

Abstract

This article takes a reflexive approach to an archaeological outreach initiative, the Hands-on-Humanities Project, and particularly the case study of the Tomb in a Box, in order to model the need for more critical pedagogy. Object-based learning can be transformative by enhancing skills, building confidence, and developing deep empathy. However, this will be achieved only if we dare to discuss, alongside our successes, the challenges faced and mistakes made along the path of project evolution. For our Tomb in a Box, this involved considering issues of stereotyping, neo-colonialism, and elitism in our disciplines. Through uncomfortable engagement with these questions, in collaboration with our students, partner educators, and academic colleagues, we were able to develop new activities and tools that moved us closer to achieving our stated goals of building skills, confidence, and educational aspirations in disadvantaged communities. This paper details our personal experience throughout our project's transformation and the emotional rollercoaster we traveled—from the highs of excitement to discomfiting lows, and finally inspiration—in our quest to ensure a valuable learning experience for our students. It goes beyond reflection, which involves questioning existing practices, to reflexion, where introspection is iterative and linked to a desire to induce systematic change. In sharing this critical reflexion, we hope to encourage open and transparent discussions about our own learning processes as educators.

Background¹

Hands-on teaching has become a staple of archaeological outreach. The immediacy of material culture makes archaeology an incredibly powerful tool for engagement, particularly with disadvantaged groups (Poce et al. 2020:47). However, this also implies an additional need for reflexivity, transparency, and care in our outreach work. The reflexive turn in archaeology has encouraged the emergence of an increasingly introspective discipline, with a growing interest in the history of archaeological practice and its engagement with particular elitist and extractive ideologies, as well as exploration of the ways in which our treatment of material from the past informs identity formation today (Roller et al. 2020). This has also impacted how archaeology is taught, with more and more educators, mainly in higher education but also at primary and secondary levels, considering how to encourage the popularity of archaeology while critiquing the ways in which the discipline has been used to support oppressive structures and popular stereotypes (e.g., Hamilakis 2004; Hutchings and La Salle 2014; Thum et al. 2024).

This process of reflexivity is evidenced in the development of the Hands-on-Humanities Project, an Australian not-for-profit organization founded to address the

inequality in educational opportunities suffered by 12- to 15-year-old students at disadvantaged schools in rural and regional areas. The project was preceded by an engagement program, established at the University of Melbourne in 2016, with the primary aims of providing an object-based learning (OBL) opportunity seeking to assist in improving learning and information retention outcomes, raising educational aspiration levels, and promoting intercultural awareness. The essence of the program was, and remains, the active incorporation of objects into the learning and teaching environment. The object becomes the central communication point which facilitates a concrete understanding of abstract concepts.

The educational disadvantages faced by students in regional and rural public schools as a consequence of geographical isolation, socioeconomic status, low educational aspirations, and lack of diverse and broad opportunities has been extensively studied and reported on in Australia (Halsey 2018; Lamb, Huo, et al. 2020; Lamb, Jackson, et al. 2015). Most initiatives set up to address these inequalities have focused on large-scale infrastructure projects or STEM-oriented subjects. However, one of the major challenges faced by schools outside metropolitan areas is being able to attract a diversity of teachers able to work across the curriculum. Often subjects are unavailable to students because of a lack of specialty teachers. We wanted to contribute on a small and personal scale by engaging students with ancient history—a subject close to our own hearts. Our experience in the study and teaching of ancient Egypt, and our teaching collection of replica artifacts, provided a foundation on which our programs were designed.

In this article, we take a reflexive approach to the Hands-on-Humanities Project, and particularly the case study of the Tomb in a Box, in order to model the need for more critical pedagogy in the discipline. Archaeological outreach has the potential to be transformative: by enhancing skills, building confidence, and developing deep intercultural understanding. This can only be achieved, however, if we dare to discuss not only our successes but also the challenges we have faced and the mistakes we have made. The Tomb in a Box was one of our first custom-designed teaching tools intended to embrace all the elements that attracted students to archaeology while promoting literacy and observation and communication skills across different age levels. However, it also had the potential to reinforce existing stereotypes about archaeology and Egypt that went against our aims of cultural inclusivity and empathy. As such, its use exposed potential critiques and challenged us with important questions. By engaging with these issues head-on, in collaboration with our students, partner educators, and academic colleagues, we developed new tools which continue to move us closer to achieving our goals. The description that follows details our own experience with the Tomb in a Box as our emotions ranged from excitement to discomfort, and then inspiration, in our quest to ensure a valuable interaction for our students. In sharing this

critical reflection, we hope to encourage open and transparent discussions about our own learning processes as educators.

Why Ancient Egypt?

