

Preparing for the SAA Ethics Bowl

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In recent years, archaeologists have begun to confront a range of ethical issues—the conundrum of looting, the interactions we have with descendent communities, the complications of business oriented CRM archaeology. How the next generation of scholars chose to address these and other ethical dilemmas will define the field of archaeology—what it offers and what it does—in the new millennium.

In 2004, the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) inaugurated the Ethics Bowl at its annual meeting in Montreal, Canada to help students gain a sense of ethical responsibility and give them the tools to tackle professional ethics in an enjoyable setting. During the Ethics Bowl, teams of graduate and/or undergraduate students debate case studies which illuminate a variety of ethical issues in modern archaeology. Student teams consist of three to five individuals, guided by at least one faculty mentor.

After two years of running the Ethics Bowl, many of the students have asked the question: how should our team prepare? So, to help students and professors get ready for the Third Annual Ethics Bowl—to be held at the SAA's 71st Annual Meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico in April 2006—below I offer some hints and suggestions. [View details of all the rules and procedures as well as past case studies.](#)

The Competition

Several months before the annual meeting, teams are provided with a dozen hypothetical case studies, each revolving around one or more ethical dilemmas. The teams prepare their response to each case study, although they do not know which case studies will be used during the competition. Each team should be prepared to (a) answer a general question about one case per round, from the moderator; (b) propose a question to the alternate team about one case per round; (c) respond to questions from the three judges about the case which is under discussion and/or respond to one question from the alternate team. There are time constraints on each response.

The three judges score each team on intelligibility, depth, focus, and judgment. Preliminary rounds are held in the morning, with the finalists challenging each other at an afternoon session, which is open to all meeting participants.

Preparation

Team members need to be able, with only a few minutes lead time, to craft an oral presentation that is focused and effective, and refers to relevant supporting data. So, you should immerse yourself in the literature of archaeological ethics. Be sure to learn about various codes of ethics which have been established by different archaeological organizations. In addition, read the literature which debates these issues in archaeological ethics. Be sure to consider international literature and codes, because many American archaeologists work outside the United States.

You should also practice oral presentation. Develop some strategies for focused, snappy presentations: like a verbal version of bulleted lists on a PowerPoint presentation. Work on the capability to use the allotted time effectively. You don't want to hear the buzzer when you are in the middle of a sentence; on the other hand, you don't want to finish with two full minutes remaining that you could use to state your case. So, you need to practice enough to get a feel for what two minutes are and what five minutes are.

Develop good posture; you will be seated at a table, so sit up straight. Project your voice outward; look at the audience as much as you can even if you have to consult notes. There will be a microphone, so practice using one. (However, also be prepared to speak effectively with or without a microphone; this will serve you well in the future!) Practice extemporaneous, but substantive, speaking so that you can pause without using fillers like "um" or "I guess." Breathe instead. Don't be afraid to pause and take a quiet breath.

Think about developing a template for the entire presentation, something along the lines of:

- Opening remarks (e.g., "The focus of this ethical dilemma is . . .")
- Your key points (e.g., "There are three [or whatever] important points to make about this scenario . . ." or "This ethical issue can be approached from two different angles.")
- Closing remarks (e.g., "To conclude, let me summarize my major points . . .")

Practice for your classmates and, if possible, for your professors, and ask for feedback. If it's too scary to start with faculty members, then start as a student group and use a tape recorder. It can be difficult to listen to yourself on a tape recorder, but you rapidly will learn what your good (and bad) speaking habits are.

You will receive about a dozen ethical scenarios several weeks before the annual meeting. The final scenarios to be debated in the Ethics Bowl will be chosen from those cases by the organizers only just before the annual meeting. The judges don't know which scenarios will be used any sooner than you do (so they can't sit around and develop malevolently complex questions for you).

If you look over the scenarios, you will see that many tend to fall into basic categories, such as: CRM work, American archaeologists overseas, relations with descendant communities, or archaeology in museums. You can develop some general points to make for any scenario within these categories.

As you prepare, consider the position of the moderator who will ask the very first question in each round. The moderator's goal is to open up discussion as widely as possible, so she or he will ask something like "What ethical issues does John Doe have to consider in making his decision?" or "What do you advise Mary Smith to do in this case?"

For each scenario, consider what outside information you want to bring in to the discussion. Various codes of ethics are obvious; remember that there are other codes than the SAA's, which may turn out to be useful (RPA, WAC, AIA, AAA, etc. and don't forget things like the code of the American Association of Museums). One caveat: the codes should not be cited as if they

were legal codes (e.g. "In paragraph 3, section II, of the RPA code . . ."). Rather, the codes are for the most part guidelines that are meant to invoke thoughtful action and not merely be prescriptions for ethical behavior. Beyond codes of ethics, you may wish to mention debate or publications that are relevant to the scenario. If you do reference outside information, be sure to provide a brief but appropriate citation (something like, ". . . as proposed by Z in her publication of Maya vases . . .").

Always consider the broad issue of stakeholders. There are likely to be multiple, often competing, stakeholders in each scenario. You may wish to give preference to the interests of certain stakeholders over others; that's fine, but be prepared to explain and justify that choice. Remember: life is full of hard choices, and archaeologists have to make some. It is acceptable to acknowledge competing interests, even when you ultimately privilege one set over another. In fact, your argument will be more realistic and compelling if you explicitly acknowledge the multiple stakeholders than if you suggest that there is one simple answer.

Remember, ethical dilemmas are just that: dilemmas. If they were easy to answer, we wouldn't need codes and debates and Ethics Bowls. You can expect that an appropriate solution to some scenarios will be unsatisfactory to some parties and/or will be imperfect. Acknowledge that honestly in your response, but clarify your decisions and choices. Ethics, after all, is about the reasons we have to guide the choices we make.

Think about how you can use your response to turn from the specific scenario to more general issues that archaeologists grapple with. For example: can you make an opportunity in your response to consider differences between some of the existing codes of archaeological ethics or gaps in the codes that should be considered in the future? Or, try to consider in your response the future implications of different choices, or the more general ones for archaeologists beyond the specific case. Or, consider future steps that an archaeologist could take once a specific scenario is resolved. In other words: what's the bigger picture?

Consider history, but don't get trapped by it. Some scenarios turn on events that occurred 30 or more years ago. Should we hold archaeologists of that period to standards of behavior that we have struggled to develop over the past 10 years? If not, what are our responsibilities in the present? It may be moot whether we agree or disagree with the actions of someone years ago. What we have to grapple with is what we should do now.

Finally, remember that the Ethics Bowl is intended to be enjoyable and educational. No one is out to "get you." In fact, everyone involved—the organizers, moderators, and judges—will want to see you succeed! And simply by preparing, showing up, and earnestly sharing your thoughts, you'll find a measure of success. So relax—and have fun too.