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Where to find archaeological information work and how to CAPTURE it

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Keywords: paradata; practices; information; information work; documentation

Introduction

There is a growing corpus of studies on archaeological practices, knowledge and information work. This earlier work has provided new knowledge of the work of archaeologists and how information is produced and used in different archaeological and archaeology-related practices (e.g. Edgeworth, 2006; Huvila, 2006; Davidović, 2009; Buchanan, 2016). The findings have highlighted the diversity of archaeological work and the importance of understanding how archaeology is achieved in specific circumstances and situations as a premiss for apprehending and using its outputs: information, data, collections, documentation and eventually, archaeological knowledge. Several authors (e.g. Huggett, 2012; Gant and Reilly, 2017; Vatanen, 2004) have raised the question of the need of documenting and preserving not only data and metadata but of the importance of provenance metadata and paradata i.e. information on the origins and processes that underpin archaeological information. In comparison to steadily growing number of studies of archaeological practices, less attention has been paid to how to identify, document, communicate and systematise the understanding of the pertinent aspects of these processes to inform users and producers of archaeological information. The aim of this paper is address this research gap by discussing the premises of how to identify, capture and document such aspects of archaeological practices and information work that have major implications to the future usability and usefulness of archaeological information. With a focus on a particular type archaeological practice (excavation) in a specific context (case study), the present study explores the questions where in archaeological and archaeology-related practices information work takes place, what traces it leaves and have left in different times, how to determine their potential relevance for contemporary and future archaeological work, and where and how they could be captured and documented. This study lays ground for future empirical work providing new understanding of the significant aspects of archaeological practices for systematic documentation and capturing of such paradata (or, provenance metadata) which can improve the usability and usefulness of archaeological information in the future.

Methods

This paper draws from an ethnographically inspired investigation of 5-days long teaching excavation in a Nordic country in 2016. In total, 4 senior archaeologists and 11 undergraduate and graduate students participated in the project. The study was conducted by the author and documented by taking notes and photographs. The approach to

observation was participatory but the observer acted as non-intrusively as possible in an attempt to document the study context in as naturalistic terms as possible. A parallel rationale for the non-intrusive approach was to investigate the degree of explicit articulation work at the site and the informativeness of observable practices versus how the participants reflected upon their work when asked directly. The analysis was inspired by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and was based on constant comparative identification of categories and using writing as an explicit method (Richardson, 2000) of analysing the material.

Findings and argument

The analysis of the ethnographic material confirmed the earlier observations of the complexity and social nature of archaeological excavation (e.g. Edgeworth, 2006; Davidović, 2009; Huvila and Uotila, 2012; Buchanan, 2016). The unfolding of information at the study site reminds of how ethnomethodology perceives information as unexpectedly and contingently lived and experienced in social order (Garfinkel, 2008). As Rawls notes of Harold Garfinkel's sociological understanding of information, information "only exists in and through the ways in which it is constituted and apprehended in social situations according to mutual oriented processes of sequential order production" (Rawls, 2008, p. 13). As recent research has purported, the sequentiality of the order (i.e. meaning) does not equate with with an a priori sequentiality or orderliness of the process but rather be enacted as a coming-together of an assemblage of convoluted, discontinuous and evolving processes of making and taking information (cf. Huvila, 2018). From this kind of contextual and temporal perspective to what archaeological practices and the information work that underpins these practices, the central constituents of how archaeology is achieved comprise the entire spectrum of human actors (including social constellations and institutions), material artefacts (including the objects and tools of trade), their entanglements (as in Hodder, 2012) and spatiotemporal contexts and situations. Perhaps most importantly, it is underpinned by social exchange, inter- and intra-actions, between and within the situations and social orders, or "in conversations at the edge of the trench" (Morgan and Wright, 2018, p. 146) and, importantly, with references to lived experiences and social situations far beyond the trench both in space and in time.

Because the making of information and information itself do not happen in isolation at an excavation, the archaeological practices (i.e. doing) contain traces of information and vice versa, the produced information is rich in explicit and implicit clues of what happened and was done. However, in contrast to relative explicitness of the traces of what was done and which human actors and non-human things were involved in the process, it was apparent that the rationale of the choices remained tacit when not explicitly asked. The non-intrusive approach to observation in the present study highlighted this fact. The attempt to interfere with the work at the site as little as possible underlined the importance of explicit articulation work, and the practical value of discussing with the participants of the excavation and of the discussions the participants had with each other. At the same time, however, the analysis showed that not everything has to be specifically articulated aloud and that a fairly small amount of background information together with the field documentation produced at the site could provide a relatively rich understanding of how the documentation came into being. Especially when the participants had experience of earlier excavations in different contexts and countries, they tended to be much better in asking relevant questions and interpreting tacit cues about how and why certain aspects of the work were supposed to be done.

Conclusions

The analysis of the observation data seems to suggest that one of the major issues in

capturing and documenting pertinent aspects of archaeological information both for a relatively non-intrusive participant observer and the participants alike was the issue of not being able to appreciate the importance of articulation work in specific situations. For the observer this became obvious when the participants articulated their work in different terms the observer had expected, and for the student participants when seniors noted that they should do their work, for instance, take photographs or notes, or use trowel, in another way. On the basis of the present analysis, it seems plausible to suggest that the capturing and documentation of archaeological and archaeology-related practices and information work could benefit of a closer attention to Garfinkel's perspective to information as lived and experienced, unexpectedly and contingently. From the perspective of understanding where information work takes place and capturing its pertinent aspects, a key issue is how to articulate how archaeological things are lived and experienced in archaeological and archaeology-related practices, and how something becomes unexpected and contingent not only as an exercise of momentarily reflection but in a longer spatiotemporal perspective.

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