The politics of storytelling: electronic media in archaeological interpretation and education

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Abstract

This paper raises and draws together a number of emerging issues in the maintenance and growth of archaeology through education. While the use of electronic media is increasingly pervasive in archaeological interpretation and in both formal and informal educational representations of archaeology, there is limited engagement in the discipline with the theoretical and pedagogical rationales for the adoption of these media and the interpretative narratives they offer. Indeed, many questions remain both unarticulated and unresolved in these discussions. 'How should these interpretations be best used for teaching and learning in archaeology?' and 'Why?' are research questions that may help to advance interest in teaching in the discipline beyond its current, fairly exploratory, level. In this process, the central role of pedagogy as an agency of concepts of disciplinary knowledge, rather than a neutral and naturalized addendum to the real business of the discipline needs to be recognized. For the pedagogical is political.

Many questions

The use of electronic media, including the Internet, is increasingly pervasive in archaeological interpretation and in both formal and informal educational representations of archaeology. This growth is occurring together with a developing disciplinary interest in the role and deployment of narrative (e.g. Joyce 2002; Paynter 2002; Bender 1999; McGlade 1999; Pluciennik 1999) in archaeological reconstructions of the past. In the mix, a number of questions remain unresolved, such as an ongoing tension in the discipline concerning the use of narrative, or a variety of narratives, in archaeological interpretation and an empirical focus on archaeological method (e.g. Joyce 2002; Paynter 2002). In

addition, specific features identified for the Internet and other electronic formats used in presenting archaeological interpretations as teaching resources – such as hypertext facilities – have been marked out as peculiarly inimical to narrative in that they are inherently non-linear (e.g. Snyder 1997). In a broader view, too, the use of electronic technologies has been marked in public education and entertainment, with a range of popular entertainment and informational programmes, such as *Meet the Ancestors* (BBC) and *The Time Team* (Channel 4) delivered via the public media as well as the Internet. What are the implications of the use of these media representations in education for archaeology? At the generally political level, where, if anywhere, might they impact on the position of archaeology as an academic discipline in a social context of competing interest for public support and funding? I suggest electronic media representations are key factors in building and promulgating the interests of archaeology (and with it archaeological knowledge). That is, provided they are designed and set within a sound pedagogic framework that both is evidence based and promotes critical reflection.

At the nub: what is the problem?

A central problem for research may well involve the fundamental question of how the contexts of discovery and of justification in archaeology are developed as interpretations and how these interpretations are promulgated as narratives in a variety of forms. How does the discipline manage the interface between persistent public interest in the past and popular education about this, and the concepts, skills and principles for study that it might wish to induce in its recruits in formal higher education? Electronic technologies are used increasingly for this purpose and the vaunted advantages offered by features in which these technologies have been said to have great strength, such as the use of hypertext to provide non-linear, user-selected pathways through text, argue for their research scrutiny. This scrutiny is especially timely since features such as hypertext are also said (e.g. Roberts 1996) to be inimical to the development of sustained argument, which is at the heart of scholarly archaeological interpretation. Also, some within the discipline may contend that multivocal approaches necessitate the accommodation of a variety of interpretative narratives about the past. On what bases can a variety of narratives be accommodated within the discipline and what is the role of electronic technologies in this task?

  A related problem is that, while archaeologists need to teach to recruit and induct people into their discipline, they often do not recognize that this is something they need to:

- explicitly acknowledge, and then
- work at to do well enough to further the aims of their discipline and maintain social, political and financial support for it from relevant stakeholders, such as developers and state agencies.

When they do recognize this, archaeologists need to work out the best way to do it. Just as for any question worthy of scholarly research interest (Bass 1999), higher education teaching in archaeology itself needs to be problematized. A problem to be addressed by such research is the extent to which education is an agent for change from incidental

