

CONSIDERING THE POSSIBILITIES: CULTURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT'S ROLE IN HERITAGE EDUCATION¹

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Abstract

Most of the archaeological work being conducted today is in a cultural resource management (CRM) or public archaeology context. The many successful heritage education programs developed by industry firms demonstrate the possibilities for engaging the public. Schedule and budgetary constraints challenge the average project yet the goal is consistent — to develop public outreach and educational components for our projects that result in a meaningful experience for all participants. But how does CRM continue to engage the public? This paper explores CRM's continuing role in heritage education and looks at the potential of everyday technology to enrich our conversations with the public.

Those paper brochures seem so...old school (Waxman 2014)

It is well known that public outreach and education have become a fundamental part of nearly every major cultural resource management (CRM) project (cf., Frost 2004). Most archaeology in the U.S. is within CRM or public archaeology, and this nearly one billion dollar industry is growing. In this context what the outreach or educational program will look like will vary widely and be framed by a firm's experience, the kind of the project, client-related needs, project findings, and the availability of resources (e.g., McManamon 2005).

The CRM industry operates in the public arena and this results in a high frequency of interaction between CRM professionals and the public. The educational outreach programs that arise out of CRM projects demonstrate the range of possibilities to engage the public in a dialogue or conversation about archaeology. With shrinking budgets and aggressive project scheduling, the industry is challenged to develop educational public outreach that is genuine, increases public engagement, builds social capital, and results in a meaningful experience for all participants.

I continue to question whether the information we present as CRM professionals and the format in which we present it reaches those we hope and is effective in engaging the public. In other words, *whom do we want to reach, what is the goal of the public outreach, and are we successful?* CRM needs to consider

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who, why, and will it work before initiating the development of an outreach program to pinpoint what may be the most appropriate and effective way to exchange information with a targeted audience. We must also consider the information we intend to share — *what are we trying to say, and why?* Tours, popular reports, brochures, pamphlets, lectures, demonstrations, and exhibits have been around in some form or another since the beginning of the industry. Taking advantage of the available technology, popular reports, brochures, and pamphlets are offered for mass distribution of archaeological storytelling. Today these products are often joined by educational curricula, websites, Facebook pages, and blogs, exemplifying some of the stellar public outreach initiatives offered through government agencies, CRM industry firms, and project proponents or sponsors.

Successful public outreach strives to captivate the audience, and our goal is to share what we have learned with our audience and give them the tools to find their own understanding of the past. Some outreach efforts, such as tours, are difficult to manage in a CRM context given typical project pace, constraints, and liabilities, and are often reserved for long-term projects. However, many of the approaches for public engagement learned through tour presentation are applicable to any level of interaction with the public, no matter what the program or the duration of the encounter. In essence, this involves *knowing the community, introducing ourselves and the project, keeping our message focused, incorporating show and tell, creating an interactive environment, and providing connections of continuity.*

It is always a good idea to consider what we want to accomplish when we reveal what we learn from our work. Whether we are having conversations with clients, agencies, colleagues in associated disciplines, those who assist us in our research efforts, vendors, or the homeowner whose front yard we are digging in, we are connecting ourselves, our work, and our profession with the public.

Let me share an example: We are developing apps for field survey use and I have been working with our corporate R&D team. One of the key team members is a long-serving corporate employee. As we discussed the field methodology requiring digital data collection, he expressed a keen interest and stated that he never knew what it was our archaeologists did in the field. At first I was shocked, but as I thought about it, I realized that there would have been little opportunity for this colleague to know *how* we do our work as he would have only been presented with the project name and its financial performance.

So why is this relevant? Because the key to successful public outreach and education is *effective communication, the information we exchange, how we exchange it, and the stories we tell.* Obviously, my colleague's previous exposure to our work didn't give him a full understanding of all that went into how we did our work and that was the part of the story of most interest to him. Public outreach *is* communication, and our *outreach initiatives need to have focused relevance to our audience.*

So how do we engage the public in a sustained dialogue about archaeology using the information and tools that are available to us? We all know there is no one-size-fits-all approach and that what works in one situation may not be effective in another. Providing brochures to a group of first-grade students will not work as well as a focused hands-on activity within a lesson plan. In some situations a site tour may not be possible for safety reasons, but may be the most effective means to tell the story of the site and its people, and so you compromise. Budget and schedule constraints always

present stumbling blocks. The time allowed for projects may be shorter than we might like, and the site's story may not be fully understood until sometime after we depart the field. *How can we effectively converse with the public about what we are doing, what we are learning, and why it is important to them?*

Let's look at a real-world proposal description for the completion of public outreach and engagement activities for a CRM data recovery investigation.

Public Outreach. CRM firm will organize several opportunities for the public to learn about the results of the data recovery investigations at Site 99XX123. These opportunities will include (1) a public open house scheduled during the latter half of the 99-week excavation period (the specific timing of this event will be coordinated with the client and its ongoing activities), (2) a website that features information about the ongoing site investigations, (3) a public presentation at a local venue scheduled to coincide with the State Archaeology Month, and (4) preparation of a written article describing the investigations at Site 99XX123 for publication in the *Journal of the State Archaeological Society*.

Although the location and specifics of this particular situation have been modified, it does represent an actual project. When I inquired about the rationale behind the activities proposed — who was the target audience and what was the expected outcome — the answer was “This is what the SHPO expects.” When I asked if this was discussed in advance because there might be other ways to share the story, I was told that “this was what everyone had to do.” Unfortunately, the open house had few attendees and the website hasn't happened. An article may still be written, but does it tell the story to the *public*? Is this overall approach cost-effective from a financial standpoint and a public engagement perspective?

