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The following lessons were created by **Kathy Nesteby**, a teacher participating in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute for Teachers entitled Touch the Past: Archaeology of the Upper Mississippi River Region.

How Do We Know About the Past?

Grade Level- 6 (can be adapted for 3-12)

Subjects- Social Studies

Objectives- Students will be able to explain how historians and archaeologists learn about and interpret the past.

Standards- 6th grade California Social Studies standards

Research, Evidence, and Point of View

1. Students assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources and draw sound conclusions from them.
2. Students detect the different historical points of view on historical events and determine the context in which the historical statements were made (the questions asked, sources used, author's perspectives).

Historical Interpretation

1. Students recognize that interpretations of history are subject to change as new information is uncovered.

Duration- 1-2 class periods (45-90 minutes)

Materials/Supplies -

History/social studies textbook

"How do we know about the past?" worksheet

Scientific American or newspaper articles about new archaeological finds

Optional- pictures or reproductions of ancient artifacts

Vocabulary-

archaeologist

excavate

historian

midden

artifact

context

stratigraphy

Background-

In California, the sixth grade curriculum begins with the study of prehistoric times. Because our understanding about early humans is based on limited evidence, our conclusions are frequently changing when new evidence is found. Students often come into sixth grade thinking that their textbook is based on absolute, 100% "truth". This exercise, along with other lessons at the beginning of the year, is meant to get kids thinking about how and where historians and archaeologists get their information, and how our understanding of the past can change with new discoveries.

Several activities at the beginning of the year get students thinking about how historians and archaeologists learn about the past. These include:

- Who killed Paul Dudden? The first week of school students try to solve a murder mystery (with the help of an Agatha Christie dinner theater kit.) Students watch a video, view the "crime scene", analyze the evidence, and write a persuasive essay about who they think committed the murder. Then, a connection is made between the murder mystery and our study of ancient history. Just like the crime scene, we only have an incomplete view of past events, and, like the suspect's interviews, we can't be sure about the reliability of individual accounts.
- Introduction to Archaeology Powerpoint
- Why is the Past Important? From *Intrigue of the Past*, p. 9-10
- It's in the Garbage- From *Intrigue of the Past*, p.34-38
- Personal artifacts projects- After studying how historians learn about the past, students choose four objects that are important to them. Then, they explain how historians 2000 years from now might interpret the object, how they would date it, and whether or not it would be misleading.

Setting the Stage-

Before beginning this activity, students should:

- Be introduced to archaeology
- Define key vocabulary words

- Complete the garbology activity
- See examples of news articles within the past year or two in which our interpretation of the past has changed. For example, "Newly Unearthed Painted Shells Show Neandertals Were Homo sapiens's Mental Equals" (www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=neandertal-art-human) and "Middle Eastern Stone Age Tool Mark Earlier Date for Human Migration out of Africa" (www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=middle-eastern-stone-age-tools)

Procedure-

I. Introduction- Discuss how our interpretation of history is based on incomplete evidence and how our understandings can change. Discuss examples from the Dudden murder mystery and Scientific American articles.

II. Turn to first page of ancient hunter/gatherer chapter in history textbook. Pass out "How do we know about the past?" handout.

III. Teacher Modeling

A. Ask a student to begin reading chapter out loud. Stop him when he reads a key fact about ancient people. For example, "Ancient people moved frequently." Write the fact in the "Text says," column of the chart, then ask the class, "How do historians know this?"

B. Brainstorm ideas for how we know, such as through ancient artifacts, observing historical hunter-gatherers, artifacts, etc. Decide which method are the most likely and write them on the "Archaeological Evidence" side of the chart.

IV. Guided practice

A. Have another student read out loud, stop at a key fact, and have students fill out the chart by themselves or with a partner.

B. Review the evidence together.

V. Independent practice

A. Have students complete the remainder of the chapter and chart silently, filling in three key facts and possible evidence independently.

B. When students are finished with the chart, review and discuss the information with the class. Also discuss how our understanding of the past might change with new evidence.

Closure- Students answer the Closing Question.

Evaluation- Collect student charts and closing questions and review. Students will also be evaluated with their Personal Artifact Projects.

Links/Extension- Students are encouraged to find and bring in newspaper and/or

magazine articles about new archaeological finds.

References-

Intrigue of the Past, U.S. Dept. of the Interior and Bureau of Land Management

Name: _____ Pd. ____

Date: _____

How Do We Know About the Past?

Text says . . .	Archaeological Evidence

Closing Question:

Imagine that archaeologists find new evidence that changes our understanding about something in the textbook. What new information might they find?
