

## An Archaeologist in Your Room

A class activity to be done in parts on two consecutive days  
(20 minutes first day; 1 hour second day)

**Goal:** *Students will experience learning about contemporary people from objects using familiar information in order to understand how archaeologists learn about people from artifacts.*

TEKS Social Studies Skills Objectives: *Students will*

1. *organize and interpret information from a list;*
2. *consider options, consider advantages and disadvantages, choose and implement a solution, and evaluate the effectiveness of the solution;*
3. *use a decision-making process to identify a situation that requires a decision, gather information, identify options, predict consequences, and take action to implement a decision.*

### Day 1 Class Discussion (20 minutes)

**Teachers:** Set up the following scenario:

*It is A.D. 4000. The world has been covered by a vast layer of volcanic ash. All the written records have disintegrated, and a horrible virus has destroyed all electronic files.*

*Dr. Adriana Hall has found a strange metal object sticking out of a hole in the earth and hypothesizes that it is an archaeological site, a midden, of the mysterious Tsumi tribe. She prepares and presents a research proposal which succeeds in earning a grant to conduct an archaeological investigation. She selects colleagues with various specialties to work on her team.*

*What Dr. Hall has found is actually the remains of your room. What do you think Dr. Hall's team of scientists might conjecture about these items (write on board—or bring in a similar assortment)?*

1. TV set
2. 1 gym shoe
3. 7 nickles, 2 dimes
4. A piggy bank
5. A basketball
6. A dozen CDs
7. A cell phone
8. 2 toothpaste tubes, one full, one squeezed
9. 14 plastic Dr. Pepper bottles
10. A stone arrowhead

(Generally, let students follow their own ideas, but here are some back-up questions.)

*What, if anything, might they learn about the “Tsumi” from reading the label of the CD? If they had the equipment to play it, would they learn more?*

*Assuming the TV set no longer worked (and there were no broadcast stations anyway), what might the team guess about it? Could it be a “Tsumi” altar? Could it be used to cook food?*

*What could they learn from the basketball? Would they be able to connect it to the gym shoe, or might they think it had some mysterious connection to other plastic items such as the Dr. Pepper bottles?*

*What might they think of the word “Adidas” written on the one shoe?*

*What does the total collection, all the contents of the midden found together, tell us about its owner?*

*What misinformation might it give?  
(For example, the stone arrowhead, found apart from its natural surroundings)*

*What can you say about learning from artifacts?*

**Announce individual homework assignments** (students should allow 15 minutes):

*Find a “midden”—a drawer, box, or surface in your room—and list at least ten assorted items from it. Bring the list to class with you tomorrow.*

## **Day 2 Class Activities (1 hour)**

### **Reorganization (5 minutes)**

Teacher: Take up the lists and give credit to students who completed the assignment.

Use a papercutter to dramatically cut the names off the headings of all the papers, leaving just the lists. Ask students to select a partner (or use your own formula for pairing) as you quickly select enough good lists to go around. (Discard incomplete or illegible lists, or lists with distracting items on them, e.g., condom.)

### **Paired Student Assignment (20 minutes)**

**Teachers’ Directions:** *“Imagine that you are an archeologist like Dr. Adriana Hall in A.D. 4000. Written records have been destroyed, a terrible virus has eaten all electronic files, and the world has been covered by a layer of ash. You and your partner have come across a midden, a cache of strange items—the ones on this list—but you don’t know the proper name or function of the items.*

With your partner discuss what you have found: possible uses of each item, who the owner might have been—age, gender, etc. Take about 15 minutes to do this.

### **Two-Minute Oral Reports (15 minutes)**

**Teachers:** Call on various pairs to report on their findings. There will not be time for everyone to make a report; choose volunteers and use your best judgment based on what you observed monitoring student conversations.

Use time between reports to reinforce good examples of how students learned from found artifacts and how students and scientists sometimes guess wrong and “learn” things which are not, in fact, true. Reinforce the point that the objects were found together and therefore probably belonged to the same person or family. An item found in isolation would tell us much less about its owner.

### **Closure (10 minutes)**

**Teachers:** Thank the students who presented their cases. Invite comments from others who were not able to present—unusual things on their lists that they might like to comment upon, for example. Can the students imagine how much information might be added if a photograph, drawing, or even a diary in a known language was found with the objects? If such an object *was* on a group’s list, remind students how it added to the understanding.

**Closing Question** (if time allows): Assume that everything on the lists was brought to school on the day of the great calamity, and 2,000 years later the objects were found together. In that case, what might a future archaeologist be able to tell about our class in Texas in the early 21st century? (Age, interests, popular culture items, clothing styles, etc.)

Remind students that any ancient artifacts they find, such as arrow points, woven sandals or mats, pottery sherds, skeletal remains, or grinding stones, should be left where they were found. Such information may be helpful and could lead to further discoveries in the area. The find may be reported to the Center for Archaeological Research at the University of Texas at San Antonio Department of Anthropology, the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory in Austin, the Southern Texas Archaeological Association, or a responsible agency or individual such as the National Park Service or the social studies teacher.

**Follow-up Activity:** As you read about ancient people in your history text or view information in videos or visit a museum on a field trip, remind students of this activity. There is much ancient people can tell us about themselves; it is up to us to use our best thinking skills to glean accurate information from what they left. ✎