

Teachers Voice

Pretoria Archaeology Club for Schools: Bridging the gap between archaeology and the school history curriculum

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Archaeology and the knowledge gap

The Society for American Archaeology (n.d.) defines archaeology as “the study of the ancient and recent human past through material remains”. Archaeology is one of those heritage-related subjects that should involve Black people narrating their own stories. Unfortunately, it has not received much attention from the Black community. The main reason for this lack of attention can be attributed to the fact that the subject is not included in the school syllabus. In addition, it has also been presented in a way that has excluded Black people. Archaeology has been excluded from Black schools (Esterhuysen, 2000), as well as at university level. According to Ndlovu (2009:92) “African students were not given adequate opportunity and support to partake regularly in fieldwork”. This was due to past politics and the fear that giving equal access to education to Black learners would make them competent in the job market, politics, and economy (Esterhuysen, 2000). According to Zarmati (2020:247), from the 1850s, archaeology was used by Europeans “to define their perceived distinctiveness”. In most cases, Black people were used as knowledge providers and subjects of study, and not necessarily the narrators or ‘discoverers’ of evidence. It has therefore attracted a great deal of politics in terms of involvement. This situation has also created an environment where archaeology is regarded as a discipline for White people (Ndlovu, 2009:91).

Vijand (2019:67) argues that the discipline has not been included in the school curriculum in general, except on an occasional basis when learners might be given a related project. This implies that the gap not only exists in Black schools but schools in general. Perhaps it can be argued that the knowledge gap exists because no mention of the discipline is made in some schools, while in other schools misinformation and misinterpretations

about the discipline abound. Over the years, there has been some ground work by various academics to try to bridge this gap by making archaeology part of the history subject so that learners can have access to prehistorical knowledge. Archaeology has also been used as a tool for decolonisation and empowerment, especially for Indigenous people (Zarmati, 2020:247). Sadly, as discussed by Zarmati (2020:250-251), many factors have stood in the way of making the teaching of archaeology in schools possible. The main issues have been that teachers are not trained to be archaeologists and vice versa. Also, most history teachers do not have the archaeological knowledge background to teach it to learners. Zarmati (2020:248) also mentions that most learners confuse archaeology and palaeontology. In support of this, Zarmati (2020:248) further states that most people usually link archaeology to dinosaurs. This is very common, even among adults. The media has also played a role in how archaeology is perceived by learners and the public in general. Popular movies such as *Tomb Raider*, *The Awakening*, *The Mummy*, and *Indiana Jones*, to mention a few, have popularised archaeology. Popularising the field has, however, often caused misinterpretations of the discipline, leading many people to think that studying archaeology involves going on an adventure of raiding tombs or even discovering spooky mummies. Image 1 indicates the knowledge gap and misrepresentation that exist regarding the discipline.

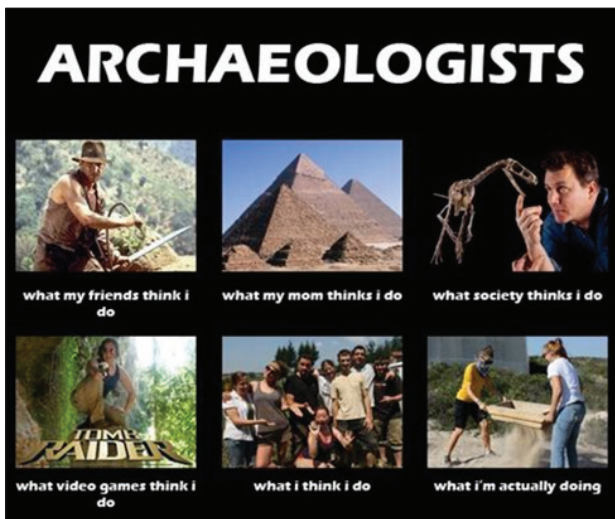


Image 1: Archaeologists meme

Source: Memes Monkey (n.d.)

Personal experience as an archaeology student

As someone who comes from the township of Mamelodi and who had no previous knowledge of archaeology, I became fascinated by this discipline when I learned of it during a university open day. I decided that I was going to study it even though my family and friends did not understand what I would be studying. In the beginning, I also did not understand what I was studying and became worried whether I would be able to make a sustainable career out of this field. I wanted a career that would help me make money but I was torn between my new-found passion and making a living. I soon realised that the field is multidisciplinary, and I could turn it into a sustainable career. One of the main realisations as a student was that there were very few Black students who took archaeology as a subject. It also seemed that White students were more knowledgeable about the field. It dawned on me that there was a racial knowledge gap since it seemed that the White students were more knowledgeable about the field. Because of this, I thought that perhaps the field was not for me. The study in general was not easy for me. I found it difficult to learn and understand certain areas of the discipline, but that did not deter me. Instead, I wanted to ensure that I become one of the few Black archaeologists in the country. Going on my first field school was a great experience for me; so much so that I wanted more Black students to have such an experience. Field schools include being away from the classroom and camping near the archaeological site that is being researched. They are set up to teach practical archaeological work outside the classroom. This is where students learn to dig or excavate, map, and survey, as well as learning about the various materials that can be found during an excavation, and what the materials can teach us about the people that existed before us.

The establishment of the Pretoria Archaeology Club for Schools (PACS)

As mentioned above, various academics have tried to find ways to include the subject in schools, especially high schools. After obtaining my honours degree in archaeology, I saw an opportunity to assist. Instead of trying to find ways to include the study of archaeology in the school curriculum, I deemed it necessary to establish a programme that would assist in providing knowledge outside the classroom. Seeing that archaeology was becoming a way to decolonise knowledge and make it accessible to various communities, as mentioned above, the programme would focus on doing exactly that. The idea was inspired by a community project we did as part of the honours programme at the University of Pretoria.

