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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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AI Text and Old-Fashioned Pencil: New Strategies for Teaching Archaeology

Monica L. Smith

There’s something about archaeology that draws people into courses; we probably can thank the movies, popular culture, and human curiosity about the world that we’ve inherited from our ancestors. But archaeology is also about the thrill of creating the story of the past through the little fragments that ancient people left behind. As it’s often said, archaeology is like trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle without the picture on the box and with most of the pieces missing.

Indeed, it’s the concept of the “picture” that creates the most compelling aspect of archaeological description. Archaeological reports, scholarly articles, and publications like Backdirt aren’t just enhanced with imagery; our writings fundamentally rely on photographs, maps, and drawings to make the ancient past whole in a way that words cannot. Yet we often don’t pay much attention to how students “read” images; we assume that they can make out what’s being presented and that the images unproblematically add to the knowledge they will absorb from reading a textbook or article.

1. Anthropology, Navin and Pratima Doshi Chair in Indian Studies, and Institute of the Environment and Sustainability.
Images in archaeological publications are themselves a creation, just as much as the words we use to describe our theory, methods, and conclusions. In a prescient 1997 work entitled “Photography and Archaeology,” Michael Shanks suggested that archaeological photographs, because they are framed in ways that highlight some conclusions over others, really should be called “photoworks.” Archaeologists routinely crop out messy areas of excavations or touch up footprints at the bottom of trenches, but how much manipulation is acceptable in generating the visual facts of an archaeological conclusion?

It’s not just photographs that we need to think about. Every form of archaeological illustration, from the humble sherd profile to the most sophisticated GIS landscape map, is something that is deliberately created. Drawings are envisioned many times over, from the time we first see something in the field and consider how to capture it visually, to the making of that initial photo or drawing, to the creation of composites that have been inked, scanned, and trimmed for publication.

We’ve all been at the side of a trench figuring out how to draw a stratigraphic profile, how much detail to include, and whether rocks, artifacts, and features should be drawn literally or schematically. Or maybe we’re illustrating an artifact and deciding how much visual emphasis should be placed on the spot where the object is broken. Project directors have to set up protocols of standardization, often at the very beginning of a project, when every decision is destined to become enshrined in subsequent analysis. After the site has been backfilled and artifacts are permanently stored, the images might be the only way for specialists to continue their work, a process that can take years and involve dozens of people until the final site report lands on the shelf.

**Learning about Words and Pictures**

Archaeologists aren’t the only ones becoming increasingly aware of the impact of images in the publication process. Long before the widespread manipulations we’re seeing in the media now, literacy scholars such as Dana Statton Thompson encouraged the concept of *visual* literacy as a component of education; students are encouraged to develop “a set of competencies in reading, writing and thinking visually.” There’s even an entire scholarly series devoted to the topic, titled the *Journal of Visual Literacy*, along with a conference in its fifty-fifth year of existence.

The analysis of imagery has a long history at UCLA too. We have world-famous institutions devoted to visuals, including the School of Theater, Film and Television; the Art History Department; and the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance. We have visual anthropologists such as Rob Lemelson and Susan Slyomovics, who teach about the ethics of photography and documentary film, and we have cultural historians like Aomar Boum, who shows how images capture the intensity of human action beyond words.

Figure 2. Maps of Dickson Plaza. Courtesy of Maya Janaswamy and Alexia Jimenez; published with permission.
The concept of visual literacy entered my thought process at a very convenient moment in the spring of 2023, when I was getting ready to teach Anthropology 2: Introduction to Archaeology. I had already been looking to refresh the course with assignments that could provide more relevance and career preparation to our intellectually diverse student body. But there was another reason I was looking to have students do something new. The sudden entry of artificial intelligence (AI) text generators in the 2022–2023 school year had caught the university world unawares. Faculty meetings were called to discuss how to deal with text that could be generated without a trace of the software used to write it. Unlike plagiarism, which results when a student copies a published exemplar and presents it as their own work, AI-generated text is slightly different every time, making it nearly impossible to distinguish it from prose written by a real human.