interest to informed interest. For, while there is some emergent interest in teaching in the discipline, this interest remains at a level that can be best described as exploratory. The thrust of writing in the area so far has focused largely on pragmatic issues. The first is that of gaining and enhancing credibility for the discipline in a wider social and political context by producing graduates who can be seen by government agencies and commercial employers to perform with professional efficiency in cultural heritage management (e.g. Collis 2000). Second, interest is stirring as a result of movements within the academy itself to respond to funding bodies' increasing demands that academics be accountable for the quality of their graduates' education (Collis 2000; Malone et al. 2000). Third, there is a recognized need to raise the public profile of archaeology, both to ensure that the discipline has public support for its aims and to protect as far as possible archaeological heritage, which is increasingly threatened by urban and industrial development (Pokotylo and Guppy 1999). Each of these issues has at its base a need to attract students to the discipline, retain them for a course of study and teach them well while they are there. For this reason it is critical that teachers of archaeology place emphasis on the experience of students in introductory courses in archaeology, a need noted as basic by Fagan (2000). The question as to why people choose to study archaeology may have many answers but it is safe to assume, and there is some evidence (e.g. Ramos and Duganne 2000; Russell 2002), as discussed further below, that a major means is through the electronic media in various forms. How well the representations in this media are designed to perform the task is another question.

Research into these emerging issues in archaeological education should, at the broadest level, contribute to the clarification of the bases of interpretative justification in archaeology. As well, it should throw light upon the range of motives and expectations students may have when they first choose to study archaeology and how these may best be engaged educationally. By clarifying principles of and suggesting strategies for using electronic technologies for teaching in archaeology, the study will also help teachers of archaeology ensure they inform and improve archaeological practice through their graduates. Teachers of archaeology will then also be better equipped to engage with the demands and requirements of designing and developing appropriate and effective teaching strategies and resources for the curricula they develop and for which they are increasingly accountable. To survey the possible areas of research, let us begin where many people do begin to take an interest in archaeology, with narratives in popular media.

From the crazy to the Cretans and back again: images of archaeology in popular and educational media

Images of and references to archaeology in popular culture are increasingly pervasive and cover a wide spectrum of cultural and temporal references. Images, themes, artefacts and depictions of archaeological method and practice are found in a range of media genres and formats. Some, such as *Dr Who* and the *Tomb Raider* films, are avowedly simple fantasy tales; others, such as *Meet the Ancestors* and *Walking with Cavemen* are presented as non-fiction and as having an educational intention.

It is mainly this latter group that may be the most fertile area for educational research. However, it should be illuminating to analyse both types of presentation to distinguish the essential differences between those two major groups of production. Archaeologists have given some attention to the former group (e.g. articles in Russell 2002), drawing upon extensive general studies of popular culture from critical theory analysis (e.g. Ashley 1997) to do so. But studies of specifically educational works and resources and the relationship of both forms in the perceptions of prospective students of archaeology have been far fewer. Hamilakis's (2003) study of primary and secondary school history textbooks incorporating archaeology, however, offers observations about the role of these resources in the development of students' stated interest in studying archaeology at the tertiary level as well as about the development of concepts of nationalism and ethnic identity.

This relationship would merit not only being examined in more depth and more formally to establish the extent of the influence of these productions on students' choices but also analysed for areas where the interface between interest and knowledge can perhaps be most profitably pursued. This should help illuminate where the popularly educational is related to and even articulates with resources specifically developed for use in formal educational settings. In particular, the uses and role of narrative in interpretation and education will be clarified and the proposed advantages of the electronic format tested. These are points that should be of close concern to archaeologists, as these interpretative narratives in electronic format can initially excite and sustain the interest of many people in archaeology, both for general interest and for more formal study. The fact that archaeologists may have strong reservations about the accuracy of many of the interpretations and the view of the archaeological principles and practice they reflect should only strengthen the argument for affording them close attention. Representations of archaeology and archaeologists in popular entertainment have been at least noted in archaeological textbooks since Rathje and Schiffer's *Archaeology* (1982) and archaeology has been presented for more educational purposes in a variety of electronic formats since at least Jacquetta Hawkes's (1946) film of life in prehistoric Britain (Finn 2000). There is no sign that either of these types of media uses of archaeology is diminishing or, as Russell (2000: 53) indicates, that archaeologists in general are any clearer about what the implications of this are for the discipline.

Perhaps as a result, distinctions between a number of these representations as well as their possible links to an educational agenda, including a formal educational agenda, have yet to be systematically articulated. What, in fact, is the relationship between informal and formal interpretative narratives in electronic media and what educational purposes could be served by the relationship? Certainly, public interest in such representations is quite high and increasing. Russell (2002: 38), for example, notes that both factual and fictional 'archaeologically themed' television has attracted considerable and growing interest in Britain. This observation is supported by the finding in a survey commissioned by a coalition of archaeological organisations that television is the most popular way of finding out about archaeology in the United States (Ramos and Duganne 2000: 17). A related question is: where does the growth of the use of Internet resources for formal and informal education in archaeology fit with other forms of electronic media production on archaeological themes mentioned above? Again, this is a question that requires attention,

for the use of the Internet and other electronic resources is growing in formal education and is set to continue (e.g. Williams 2002).

