

# Archaeological Dig Activity

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This is a small scale archaeological dig activity.

## ***How do things end up getting buried?***

Students may be curious as to how or why objects, buildings or other materials used by humans in the past end up being buried. Discuss how in certain areas, trash (usually biodegradable) would have been dumped in areas. There was no trash collection, so this would accumulate. Eventually, this would decay and turn into soil. This would add layers of soil to an area where people had lived.

Natural occurrences, such as floods, would add layers of soil and debris, often covering up objects left by people. This would have happened when the Red River would flood. Silt from the flood waters would end up covering the flooded land. When excavating an area, archaeologists can tell when floods occurred and left a layer of silt or soil.

## ***The Dig***

Archaeologists use a variety of tools when excavating a site. The sites are carefully dug out in a horizontal excavation. They do dig a hole. An area is carefully marked off and the soil is removed in layers. When an object is found, its position is recorded and it is left in place. More removal of soil is done, checking to see if other objects are around it. Archaeologists use this information to help make connections between the objects. All of this helps to tell a story about how people lived.

Sometimes, there are many different layers of objects. This means that people had lived there for many years. Each layer representing a specific period of time. Archaeologists are careful not to mix up objects from one layer (time period) with another layer. This is why the dig is done very slowly and carefully, with soil removed horizontally, instead of being dug straight down. As archaeologists dig, they become aware of differences within the soil: colour, texture, smell, composition.

## ***Constructing the simulated dig***

### **Materials required:**

- Shoeboxes: number them, with one side labelled WEST
- Sand (bottom layer)
- Charcoal
- Potting soils (different types/textures/colours)
- Sugar crystals
- Coffee/herb such as oregano for scent
- Artifacts for each layer: can be small toys, laminated images, popcorn, plastic bugs, dried pasta
- Plastic table cloth on which to work
- Small clay pot/ broken into pieces to distribute amongst the boxes (able to be reassembled)
- Small beads to simulate necklace/bracelet

**Tools:**

- Spoons
- Paint brushes
- Small sieves
- Small plastic bags to hold the artifacts
- Container to hold the soil
- Pencils
- clipboards
- Top plan (grid to record artifacts)
- Sheets to record finds
- Camera: digital record of the find

When assembling the shoe boxes for the digs, the teacher should have a story in mind for the dig site. There should be some mention of objects found at or near the surface. You may want to display these and have the students talk about what these may mean and what inferences the students can make from these objects. The story should be able to tell of change of cultures over time. A dig could outline how people obtained food over time.

*The teacher will need to set up the boxes with a variety of textures to ensure differences of layers. These layers may include gravel, sand, potting soil, coffee grounds/herbs for smell, etc. Adding ground charcoal could simulate a fire pit. The layers should be fairly tightly packed. Lightly spraying each layer helps to maintain the strata you are building.*

Bottom layer: Sand. Artifacts could include some type of “bone”, object to indicate animals being hunted. Could also include a weapon and inclusion of a fire pit.

Middle layer: include popcorn, beans, shards of pottery (these could be spread over the various shoeboxes used for the class dig, to be assembled once all have been excavated and catalogued) and some type of a tool for cultivation (could be a laminated picture)

Top layer: To add interest, this could be different amongst the boxes for the class.

Section a: soil has something added to it to distinguish from the other section (add sugar).

Section b: plain soil

Artifacts found in this layer would be different for a and b. Indicating that there are some similarities to the people (living in proximity), yet eating different types of food. Could use pasta and some type of plastic insects.

Although these are only suggestions, the layers should be such that differences are quite apparent between them.

***Starting the “dig”***

Begin by showing the students some artifacts found at the “site”. Students should be encouraged to discuss what they may find at the site. By including a variety of materials on each strata, the students should be able to note changes over time. It is recommended that a number of artifacts be included on each layer. The artifacts do not have to reflect a culture that really existed. Students are using their

observations of the materials. By changing the artifacts, the story can be as simple or complex as the teacher wants.

As the students begin their dig, they need to be able to record their finds. A grid sheet for each layer would assist in recording the position and size of each artifact. Students need to be encouraged to excavate horizontally rather than vertically, uncovering artifacts one layer at a time.

- Prior to digging, let the students know how many layers are in a box and how many different types of objects that they will find.
- Set the groups and discuss the roles. Decide if students are going to have an opportunity to do all roles, such as recorder, excavator, artifact collector, etc.
- All team members should record objects from each layer
- Team works together to answer the questions about the site

### **Resources**

<http://www.nps.gov/archeology/public/kids/kidsFour.htm#>

<http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/esprits-spirits/English/Dig/digdown.html>