

REFLECTIONS OF A NEW LECTURER ON THE DAY OF ARCHAEOLOGY 2013

July 26, 2013 [Sara Perry](#) [Day of Archaeology 2013](#), [Digital Archaeology](#), [Education](#), [Excavation](#)
[academic](#), [collaboration](#), [University of York](#)



Collaborative video about our Heritage Practice module and BA Heritage Studies students at York

I've participated in the Day of Archaeology since its initiation two years ago, when my [post](#) (also see my 2012 post [here](#)) coincided very closely with my appointment at the [University of York \(UK\)](#). I have often struggled to summarise my day-to-day professional activities because, [as I've discussed before](#), they are diverse and not evidently recognisable as the stereotype of 'archaeology'. I adore my work because of such diversity—it is always different, it is of-the-moment, it is linked to so many exciting people (curators, designers, IT experts, archaeologists and heritage officers, media specialists, journalists, etc.), it is incredibly public, and hence it comes with a deep feeling of being engaged in something that truly impacts upon other individuals. Our great [Cultural Heritage Management](#) and [Digital Heritage](#) students have themselves been very successful in progressing to jobs with a comparable degree of variety and influence.

But the struggle to encapsulate my work has only intensified as my career has developed, owing to the fact that academia pulls you into so many administrative roles that push far beyond one's expert interests. As a result, my days often entail (among other things) hours of email-writing and phone calls, organising courses and modules and reading lists and guest speakers, coordinating rooms and equipment and related specialist infrastructure, negotiating opportunities and insurance and accommodations and tools for the teams that I supervise, and reading drafts of others' research.

It has been brokering this explosion in duties that I have found an especially difficult aspect of academic life, because it tends to pull you away from the very thing that is most inspiring to you—and, indeed, the thing that you are actually recognised in the wider world for: your own research. Some aspects of the job help to reinforce or elaborate your research, including preparing for teaching, in that they demand that you scour the literature and critically interrogate the emerging scholarship. But other aspects seem a million miles away from study and discovery and analysis and the other energising components of the research process.

These points have been on my mind lately as I take advantage of the couple of months of the year outside of the term-time calendar when I have more freedom to invest in my own research endeavours. I leave for [Çatalhöyük](#) next week with my great team from York, Southampton and Ege University in Turkey; our [Gender & Digital Culture](#) project is really starting to blossom (we were featured on Wednesday on the [London School of Economics' Impact blog!](#)); I have a couple of articles and chapters now in press, and two grant applications out for review; and I'm coordinating some new projects/events for the upcoming year. But much of this work has only come together with substantial support from others: colleagues, research assistants, friends, etc.

My greatest learning experience of 2012-2013, then, has surely been in navigating this collaborative form of practice, because it has necessitated a complete shift in my intellectual mindset. As a student, I was trained to work independently—a not uncommon predicament for

humanists. I would do my own study, analyse my own data, and write up my own work. However, as I've developed as a scholar, it's become clear that not only is such an approach actually impossible for me now, but it was also a questionable way to have been educated in the first place. It's questionable both because professional life demands that one be adept at collaboration, and because the best ideas and scholarship come about through learning with and from others who see the world in different ways.

The whole nature of how I intellectualise has had to change in order to accommodate this collaborative shift—and it has been a real and profound challenge for me. I'm having to teach myself how to relinquish control to others. I'm having to recognise that I can no longer do everything on my own and that I have to trust others to carry projects forward in my absence and help me. I'm having to learn to be comfortable with the fact that sometimes my role is now purely one of project manager, but that even here I can make a difference. Such a change in perspective has also meaningfully impacted on how I teach others, because I am concerned to ensure that my students don't get educated in a vacuum, expecting that scholarly life will or should be an isolated activity. From my experience, nothing is more misconceived than the trope of the academic as a solitary figure. You are constantly surrounded by people—whether physically or metaphorically—who need things from you and vice versa. It's a disservice to perpetuate the notion that independent, single-authored research is the paragon of scholarship, not least because even when such research is published, it *always* comes about through engagement with others. It's also a disservice to budding academics to insinuate to them that such a model of practice is even plausible, because what results is real disconcertion when everyday reality—the multitasking and administrative load, etc.—proves it impossible and your whole epistemological outlook on research then is forced to change.

On this Day of Archaeology, when I'm preparing to take my team out for fieldwork next week, and working with my colleagues on multiple other projects, I'm very reflective about its collaborative essence. Collaboration is what sums up my activities today, and it's what now characterises me as a scholar. And, honestly, I can't imagine good research coming about in any other fashion.

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