Before we even consider the Tomb in a Box, a question that may spring to mind is why the Hands-on-Humanities Project began with a focus on ancient Egypt, given that our audience was students living in rural and regional Australian towns. We were motivated by three key drivers. The first is that because of historic and ongoing media attention on both traditional and social media channels, and frequent “blockbuster” museum exhibitions, a worldwide deep public interest in the pharaonic period of ancient Egypt persists. The rediscovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun and its intact contents is of course the best-known example of the impact archaeological finds can have in the public arena, recognized as the impetus for what has become known as “Egyptomania”. Our experience is that at least one student in each class cohort will come to us after the session expressing their fascination with Egyptian culture and their desire to be an Egyptologist. The fact that it is such a popular topic of interest means that students are often more open to engaging with our curriculum and participating in our program. However, this also means that there is a balance to be sought in responding to this interest without allowing the stereotypes of ancient Egypt to dominate unquestioned.

Secondly, the original University of Melbourne team were specialists in the fields of research and teaching encompassed in the project modules. Sharyn Volk had been teaching on the subject “Egypt Under the Pharaohs” over a number of years and researching ancient Egyptian and Nubian funerary figurines. Andrew Jamieson, who conducted the project with Sharyn in the first year, is an expert on ancient Egyptian pottery, and he has extensive experience curating Egyptian collections and teaching courses focusing on the archaeology of the Ancient Near East. Annelies Van de Ven has taught a range of Ancient Near Eastern subjects and has expertise stemming from her research into the archives of early European Egyptologists. Our combined level of familiarity with ancient Egypt gave us a great deal to work with when developing an outreach program and provided a strong basis for creativity and experimentation. In cases where we choose to work outside our own area of expertise, we make sure to not only educate ourselves but also to work with external partners who can bring the same level of deep knowledge to the fore. An exemplar of this approach is our colleague Heba Abd el-Gawad who is not only a specialist in the reception of ancient Egyptian history but also has expertise including lived experience of present-day Egyptian culture, which greatly enriches the conversations we can have in the classroom. Our work with Heba is detailed later in this paper.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is that the list of ancient cultures specified for the Year 7 history curriculum in the state of Victoria, where our project is based, includes Egypt along with China, Greece, India, and Rome (Victorian Curriculum and

Assessment Authority 2017). Ancient Egypt remains one of the most popular options chosen by schools, though discussions with educators since starting our project have shown that interest is shifting towards geographically less distant places. To reflect this shift teachers are required to select one from the group of Greece, Rome, and Egypt and then either India or China. When teaching they must engage with the key learning outcomes detailed in the curriculum. By the end of Years 7 and 8 history courses, students are expected to be able to articulate reasons for change and continuity in civilizations over time. They should have the capacity to describe the effects of change on societies, individuals, and groups and to examine events and developments from the perspective of people who lived at the time. Historical empathy and the understanding that the same event can be interpreted in different ways is a vital aspect of this study. Students also need to demonstrate an ability to sequence events within a chronological framework and they learn how to identify different types of sources, compare them, and draw out relevant information to answer questions in a written or spoken text. Lastly, the curriculum stipulates that the significance and importance of the conservation of the remains of the past must be understood.

The Tomb in a Box

Once we had decided on the topic, we had to consider how to integrate these curricular aims into our hands-on activities. Details of our suite of teaching activities—which feature a discussion unpacking the importance of context for understanding artifacts; typology exercises involving everyday objects to highlight the nature of most archaeological finds; an excavation simulation; potsherd analysis and reconstruction; and a god/goddess card game employed across a range of age groups—have been described in previous articles (Abd el-Gawad et al. 2024; Van de Ven and Volk 2019, 2020, 2021; Volk and Jamieson 2018). We continually fine-tune these activities to meet the needs of our students. In debrief sessions, partner teachers share ideas for modifications based on their professional experience and their expert feedback is then used to develop the project. For example, a request for more self-directed learning ideas motivated us to seek out innovative technological tools that could be deployed in a classroom.

In 2018, we began to work with the technology provided by the London-based digital startup, Museum in a Box, to create a new teaching support tool that combined digital engagement with hands-on learning. They helped us give voice to our objects, and the first Story in a Box took the form of our Tomb in a Box. We chose the ancient Egyptian tomb format at the time to connect to the school curriculum which was focused on cultural comparison rather than archaeology per se. This box was decorated on its exterior with images of the cliffs in the Valley of the Kings and on the inside with stylized typical New Kingdom tomb wall paintings (Figure 1). The replica objects housed in the box represented a sample of what might be placed with the deceased in their tomb.

They included a 3D printed sarcophagus (Fitzwilliam Museum E.1.1835); a 3D printed vessel (University of Melbourne Classics and Archaeology Collection 1968.0055); a reproduced Book of the Dead judgment scene from the Papyrus of Ani (British Museum EA10470,3) printed on modern Egyptian papyrus; four stone canopic jar replicas; replica statuettes of Osiris, Ma'at, Anubis, and Horus; a shabti replica; and a scarab amulet replica. Each object connected to our teaching material and the 3D printed objects linked to our discussions of reconstruction methods, while the god and goddess replicas provided an opportunity for students to review their ability to identify Egyptian deities. The remaining objects promoted a discussion of the ways in which material culture can point to ancient belief systems.²



Figure 1. View of the Tomb in a Box, interior. Photo by author.