The use of electronic technologies in education for archaeology, as generally for other disciplines in higher education, has been suggested as a means of providing both more efficient and more flexible teaching for a wider range of students (Fagan 2000). Indeed, these media have been seen as particularly apt due to their strong potential for portraying archaeological processes and interpretative reconstructions in a highly visual format (e.g. Bateman 2000; Edmonds and McElearney 1999) or as a means of presenting multiple interpretations (McDavid 1998; Joyce 2002). However, a close and substantive discussion of how electronic technologies may not only influence but also be best deployed in teaching in the discipline is still required. In particular, no one has considered the role of narrative in forming and sustaining concepts of the discipline through these media, or related this process to a considered and explicit analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline itself. Yet narrative interpretations are central to expressing and defining these concepts and thus to framing pedagogical principles and strategies.

Narrative, meta-narrative and hypertext

There is an extensive array of literature (e.g. articles in Snyder 1997; Birkerts 1994) concerning the possible qualitative difference between electronic hypertext and paper-based linear text and the implications of such a difference for academic study. Essentially, authors who argue for the development of a qualitative difference draw upon postmodern and non-essentialist theory to posit that hypertext promotes a form of literacy that is marked by hybridity and non-linearity. It might also be seen then as inimical to narrative. While others are less convinced of the existence or importance of any qualitative differences in material delivered with the help of hypertext (Miall 1999; Ganascia 2002) the question is open for research in archaeology. For the role of narrative in a variety of forms – from personal narratives of nationhood and identity, to grand meta-narratives of the origins of humankind, to more localized stories of what the past was like in a specific location and time – has been extensively discussed in archaeology (e.g. Landau 1984; Gero 1989), stimulating recognition of the value of narrative for writing and thinking about archaeology (Deetz 1998; Praetzellis 1998). In addition, the growth of non-essentialist critiques along with the emergence of differential agendas for previously subject groups, particularly those of indigenous peoples in a postcolonial context, has led to the examination (and re-negotiation) of the uses of studies of the past. Many studies have, over some time, argued for a connection between interpretations of the past and the creation and perpetuation of national narratives (Layton 1989; Shennan 1989; Brown and Hamilakis 2003). In addition, studies of social differentiation in interpretations of the past, particularly the study of gender, have drawn upon and criticized the notion of narrative and counter-narrative in portraying interpretations of the past from a variety of theoretical stances (e.g. Joyce 2002; Bender 1999; McGlade 1999; Pluciennik 1999).

While the role of narrative as a genre has been discussed in literacy education (e.g. Anstey and Bull 1996) there has to date been no substantive assessment of the role and

possible limits of narrative in education for archaeology. It is time to analyse the notions of narrative that inform the literature and to attempt to construct a reflective synthesis that will establish guidelines for understanding and drawing upon the narrative dimension for communication and education in the discipline. Such a study should inevitably involve researchers in coming to grips with the complex conceptual fields that characterize the discipline in order to propose workable principles for the design of curricula and teaching strategies. One way to do this, and one often employed unconsciously in introductions to archaeology, is to develop an interpretative narrative.

Archaeological discipline: learning the story

For most beginning students of archaeology, the history and state of the discipline (e.g. Dark 1995) might well be summarily characterized (that is, 'narrativized') as moving from antiquarian beginnings to cultural historicism, then to a positivist 'processual' phase. Processualism is presented as having been followed by post-processualism where non-essentialist arguments informed critiques of practice before more synthetic 'multiscalar' (Preucel and Hodder 1996; Hodder 1999) approaches were promoted. Yet systematic interpretation of material evidence has always been the epistemological basis of the discipline. Within this generality however, not only has a diversity of theoretical perspectives been deployed but an extensive range of theory and evidence has also been drawn from other disciplines to support interpretations.

