

Educational Fieldwork Policy

Introduction

Throughout our 30-year history of Archaeology at Southampton, we have trained students in archaeological fieldwork in a way consistent with our distinctive departmental policy and priorities. At the same time, particularly in the last few years, we have been enhancing and monitoring the educational content of fieldwork more closely and explicitly. The purpose of this document is to outline clearly the departmental philosophy underlying our educational strategy for fieldwork, that strategy itself, and the measures in place to ensure its effectiveness.

Research Projects vs. Field Schools: a Philosophical Choice

Fieldwork is an essential component of archaeological education; even students who have no ambition to become field archaeologists need field experience to understand how archaeological data are created and how research agendas are actualised. With increasing student numbers and an ever-expanding range of skills involved in archaeological fieldwork, it is ever more difficult to provide field training. There are two basic ways of providing students with field experience. Some departments send students on research-led projects. Others, arrange one or more training digs or field schools whose function is primarily educational.

Each strategy has its rationale. If one wants to guarantee that every student is exposed to a specified list of tasks, a field school is the only practical way; on a research-led project only a selected range of relevant tasks may be involved, and where research progress is also important it may be impossible to ensure that every student gets two days of training on a skill with a two-day learning curve. Research-led digs offer students more of a chance to see how field projects develop in response to theoretical and regional research agendas, they offer much closer student-staff interaction, and they offer more possibility of exciting archaeological developments during the field season. Student reactions vary as well. Students often regard the field school as an extension of classroom lessons, often on a site or region they may not be interested in, and they may absorb the attitude of members of staff conscripted into teaching rotating batches of students to trowel or measure. On research-led projects, students' experience may vary much more with the particular project they are sent on.

Fieldwork and the Integration of Theory and Practice

At Southampton, we have a long-standing departmental tradition and policy of training students on research-led projects. We believe that archaeology is a theoretical discipline as well as a set of techniques. While students need to learn basic techniques, a few days of exposure in a field school is rarely sufficient for a student to reach an adequate level of a given technique (for instance, to carry out the same task a year further on without re-training). Meanwhile, it is equally important for students to learn why we decide to dig a trench where we do, why we survey using one of a range of alternative methods, or how we might change our future research strategy depending on what we find during the field season. Research-led projects offer the student the opportunity to understand the chain of

logic and circumstance extending from a theoretical question, a regional context or an AHRC funding application through the overall formulation of the project, the strategic decisions in the field, and right down to the grid square they are trowelling in. Research projects also offer occasions to understand the interplay of funding sources, political environments, and institutional frameworks which help create archaeological research, as well as occasions for reflecting on archaeological ethics in a practical sense (Does one preserve or excavate a site? Should one collaborate with local collectors? What ethical issues are involved in working in someone else's country?). Specific fieldwork techniques are linked to our practical courses (developing from Science and Methods, and potentially leading into Archaeological Analysis and Research Skills, Archaeological Survey and Recording, and Geophysical Survey). However, understanding fieldwork as a research process has strong conceptual ties to centerpieces of our syllabus such as Archaeological Theory, Archaeology and Society, Heritage Management, topical and regional courses, and the dissertation project itself.

It is worth noting other benefits of sending students on research-led projects. By spending their entire fieldwork working in small, stable groups, they have much more experience of group co-operation, and often form close cohorts which last upon their return to university. Fieldwork is a process of continual, informal education, and by spending an extended period with members of staff rather than a few days with rotating staff, they have more intensive opportunity for informal teaching. They also often form close ties with staff who can provide informal academic and pastoral guidance during their career here.

What our Projects Are

All students, including combined honours students, are required to do three weeks of fieldwork on a departmental project following their first year. This represents a practical balance between the amount needed to ensure an educational experience, and the available projects, funding, and time which students have free for fieldwork. It is comparable with most of our peer departments. Students are required to fulfil this requirement on a departmental project; this is to ensure the educational content of the fieldwork, which would be difficult to monitor satisfactorily on an extra-departmental project. Fieldwork should take place after the first year as it forms the final part of their foundation year, which provides the basic knowledge that serves as prerequisite for the second and third years.

Some six to eight projects are offered annually. To illustrate the range available, in 2006 students could work in Britain in Wiltshire, Hampshire, or overseas in the West Indies, Romania, Sweden, Egypt, Italy, or Spain. Projects focus on a wide cultural spectrum, from the Bronze Age through the 18th century and from submerged shipwrecks in Sweden through Neolithic henges, Saxon landscapes and colonial plantation houses. The smallest project was in Hungary (5 students); the largest was in the UK (Tidgrove with 22 students), and the average crew includes about 8 students. Students work with staff, specialists, and often with groups from other universities or countries as well. Projects are funded by the Faculty of Arts with HEFCE funds on a per capita basis, and some are also funded from research grants as well, students will generally (but not always) be expected to make a contribution.

In the past, students have reacted very positively to this fieldwork programme. While specific projects may be especially well-run or could bear improvement, students have almost always had highly favourable comments on both domestic and overseas projects; these are reflected in their course questionnaires on their first-year experience.