The Egyptian mortuary context and pharaonic material culture would be recognizable to the students, allowing them to focus on skills acquisition. However, as we will see below, this focus was reconsidered when we reflected on the effects of the essentialization of Egyptian culture and archaeology to the materials found in elaborate tombs and the belief systems that they point to. An important aim for us in the employment of the Tomb in a Box in our classes was to ensure a progression to

independent learning. A vital element in the creation of this digital tool was therefore the formulation of the stories that would be told by the objects. The storytelling had to be engaging rather than simply presenting a standard set of information. We wanted to present stories that were recognizable in the lives of the students in our groups and that complemented their ongoing regular classroom activities. For example, one of our partner teachers at this time, Leo Cruz at Shepparton High School, gave his Year 7 students the task of writing a letter or travel journal as though they were visiting ancient Egypt. They were asked to describe the different things they might have seen on their journey and the connections that they made to their own lives. This approach inspired us to consider within a historical context any Australian travelers, scholars, and collectors who had traveled to Egypt, leading to the identification of two brothers who were particularly interested in ancient Egyptian antiquities: Edward Eustace Miller and Everard Studley Miller.

Born in the 1880s, the Miller brothers belonged to an important banking family in Victoria. As young, learned, upper-class men they were encouraged to travel and visited Egypt several times in the early 20th century. This was a period of great competition in Egypt when foreign archaeologists—and the colonizing powers that dispatched them—were extremely active. The Millers, who had developed an interest in ancient Egypt through their philological studies, participated in excavations and purchased antiquities, benefiting from the unequal system that the colonial context created and perpetuated.³ They passed on the benefits of their privilege in the form of the artifacts they collected and subsequently took home to Australia, including 32 objects donated in 1957 to the University of Melbourne via the Classical Association of Victoria (Elias 2010, 2012,).⁴ Records show that several of these objects were acquired by the eldest brother, Edward Eustace Miller, during his participation in the excavations led by W.M. Flinders Petrie at Lahun in 1919–1920 (Brunton 1920; Petrie et al. 1923) and subsequently at Sedment in 1920–1921 (Petrie and Brunton 1924). This connection led to the brothers' inclusion in the Artefacts of Excavation (AofE) project which aimed to create an online database of distributed artifacts from British excavations (see Artefacts of Excavation 2015). This research was a rich source for building narratives that engaged our students.

We incorporated the story of the Miller brothers by writing a postcard suggestive of communication from Edward, while on a trip in Egypt, back to his brother Everard in Melbourne (Figure 2). An extract from the text on this postcard reads: “The excavations at el-Lahun are progressing successfully and the site is absolutely magnificent.... I am sending some of the objects found during my travels. They all come from a tomb in the pyramid cemetery. A sketch of the tomb is included with this postcard. Professor Petrie was kind enough to offer these objects to us for our Egyptology collection in Melbourne.” In composing this text, we used phrasing taken from the archives and publications available in the Miller Papers, currently held by the Miller family and the subject of a biographical study by Paul Paffen (1992). The voice chosen to read

the postcard corresponded with Edward Miller's status as an upper-class Australian man and this was used as a launching point for the other objects in the Tomb in a Box and the activities driven by these objects. We formulated a series of questions on an activity sheet that the students can complete as they listen to the stories of the objects. Participation in this activity involves multilayered sensory engagement which demonstrates the capacity to promote a higher level of information retention (Chatterjee and Hannan 2016; Shams and Seitz 2008). Details on the physical form of the objects must be observed as attention is paid to the voiced story "told" by the object itself. Each student is given the opportunity to remove an object from the "tomb" and place it on the speaker box which activates the voice. The students listen to each object story and then respond in writing on their worksheets. Participants quickly formulate their own questions based on the tomb and replica objects which leads to further discussion. Who built these tombs? Why paint the walls if only a dead person will be in there? Why are the organs kept separate from the body? We facilitate these discussions, drawing on the objects to engage students' curiosity.



Figure 2. Postcard from the Tomb in a Box set. Photo by author.

Critical Reflexions

Feedback is an essential part of our teaching process and something we are looking to strengthen as we develop the program. We currently draw upon a limited amount of quantitative data, mainly in the form of examination results from sources such as the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which annually evaluates literacy and numeracy levels at schools across Australia through the use of standardized testing. Given more resources, not just for our project team but also for the school administrators and teachers who are currently stretched thin, we would like to enhance this with more targeted sampling of the students we work with both in terms of their literacy scores and also their educational pathways, which consist of, for example, their Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)⁵ subject choices or entry into tertiary study.

Given our current funding constraints, we work primarily with qualitative data. For this, we use a number of different methods that engage the students, teachers and project team. All written activity materials are retained and combined with our own notes from each session to assess engagement. Post-activity surveys allow students to provide comments on the sessions in their own words and give us an impression of their takeaways. To ensure ethical compliance, schools were always informed in advance of the research aims related to the project and, in particular, the intended uses of the survey data. Approval was sought from both the Victorian Department of Education and Training (Research Approval Letter reference 2016_003206) and the University of Melbourne Ethics Board (ID 1647530). These surveys also allow us to collect some quantitative data in the form of Likert scale results to assess opinions related to different aspects of student learning and intentions for further study. However, increased contact time and more stability in student participation⁶ are necessary to truly evaluate the success of our methods. We also hold informal debrief sessions with teachers and administrators at partner schools. These data are collated and compared during regular feedback review sessions where we write up project reports, new grant applications, and scientific communications.

