

Context is Everything

Patrick D. Lyons,

*Associate Professor of Anthropology, School of Anthropology
Director of the Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona*

In Archaeology, context is everything. When I think back on my years as a graduate student at the University of Arizona (1993-2001), the context that I remember as the most challenging and stimulating – and also the one that had the longest-lasting effect on me as a practicing professional archaeologist – I think of Friday afternoons in Mike Schiffer's Laboratory of Traditional Technology (LTT). It was there that I was exposed to the value of peer review, the critical importance of considering a diversity of opinions, the need for scholars to develop a thick skin, and how difficult it can be sometimes to decide when you should "stick to your guns," or when to "throw in the towel."

Mike Schiffer created a space and time, a context, where true scholarship – wrestling with ideas and evidence, and writing clearly about them – was modeled for eager graduate students to emulate. All were welcome and, as Mike would say, "a thousand theoretical flowers" were allowed to bloom. We discussed and debated selectionist archaeology and post-pro-

cessual approaches, and many of us tried to advance, in different ways, the behavioral archaeology program. Mike did much during those years to create a platform for selectionists to present their program, even hosting an itinerant selectionist archaeologist, Dr. Patrice Teltser, in the LTT.

During my tenure, core members of the Friday Afternoon Writers' Group (or, as we sometimes called ourselves, the "Rhizome Breakout Committee"; Shanks 1992) included Jenny Adams, Trixi Bubemyre, Janet Griffiths, Vin LaMotta, Brian McKee, Mark Neupert, Axel Nielsen, Bill Walker, and Nieves Zedeño (a then-recent SMU Ph.D.). Those were heady times. The archaeological study of ritual and the relationship between material culture and social boundaries were key foci among Southwesternists. Research on ancient migrations could once again be thought of as respectable.

It was inspiring to witness the more senior graduate students spar good-naturedly with each other, and it was a thrill to be drawn into passionate debates.

The LTT was a place where following one's passion was well modeled as a recipe for success. I felt like I might make important contributions someday because of the examples set by past members of writers groups at the (then) department, like Cathy Cameron, Jeff Clark, Chris Downum, Kelly Hays-Gilpin, Jonathan Mabry, Jim Skibo, Miriam Stark, Chris Szuter, Daniela Triadan (Freie Universität Berlin), and John Welch.

It is my sincere wish that current and future UA School of Anthropology graduate students have formative experiences like this, i.e., that their life histories converge in the context of a learning framework that alters their

scholarly performance characteristics in a positive way. For people like me, who spent a lot of time in the LTT, the phrase "be like Mike" – rather than conjuring up images of a refreshing sports drink and a tall man from North Carolina – will bring to mind a kind, generous, and nurturing short man from California, with an "evil blue pen," who gave us a safe and encouraging place to practice being scholars.

References

Shanks, Michael

1992 *Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology*.
Routledge, London.