

Archeology 2500: Texano Weapons

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Lesson Overview: Students will work in groups to write a descriptive report of a “mystery” artifact (in this case, a coat hanger). They must creatively form a hypothesis based purely on misinterpretation. This lesson explores the difficulty of artifact categorization. Many people tend to think that science is exact and that scientists have all the answers. This lesson also shows students that, like human beings, the field of archeology isn’t perfect and needs lots of room to change and grow!

Artifacts are often difficult to identify and categorize because they have been out of use for hundreds or thousands of years. Sometimes they are in completely unrecognizable condition—pieces are missing, an animal has chewed on it, etc. Then there are those items that are misleading. An artifact may appear to be a nutcracker and turn out to be a mapping tool. This lesson stresses the value of context in archeology, as well as the creative thinking needed to form a hypothesis about an artifact’s unknown use. When an item is removed from its context (a CD for instance taken from its box and found nowhere near a CD player), it can be very difficult, even impossible, to identify. Students will need to assume that life has changed almost completely by the year 2500 and that most of what we consider to be necessities are no longer in use. In an example used for this lesson, the incorrectly identified artifact is a bag of microwave popcorn. Archeologists in the year 2500 find the popcorn near a microwave in an army barracks. They think, therefore, that it is some type of transportable weapon.

Objectives: Students will

- Listen to an oral story describing a mystery artifact
- Make inferences
- Write a creative story with a group using an outline format
- Investigate the concept of context in categorizing artifacts
- Recognize and see the potential for misinterpretation
- Share their creative writing orally, in front of a group

Materials: 5-6 clothes hangers, Texano Weapon report, Archaeology 2500 report outline (one for each group), bag of microwave popcorn.

Activity:

Step 1: Teacher reads “Weapons of the Texasos” aloud to the class. After listening carefully to the story, students will secretly record what they think is the “Texano Weapon” really is.

Step 2: After separating students into small groups, give each group a clothes hanger. They will pretend they are archeologists from the year 2500 and have found this mystery object. Using the report outline, have the archeologists begin brainstorming ideas on the use of this artifact, as well as the ancient people who used it. Students can take turns acting as recorder by dividing the report into parts.

Students should understand, prior to forming a report, that this is an intentional misinterpretation of the hanger's use, and the more creative, the better! Remind students that the Texano weapon was found in an army barracks and that the further they remove the hanger from its context, or original location (a closet), the more confused its interpretation can be!

Step 3: Groups take turns sharing their artifact reports. It is likely that each group will come up with a very different description of the artifact's use, showing students how many interpretations a single "mystery" artifact (such as a coat hanger) can generate. For fun, show students a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip discussing the very same artifact!

Closure: Students share the guesses they recorded about the true nature of the Texano weapon. Then, the teacher holds up a bag of microwave popcorn!

Extension: Students will draw a mystery artifact on one side of a note-card. On the other side, they will provide a visual description and invent its location and use.

Example:

Object's description: flat, round, mirrored on one side, hole in the middle, donut-sized

Object's location: hanging from the rear view mirror of a car

Object's (assumed) use: reflects a rainbow of light, sun-catcher, prism, decoration

A drawing of a compact disk would be found on the other side of this note-card! Note-cards can later be exchanged and used to play a guessing game.

Weapons of the Texanos

The Texanos were an ancient people living just north of the Gulf of Mexico. They seemed to have been at war with local enemies, possibly over food supply. A number of weapons have been found in the sites where they were believed to have lived and worked.

It appears that they were very active people and needed their weapons to be small and easy to carry. One such weapon was found near a box-shaped storage container. One side of the storage container is a door with a panel of numbered buttons on the outside. Perhaps this was once used as a code to unlock the protected contents of the box. We found it, however, already open—the code, apparently deciphered by some enemy.

The weapon (meant to be safely locked away) was found about six inches from the vault box. Both items were lying on a table in a building labeled “Army Barracks,” a place we believe their warriors slept. The weapon was still sealed in a protective clear bag. We believe that it was in a clear bag so that the printed instructions on the weapon itself could be read by the Texanos. The instructions were as follows:

Danger! Hot oil! Explosive! Place right side up! Be careful when opening! Use caution!

Lightning bolts and small white puffs (of what seem to be smoke) decorate the outside of the bag. There are several arrows showing exactly where to open the bag and warning to take care while doing it. There seem to be hundreds of small hard objects (possibly ammunition) inside the bag that will, if used correctly, erupt from the bag with a series of small explosions. We believe it may have been an ancient noisemaker used to distract or scare the enemy. Certainly, its small size made it easy to carry and hide. The vault it was kept in, however, is very heavy and could not have been carried far.

We have found hundreds of these small explosive bags. This leads us to believe that the Texanos were peaceful people who didn't use the noisemakers often, but they were well prepared in case they needed one of these clever weapons. More research is now being done, but care must be taken. We don't want one of our team members hurt during a serious bag explosion.

Archeologists are now working on a way of replicating the explosion, and think the vault may be a safe place to place the bag while it is erupting.

Name _____

Date _____ 2500

Report on the _____ People

Introduction: Group name (e.g. Texanos) and description (e.g. possibly at war but usually peaceful)

Location where group lived and worked (e.g. north of the Gulf of Mexico)

Location of artifact within the site (e.g. army barracks)

Context (e.g. found near a heavy box with a numbered panel)

Hypothesis of artifact's purpose (e.g. weapon/noisemaker)

Conclusion: other possible hypotheses, future research plans, etc.