Our internal review sessions serve as important moments of reflection and reflexion within our work. Reflection, as we define it, involves questioning existing practices to identify issues and inconsistencies between our aims and our practice (Schön 1983). Reflexion takes this a step further to include examining our own positioning and its potential for biased thinking with the aim of inducing a change in both our practice and the ideas underlying it (Hauerwas et al. 2021). This is especially important in subjects like archaeology, given the context of imperialistic and colonizing histories within which it operates, and their ongoing impacts. Simply reflecting on the situation and recognizing the existence of problems is insufficient without reflexivity and taking action through rectification, as it is vital we disrupt the framework of inequality upon which the discipline is built.

So, while we were very excited about the success of our box with the students, we felt it was important to stop and think critically about the framework we had chosen for our storytelling. We had clear reasons at the beginning of our project for selecting ancient Egypt as our topic, and the format we chose has certainly assisted in making the skills we are teaching more engaging. Project maturation, however, has forced us to ask ourselves searching questions about how we need to frame the narrative we had created with our teaching tools to ensure our students understand the prevailing systems of inequality. This was also motivated by feedback from our students: for example, their negative response to the upper-class accent of the voice selected to narrate the postcard and object descriptions. It was especially important to encourage our students to engage with the issues at play and then share conversation. Questions we considered included: Does the Tomb in a Box foreground Egyptomania tropes?

Where are the voices of the Egyptian people in this work? How do we deal with the role of the Millers in the extraction of cultural objects? What about the class disparity that their story embodies in relation to the socioeconomic background of the children at our schools? What are some new stories we could tell?

Even prior to the creation of the box, context was a word that re-emerged throughout our activities. It is the first term that we explain when introducing the Tomb in a Box exercise during the outreach sessions. We return to it in the typology exercise, highlighting the ways a single object defies full interpretation and emphasizing that it is only by examining objects in their contexts that we can construct a story about those who used them. Again, during the pottery analysis exercise, we discuss the importance of detailed recording on site to be able to make sense of fragmentary information. However, we noted that the students did not necessarily connect this message to important ethical considerations around the removal of objects from sites. Therefore, we incorporated debates on the extraction and restitution of objects into our classes. As Yannis Hamilakis (2004) already highlighted decades ago, critically reflexive pedagogy does not just implicate educators, but it also has the potential to empower students if applied to their activities. It is a common misconception that students of early secondary age shouldn't be exposed to the nuances of ethical and political debates because it is too difficult. We have learned through our continuing engagements that not only are they quite up to the challenge but are often more aware than many adults of the issues at play. We should also stop pretending that avoiding challenging arguments in teaching will somehow spare children from discomfort as they are able to access such discussions easily through other channels like social media. Teachers have expressed that conversations about identity politics and unequal power relations are occurring in their classrooms, whether they are in the lesson plan or not (Ferlazzo 2020a, 2020b; Lennon 2017). We felt the best way to help our students and teachers was to offer exercises and tools through which critical thinking, empathy, and communication are developed to promote respectful discussion.

From the outset of the project, we incorporated an activity in our sessions titled "Moral Dilemmas." We wanted to use a high-profile example that was recognizable, so generally we discuss the Rosetta Stone held in the collection of the British Museum. This is an object that is often cited in Year 7 history classes due to its connection to the decipherment of hieroglyphics and is thus familiar to many students. We begin our exercise by explaining the past use of the object and highlighting where it was found. We then ask where the students think it is kept today. This allows us to transition into the object's biography, its chain of "ownership" and scholarship that lead many to claim it as part of their history. The Rosetta Stone's history is useful as it complicates the prominent "we dug it up and so it is ours" narrative. We then ask the students to consider Egyptian calls for restitution. We collectively go through the arguments used against returning the Rosetta Stone, as well as those for its return, making sure to

consider issues such as paternalism, nationalism, and the Rosetta Stone's commercial value as a brand. Students are asked to close their eyes and through a show of hands provide their opinion based on the issues discussed. Those wanting to share could do so but no one is forced to disclose their opinion to their peers. When students are invited to voice their own thoughts in this way, with particular emphasis being put on explaining the rationale behind their ideas, they are able to build confidence as well as practice reflexivity.

