

Excavation: Unearthing and Recording the Past

Summary:

While students are often familiar with archaeologically related enterprises such as the “Indiana Jones” series, they are often less familiar with the day-to-day business of actual excavation. It is difficult to impart to students both the degree of care and the essential and often mundane paperwork needed to remove stratigraphic units during an excavation. In order to simulate processes that would ordinarily take place on an excavation, this in-class activity has been designed for pairs of students in my small discussion sections (approximately 25 students) at the University of Michigan. The students enjoyed the “hands-on” aspect of this activity, which taught them the destructive nature of excavation and the necessity for recording as they dug. I functioned as the “trench supervisor”, and more than one pair had to be told that their range pole was not perpendicular, or that they needed to put a North arrow on their plan!

Preparation:

I saved and washed old TV dinner trays to serve as the “extent of trench”. In each trench, I placed several layers, or “stratigraphy”. I deposited strata of Mexican layered dip, containing the following layers:

- Refried Beans
- Guacamole
- Mayonnaise, Sour Cream, and Taco Seasoning
- Chopped Tomatoes
- Chopped Green Onions
- Diced Black Olives
- Shredded Cheddar Cheese



Students were given a small Zip-loc bag of bite-sized, triangular tortilla chips, which functioned as “trowels”. Toothpicks that had been colored with red centimeter marks functioned as “range poles”. Students were also instructed the previous class period to bring in digital cameras to photograph the stratigraphic units.

Excavation:

The students were instructed to excavate in the following way:

1. **Photograph** SU using range pole.
2. Fill out **SU sheet** [attached].
3. **Draw sketch of SU** at the bottom of SU sheet, being sure to draw a N arrow.
4. **EAT SU** (going from known to unknown).
5. Repeat the process.
6. When you are done, **draw a Harris matrix**, which we’ll go over at the end of class.

STRATIGRAPHIC UNIT (SU) SHEET

SU Number:	Description of SU:
<input type="checkbox"/> Positive <input type="checkbox"/> Negative	<input type="checkbox"/> Intentional <input type="checkbox"/> Casual
Date(s) Photographed:	Date(s) Planned:
Date(s) Excavated:	Excavators:
MATRIX	
Description	Inclusions
Color/Munsell #?	Datable finds?
RELATIONSHIPS TO OTHER STRATIGRAPHIC UNITS	
This SU overlies:	This SU underlies:
Sketch:	