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Learning by Trowel and Error

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Western Washington University

Learning by Trowel and Error

Honors Senior Capstone Project

Kayla Alvarado-Hogan

HNRS #490: Senior Project

Advisor: Dr. Jerry Ek

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My name is Kayla Alvarado-Hogan. I am a fourth year senior at Western Washington University and am majoring in Anthropology with a concentration in Archaeology. I originally started at Western having a completely different plan for myself than the one I ended up following. I think that right there, the “plan”, can sometimes be the hardest part about college. Another big thing about college is that you have to find your own way through it. This can be socially, with choosing a career, finding academic programs that fit you, or just learning to be in a new place and living a different life. Even after finding archaeology as a field, I wasn’t sure what my plan was for it. Through my time at Western though, I found the field focus of decolonized archaeology.

When I first started at Western I thought I would be a psychologist. I’ve always loved trying to understand people and why they do what they do. Mental health was also incredibly important to me, and so I largely was considering a career in psychiatry or therapy for about a year before I actually started college. I was never fully sold on either of these careers though, primarily because I have never been that great at STEM. My very first quarter at Western, Fall 2018, I took the very basic PSY#101: Introduction to Psychology course. I am very grateful I took that class as early as I did because, not only was it one of the worst barely passing grades I’ve ever gotten at Western, I immediately realized that although it was an interesting course, I had very little desire in taking a single other class on psychology. I’m honestly not sure if I would have found archaeology if I hadn’t taken psychology that first quarter. During that same quarter, while I was quickly learning I had no interest in psychology and started trying to think of other options, I was also taking the first of the Honors Major Cultural Traditions series. My professor for that class was Christine Johnston, a history department faculty

member. During that Honors course, Johnston spoke a bit on her own personal experience doing history research about the Ancient Mediterranean, which included archaeological work.

In all honesty, Professor Johnston is the reason I am now graduating with an archaeology major. Before she talked about her own experience with archaeology, I had not even considered that it was a field that one could pursue. Looking back on how I grew up, archaeology was always something that directly and indirectly interested me quite a lot. From a very young age I had a strong hyperfixation with mythology. My biggest interest was dragons, but any mythological creature or fantastical story would entirely hold my attention. This meant that indigenous folklore, religion, and belief systems from cultures all around the world often ended up on my radar. I also grew up with an interest in old items. My parents and grandparents were all avid thrift shoppers and believed very strongly in collecting and reusing items. The result was that I basically had no choice but to love used items. In elementary school, this got to the point of me digging through the back of thrift shops almost as a hobby, as well as digging through free give away boxes at bus stops, and even just picking up random lost or discarded items. Growing up, I also often had access to old abandoned boats, cars, and other structures in Southeast, Alaska, spending a lot of time exploring and picking through all sorts of abandoned items that I felt had a story to tell. From these locations I often collected things like books, coins, old pieces of technology, and even animal bones.

I'm not sure how it took me as long as it did to realize that archaeology was the field for me. I think mainly for a while I didn't really understand that it was an actual field I could do for a career. Whenever I thought about archaeology, I generally associated it

with movies like the 1999 *The Mummy* or *Indiana Jones* and the many fantasy books I read that followed similar storylines. It took meeting a professor who had personally been involved in actual archaeological work to make me realize that it was indeed a real field of study that did occur in the world, and that it wasn't as unreal and fantastical a job position as professional sorcerer. In the end, the fact that I found archaeology is more than I could have ever dreamed for myself. It is the one field that fits so exactly with everything I cared about as a child, and I don't think there is any other position that could fit me better.

Of course, finding a position that fits you well does not necessarily mean the work is done with finding your path. For me it was definitely only the beginning. As interesting and diverse the class options are in Western's Archaeology program, there were still a bunch of pieces missing for me. There are many secondary topics that have always been very important to me and, if I had solely followed the Archaeology major, I would have completely missed out on the chance to learn more about them. I was lucky though, and did eventually find my way towards those topics. As a result, I am currently set to graduate in a few weeks with six minors, including the Honors program.