The power of this activity was fully realized when our colleague Heba Abd el-Gawad, a resident of Cairo, led some of these sessions. She started by asking the students to each nominate one of their favorite personal objects. Responses included a diverse range of items including such things as a paintbrush, a book, and a mobile phone. Heba then positioned herself as a famous Egyptian archaeologist visiting Australia with the intention of gathering a range of artifacts to be packed up and sent back to her home country where they would be displayed in a new museum. Some students nominated a person as their most precious thing, leading to a discussion about the removal of human remains as a topic in certain classrooms. The students were then asked how they would feel if these important things—and indeed potentially the remains of a relative—were taken away and then displayed without reference to their story or lived experience. A discussion considering artifact repatriation from a place which is vastly removed from the practical experience of young people can result in only theoretical consequences being considered. If, however, the same concept is brought back into a personal realm an immediate connection is made and passionate ideas are more likely to flow. Unfortunately, Heba cannot always be with us on these classroom visits to provide essential insight into the Egyptian lived experience, but we have continued to follow the example she has set using the class divide evident in the Miller example to demonstrate another facet of inequality present in archaeological extraction.

As educators, this type of reflexive practice and co-creation with our colleagues in teaching and research, as well as with the students themselves, continues to transform the ways in which we deliver our activities. Given the short time that we have with each group (one double-period session which varies between schools but is only ever a maximum of two hours), we are somewhat limited in the extent of the Tomb in a Box discussions with our secondary school students. But we have imagined our tool being used as a launching point for other activities at all ages. We considered an inverted version of Leo Cruz's travel journal exercise in which students could write postcards imagining a visitor to their own town compelling them to reflect on what is considered familiar and what is exotic. In one idea, following a museum visit, students could be invited to research one specific type of object from the Tomb in a Box and then present it as a museum display for young adults like themselves, taking into consideration our ethical debates but also contemplating the types of communication they want to see. Another idea that emerged was a project considering what objects

they would want to select to represent their identity and beliefs, and of course the creation of a box that could somehow present that identity, and therefore the stories that students want to tell about themselves.

This final idea was the one we decided to implement, and it has since become a key element of our teaching. Importantly it responds to the global trend toward cultural polarization that our students are increasingly being drawn into as they live in a multicultural community. In Australia this manifests most clearly in the “history wars” terminology describing a continuing debate about the interpretation of the colonization of Australia and its impact on our First Peoples and the development of contemporary Australian society. Recently this intercultural discord became more pronounced as a function of the debate surrounding the “Voice” referendum of October 14, 2023 which asked all Australians who were registered to vote to decide if they wanted to constitutionally recognize our indigenous First Nations people and set up a body which would facilitate their voice being heard in parliament during deliberations on decisions that directly impact their lives. Many of the arguments presented against a positive outcome were based on fear rather than fact, and the referendum was unsuccessful. As evidence for living in a post-truth world continues to mount, we wanted to counter this rift through our work with secondary school students, who are at an age and time in their lives when they are formulating their own worldviews. We could see the potential for extending our Story in a Box concept and employing it as a tool to develop intercultural awareness and understanding, thereby enhancing the potential for social inclusion and belonging. This idea was our motivation for the creation of a new series of places in a box.

Co-Creative Boxes

At the outset of our project in 2016, we began working with a group of schools in the Goulburn Valley,⁷ an area in Victoria which is approximately 190 kilometers or 120 miles from Melbourne, so it was appropriate they were given the first opportunity to create their own box when we introduced the idea following our experimentation with the Tomb in a Box. During museum visits with these schools we had already discussed with the students how exhibitions of ancient cultures always involve a level of simplification and how the objects come to represent a complex culture that is made up of different identities. Some of the exhibited pieces are connected to the choice of certain individuals in that past culture through, for example, the selection of objects to place in a tomb, but much more is determined through preservation bias in the archaeological record and the image formed by us in the present day when we curate these collections. The students reflect on what an exhibition of the Goulburn Valley might look like. What are the objects that people who don't live there might expect? Which ones do they genuinely feel connected to? What objects do they want to add that might be unexpected for outsiders? What sensory experiences might objects evoke? How can a small set of objects still present diversity?

As a team, a representative group of Year 9s (15- to 16-year-olds) from our participant schools worked as a team and discussed the objects they would like to include in their box. The final selection includes representations of the industries important to the region: dairy, agriculture, and the local Shepparton Preserving Company. They also incorporate well-known cultural institutions like the Moooving Art Cows and one town's memorial rose garden. Australian Rules football and speed boat water ski racing speak to the importance of sport in bringing together the community. A platypus represents the unique fauna of Australia and finally two more animals, a snake and long-necked turtle, symbolize local indigenous creation stories and identities. These objects are housed in a box decorated on the outside with imagery of the Goulburn Valley landscape, and on the inside with Australian native animals. As was the case with the Tomb in a Box, each of the objects carries a voice file embedded on a sticker attached to its base. The students relished the opportunity to act as experts and curators in their own exhibition of local culture. This exercise also helps to give context to our archaeology-based activities, as students come to understand the connections between the analysis of archaeological material and their own engagement with objects and symbols in their daily lives. In writing the narrations for their voice files they had to think about how to communicate these experiences to others who come from different backgrounds, a task that requires them to draw on their developing skills in intercultural empathy and critical thinking.

