

Thoughts from the Classroom

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People with careers in Humanities know that the way to engage in this area is usually long, complicated, and without the assurance that you can finally be full-time Archaeologists, Historians, Art historians...etc.

But, sometimes life takes you in unexpected directions.

In the last years of the last century I was working as staff in a local Red Cross in Catalonia and taking time to finish my Ph D Thesis about the collapse of Teotihuacan (México). These look like two very different and separate areas but they both and at the same time led me to reflect on some aspects that I had never considered. It was through the Red Cross that I began to see the need that we have in the fieldwork in archaeology to incorporate the concept of emergency response in our daily work. In the same way , emergency actions in the Red Cross projects shows me that although people are attended to first in an emergency situations, it was archaeology that taught me that people without their “things of the past” never will be comfortable with their present and they can never build a future as a complete society.

The subject of my PhD Thesis was about crisis, collapse and cultural change. Archeology allows us to observe cultural processes through the study of material culture over a long period of time. Humanitarian crisis taught me that time is vital but it is also essential to prepare a recovery period for the people engaged in the crisis situation. One key aspect is the training and empowerment of people and communities.

In 2003, back in México I started to include some concepts from the International Committee of the Blue Shields as a particular topic in my classes of General Archaeology and Cultural Heritage in the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo. Living in a country like Mexico, my students are very much prepared to

act/react in an emergency situation as they are familiar with natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes...etc. One of the most controversial issues in my classes was the discussion about the importance of the pre-Hispanic versus colonial or contemporary Mexican heritage. The background of the Conquest and the official history after the Independence was the historical context that formed my students in their earlier education (Pre- Hispanic is good. Colonial is bad) Most of the discussions were about the value of cultural heritage for the communities versus the Official governments Institutions and what should be protected or not, and how.

Now , I'm teaching in the University of Barcelona and the context is very different at some points. Like my Mexican students, almost all of my undergraduates from the University of Barcelona had no idea about the existence of an organization like the International Blue Shield. They are very much aware of the importance of the protection of cultural heritage in a general sense and they agree about the necessity of protecting them. In contrast to the Mexican students they are not prepared for emergency situations as they are less confronted with them in their daily lives and they have some romantic thought about the protection of cultural heritage.



© 2008 Fieldwork in Teotihuacan Mexico with Mexican and Spanish students

The twenty-first century is going to be a global century in communications and teaching but there also seems to be an increasing of risk situations where cultural heritage is in the midst of many conflicts.

I feel strongly that we have to design a program for our students that includes basic concepts about emergency preparedness and we should design some kind of program to share with Universities and other similar organizations. It is true that not all the students will become experts in prevention and recovery in the field of cultural heritage protection but this is not an obstacle to decide how we can put it on the agenda.

On my first day with the Red Cross I learned a lot about the fundamental principles of the Institution but also about to prevent, to protect and help. My rescue trainer showed me that to prevent is the first step before to protect. To prevent the perverse use of cultural heritage in conflicts means to educate the next generation. Prevention is an investment for the future and the Universities a very suitable place to start. It also means collaboration between institutions. We want to start? Time is running out.



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