First and foremost, I will be graduating with the Spanish Language Minor and the Latin American Studies Minor. Though my mother is from the US, my father is from and grew up in Chile, and so I am mixed race latine. I've been bilingual my whole life having done the K-12 Spanish Immersion Program in my school district so as to learn both my inherited languages alongside each other. I had always planned to do a Spanish Language major or minor at Western, simply because I have always had being fluent in spanish as a big part of my academic and personal identity. The Latin American Studies

minor though, was something I stumbled into. My first quarter, I had to choose a random class to get my credit count up to full time. The first class in a two part Latin American History course just happened to be the only class that worked with my schedule and also held some interest for me. Latin American history represents both my cultural background and the overall locational area I hope to do archaeology in.

Later on, I took a few Environmental Studies classes simply as electives based on my interests in environmental protection, and quickly realized that it interested me enough to take more classes. After taking a couple more ENVS classes for fun, I knew it wouldn't be too hard to take a few more and complete the Environmental Studies minor program. I did a similar thing with geology, though I took my very first geology class to fulfill the science lab class general university requirement. As for my Religion & Culture minor, I don't actually remember why I took my first religion class. All I remember is that I had a very good experience in that basic introduction class, learning history but with a focus on religion and how the two intertwine.

Overall, all my minor programs are not just side projects, they are also meant to support my field in Archaeology. I originally reached out to each program because I thought they all represented a different field that interested me, and before coming to Western, I definitely always viewed them as all being completely separate interests. As I started taking courses from each program though, I realized just how much many of the classes overlapped. Some of the overlap might be obvious, like LA Studies and Religion & Culture representing the overlap between history and anthropology. Some were less obvious, like the fact that many Environmental Studies classes turned out to be entirely focused around a combination of environmental research and major anthropological

work. Geology was the last program I joined, having realized that learning about rocks, sedimentary environments, and fossils is very helpful when it comes to analyzing and understanding archaeological digs.

I think that finding each of these programs made me discover what kind of archaeologist I want to be. First of all, I want to be involved in Latin American Archaeological work. That does not necessarily need to be all that I do, but I want to be involved as it is the closest I will ever get to being involved in projects that I personally have a connection with. I would also love to work on projects that focus on religion and belief systems as a driving cultural force in a community. It would also interest me to do work with ethnographers and try to understand how people used to interact with their environment, and how that correlates with how more modern cultures interact with environments.

The last pieces of the puzzle for me came from the two field schools I took while at Western. The first was the summer after my freshman year at Western. I had originally planned to take the ANTH#312: Field Course in Archaeology, run by Dr. Jerald Ek but instead ended up finding the opportunity to take a unique Environmental Studies based field school called the Redfish School of Change. This field school included three weeks of camping on the San Juan islands, both on the Washington and BC side. The project focused on working with indigenous communities on each island, both learning cultural practices like traditional canoe culture from them and helping out with projects like pulling up invasive blackberries on their land. This field school helped me start the process of thinking like a modern anthropologist in ways that the purely textbook based introduction to anthropology classes did not. I learned the concept of working for a

community during archaeological research, rather than expecting the community to work for me. This field school taught me how to begin to decolonize how I thought about archaeological work, and start moving forward toward finding my own version of archaeology. A version where I hope to never make a community feel the way archaeologists and anthropologists of the past made people feel.

The second field school was a course I just completed not two weeks ago. It represents perhaps the most important part of my academic history at Western. I finally got the chance to take the Western ANTH#312: Field Course in Archaeology after it having been canceled two summers in a row as a result of COVID 19. I had been impatiently waiting to take this class since I chose to take Redfish instead my first year. In the end though, it was well worth the wait. This interpretation of the field school follows a particular line of thought: the idea of decolonization. This is done primarily through something called “indigenous archaeology”. This version of archaeology is unique because it centers indigenous communities and community involvement. It is meant to function "with, for, and by" members of the local indigenous communities (Atalay, 283). With the terrible history in anthropology of so many forefathers having been grave robbers and doing “archaeology” in similarly unethical ways, the biggest step towards reparations is involving those who actually care, know about, and have a personal connection to the items and history being studied (Atalay, 287).

