

Teaching Archaeology: The Kennewick Man Case Study

Lisa Nagaoka, University of North Texas

Introduction: Project Goals and Objectives

In my introductory archaeology class, I use the legal battle surrounding Kennewick Man case as a capstone project where students act as expert witnesses, judge, and jury to decide the fate of the remains. The project addresses most of the curricular goals recently advanced by the SAAs, which include stewardship, ethics and values, and diverse interests in archaeology. Through the project, students develop an understanding of

- archaeological laws,
- viewpoints from all sides of the Kennewick debate,
- social and political concerns of doing archaeology today.

By the end of the project, students gain specific knowledge and skills. They are able to

- critically evaluate the information on the case,
- explain the positions of the groups involved in the case,
- discuss how NAGPRA is being interpreted,
- communicate their knowledge and viewpoints orally and in writing.



Methods: How is the Project Structured?

Rather than telling the students about the case in lecture, they 'discover' and 'experience' it for themselves. By researching the issue with classmates, students become 'owners' of their knowledge, and become more invested and interested in their learning. Through discussions with other students, they also encounter different viewpoints, and gain a better understanding of the complexity of the case. The project consists of several components, which are described below.



Group Research

Group work or collaborative learning has been shown to help students better understand and retain material, as well as to enhance communication skills. Groups of five to ten students become expert witnesses on one of six topics: NAGPRA, the biological data relating to the First Americans, and the role of the Army Corps, the Asatru Folk Assembly, the scientists/plaintiffs, and the Native Americans. Students keep a journal in which they document their research and their learning process. Class time is provided for the groups to meet, during which the groups' progress can be monitored and any problems that may arise can be addressed promptly.

Presentations

The students present the information they have researched to the rest of the class. They are given the freedom to present in any manner they choose, as long as they communicate the information effectively. Students have been very creative in their efforts. For example, one group performed an X-files skit. Another group videotaped a 'meeting of the minds' type discussion in which they argued the major issues.

During the presentations, the audience or jury is required to take notes. After each group presents, the audience asks questions of the presenters. Since the information is critical for their papers, the Q&A sessions can be quite lively.



Discussion

At the end of all the presentations, I guide the students in a discussion about the major issues of the case. Students then vote on who should be awarded custody of the remains. Finally, we watch the 60 Minutes segment on the case, which along with their journals, provides the students a measure of how much they have learned.

Project Paper

Each student writes a paper, which consists of two sections. The first section contains the information gathered during their group research. The second is a position paper in which they argue and summarize their legal and personal positions on the case.

In sum, I provide students with

- a list of guiding questions and resources to start their research,
- time to meet in class,
- guidance throughout the project.

Students are responsible for

- working with their peers to accumulate and discuss information,
- keeping a journal of the learning/research process,
- effectively presenting their information in class,
- actively participating in discussions,
- summarizing their research and deciding on the fate of the remains in a paper.

Results: What Have the Students Learned?

To demonstrate that the project objectives are being met, quotes from student papers and journals are used as data. The quotes show that students are able to discuss the different viewpoints in the case and their discussion is often very thoughtful. They can also identify the aspects of NAGPRA that are at the center of the debate and the role that biological studies are meant to play in clarifying the debate.

The Scientists

"The scientific view of this issue is a fight for complete freedom to thoroughly study the remains of Paleo-American skeletons, in particular, that of Kennewick Man."

"The scientists are simply looking for two things. They want to explain how people got to the Americas, and they want to know what they were doing once they were here. The Kennewick Man can help answer both of these questions."

"The scientists think that the NAGPRA law does not apply because Kennewick Man is clearly much older than the gravesites the law was intended to protect."

"...NAGPRA allows for scientific study of remains when the outcome of the studies are a major benefit to the nation. The skeleton is critical to the Smithsonian's ancient populations project, therefore it will be of major benefit not only to the US, but to the world."



The Native Americans

"...the United States made a law and a promise to Native Americans that remains which are rightfully theirs should be returned and repatriated to them."

"...Native Americans do not question the importance of science. What they question is that it is valued above all else."

"Not all tribes are against scientific study, but the beliefs of those who are should be respected."

"Even if they win their argument...the Native Americans will have still lost. They may still receive the bones, and have the chance to repatriate them, but this will only happen with more scientific testing and more desecration in their eyes."



The Army Corps of Engineers

"The suit was brought against the Corps when it refused to reconsider their decision to ban scientific study of the Kennewick Man skeleton. To allow such a study would have been in violation of the wishes of what the Corps saw as the legal owners of the bones."