The number of software programs for generating bespoke text has exploded in the past year. There’s not only the awkwardly named ChatGPT but also Bard, Hugging-Chat, and a host of others. The breakneck pace at which companies are releasing new AI software packages raises considerable concerns not only for course papers but for the forms of routine writing that are part of the entry-level jobs students will get once they graduate. AI text generators can synthesize information and answer questions with supporting documentation, meaning the hours that used to be needed for writing a term paper or quarterly report can be short-circuited with a few keystrokes.

Debates have already begun among educators as we consider the impact of this new technology. Is AI a scary takeover of the subtleties of old-fashioned analog intelligence or just a more sophisticated version of spell-check, auto-fill, and Clippy (Microsoft’s cartoon helper of the 1990s)? And if AI is going to have an impact in the business world as companies seek to streamline routine clerical tasks, is teaching AI literacy an essential part of college now? Should students learn about AI writing in class so they can recognize accurate distillations of information even if (or perhaps especially if) they are no longer going to be creating written reports and correspondence from scratch themselves? Should we ban AI text generators and return to in-class exams and writing prompts instead of homework? Given the many new uncertainties about evaluating students’ knowledge through written essays, I decided to pivot away from the question altogether to let students work on building a different skill set: the creation of images as a way for them to demonstrate their mastery of course concepts.

**Visual Literacy in the Classroom: A Practical Experience**

I encoded visual literacy into the spring 2023 Introduction to Archaeology syllabus as one of the course goals and interwove the concepts throughout the term. In lectures I walked students through maps and other images that are part and parcel of archaeological publications and worthy of scrutiny just as much as—or more than—the words themselves. I made use of a groundbreaking graphic novel history of the ancient Indus civilization, coauthored by India-based artist Nikhil Gulati and American university professor Jonathan Mark Kenoyer. I also asked Aomar Boum, who recently co-authored a graphic novel history of World War II in North Africa with illustrator Nadjib Berber, to deliver a guest lecture about how visual information frames and enhances new analytic perspectives on difficult subjects.

Because many of the 300 people in the course had enrolled to fulfill the general education requirement for their science majors, it was also a great opportunity to have the students consider how they will use images in their careers—whether in business through product advertising, in manufacturing through safety diagrams, or in engineering through user manuals that employ imagery rather than text to make assembly possible across the languages of the globe. I pointed out the many ways in which we absorb information visually: in newspapers and magazines, in the logos of consumer goods, and even in passenger safety cards in airplane seat pockets. Lectures toggled between the past and present of visual images, in preparation for students to create their own drawings and diagrams.

While the students were initially happy to have assignments other than the usual college essay fare, they were also a little skeptical. They were worried that they would not understand the assignment or that they would be graded on their artistic ability. “Not at all,” we reassured them, because the point was to be able to do what archaeologists do: make observations about the world around them and put that 3D world into a 2D format. It’s not about skill but about representation: What’s essential in an image and how can it help a person who is not familiar with a site or object “see” what the illustrator has experienced?

The first assignment was to make a map of an area of campus, just as an archaeologist would make a map of a site or region. A discussion section meeting was devoted to the mapping of Bruin Plaza together, so that every student could get the experience of how to make a map in the company of their peers and with their teaching assistant close at hand (Figure 1). The students could compare their own maps with others as they went along. We also explained that there were many ways to make a “good” map that would earn full points.

For the subsequent assignment that the students did on their own, I selected six zones on campus, including the Court of Sciences, Wilson Plaza, and Dickson Plaza. (There was a different area for each teaching assistant, so they could be assured that students were doing their own work and not copying from a pal in another section.) The assignments had to be hand-drawn with pencil and paper, so work couldn’t be copied and submitted by multiple individuals simultaneously.

Students were instructed to make a map of an area measuring 150 x 150 m (introducing some of them to the met-
The ric system, the main measuring system for global archaeology, for the first time). They were required to show the structures that provided the boundaries of open spaces, the vegetation of the area, and at least one symbolic structure, one trash feature, and one water feature. As is standard in archaeological illustrations, the map was to have a north arrow, a scale, and a key to map icons. Students had to write a short description of how they did the mapmaking and how their observations and interpretations were encoded in the finished product. Each map was recognizable for its location but also contained one-of-a-kind perspectives and inputs, just as any site map would (Figure 2).

