“READ” an Artifact

Students learn to think like an archeologist.

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Grade Level: 6
Duration: 2 class periods

Overview
In a world history course, students should know what an archeologist does and how primary and secondary sources differ.

Purpose
In this lesson students will be given the opportunity to look at a potential artifact and interpret what a future archeologist might think about the past.

Students will also identify if the artifact is a primary or secondary source.

Materials
- Pennies (one per child)
- Grading rubric (example included)
- Primary vs. Secondary Power Point

Objectives
The student will be able to:
• Put himself/herself in the role of an archeologist and interpret an "artifact"
• Write a summary of what he/she thinks the archeologist would be thinking.

Procedures

1. Ask students to imagine they are archaeologists living many years in the future. In excavating a site, they have found a coin from an unknown society.

2. Hand out one penny to each student.

3. Ask students to examine the penny and write down all they notice on both sides of the coin.

4. Ask students to consider what this coin could tell future archaeologists about the unknown society.

5. Next, tell the class that the penny might suggest some other ideas.

6. Students might say the man on the penny is Lincoln and that almost nobody knows Latin. Remind them a future archaeologist might not be aware of Lincoln or the languages of the unknown society, so he or she could only make educated guesses, or hypotheses, from the objects.

7. Show the Primary vs. Secondary Power Point.

8. Ask students what archaeologists might use that would support their guesses about the words and symbols on the penny. Answers could be:
   • books about religious beliefs
   • pictures that identify Lincoln as a President, not a god
   • dictionaries that explain Latin inscriptions
   • diary written by a person living in 2012 that talks about the Lincoln penny
   • newspaper article from 2011 that shows the Lincoln penny and explains the symbols
   • large schoolroom chart that shows the Lincoln penny and other coins

8. Have students look at the list of resources they identified in #8 above. Which of these are primary sources? Which are secondary sources? Remind students that ideas about the past change as archaeologists continue to uncover new evidence.

Assessment

Have students write a supported argument about what the coin might mean to an archeologist if found in the future. They should include the sources of information that the archeologist would use and identify them as primary or secondary sources. Evaluate the argument using the writing using the sample grading rubric or 6 Traits Writing Rubric focusing on Ideas and Content and Organization.

Extensions

Give the students a foreign coin and repeat the assignment. What primary and secondary sources did they have to use to interpret the words and symbols on the foreign coin?

Ask students to make a list of 10 things in their room at home that could be clues about themselves for a future archaeologist. Have students imagine that an archaeologist finds the ten items. Ask them to write a paragraph describing what the archaeologist might infer about the student. Back in class, students could exchange lists to see if they can tell to whom the ten items belong.

Sources

The Oriental Institute Museum
http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/MUS/ED/TRC/trc_home.html

Library of Congress

South Bay Union School District