To make this field school come to life, Western partnered with the Stillaguamish Tribe down in Arlington, WA, working on a site on tribal lands that the tribe wanted to be excavated. The site is called *ḥwíq'wíḥwalqwu?* or “Blue Water”, referring to the site being found on a bluff just above the banks of the Stillaguamish river. The site was chosen for

its proximity to other sites where artifacts have already been found, and for its prime spot along the river that fits in exactly with the type of location where Stillaguamish peoples took residence. The focus of the project, rather than simply finding artifacts, was in the creation of community and collaboration with the Stillaguamish Tribe. Alongside the topic of indigenous archaeology, is the idea of “community archaeology”. Community archaeology is meant to center indigenous communities as being the main lead of the research process (Londoño, 389). It gives them sovereignty over all the research collected on their history, and allows for them to have “active participation” in the project (Londoño, 389).

I am incredibly grateful that this particular version of the Western archaeology field school is the version I got to take. Instead of just talking about decolonization and reparations with no actions to back it up, we actually did archaeological work that the local tribe wanted us to do. We participated in both archaeological work and anthropological work with an indigenous community that is still alive and well with many members who could have been directly blood related to the individuals who made or used the artifacts found on the site. This project is certainly not unique though. Across the US, slowly efforts have been increasing towards creating a more ethical field of study, so that the new generation of anthropologists will not make the same mistakes as the past. One example of such a project was the Field Methods in Indigenous Archaeology project that was done in collaboration between the University of Washington and the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon (Gonzales et al, 87). This collaboration was an archaeological and ethnographic research project that was created with the consent of the Grande Ronde community and

both included the members of their Historic Preservation Office in the research work, as well as gave them authority to accept or veto any part of the research process (Gonzalez et al, 90). This particular project was a big inspiration for Western's own field school this year.

Our field school started off with a week on the Western campus learning compass, mapping, surveying, and plant identifying skills with Dr. Ek. Starting the second week of the quarter, we finally went out to the site. For the next four weeks we learned how to dig Shovel Test Pits and to analyze sediment and potential artifacts. The last week we also dug multiple full archaeological excavations units as a class. Throughout the length of the course, we also did what the tribe called "Community Days". These days were once a week where members of the Stillaguamish tribe took time out of their day to teach us about their culture. One of these days included a rowing trip in a traditional Stillaguamish canoe. Another day included learning different skills like flint knapping, plant identification, and atlatl throwing. We were also told many stories and sung many songs from Stillaguamish culture. A big part of indigenous archaeology is understanding that people with indigenous versus Western background tend to approach research and the understanding of culture and artifacts very differently (Atalay, 292). During these community days, the tribe helped us understand some of their perspectives.

Overall, the field school was incredibly informative and I learned much more than I expected I would. There were a couple experiences that stood out to me the most though. The main one was that my Shovel Test Pit group was the group to find the very first high probability lithic artifact. This artifact was a human modified flaked stone tool of

some sort. It was a very important artifact as its finding marked the site as a legitimate archaeological site. When we first found it, I was excited but I did not feel very intensely about it. The moment where it truly sank in that I had found my first actual artifact in my career as an archaeologist was during the community day we had that week.

While we were with the tribe, one of the members, Sam Barr, made a point to publicly thank my Shovel Test Pit group for having found the artifact. This moment was what made me finally feel proud that I had helped find an artifact. I don't think I could ever follow a version of archaeology that looked for artifacts just for artifacts sake. I only felt the joy of having made a discovery once I felt that those who had a personal connection to the artifact were benefiting from my discovery. That feeling of being thanked for finding the artifacts that once belonged to someone's ancestors really solidified for me that a decolonized, nonwhite savior version of archaeology is the only one I could ever be a part of. I never ever want to be in a situation where I am taking from people who's history I am researching. I only want to give all that I can and help where I am wanted, otherwise I'd prefer to not be involved at all.