EVERYDAY TECHNOLOGY

I regularly attend the public involvement sessions offered at the annual meeting of the Transportation Research Board. These sessions focus on the techniques used to increase stakeholder engagement for effective decision making in project planning. A couple of years ago a session focused on the role of social media in public involvement and started me thinking more about alternative approaches to public outreach that blend traditional approaches with online technology.

I have a keen interest in ever-increasing role of social media in daily communication, how marketing took advantage of the Web 2.0 world (Tuten 2008), where Web 3.0 might take us, and the possibilities of everyday technology that incorporate mobile apps. In the fourth annual American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) social media survey in 2013, 90 percent of the participating state departments of transportation (43 and the District of Columbia) are using social media for public engagement (AASHTO 2013). The use of social media as a platform for information sharing has become standard practice. This is made possible by the 90 percent of American adults with cell phones, of which 56 percent are smartphones, with tablet ownership on a huge upswing (AAHSTO 2013).

I still get a daily newspaper, but I am able to get *instant and focused news directly relevant to my life and interests* through Twitter, along with updates from *The New York Times*, Reddit, and other outlets. Nearly all of us are now connected. We use Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr, Storify, and Snapchat for text, picture, and micro-video sharing and can follow a multitude of blogs focused on our particular areas of interest.

My interest has ranged from tweeting random thoughts to exploring various online tools. While using them, I keep thinking about the possibilities for outreach if we combine these tools with traditional techniques. Should we be using social media? How might that work? How do you get noticed? How would people find it? What hashtags should you use? In what situations would this work for the average project? What would I tweet, who would see it, and would they care? Why would anyone want to follow your tweets of finding something or maybe not finding anything?

Social media are enriching our conversations within the discipline and industry and have applicability to the fast-paced nature of CRM projects whether it is an online component for projects with an anticipated outreach effort or for a general ongoing program. So how can social media become another tool in our public outreach and education toolbox?

Social media offer the online means to connect to more people than may be possible with a traditional program. Therefore, if we wish to engage in conversations with the public, social media offer us the opportunity to make that happen in new, exciting, and expanded ways. There are countless varieties of social networking formats that can increase creativity and information sharing. These work best as an informal information-sharing dialogue — but offer the ability to have a continuing dialogue in a dynamic, albeit online environment.

So how might we do this? In a recent issue of *Time* magazine, Waxman (2014) writes about the decline of the old-school brochure and the rise of the use of social media — in particular, the use of the mobile app Snapchat by college and university athletic departments as a tool to reach potential recruits. The app is also being used to share what life is like as a student athlete with current students and sports fans. Could Snapchat be used to give insight into life as an archaeologist or into the daily happenings of the typical CRM project archaeology team?

If the key to social media is to have conversations, then it is important to create an online environment that will keep the conversation going. The resources do not require much — just consider what it takes to open a Twitter or Snapchat account, post a short video on YouTube, or create a Facebook page — but you still need to know your audience and build the platform for dialogue with your audience in mind. There are demographics associated with the use of Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook, and just because we invest in the use of social media does not mean it will have the impact we expect. These tools are not static, they require an investment of time, and should build on established relationships within our targeted audience to offer an online means to create an educational portal that is conversational.

Just as academe may have outgrown the brochure, so perhaps has educational public outreach — that is, unless it is a *smart brochure* and combines everyday technology (cell phones, tablets, and now

wrist watches) with social media, mobile apps, QR codes and augmented reality, Web 2.0 tools, and traditional educational techniques.

It is possible that this technological toolkit offers us *smart educational outreach* opportunities to do what we want to do — *engage the public in a dialogue about archaeology*. But how do we find the public in the digital world and how does the public find us? Therein lies an interesting twist — to do so effectively requires us to use many of the same skills for reaching the public that we use today. We still need to target the audience, know who they are, and figure out how to connect with them. This involves *knowing the community, introducing yourself and the project, keeping your message focused, incorporating show and tell, creating an interactive environment, and providing connections of continuity* to keep the conversation going. Any outreach effort will benefit from using Web 2.0 blogs, video channels, social media, micro-video, and the suite of tools now available, but to create a broader audience and get more attention, it is “crucial to exploit existing, trusted services ... science sites, cultural sites, news sites ...” (Hadley 2012:234). The possibilities provided by everyday technology and social media do not mean we should abandon traditional outreach techniques — rather, combining these approaches will ensure expanded and exciting storytelling that results in sustained and meaningful conversations with the public. And as our target audiences conduct more complex compound searches, we must customize our digital presence. Think through what you intend to do, what approach should you use, and whom you intend to reach if you want your message — *the story you are telling* — to reach those you want to reach.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I constantly ask myself *why are we doing this, what are our goals, are we doing enough, and how can we be more effective*. For public outreach and educational programming in the context of CRM to succeed, we must genuinely share ourselves and our work, build social capital, and weave these efforts into the fabric of our programs and projects.

The ideas and thoughts presented here are intended to provoke discussion as CRM continues to engage the public. How do we approach public outreach in a standard CRM context? Where do you start? No matter how big or small the project or the outreach approach chosen, stick to the basics — involve the local community, be personally present in the project, keep the message focused, incorporate show and tell, create an interactive storytelling environment, and provide connections of continuity with opportunities for further participant involvement in the discipline. In the almost five decades since the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act, we have amassed a wealth of information and have many stories to share. Public outreach and education are not just another deliverable — they are our collective responsibility.

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