The voice files for the Goulburn Valley in a Box were translated into Arabic to facilitate the box traveling to Cairo and Dubai, where local students have engaged with its contents. Our partner schools, Tawasol Foundation School in Cairo and GEMS Modern Academy in Dubai, then got to work creating their own boxes that could be sent back to the Goulburn Valley group. They had become box pen pals. The results were surprising, both for us and for the students. The Cairo in a Box (Figure 3) featured a number of important ancient landscape markers such as the Giza pyramids and an obelisk, but also sights, sounds, and smells less common to those who have little lived experience of the place. Objects telling local contemporary stories include a fava bean vendor, renowned opera singer Umm Kulthum whose voice can be heard at coffee shops across the city, or the *fanous*, a lantern that decorates the streets of the city during Ramadan. The Dubai in a Box (Figure 4) is unexpected as it explores the identity of our partner school where the Indian curriculum is taught. Thus the decoration on the outside of the box features familiar imagery of the Dubai cityscape, but the objects chosen for the inside of the box all speak to India. These new boxes allowed us to break through the stereotypes of the Tomb in a Box and discuss how we create our own images of place and how disciplines like archaeology have contributed to this dialogue. Our aim is to allow a new group of students, armed with discussions on essentialism and multiculturalism, to create a new version of the Goulburn Valley in a Box. This can

be used to explore the multitude of associations that a single place can have as well as to assess how objects come to hold meaning in our lives.



Figure 3. Views of the Cairo in a Box set: a) left, interior, and b) right, close up of a fava bean vendor figurine. Photo by author.

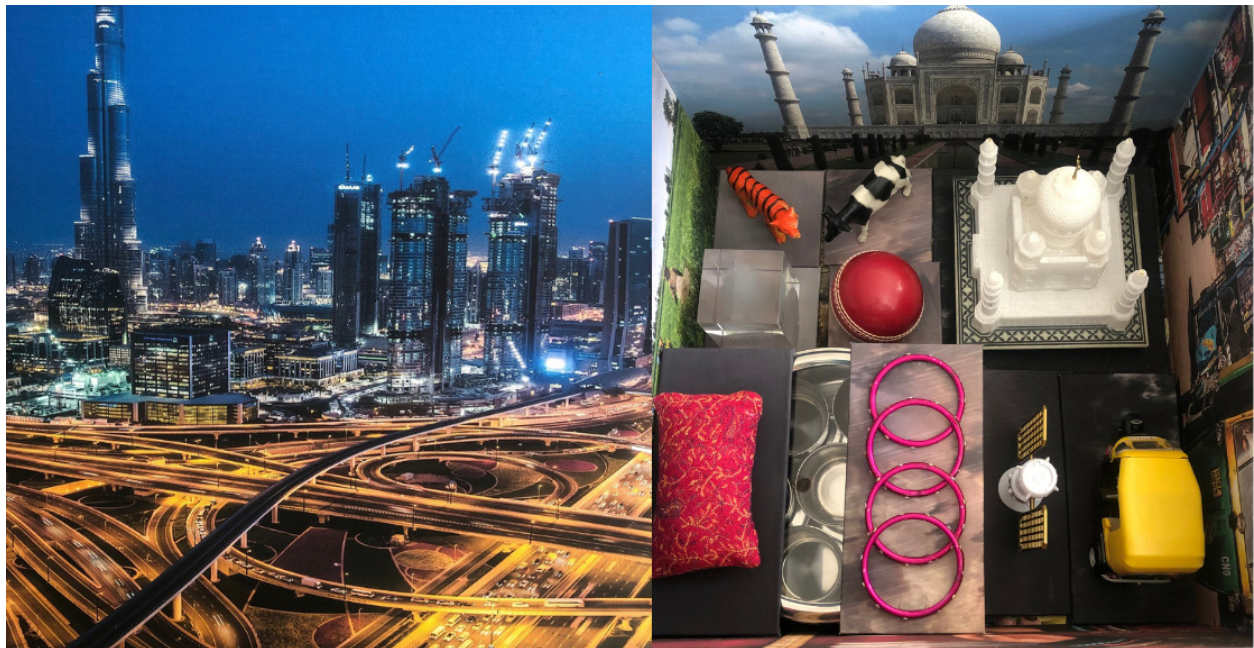


Figure 4. Views of the Dubai in a Box set: a) left, skyline image used for the exterior, and b) right, interior. Photo by author.

As an element of our evaluation process, we also like to test our teaching tools in our own peer circles. The inclusion of “Breaking Out of Our Boxes” in the title of this paper was inspired by a group of attendees at the interdisciplinary Story in a Box Symposium that we organized and held at the University of Melbourne, September 15–16, 2022. Following the presentation of our existing Stories in Boxes, we workshoped a new box which earned the title “Getting Out of Our Boxes.” The name was proposed by one of the participants, Ethel Villafranca, after a rich discussion about the conference themes: storytelling, object-inspired discovery, and empathy (see conference website at Hands-on Humanities 2022). We considered how these themes collectively address the need to overcome boundaries and connect people across disciplines, cultures, and languages and to challenge personal preconceptions. The diversity among participants challenged all attendees to consider the potential embedded in objects from a different perspective. Additionally, the workshop required a level of personal sharing which can occasionally cause discomfort, sometimes even self-exclusion. We were therefore all required to “get out of our boxes” in order to get the most out of the Symposium.