Another of the more important experiences was simply a normal day on the site. We were just starting to learn the proper procedure to dig 2x1m excavation units. While Dr. Ek taught us different excavation methods, the tribe brought a class of tribal youth aged from elementary school to high school out to the site to join us. The youth were included in our class learning, and even helped us begin to dig the excavation units. Learning alongside these much younger students was a really amazing experience. It was great to be able to see first hand how excited they were to learn and be involved in the project, especially considering this location could easily hold artifacts that belonged

to their direct ancestors. It reminded me just why and who we are meant to be doing this work for.

The last experience in the field school that truly affected me was the closing ceremony. The Saturday after the last week of the field school, the tribe hosted a ceremony for our class that functioned much like a graduation of sorts. The ceremony focused on the importance of the continued collaboration between Western Washington University and the Stillaguamish Tribe. They told us stories and sang cultural songs, alongside a gift giving ceremony. Each of the Western students brought a gift of some sort that had meaning for them and facilitated the sharing of some of their background to the rest of us. The tribe also had their own gifts to give us including things like traditional local teas and t-shirts to remember the program. The biggest focus of the day was in highlighting how well the collaboration had worked, and the tribe's desire to continue this project for years to come. The expectation that was set with all the students that day was that, since we had become involved with the project, we would continue to stay at least peripherally involved throughout its existence. We now all have a longstanding invite to any future closing ceremonies and program activities for one main reason: so as to not be the typical anthropologists who learn and take what they can from tribe's before up and disappearing, we must stay involved. In a way, we are now all connected through this project, and will be, until we help see it to the end.

Some of the other lessons I learned from this experience are ones I hope to always remember. The first, while basic, is one that I think is easily forgotten and ignored in the modern day of technology: always ask before you take photos or videos. When it comes to the sharing of culture, some things are not meant to be captured and

shared indiscriminately. If you ever find yourself privy to a cultural experience not of your own background, it is good practice to be wary of how you choose to record that experience. Another is that, in archaeology, finders keepers is simply not an acceptable argument you can make. Unless it is your own cultural background and ancestors that you are researching, nothing you ever find belongs to you in any way, shape, or form. Lastly, if someone chooses to share their culture with you, your first order of business is to shut up and listen. It is not necessary for you to make comments or, depending on context, even ask questions. If someone is sharing with you, they will share what they want and feel comfortable sharing, and should not be pushed into more or talked over so they don't get to share as much as they might have.

In the end, I believe that without having sought out all these different experiences at Western, I would have had a much more difficult time finding a version of archaeology that fit with the ideals and interests I hold close. The Spanish and Latin American Studies minor programs will help pave my way for work in Latin America. Geology and Environmental Studies will help me analyze the natural world in the locations I am working in and better understand how the people might have interacted with their environment. The Religion & Culture minor gives me a basic understanding of belief systems that will hopefully assist with understanding different religious and folkloric backgrounds. The two field schools, highlighting particularly the Blue Water Stillaguamish Site Project, helped me learn to properly connect it all to the modern communities of people who's history I will be studying, and learn to first and foremost think of them before I do a single piece of research.

In the future, I hope to always do the best I can to learn even more about each of these topics as a whole. More than that though, I hope to always remember that my job as an archaeologist is to work and research for others before myself. Indigenous archaeology and all the work that goes into achieve it fully, is the only archaeology I have yet come to know that I would be proud to be involved in. In the end, I really got a lot out of my time at Western Washington University. I hope to stay in contact with the members of the Stillaguamish community I have gotten to know so well over this summer, as well as the many other individuals I met during my time at Western. Perhaps these relationships will be what lead me to my next step in finding my path.

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