The second assignment was to take a scholarly article and render its main points into a one-page pencil-and-paper graphic novel format, with a mixture of words and pictures. Examples taught in the lecture included not only the work of Gulati and Kenoyer on the Indus but also the wonderful work of archaeological illustrator John Swogger, whose article “Comics, Creativity & Community” showed how to turn what is often dense scholarly prose into words and images that can be easily understood by non-specialists.

Each graduate teaching assistant selected an article for the students in their section to read, analyze, and render into the graphic novel explanatory format. The articles reflected the TAs’ own scholarly interests, such as ancient camel caravans, Indigenous lifeways at historic California missions, and the zooarchaeology of the Maya region. Like the other readings for the course, the articles for the assignment were from heavy-hitting academic journals including the *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, the *Journal of Archaeological Science*, and *Quaternary Science Reviews*.

The graphic novel assignment was by far the “edgiest” concept integrated into the course, and the results were amazing. Because the students had been exposed to scholarly readings throughout the term (the course was taught with recent research articles rather than a textbook), they were already skilled in using an article’s contents to understand the who-what-why-how-when of a particular research project. In discussion sections, they further honed their understanding of the articles with their TA’s guidance. The students’ visual renderings were each unique in their own way, providing a solid, individual demonstration of their understanding of the course contents—and bringing the past to life (Figures 3, 4, and 5).

**Postscript: What We Learned Together**

The challenges and rewards of the visual literacy component of the class were surprisingly comprehensive. The course activities revealed to me, the teaching assistants, and the students many of the assumptions about the relative impact of visual and textual renderings in the college classroom and in daily life. It’s an experience I would definitely repeat given the refreshingly new insights and conversations about visual representations as “facts.” Students engaged with the implications of understanding the past for contemporary and future problem-solving and also depicted the realm of archaeological research as vibrant, diverse, and collaborative (Figures 6 and 7).

![Figure 3. Excerpt of student summation of Zheng et al., “Prehistoric Sea Salt Manufacture as an Adaptation to Coastal Flooding in East China,” Quaternary Science Reviews. Courtesy of Lindsay Harrison; published with permission.](image-url)
Figure 4. Student summation of Panich et al., “Points of Contention: Tradition, Resistance, and Arrow Points in the California Missions,” *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*. Courtesy of Mohammed Uddin; published with permission.
With that positivity in mind, there are a few things that are worth sharing about the process. The first assignment actually turned out to be the more difficult of the two for the students to comprehend and execute. Although we might expect that students are very used to the concept of maps (considering that maps are an essential component of almost every app devoted to consumption and transportation), the concept of making a map was very unsettling to some. The level of anxiety was unexpected, which I credited to the intense college-prep high school essay curriculum that most of them had recently graduated from (and the fact that this cohort was heavily impacted by COVID remote learning).

By contrast, I had expected that the second assignment (to render a scholarly article into a one-page graphic novel format) would be the one to cause the most stress. However, by that point in the term, the students had learned to take us at our word that the assignment was not about artistic skill but about interpretive attention. The idea of words and images going together was perhaps more amenable to a meme-creating student population, and they readily transferred those latent skills to the interpretive challenges of rendering dense scholarly prose into user-friendly, public-facing explanations. A little self-reflective humor about the learning process emerged as well, as in one student’s begrudging admiration, reported to me by a TA: “Huhn, Prof. Smith got us—we can’t fake these with ChatGPT!”

By the end of the course, students overwhelmingly responded positively, relaxed their way into the novelty of the assignments, and walked out with an unexpected skill set. In their long career lives after UCLA, I hope they’ll continue to look at the world around them as though they were going to map it for another person and see how little bits of information create a whole story out of pieces of the puzzle.
Acknowledgments
I would like to thank the great TA cohort from the spring quarter 2023 Anthropology 2 class for all their care and support in creating student learning opportunities: Madison Aubey, Ananya Deoghare, Nico La Mattina, Robin Meyer-Lorey, Saliem Shehadeh, Nicole Smith, and Haoyan Zhuang.

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