Archaeology has been characterized as the quintessential interdisciplinary discipline (Schiffer 1988: 463). This appraisal arose from the necessary practice of synthesizing interpretations of material traces of human activity from knowledge of geological, chemical and biological processes established in other disciplines. It can be seen as true if a fairly restricted view of interdisciplinarity, that is, one that limits legitimate interdisciplinary activity to the sciences, is held. It is also, though perhaps more problematically, so with a growing number of interdisciplinary applications designed to reach beyond the scientific disciplines.

Since the 1960s, and particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, the positivist thrust of processualism has been vigorously challenged. These challenges have been based not only on the inherent epistemological difficulty positivist archaeology faces of 'attempting to "know" something that literally does not exist' (Gargett 1992: 116) but also on the exclusion from study of questions about belief and social differentiation in the past (Preucel and Hodder 1996). A major force added to post-processual critiques has been the steadily articulated claims of groups descended from or representative of the cultures that archaeologists studied. The claims of indigenous peoples to their past and to the ways that past was viewed and studied have been a determining influence in the development of archaeological theory and method since the 1980s (Layton 1989).

This story is not offered in a frivolous light. On the contrary, engaging with this story in a variety of ways is vital for anyone seeking to engage with archaeology. The story of archaeology and the debates that are a feature of that story are themselves at

the core of the discipline. To tell the story to students, including its contentious aspects, is to make use of narrative in order to educate. The crucial consideration, of course, is how to include those contended aspects. In this process, the central role of pedagogy as an agency of concepts of disciplinary knowledge, rather than a neutral and naturalized addendum to the real business of the discipline needs to be recognized. To explore this further, consider a bit further the question of that quintessential feature of archaeology, interdisciplinarity.

Learning about the story: why thinking about education is important

With regard to scientific interdisciplinarity in archaeology, the apparent success of scientific method for answering many research questions resulted in limited interest in questioning either the paradigm or the legitimacy of such interdisciplinary borrowing. This has been the approach taken by many members of the profession despite arguments such as Bulliet's (1992: 132) that, if interdisciplinary borrowings were to be analysed, 'lapses and discontinuities' might well appear. Similarly, within this context, I suggest, pedagogy in archaeology may well have received little attention and the educational approaches developed from scientific instructional models may have been utilized with limited critical reflection upon their efficacy or necessarily any systematic process of reflection, evaluation and revision. This naturalized concept of teaching has distinct implications for how archaeology has been taught and, consequently on the ways in which students have responded to archaeology as a way of knowing the past and assessing its relevance to their own lives in the present. An evaluative survey of teaching principles and practices among archaeologists could contribute much to knowledge in this area. For the epistemological and ontological bases of the discipline are not only at the core of what is taught; in turn, teaching is at the heart of how a discipline proceeds through the recruitment and induction of new practitioners.

And when, as in archaeology, the bases of the discipline are themselves the sites of contentious, even polarized, views? In latter years, archaeologists have ventured to cross disciplinary boundaries into a second form of interdisciplinarity, turning to an array of scholarship from other disciplines, including feminism, Marxism and critical theory (Scott 1994: 4) to provide frameworks for their research into social structure, social differentiation and past ideologies. Whatever value such investigations may be found to have, their implications need to be assessed and evaluated by all members of the archaeological academy involved in teaching and incorporated, perhaps as debateable interpretative narratives, into the educational process. Contention and debate in a discipline are not things to be either ignored or lamented. Instead, they are at the heart of a discipline and students need to engage with them really to learn about the discipline. To develop ways and means for students to do this is the work of teachers of archaeology.

There are strong indications that it may be very productive to explore the use of electronic technologies for this purpose. But how can such resources best be evaluated for teaching and learning in archaeology? To raise such a question, of course, depends on answers to basic questions of what we might wish to teach in archaeology and why.

Education in archaeology

An interest in the relationship between archaeology and education has been articulated at least since the late 1980s (Stone and MacKenzie 1990) and is currently the subject of a revival of interest (e.g. articles in *Antiquity* 74, 2000). However, many of these studies focus on concerns about accountability to various bodies or groups and how these impact on the discipline and its practitioners, rather than stemming from any dispassionate interest in teaching itself. An associated area of interest in archaeology has been that allied to the development of social narratives mentioned above (Hamilakis 2003) through primary and secondary school curricula. Smith and Bender (2000) are among those arguing for the development of teaching to foster attitudes and skills for professional practice in consultant archaeologists as their practice is the subject to scrutiny from various external funding and decision-making bodies. Then too, an increased scrutiny of academic programmes by funding bodies through quality assurance procedures and monitoring has lent weight to movements to examine best practice in teaching in the discipline and to developing benchmarks for that practice (e.g. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2000). So far, close attention to developing rationales and then curricula, techniques and resources that will put these efforts into operation in higher education are largely in the future. Very few archaeologists engage in a systematic appraisal of teaching in the discipline, even if, presumably, many conscientiously work to develop their teaching and ways to enhance and improve it.