Ensuring Educational Content: The Project Educational Plan

The general educational goals are the same for all projects:

1. to teach both general field techniques (e.g. the various skills involved in excavation and field survey) and specific methods such as geophysical survey, topographic survey, and environmental sampling as appropriate to the project;
2. to ensure students are familiar with the archaeological context of the project;
3. to teach students about the research strategy and process of the project;
4. to discuss the results of the field season, their significance, and their impact upon future research directions.

Taken together, these goals provide the student with a coherent overview of fieldwork as taking place within a theoretical, methodological, and practical context, and they provide an experience of fieldwork which articulates with understandings of archaeology taught in the academic syllabus. Projects may have other educational goals as well (for instance, overseas projects may expose students to other cultural settings or other traditions of doing archaeology; projects may involve communicating archaeological knowledge to local communities; and so on).

To ensure that our students are educated during fieldwork, we integrate educational planning into the process of setting up projects. Early in the planning stages, the project leader meets with the head of the Fieldwork Committee to agree upon a project-specific educational plan through which each of the goals above can be attained. While we recognise that much teaching in the field happens informally, through what is essentially a month-long conversation among crew and staff, it is useful to specify additional steps:

- A meeting for all students during term-term ensures all students understand the fieldwork requirement, its goals, what projects are available and how to sign up for them.
- An initial orientation meeting for each project during term-time serves to make students familiar with the archaeological context (goal 2), and the research goals and strategy (goal 3) of the project.
- In the field, field techniques (goal 1) are typically taught through supervised practice, through small-group lessons, and through impromptu "show and tell" sessions during work time.
- Whenever possible, student crews include up to 20% advanced students who have already done their required fieldwork but want to do more. As well as furthering their own education, these students (many of whom are returning to the same projects) play a key educational link for training first-years by providing stability, guidance and context, helping in small-group learning, and setting an educational and productive crew ethos.

- Most project leaders familiarise students with local archaeology (goal 2) through site tours and discussions, visits to nearby archaeological sites, local museums, and/ or evening lectures during the field season.
- Periodic site tours and discussions help students understand significance of what they are doing and how it enters the research process (goal 3) to affect work plans for next week or next year.
- At the end of the season, all project leaders present results to crews and discuss them (goal 4); the means of this varies from lectures in the field, final site tours, circulating bulletins and reports after returning to university, having post-field meetings, or integrating students into post-excavation plans and into future fieldwork.

We have been devising project educational plans informally for several years and formally from 2001. We have found that integrating educational goals into research-led projects has to be well-planned (most crews object to relentless lectures and lessons during the field season), but it is rewarding for both staff and students. Students appreciate the time it takes, be it a few minutes of informal explanation at the bottom of a trench or an afternoon taking them on site visits, and a well-informed crew is usually a happier, more productive, and more engaged crew.

Assessment and Project Evaluation

There is great variation in how archaeology departments assess student fieldwork. Some do not assess fieldwork at all; others make it the basis of a large project written up back at the university which is then marked as coursework. It is worth noting that very few actually assess students' participation in fieldwork itself, beyond perhaps listing techniques the student has been exposed to and recording whether the student's participation has been satisfactory. Rather, the main variation seems to be in the degree to which fieldwork is used as a basis for post-excavation assessed work.

At Southampton, we assess the student's actual participation in fieldwork using a brief Fieldwork Assessment Form which asks students to note skills and techniques they have learned, to comment on the research goals of the project and the outcome of the fieldwork. They can also add any positive or negative comments on the project itself. Project leaders can add comments on the individual's contribution to the project. Beyond this, we do not make the fieldwork the basis of an extended report or writing project.

How good are the projects themselves? In the past, any problems with specific projects were typically addressed in informal discussion between project leaders and the Fieldwork Committee head, and appropriate remedies for the future were noted. From 1999, the Student Assessment Form also included a space for students to note any difficulties or problems to consider. From 2001, project leaders will also have to provide a brief written report noting how the educational measures specified in the Project Educational Plan were carried out, and discussing the general student experience and any problems or difficulties to be considered in planning future work or in structuring the general departmental fieldwork program. These reports, and any comments from the Student Assessment Forms, will also be submitted to the Undergraduate Programme Committee for their consideration.

Student Safety on Fieldwork

Safety and well-being pose special challenges for fieldwork planning. All of our students receive field experience, regardless of health or disability. Over the past five years, we have had no major health and safety problems, and we are taking a number of measures to ensure that this continues. These include:

- discussing projects and logistics with students so that they know what each project involves before signing up for projects;
- systematically collecting information on student needs and health risks (e.g. dietary requirements, allergies, chronic health problems). While most projects can accommodate most students, this information can be used to ensure that students are placed on projects appropriate for them. For instance, someone with narrow and rigid dietary requirements might be happier on a self-catering project; someone with a history of epilepsy or a serious heart condition should not be on a project far from the nearest hospital. Project leaders are briefed on health conditions among their crew members;
- carrying out a risk assessment for each project to ensure all necessary precautions are taken;
- providing students with a safety briefing at the pre-field orientational meeting (where they can be instructed in any protective clothing or gear to bring) and again upon arrival at the site where any specific hazards are pointed out;
- ensuring all project leaders have a mobile telephone and are equipped with first aid kits for all crews, and that each project has adequate vehicles and drivers to avoid leaving crews in field situations without transportation;
- ensuring all project leaders inform themselves and the students about local hospitals and clinics, and about the University's insurance policy covering field crews.