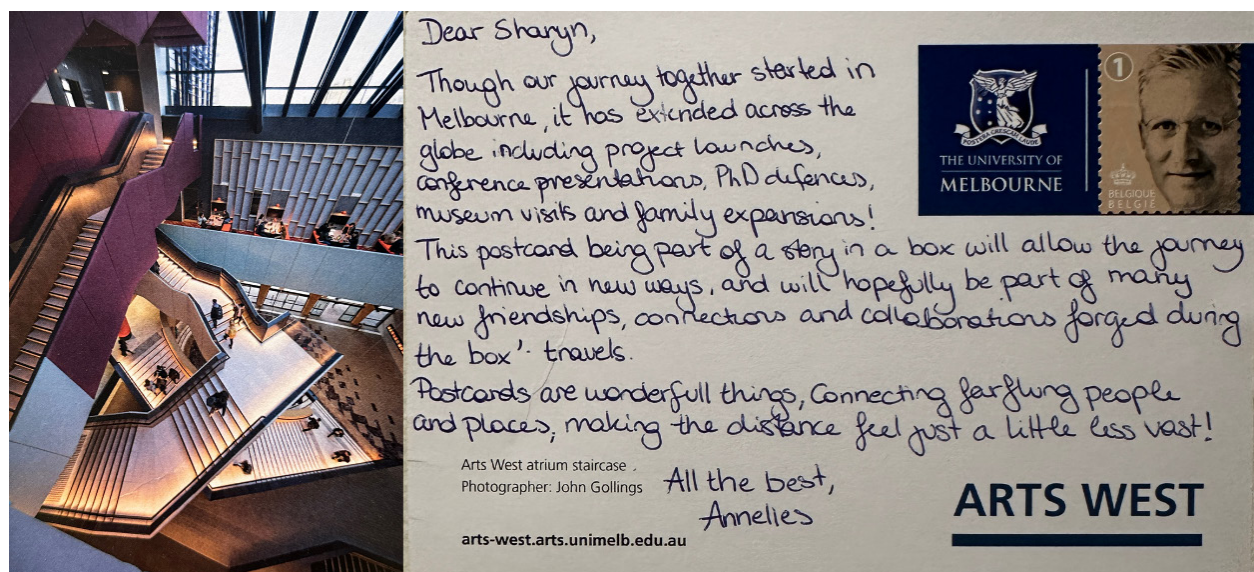


Figure 5. Postcard from the Getting Out of Our Boxes set. Photo by author.

Workshop participants were asked to individually nominate an object for inclusion in the box. Each object was to tell the story of its nominator’s pathway to attendance at the symposium. The object selection included a postcard depicting the university building in which our workshop had been held with handwritten text telling a personal story of collaboration and friendship in academia (Figure 5); a train of the type which travels between rural and regional areas of Victoria and Melbourne, signifying a dislocation from home to pursue educational dreams; and a question mark to symbolize the curiosity and uncertainty that academic life brings. After sharing individual stories, the group was tasked with choosing the decorative elements for their box. The variation

in stories from each of our participants highlighted the disparate paths we had taken in our respective careers and demonstrated inequality in access to opportunities based on our identities. This was exemplified most clearly by the disparity in visa procedures for those attending the symposium, with a European participant having to wait mere minutes to be granted approval while another person coming from Africa was subjected to months of administration. To symbolize the journeys described, depictions of travel modes were chosen to decorate the outside of the box, while on the interior were examples of obstacles that could be encountered (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Digital mockup of the Getting Out of Our Boxes set. Photo by author.

In a sense, this box also symbolized our project's own journey: the many twists and turns taken from a fairly straightforward delivery of a hands-on archaeological outreach project, oriented towards object handling and description, to a series of co-created boxes that question notions of place, identity, and access. At this point, it would be understandable if the conclusion was that we are moving away from our

archaeological roots but nothing could be further from the truth. Archaeology has from its inception been implicated in the creation of identity. As Lynn Meskell states “the illusion that the subjects of our research are dead and buried” (2002:293) denies archaeology’s deep connection to ongoing identity construction processes through its engagement with materiality and its “monumentalization” of the everyday. When placed within this framework, our lessons’ progression from artifact analysis to contemporary storytelling through objects is a logical one that embraces the discipline’s ability to interlace past and present in meaningful ways. An examination of ancient pottery sherds and a discussion about the reason for preserving and studying them motivates students to look differently at their own material culture—from a treasured family heirloom to an everyday utensil. Simultaneously, discussions about modern symbols and prized possessions rehumanize our engagement with materials from the past. Reflexivity allows us to acknowledge these subjectivities, deploying them as powerful tools for engagement rather than considering them as potential threats to the image of an objectivist science.