By and large, the literature reflects the situation noted in other areas of study that archaeologists have been relatively uncritical of their own practice in teaching as they have been taught. That is, the practice of inducting new members into the discipline has been largely naturalized by emulation of familiar forms. Bass, for example, in relation to his practice as a professor of literature, recalls that '[e]ver since graduate school, I had taught mostly the way I had been taught, and tended to replicate the pedagogies that worked best – quite frankly – for me' (1999: 2). Fagan's assertions of an uncritical traditionalism in archaeology teaching (mainly through lectures) resonate with this view: 'the way we teach, how we think about teaching…has changed little over the past half century' (2000: 1).

As such comments indicate, an uncritical approach to one's teaching is most likely to result in the familiar becoming the natural but, if pedagogical practices have such a critical role in the creation of disciplines and disciplinary practitioners, then teaching is not just an addendum to disciplinary practice. Such a viewpoint opens up to scrutiny the range of practices employed in teaching. In terms of the complex disciplinary context of archaeology referred to above, therefore, which pedagogical practices will be most appropriate as well as effective? Which practices, moreover, will be most appropriate and effective for the wider social context in which the discipline is set – a context that includes students and other potential audiences from diverse social and political groups? More centrally, which methods of teaching and type of teaching resource will be appropriate for introducing new students to the discipline? Answers to these questions may be approached through considering a body of literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning in the disciplines.

Towards a scholarship of teaching and learning in archaeology?

This branch of scholarship has been defined as academic staff 'taking a systematic interest in curriculum, classroom teaching, and the quality of student learning' (Huber and Morreale 2002: 1). Shulman (2000: 49) compares this form of scholarship to disciplinary scholarship. He relates scholarly activity, the responsibility to 'discover, to connect, to apply, and to teach', to a scholarly approach to teaching itself, where 'our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued, and exchanged with other members of our professional communities' (Shulman 2000: 50).

Archaeology is no different from other disciplines in that over the last two decades a number of factors have emerged to challenge the ways in which students of archaeology are inducted into the discipline. Huber and Morreale identify four 'historical developments' they assess as driving an interest in teaching and learning in higher education: 'new students, national priorities, public accountability and changing pedagogical technologies' all have 'specific consequences' for individual disciplines (2002: 2). An effective approach to teaching and learning in archaeology, therefore, will first engage with a concept of the discipline as a problematic field and, within that, with the principles of and media for teaching and learning as correspondingly problematic. While the power of certain media to arouse interest in archaeology may be acknowledged and researched, research into why and how we might seek to make use of these media in education is also needed. It would be well worth our while to articulate and explore specific ways of doing so.

Conclusion: a step into pedagogy?

There are many questions for research where education for archaeology is concerned. There are fundamental questions about the nature of the discipline and how its practitioners frame and substantiate knowledge claims about the past. While these questions and debate about them should abide as an essential part of the normal and necessary substance of disciplinary activity, the ways and means by which this debate is carried forward in educational processes need to be addressed. In this, not only the process of attracting and informing public interest but also that of inducting new practitioners into the discipline should receive careful attention. For the latter, if as archaeologists we have an interest in maintaining and furthering the aims of the discipline, including the principle of reflective critical debate about those aims, we need to help build and nurture them through exemplary scholarship that extends beyond academic research into pedagogy. For the former, if we wish archaeology to survive in a social and political context of competing financial and ideological interests, we need to engage, wherever possible, with the educational quality of the interpretative narratives that will both generate and foster a public appreciation of the value of the discipline. For both, electronic technologies have already claimed a significant place but it is after careful work has been done in designing and developing appropriate educational frameworks in which to set them that the value of these media will be realized and their best potential realized. We need to work out what we want to say and how best to say it, then select or devise the best media for the purpose. That would be the most politic thing we could do.

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