Teenagers, archaeology and the Higher Education Field Academy 2005–11

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The University of Cambridge Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) (www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/schools/hefa) involves teenagers in new archaeological excavations within English rural settlements. While the research aim is to reconstruct the development of today’s villages, hamlets and small towns, the social aim is to raise the educational aspirations of state-educated 13–15-year-olds and instil skills which will help them fulfil those ambitions. HEFA began in 2005, when it was funded by Aimhigher, itself set up in 2003 to increase the number of young people from lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds attending university. HEFA was supported by English Heritage between 2009 and 2011. HEFA’s track record since 2005 has enabled it to weather policy U-turns and deep funding cuts, delivering more than 12,000 learning days to c. 4,000 young people interested in subjects ranging from accountancy to zoology. Rigorous monitoring shows that more than 90% of HEFA participants rate it good or excellent and that after completing HEFA, 80% feel more positive about post-16 education, 85% have developed new skills and more than 90% plan to attend university, a rise of 25–60%.

Each HEFA involves around 40 teenagers working for two days in four-person mixed-school teams completing all stages of one of ten simultaneous 1m² ‘test pit’ excavations on different sites within a single settlement, most in private gardens volunteered by owners. Learners excavate their pit in 10cm spits, sieving spoil for artefacts, supervised by university archaeologists who brief learners on the archaeological process, identify and contextualise finds and provide encouragement and advice as needed. On the third day, in the University of Cambridge, participants learn about applying to university, experience university life and analyse their finds. Afterwards, they write a report on their
excavation and ultimately receive a detailed assessment of their performance covering the wide range of skills – academic, technical, social and personal – they have developed on HEFA, many of them ‘soft’ skills not included in the school curriculum whose absence can significantly handicap young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The value of HEFA is reflected in its endorsement by the OCR exam board as a programme which promotes worthwhile learning.

HEFA harnesses the unique capacity of archaeological excavation to enable novices to make discoveries that they know for certain are new – because they themselves have unearthed them. For HEFA participants, this aspect is transformative: many can barely believe they are being entrusted to carry out a ‘real dig’, expecting instead to be excavating some sort of pre-prepared sand pit.

I enjoyed the knowledge that we were working on a genuine excavation with genuine tools and artefacts, rather than an artificial mock-up.

LW/Thorington 2007

HEFA also benefits from its focus on place because participants’ research is about, with and within rural communities. Learners are empowered not only by taking responsibility for excavating (and restoring!) residents’ gardens but also by generating archaeological knowledge which is of interest to their host communities. The fact that the excavations take place in accessible ‘ordinary’ towns, villages, hamlets also brings the experience, and its aspirational impact, closer to HEFA participants’ own daily lives.

It opened my eyes discovering things that have not been touched in hundreds of years just inches beneath the ground.

LW/Thorne 2010

That HEFA can potentially take place in any rural settlement enables it to target areas where it is most needed.

Learners’ sense of achievement in completing the physical and mental challenge of excavating a ton or more of spoil against the clock is further enhanced by seeing how the tiny fragments of pottery they have recovered generate distribution maps reconstructing the development over centuries of more than 50 settlements as, shard by shard, they piece the past together.

I enjoyed finding out more about the history of Norfolk and knowing that I was a part of discovering it.

AE, Binham 2010

Over ten years, HEFA has capitalised on one of archaeology’s greatest assets – its potential to educate and inspire, not just about ‘heritage’, but much more widely, demographically and geographically, building social capital well beyond typical heritage consumers. In making a proven difference to the lives of thousands of teenagers, HEFA showcases archaeology as a resource and a discipline relevant not just to the past, but also to the present and the future.

The whole academy was brilliant. I particularly enjoyed how the study of archaeology surprised me. It certainly has inspired me.

RB, Binham 2009

REFERENCES


Two HEFA students carefully plan a subtle feature showing as a soilmark in their test pit sited in the garden of a moated site in Little Hallingbury (Essex).

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