Looking to the Future

What is the future of the project? We have always dreamed big and imagined we would continue to grow our collaborations, developing a library of boxes that would fly around the world sharing stories told by young people with their peers growing up in other cultural traditions. Discussions with potential partners in Nepal, Korea, and Japan are currently underway and we are applying for funding to allow for more frequent visits to our existing communities. Though we recognize it may be easier to scale up using a digital strategy, we are strong believers in the power of investing in personal relationships which can only be established and strengthened by engaging with students and teachers on-site in their place. However, there are a number of challenges to outreach projects such as ours that we must address with creative solutions.⁸

The first is the maintenance of long-term relationships with our community education partners. This has been a challenge on multiple levels. The educational landscape is changing, and in our school community in the Goulburn Valley there has not only been a large teacher turnover in recent years, but the schools have also seen a complete reordering based on the Victorian government’s plans to centralize resources in order to improve educational achievement in the region. More concretely this resulted in three of our school partners being collected with a fourth into a large regional superschool. The change in scale altered the ways in which we were able to teach our classes, challenging us to adapt to larger class sizes and shorter class periods. This continues to be something we struggle to balance as our teaching method is designed for in-depth engagement with smaller groups.

Our own careers as academics are also often in a state of flux, with educational collaborators moving between different affiliations and roles. This has implications for

our access to resources: the artifacts we teach with but also funding streams. Even with a tenured position at a university, funding for outreach is notoriously precarious. Our partner schools do not pay for the learning opportunities we provide, and we are determined to ensure our offer remains accessible to disadvantaged students. We are also committed to nurturing our important relationships with our existing schools because reciprocity in trust and integrity is central to our work. However, this is difficult as we remain dependent on short-term project funding that focuses on originality and thus is not always suitable for supporting long-standing collaborations. The schools bear the brunt of inconsistent funding as costs determine the possible length of our engagement, the number of collaborators present, and the potential for a class excursion to Melbourne. Thus, the constant cycle of writing grant submissions becomes another element in the balancing act of securing existing relationships and expanding into new communities whilst remaining dynamic and innovative in our development of new programs. Industry collaboration and project commercialization have been the subject of ongoing discussions in order to provide more security, but these come with their own challenges and ethical dilemmas, not to mention that there is an underdevelopment of such discussions in the humanities (Petersen 2023:28) that must be considered.

No matter the circumstances and challenges we face, we expect and hope that the Hands-on-Humanities Project will continue to evolve as we gain new insights from conversations with partners, interactions with students, and continuous self-reflexion. Our work has shown us how important it is to allow our experiences to guide us towards an expanded understanding of what archaeology can be. The Tomb in a Box is a poignant example, having started as an exercise in observation and listening based in a stereotypical Egyptomania setting, and ended as a jumping off point for discussions about the intersection between archaeology and identity. In our experience, sharing our failures and shortcomings through questioning our practice together with collaborators, students, and colleagues is not only extremely valuable but essential. It helps us to get out of our own boxes by providing perspective, building connections, problem-solving creatively, and ensuring accountability across our educational efforts. In presenting our own mistakes, and the personal and professional development we have experienced as our project has evolved, we hope to normalize more open discussions considering the challenges faced in educational practices.

Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank the editors and reviewers for their feedback on our submission. The comments and suggestions we received in the process of publishing this piece have allowed us an additional opportunity to critically consider our project and brainstorm ways to improve it in the future, both with an eye to its potential impact on our partner communities and to funding bids.

- 2 These objects were sourced from a variety of places including museum shops and Cairo souvenir shops and were not aligned in scale or material, with the focus going instead to the narrative elements. These kinds of material considerations came into play much more as our boxes became professionalized to ensure that each box felt unified.
- 3 Though Egypt may not have been formally colonized, it certainly was exploited within a colonial context most evident in the occupation of Egypt by British forces to different extents from 1882–1956 and, in particular, the formal protectorate extended over the country in 1914. In addition to this, there is the French paternalism within the management of Egypt's history through the Antiquities Service being under French directorship from 1858 to 1952.
- 4 The National Gallery of Victoria also greatly benefited from their collecting activities. <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/everard-studley-miller-and-his-bequest-to-the-national-gallery-of-victoria/>
- 5 The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) is the certificate that students in Victoria receive after completing their secondary education to Year 12. In their final years they can pick key subject areas, including history.
- 6 The shift in school composition in the Goulburn Valley—particularly in Shepparton during and following the shift from 4 separate secondary schools to a single superschool—has meant that class groups have shifted and the higher-year students we currently work with have not necessarily followed the course trajectory from the beginning.
- 7 The Goulburn Valley region, and particularly the urban center of Shepparton, is a very culturally diverse community. In the 2021 Australian census, English was the only language spoken in 74.7% of homes while the top five languages other than English spoken at home were Punjabi, Arabic, Italian, Hazaraghi, and Mandarin. At our principal partner school, Greater Shepparton Secondary College, 56% of the students live in families identified as being in the bottom quarter in the distribution of socioeducational advantage, 31% identify as indigenous, and 31% come from a language background other than English (see also Van de Ven and Volk 2020).
- 8 These challenges are not new and already by 1987 Craig Dreeszen described the difficulties of funding, staff turnover, and timetabling (Dreeszen 1987, 39–41).

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