

Case study: Professional and ethical considerations around critiquing archaeological work

As professionals we have a role in promoting archaeology, broadening thinking, challenging understanding, and encouraging innovation. The information and techniques we have available to us are continually adapting, allowing us to rethink our analyses of archaeological evidence and express new opinions. Critiquing and discussing each other's work and interpretations, such as reconstructions, illustrations, articles or books, is an important part of this, and it is equally important that we reflect and review our own work, taking on board these comments from others. In both critiquing and reflecting we need to do it constructively and professionally and by considering the ethical and professional conduct boundaries we operate within.

Scenario

This case study involved a group of archaeologists using a video on social media to discuss and critique the work of other archaeologists in an informal setting, but the video was delivered under an archaeological organisation's corporate banner. One of the archaeologists whose work was being discussed believed the comments were unkind, of a personal nature and potentially harmful to their career and reputation. This opened up further debate on social media with opinions being expressed from a wide range of people.

In the end, the individual contacted the organisation to raise these points and as a result the recording was taken down and a formal apology sent to the archaeologist.

Professional conduct implications

All CIfA-**accredited** archaeologists (Members, Associates and Practitioners) have made a professional commitment to **comply** with the principles of the Chartered Institute's *Code of conduct* which cover

- high standards of ethical and responsible behaviour
- conservation of the historic environment
- conducting work in such a way that reliable information about the past may be acquired
- making available the results of archaeological work
- recognising the aspirations of employees, colleagues, and helpers

In terms of the actions of the archaeologists in the video, it would have been reasonable to question whether they may have been in breach of CIfA's *Code of conduct*. In particular this would relate to rule 1.5 which states that members must *give appropriate credit for work done by others and shall not commit plagiarism in oral or*

written communication, and shall not enter into conduct that might unjustifiably injure the reputation of another archaeologist.

In all professional conduct cases, the individuals involved are first encouraged to try and resolve the issues by discussion. In this scenario the removal of the recording and formal apology resolved the issue but had that not been the case the allegation may then have moved forward for consideration by a Professional Conduct Panel.

Ethical considerations and interpretations

Once a professional conduct case is passed to a panel, the individuals on the panel will use their professional judgement to consider the evidence provided to support an allegation to determine whether or not there has been a breach of the *Code*.

In a scenario like this a Professional Conduct Panel would consider ethical questions such as

- what do the rules in the *Code of conduct* and other supporting Standards, guidance or policy statements say about the conduct in question?
- what harm has resulted? For instance, how personal were the comments? How might they affect someone's professional reputation or career? How were the comments delivered and was this fair?
- have the individuals involved acted with integrity?

The second element of rule 1.5 of the *Code of conduct* talks about *conduct that might unjustifiably injure the reputation of another archaeologist*. 'Unjustifiably' is an important word here. If the comments are insults not founded in fact, then it's probably a breach, and might also be found to be defamatory by the courts. However, if the archaeologist has clearly demonstrated incompetence, it may be ethically acceptable (and in a professional conduct process ethically necessary) to make a public statement about that piece of work which may have reputational consequences. **But** there's no need to be unkind about it. Similarly, those critiquing the work of others should be mindful of rule 1.2 *A member shall present archaeology and its results in a responsible manner and shall avoid and discourage exaggerated, misleading or unwarranted statements about archaeological matters*. What might have been an acceptable disagreement can easily become unacceptable when exaggeration, extra adjectives and personal comment get involved.

Reflecting on the issues

As noted at the start of this article, critiquing, and discussing our work is important. It helps us to learn and improve, and to develop our understanding and approach – and it is another commitment we make in the *Code of conduct* in rule 1.14 where members agree to *work towards the development and continuous improvement of the profession by contributing to, and challenging, existing knowledge and professional practice where appropriate, by devising and validating new techniques, by ensuring*

that others benefit from the member's own experience and knowledge and by using their best endeavours to foster a culture of continuous professional development and career progression. But it's important that we apply emotional intelligence here and think about how this is conveyed, and ultimately how we would feel to be on the receiving end. When someone interprets archaeological evidence differently from us, does that make them wrong or incompetent, or are we able to respect a different viewpoint or style?

Social media provides a very accessible platform for the public to engage with archaeology, and for archaeologists to engage with each other. However, this medium is still a published record and we have all witnessed how posts can get out of hand and control can be lost. It is important that we consider how messages or comments on social media can be interpreted, read comments carefully before replying and listen or think about what it being said.

It is also important to consider how we deliver our comments and whom we are addressing, recognising the audience, and honing our style accordingly. How might comments impact someone who is new to archaeology and publishing their first pieces or work? How might 'hard hitting' remarks be contemplated on by people who are nervous or apprehensive about expressing views to their peers? Are you providing the critique to help the author of the work learn and develop and produce a better product or are you simply highlighting perceived failings or weaknesses for the sake of it? How does this reflect on the profession as a whole? And how does it reflect on those offering the critique?

Useful resources

- Code of conduct (www.archaeologists.net/codes/cifa)
- Introduction to professional ethics practice paper (www.archaeologists.net/publications/papers)
- Spotlight on CifA's professional conduct process (www.archaeologists.net/codes/cifa)
- Policy statements (www.archaeologists.net/codes/cifa)
- Resources for professional ethics webpage (www.archaeologists.net/membership/ethics)