and document their discoveries, and a bit about how they interpret and explain what they find. The site used as an example is an Archaic-era Native American site.

Hansen, Joyce and Gary McGowan. *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York’s African Burial Ground* New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1998.

This book is most appropriate for grades 6–12, but I have used it successfully with elementary students by focusing on specific chapters and scaffolding the vocabulary. Archaeological findings at the Burial Ground are explained in light of history discovered through other sources. Each year, we have a field trip to the African Burial Ground (which is now a National Monument and includes an

excellent museum about the history of slavery in New York City).

McIntosh, Jane. *Archeology*. New York: Dorling Kindersley, 1994. Like others in the Eyewitness Books series, this has lots of great photos and detailed and clearly writing. It explains that only certain objects survive over time, meaning that our view of the past can be influenced (or even distorted) by a focus on what does survive. This is something that students might not realize on their own.

The Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side of New York City is housed in a restored 19th-century tenement, with different apartments reflecting their real inhabitants at different times in the building’s history. (See *Middle Level Learning*, May/June 2011, www.socialstudies.org/mlL.) The museum staff found many old artifacts in apartments that had been sealed up like a time capsule when the building closed. Visit www.tenement.org/collections.html.

there was no way we could excavate all the closets before the end of the school year. As Millie wrote, “I want to do more of this work. It is too interesting to do only for half a year!” But, in September, they would be in 5th grade, no longer in my class. I told them I’d be willing to do a lunchtime archaeology club in the fall for kids who were in this class. They told me that they definitely did not want this club to be open to any other students! As of this writing, it remains to be seen the form this will take in the fall, as I will have to work it into my existing teaching responsibilities with my new class.

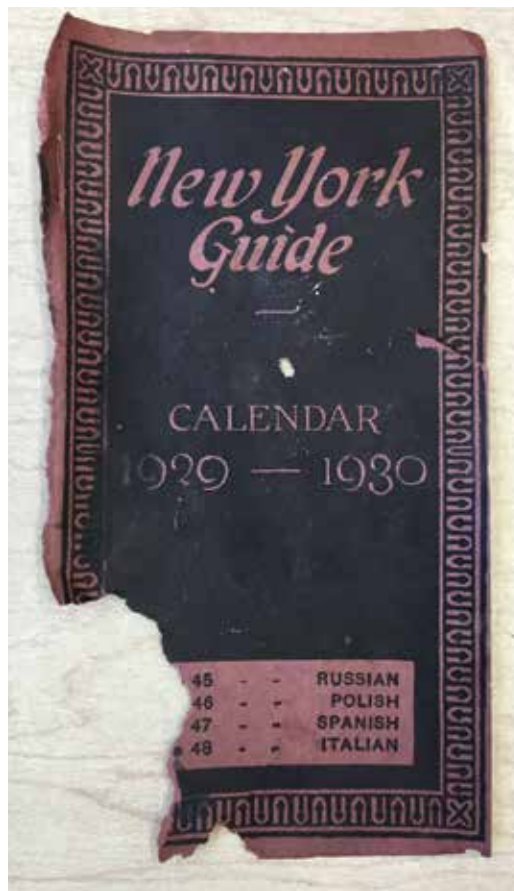
Keeping Excitement Alive

I have thought a lot about the meaning of this project, both in terms of the effects it has had on these students, and what kind of applicability this rather unique situation may have to other classes and projects. For these students in particular, it has definitely stimulated a more intense interest in history, as well as a more sophisticated understanding of our own place in a long time span. As Ezra wrote, “I once had candy and threw the wrapper into the trash. Maybe that may be a collector’s item in the future.”

More broadly I think the kids now see the world as a place full of interesting stories that are hiding in plain sight. Kai wrote, “I learned that there can be really cool stuff anywhere,” Lilyania wrote, “You get to discover things,” and Joseph wrote, “You are happy when you find something. When I found something I really wanted to go and research it.” Finding something on

their own initiative, rather than as part of an assignment from a teacher, was a huge motivator. While I hope my students find a lot of my assignments interesting, it will be hard to match the attraction of this project. Every single day this spring, students would ask, “Can we do archaeology?” This deep level of interest developed in every student, and came directly from their own intellectual yearning. I’ll never forget what I saw after the last of six days of standardized testing in April. I gave the kids free time to decompress for the rest of the morning. They could draw, read, chat, build with Legos, or just relax. They gravitated instantly to the closet, making room for each other, helping each other extract tricky items, rotating in and out to give everyone a chance. They needed it. It was real work that served as an antidote to the decontextualized, artificial, cold world of the test.

As for applicability to my own and other teachers’ classes in the future, things get complicated. Obviously, most teachers don’t have such a closet or equivalent site, and even the closets in our building will be exhausted eventually. There are a few broader things I hope to take from this work. One is the importance of even just a little bit of free time each day—and not just giving kids the time but observing what they do with it. One kid’s personal interest that she pursues during that time could lead to a class-wide study. I want to make sure to make room for this sort of happening – a serendipity that cannot be planned, but is at the beginning of many discoveries in art, the humanities, and science.



Allowing for the Unexpected

Jacob wrote that he was glad that his teacher “was fine with us...getting messy.” This project was definitely messy in the literal sense (I finally invested in some disposable gloves for the students, and we spent a lot of time sweeping) but also figuratively. I didn’t know what we would find or what the end product would be. I had to work it out as we went along, always using the kids’ ideas and interests as important guidelines. So another lesson learned for me is to not be afraid of an open-ended project. This doesn’t mean anything goes—it means being alert and aware and noticing in each moment the glimmers of

possibility. After 15 years of teaching, it has been an amazing gift to be re-inspired by children’s discovery of dusty objects in a forgotten space.

Notes

1. Francisco Jiménez, *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).
2. Paul Lukas, “Young Treasure Hunters Dig Up History Lessons in a Classroom’s Closet,” *New York Times* (May 25, 2015).

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