My community project focused on introducing archaeology to my former high school. During the programme, I conducted a short survey to determine how much the learners knew about the study of archaeology (see Image 2). The main question asked was: “What is archaeology?”

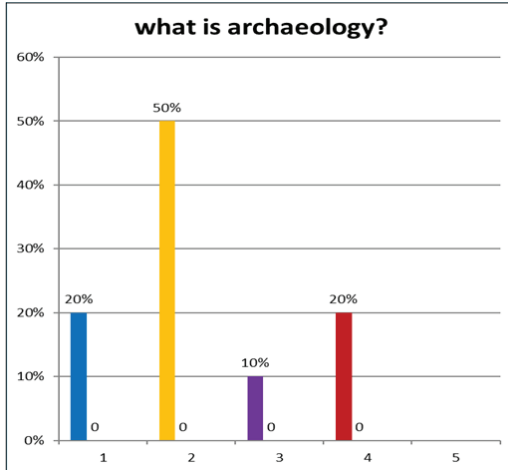


Image 2: Feedback from the community project conducted in 2013

Source: Maripane (2017:21)

The results indicated that:

- 20% of the learners could at least define archaeology from their own understanding;
- 50% of the learners had never heard of the word “archaeology” before;
- 10% of the learners had read about it somewhere but did not really understand what it entailed; and
- 20% of the learners had learned a bit about archaeology in primary school, but still had no clear understanding of what it was.

In 2016, with the assistance of a few students I was tutoring, I established PACS with the vision of making learning about the past interesting and enjoyable. The club was registered with the Department of Social Development and focused mainly on reaching out to township schools as a process to address past marginalisation. The starting point of this

project was at my township in Mamelodi. The structure of PACS was inspired by the Young Archaeologists' Club, which offers children as young as six years old the opportunity to get involved in archaeological activities.

PACS works with various schools in order to create awareness and knowledge about the field of archaeology and other related subjects. Over the years, PACS has achieved its goals by making learners aware of the discipline of archaeology as well as its diversity as it relates to many other courses. The club has made learners and teachers conscious of the fact that archaeology is everywhere and that most of the things we do or create today will be regarded as archaeological hundreds of years from now. Although some scholars such as Zarmati (2020:246) have acknowledged its diversity, others such as Vijand (2019:67) have mentioned that its diversity makes it a difficult subject to teach, because it includes "different areas of knowledge". PACS has used this diversity to grab the attention of learners and the larger public.

The groundwork done by PACS has included hands-on activities that increased the learning experiences of the township learners we worked with. Such activities include mock surveys and excavations (see Image 3), collection and sorting of artefacts, and dating the artefacts. We soon realised that the learners were intrigued by the activities and in late 2016, we launched the first Archaeology Olympics. The Archaeology Olympics has attracted a great deal of attention not only in the townships but also among academics in the field. The Archaeology Olympics comprises of various games that are archaeology themed. Learners are divided into groups and compete against one another. Some of the usual games include 'Tools of the trade', where learners must match the tools used during excavations to their correct names; and 'The dating game', where learners must group or list items in chronological order. For this game, we usually use common items such as cell phones. The learners must list the devices according to which came first. This teaches them simple archaeology dating methods and chronology. Some of the games have included teaching learners how to conduct research by allowing them to research information on various archaeological sites using the Internet, which most have access to on a daily basis. The winning team receives medals with the PACS logo.



Image 3: Lesson on excavation and a mock excavation activity

Source: Maripane (2016)

PACS has gone beyond these activities and in 2017 we launched the Archaeology Open Day (see Images 4 and 5). The Open Day included various academics and university students who are experts in archaeology, palaeontology, and other heritage-related disciplines presenting their work in the townships. It is a platform where learners, teachers, and community members have access to information and are able to ask questions. This assists in teaching the community about the various activities involved in archaeology and other related disciplines.



Image 4: Learners at the Archaeology Open Day held at Mamelodi High School in 2017

Source: PACSUP. (n.d)



Image 5: Learners participating in an experiment during the Archaeology Open Day in Mamelodi

Source: PACSUP. (n.d)

PACS has also allowed learners the opportunity to visit real-life excavations at East Fort (see Image 6) with the assistance of Heritageworx and Prof. Van Vollenhoven. In addition, learners have the opportunity to visit museums such as Mapungubwe Museum at the University of Pretoria, the Origins Centre at Wits University, and Freedom Park. We are hoping to do more activities in the near future.



Image 6: Learners taking part in a real-life excavation at East Fort

Source: PACSUP. (n.d)

PACS has become a breakthrough initiative to make archaeology accessible to learners while the process to make it part of the school curriculum is underway. We have received much support from other archaeologists, which has made our work easier. We have also partnered with Ikamva Youth Programme, which aims to enable disadvantaged youths to pull themselves and each other out of poverty and into tertiary education or employment. Although the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic interfered with most of the club's plans, we are working on finding ways to survive amid the pandemic and to continue the work that we do. One of our future plans is to involve the Department of Arts and Culture in our projects, so that events such as the Archaeology Open Days and the Archaeology Olympics become bigger annual events that can be accessed by other learners outside of Mamelodi. We also want to venture into other projects to assist the community, such as assisting learners with school uniforms and stationery, especially after COVID-19 affected many people financially. We not only aim to teach archaeology and make learning about the past interesting and enjoyable fun, but also to support learners in various areas as we do so.

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