"I believe that the Army Corps acted too quickly in their decision to give back the bones to the Native Americans. Although they claim to have been just doing their job, I think the law is too ambiguous on this subject for them not to have called on further investigation into the matter or ask for a mediator."



The Media

"When Chatters made his statement public, sometimes referring to Kennewick Man as Jean Luc Picard of the Star Trek series, a wave of media flooded the area and brought to life a theory that had not been thoroughly studied and was completely unfounded."

"...the media sensationalized the word Caucasoid....and Kennewick Man, (and) he became a much bigger symbol to all parties involved. This sensationalism, along with references by the media claiming that Kennewick Man resembled the actor Patrick Stewart, further drove the stakes of the game higher."

"The television program 60 Minutes hinted that (the case) is an argument of greed on the part of the Native Americans."



The Law

"Anthropologists differ on their views of NAGPRA. Some see it as a much needed balance between archaeological, culture reconstruction and modern Native American culture. Others view NAGPRA as a barrier to the right to pursue knowledge."

"European explorers are officially documented as being in the Northwest in the 1600s, so any group or individuals here before that under NAGPRA are officially Native American. Therefore, since the remains of Kennewick Man have been dated to over 9,000 years ago, they can be considered to be Native American under NAGPRA."

"For an inadvertent discovery on federal lands the law reads that it should go to...the tribe aboriginally occupying the area or the tribe with the closest cultural affiliation. This is why there has been so much effort to try and prove or disprove whether the remains are culturally unidentifiable."



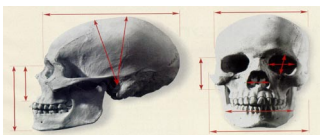
Scientific Examination Team

Kennewick Man



Luzia

Spirit Cave Man



The Biological Data

"The most recent access to the bones by a panel of scientists...was assembled with the expressed goal of determining whether the remains were Native American or not."

"Kennewick man's skull was not unusual: other Paleoindian remains display features that do not resemble those of living Native American peoples."

"Biological evidence has shown, in my opinion, that race as we define it did not come into being until just after the time this individual died. Thus, if he pre-dates the racial markers that would determine him to be Native American or not Native American, he cannot be considered under the NAGPRA law."

"... the realistic limitations of scientific study of Kennewick Man may not even present the data that is desired - a tie to some ancestry, be it European, Native American, or otherwise."

The Verdict

The verdict at the end of the trial is usually split. Whether they vote for the scientists or the Native Americans, students demonstrate an understanding of both viewpoints. They are also very concerned about the impact the case will have on future research and relations.

"The Kennewick man case is a complicated one that has many people questioning the ethics of the government and scientific study, the wordings of our laws, and the boundaries of respect for the religions of others."

"I feel that Kennewick Man is telling us that we need to start working things out right now. Relationships between scientists and Native Americans need to be heavily examined, debated and worked out. It needs to improve."

"Clashes between cultures are inevitable in this diverse world, but better ways of managing these types of situations must be found. Whatever the final decision is, it will set the precedent for all future debates like that of Kennewick Man."

"This case has become so complicated and emotionally charged that I doubt the end result will leave anyone pleased."

"The debate over ownership of Kennewick Man is a difficult one especially for myself. One can't help but sympathize with the plight of the Native Americans, but being a student of archaeology, I can't deny the overwhelming desire to study and learn from the remains."

"The case is more than a right to study ancient human remains. It is a clash between two cultures: one spiritual and one based on Western thought...within their own context, both are correct."

"Whether the bones are returned to Native Americans or handed over to the scientists, this is certainly a case in which the results will affect future decisions about repatriation of bones and artifacts, as well as the relationship between Native Americans and scientists."

"Both sides have truly valid arguments if you follow along the legal boundaries, and both have lost already to an extent."

Conclusions: What I Have Learned

Controversial issues such as the Kennewick Man case can be useful tools for teaching about the complexities of doing North American archaeology today. The success of this project demonstrates that undergraduates are more than capable of tackling such complex issues even in an introductory course. In fact, students value the opportunity to learn about ethical issues. When asked about the role ethics should play in undergraduate archaeology courses, the students unanimously believed disciplinary ethics were important. The archaeology students argued that it takes years to develop a solid ethical background, therefore we should start early. The non-archaeology students argued that discussions of ethical issues are necessary in undergraduate classes if they are to become educated consumers who know how to evaluate what 'good' archaeology is. Clearly, students have a lot to teach us about teaching archaeology.