

THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE 2.0

a 'new New Archaeology' of public value

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Archaeology is said to add value to development, creating a deeper sense of place, community identity and improving health and wellbeing. Accentuating these wider social values has been welcomed by a profession keen to broaden its public relevance and legitimacy (and protect its seat at the table in modern cultural life) but how much, if at all, do the public actually benefit from archaeology?



Hannah and Ayan join a DigVentures DigCamp with their parents at Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire. Credit: DigVentures

Concealed behind the acceptance that good practice is synonymous with public benefit lies the complex reality of a discipline where impacts are often abstract, intangible and difficult to attribute. These complexities are often glossed over by what Dr Peter Gould, my colleague at DigVentures, calls 'smiley-faced evaluations': simple top-line stats of open-day visitors, Facebook impressions and publication outputs that stand for evidence of impact.

This lack of sophistication in expressing and quantifying impact reduces our capacity to make substantive claims regarding efficacy, and fails to capture whether an archaeological project had any negative effects, or what public benefit would have happened anyway in the absence of the initiative. If the technical excavation process of a contemporary dig site was approached with similar indifference, it is doubtful that the site director would long remain a member of ClfA.



The DigVentures evaluative framework. Credit: DigVentures

We've reached this Rubicon before. In the 1960s a theoretical movement dissatisfied with the 'un-disciplined empirical discipline' of traditional culture-historical archaeology formulated a new agenda designed to guarantee the security of knowledge claims about the past. David Clarke framed this 'New Archaeology' as the 'loss of disciplinary innocence': a departure from traditional practice which favoured empiricism over interpretive inquiry. The parallels with our current predicament are undeniable; so, might we now be on the cusp of formulating a new New Archaeology, underpinned by an evaluative framework designed to ensure that claims made regarding the present-day social impact of public participation in archaeology are as substantively evidenced as the conclusions we draw through our practice about the past itself?

DigVentures has addressed this challenge by drawing on the language of social impact investing. Exactly how a specific set of activities result in the achievement of desired goals is pictured as a **theory of change**, detailing outputs, outcomes and impacts. This is tacked to a **standards of evidence** framework designed to articulate and highlight the causal links between activity and change.

In this framework, social impact can be conceived as the difference that activities make to people's lives over and above what would have happened in the absence of that initiative. Outputs are a measurable unit of product or service, such as a community excavation; outcomes are an observable change for individuals or communities, such as acquiring skills or knowledge. Impact is therefore the

effect of outcomes attributable to the output, measured against two metrics: scale, or breadth of people reached; and depth, or the importance of this impact on their lives.

The credibility of a theory of change rests on the level of certainty that organisational activities are the cause of this change. For this certainty to be achieved, the correct data must be collected to isolate the impact to the intervention, and attention to detail paid to this process on an even par with excavation. This is where archaeology has much work to do to support our claims about impact – but, as a sector, we should view this challenge with total confidence. These frameworks are a golden opportunity to evidence what we all know to be true about our work.

DigVentures was founded with a robust evaluation framework designed into our work as an essential step to scaling a model that now accounts for over 1000 dig participants a year. Increased evaluation requirements have recently been called out as just another form of audit trail for funders or PR gloss for partners, but we see it as an opportunity for an organisation to learn, adapt, and

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improve their contribution to public benefit: a real-time process of equal importance to financial reporting for the health of an organisation.

Just as a hole in the books would be dealt with as a matter of fiduciary responsibility, a similar rupture between the delivery of public benefit and the realities of archaeological working practice should require swift and decisive action.



(above) Investigating five ancient landmarks in the magnificent grounds of Soulton Hall in Shropshire. Credit: DigVentures

(left) Community participants excavate a recently discovered Bronze Age ring cairn on the North West coast. Credit: DigVentures

Further Reading

Gould, P, 2016 On the Case: Method in Public and Community Archaeology. *Public Archaeology*, 15, 1–18

Wilkins, B, 2019 A theory of change and evaluative framework for measuring the social impact of public participation in archaeology. *European Journal of Postclassical Archaeologies*, 9, 77–100