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## COMMENTARY

# Historic Mortuary Archaeology: A Case Study in High-Impact Learning Experiences

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## Introduction

Institutions that focus on undergraduate teaching often encourage instructors to provide “high-impact learning experiences.” These experiences have many positive effects: they encourage students to make stronger connections among themselves, they demonstrate the applicability of classroom knowledge to situations in the community, and they help students feel more invested in their education (Kuh 2008). I teach at a mid-sized urban university where most of the students are from the Little Rock metropolitan area and many are of non-traditional age or first generation students. Involving these students in high-impact learning experiences can positively influence their academic progress, retention, and graduation (Kuh 2008).

In this commentary, I describe my response to an initiative at my college to create more of these experiences. I initially developed a course exercise that invites anthropology students to leave the classroom to study local cemeteries to learn about past beliefs and cultural practices. This exercise proved to be so popular that I developed a new class around this idea, called *Historic Mortuary Archaeology*. In this course, I attempted to incorporate two strategies that have been shown to create a high-impact learning environment and to positively affect multiple learning outcomes: the course 1) encouraged active and collaborative learning and 2) engaged undergraduate students in research (Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella 2015; Kuh 2008). Here, I reflect on lessons learned in the development of this exercise and course, and I highlight important considerations for other instructors interested in designing high-impact learning experiences.

## Background

From the perspective of historical archaeology, grave markers are a form of material culture that can be used to examine societies of the recent past. Unlike most archaeological evidence, grave markers are readily accessible and easily identifiable. They are often preserved in situ, which allows us to study land use patterns and

deliberate postmortem segregation, most often by religion, race, or—as in cemeteries with designated “babylands”—age. Grave markers preserve the language and symbols of the past through their inscriptions, decoration, and iconography (Cannon 2005; Mytum 2009). They reflect personal and community-level values related to death and mourning (Anderson et al. 2011; George and Nelson 1980). Because they typically contain some written information about the people they memorialize, such as birth and death years, full names, and family associations, grave markers can also be used to conduct demographic studies of past populations (Dethlefsen and Deetz 1967).

I modified a cemetery and grave marker analysis exercise for my location and courses. The exercise was originally designed and described to me by my colleague, Dr. Kimberly Pyszka of Auburn University at Montgomery. I first used this exercise in *The Anthropology of Death*, a multi-subfield course that incorporates perspectives from medical anthropology, cultural anthropology, bioarchaeology, and historical archaeology. The cemetery exercise is designed to introduce students to the value of cemeteries and memorials as repositories of historical cultural information.

We began the cemetery exercise with a tour of Mount Holly, the oldest cemetery in Little Rock, guided by a volunteer from the cemetery’s preservation association. The purpose of this field trip was to gain a basic understanding of the structure and arrangement of cemeteries. Students then spent approximately two hours examining the forms of the markers, the epitaphs, and the symbols and decoration used on the markers, but they did not begin to formally record data.

We spent the next class period creating a data collection form that included information students thought should be gathered during the course of the project. Each student found a different local cemetery with stones that span at least 75 years in age. They recorded information from 25 markers, noting the year of death, age at death, name, and presumed gender of decedents as well as any epitaphs or decorations on the markers. The students were given approximately two weeks (including at least two weekends) to complete the data collection.

The final portion of the project was for the students to evaluate the data they gathered. I asked them to choose two variables from among the information they collected and to determine if there were any correlations, connections, or trends visible in the data. Students were not asked to do statistical analyses—most of the undergraduate students I teach have little or no statistical training—but many of them created tables or graphs to help them see patterns in the data.

## **Development of the *Historic Mortuary Archaeology* Course**

In end-of-term course evaluations for *The Anthropology of Death*, many students expressed an interest in learning more about grave marker analysis. Thus was born the *Historic Mortuary Archaeology* course I taught in the spring of 2016. The purpose of this

course was to familiarize students with the process of conducting research while responding to student interest in cemetery studies. In addition to anthropology majors and minors, the course attracted undergraduate and graduate students from history, writing, and interdisciplinary studies. Twelve undergraduate and four graduate students enrolled in the course. As a group, we defined a research question, conducted a literature review, and collected data from several local cemeteries. I was charged with conducting and interpreting the statistical analysis of our data.

We began the semester with general readings on historical archaeology, including James Deetz's *In Small Things Forgotten* (1996) and various articles from history, sociology, anthropology, and interdisciplinary journals on cemetery and grave marker studies. The purpose of this section of the course was to familiarize the students with the types of research that can be conducted using grave markers and with the structure of academic studies. Next, students were asked to track down additional academic resources about grave marker and cemetery research. To facilitate this process, we spent one class period in the campus library working under the direction of the social sciences area librarian. The four graduate students were then given PDFs of the articles and asked to determine which were most relevant for our course. For this assignment, I emphasized that they did not need to read every article in depth, but that they should scan the articles for ideas, methods, and conclusions that could be useful to the project. All students were then assigned to read and summarize several of the articles selected by the graduate students for an annotated bibliography. At least two students read each article, which allowed me to compile their summaries for increased accuracy. The edited summaries were then posted on the class's Blackboard site and made available to everyone.

The next step was to refine our research topic. I asked the students to propose a topic to study, and these topics were put to a vote. The winning proposal was to study the influence of gender on epitaphs and decoration on grave markers. The next task was for the students to look for more articles focused on this particular topic. Again, the graduate students selected the best articles, and all students were assigned a second set of articles to summarize.

In order to facilitate data collection trips, class was held once a week on Friday afternoons. As a group, we visited two local cemeteries. One visit included an informal introduction and tour from the sexton; the other cemetery did not have a caretaker on site so we explored it on our own. The students and I collected data from markers at these cemeteries (see Table 1 for a description of the types of data collected for each marker). Additionally, the students had three other Friday afternoons in which they could collect data from other local cemeteries on their own. Each student contributed information for at least 75 markers. In total, we collected data from 1,329 unique markers in 18 cemeteries in the region, with years of death from 1847 to 2006.

Toward the end of the course, the students inputted their written data into Excel spreadsheets that I had previously created. I later compiled these spreadsheets for the statistical analysis. The students' last individual projects were to write a short literature review based on the articles they had annotated and a rough draft of the methods section of our study.

**Table 1. Characteristics of grave markers collected in *Historic Mortuary Archaeology***

Characteristic	Description
Age of stone	Typically the year of the person's death (or first person's death in the case of multiple names) unless otherwise clearly indicated by a "placed on" date
Name(s) of deceased on markers	Full names, including nicknames
Number of males and females on the marker	Number of males and females memorialized by a marker, with a third option for those of unknown gender
Death date(s)	Date of death inscribed on the marker for each person
Birth dates(s)	Date of birth inscribed on the marker for each person
Age(s) at death	Date of death minus date of birth for each person
Form of marker	Upright, plaque, double marker, etc.
Material of marker	Granite, marble, cement, brass, etc.
Size of marker	Approximate height and width
Random location or deliberate?	Is the stone in a family plot, babyland, area of coreligionists, or otherwise spatially segregated?
Kinship terms	Does the inscription include terms such as mother, son, grandfather, or mamaw?
Decoration and iconography	Carvings, decorative motifs, photos, religious symbols, or markers of group affiliation or occupation
Complete epitaph	All writing on the marker except for name and dates
Etc.	Any other interesting information not otherwise covered in this list

## **Reflections**

The final write-up did not happen as planned. I was unable to complete the statistical analysis in time because I ended up giving birth during the last week of the semester. I had planned to use the last class period or the designated finals period as a time for students to come together to look at the results and draft a conclusion. Because I missed these sessions, we were not able to meet as a class to formulate a conclusion to the project during the semester.

Ultimately, the research question we decided on was too unruly to analyze mathematically, and we had not planned to conduct a qualitative analysis. In the future, I will suggest that we further develop the research question into more specific sub-questions. If one sub-question needs to be abandoned, it will not jeopardize the entire project.

The application of collaborative learning in the classroom seemed to be an effective strategy in this course. The students progressed together in their knowledge of how to conduct research and some gained a special interest in this specific topic. In course evaluations, students praised the structure and content of the course and appreciated the fact that they were able to help select the topics we studied. In later discussions with my program's graduating seniors, students positively identified the course as one where they learned to apply research skills.

An important part of any collaborative work environment is to make students independently accountable for their own grades, so even if they are working toward a common goal, students do not feel that others are "freeloading" off their work (Millis 2009). Students were graded on the assignments they submitted and their individual contributions to group discussions. No grades other than participation scores were given for collective assignments, and all collaborative work was done during class time to prevent scheduling issues.

## **Practical Considerations for "High-Impact Experiences"**

A community-based high-impact experience will be most successful if the logistics of the exercise are not onerous for students. A common complaint I hear from both colleagues and students is that it can be difficult for students to fulfill off-campus class obligations, particularly those who work or have young children. One of the reasons I picked the once-a-week class time was to allow for in-depth discussions while on campus and to give students sufficient time to complete the off-campus data collection, since they had already reserved time on Friday afternoons for the course.

The logistics of this class did not appear to be a hindrance for this group of students. My university's students are mostly commuters and many of those who live on campus have cars. The university's location in a medium-sized city that has been established for over two hundred years facilitates this exercise. There are approximately 85 active

cemeteries located in the county, with dozens more located in the adjacent counties where many students live. For residential students with no personal transportation, there are several cemeteries within three miles of campus that are located along bus routes (our students receive free access to the city buses). On a more residential or rural campus, this type of project might be more difficult to execute.

This type of course could present difficulties for students with some disabilities. Some cemeteries are not designed or maintained well enough to allow wheelchair users or others with mobility limitations to easily access the markers. Students with visual impairments might have trouble collecting data about inscriptions and decoration. These issues could be addressed with minor modifications to the assignments: allowing students to collect data in teams; allowing those who cannot physically access cemeteries to use photographs from genealogy websites (such as findagrave.com) to collect data; or allowing students to omit the data collection aspect of the project in exchange for more work in the area of literature review or data analysis.

Developing and deploying a community-based high-impact learning experience required some extra preparation on my part. I had to 1) ensure that there were ample, accessible cemeteries for the students to visit without creating too much replication of data; 2) secure administrative approval for insurance purposes for what was essentially a series of individual field trips; and 3) help the few students without personal transportation figure out how to access the local cemeteries. Pedagogically, the greatest challenge was to create assignments that allowed sixteen students to collaboratively work on a project while allowing for the fair assessment of each individual's contribution. The positive student feedback for this course shows that developing this type of learning experience is worth the small increase in effort on the instructor's part, especially in university climates that emphasize student retention.

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