Authentic Activity Teaching: the Future of Forensic Archaeology and Anthropology

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Abstract

This opinion piece discusses the importance of authentic teaching and its crucial offering as a pedagogical principle, particularly in vocational forensic science disciplines that cover the location and identification of human remains. Drawing on real-world humanitarian field activity, we show how field-derived material may be translated directly into curriculum design and delivery. When geophysical survey data, excavation decision making, documentation standards and comparative osteological analysis are integrated into teaching, students may connect classroom learning to professional expectations and encounter the ethical foundations of practice. By making the learning-to-practice pathway explicit, realistic and values-led, this approach cultivates and strengthens motivation and engagement and supports employability.

Key words: forensic anthropology, forensic archaeology, pedagogy, real-world learning, employability

Forensic archaeology and anthropology are vocational, values-driven disciplines, yet students often struggle to see how the theory translates into what practitioners do in real cases. According to Weinel's (2025) recent proposal, students are indicating a preference towards authentic activity over research-led teaching. While theory-based lectures remain useful for providing students with the basics, the literature has long highlighted how traditional lecture formats can promote passivity unless designed for interactivity (Doherty, 2007). The position in this opinion piece is explicit: in practice-facing degrees, authentic activity and authentic assessment should be considered where possible as the default foundation of curriculum design.

Forensic science is a broad discipline, and students come to do this programme less for the theory content than for its workplace application, because they aspire primarily to be practitioners in the field. Although research is essential, practitioner academics – a.k.a. 'pracademics' – can help students to understand the connections between academic learning and professional practice (Kitchener, 2025). Though research-led teaching may deliver value in advancing forensic techniques, to students it can sometimes feel detached from the overall goal. Our programme team often sees how hard they find connecting abstract theory with the realities of working in forensic fields, especially those that involve body recovery. By contrast, authentic activity/teaching makes the pathway from classroom to practice visible, tangible and, most importantly, motivating.

Alongside its broad nature, forensic science is inherently applied. Its main goal is to contribute to justice but has a broader reach, with its involvement in such things as humanitarian efforts (Naji and Margely-Lardeyret, 2025). Our own commitment to authentic activity is engrained in such work. Each year, we join field missions across continental Europe to search for, locate and recover the remains of United States airmen officially listed as 'missing in action' (MIA) during World War II. These missions require a broad range of forensic and archaeological proficiency: reconnaissance and

research to identify the crash site, geophysical surveying to support that research, methodical excavation, osteological triage of human versus non-human remains and precise documentation in regulation with International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) (Defense Prisoner of War (POW)/MIA Accounting Agency, n.d.). They also demand something more: dignity and awareness, both qualities being crucial to forensic work as a whole. Professional guidance is explicit that human remains must be treated with care, dignity and respect, including within teaching contexts (BABAO, 2024). These are not just nameless skeletal remains or personal effects: their recovery is a matter of restoring their identities, of remembering their names and supporting their families who, in many cases, have waited decades for closure. This work is not only profound; it is also pedagogically rich. Every aspect of this process provides teaching material which directly emulates genuine professional practice.

In two relevant elective modules, the authors draw extensively on this field experience. Anonymised magnetometry data, current and historic crash-site photography, three-dimensional imagery, excavation records/techniques and skeletal imagery are all used to enhance teaching in lectures and laboratories. Where timings allow, live teaching has been delivered from active field sites, enabling students to observe in real time the methods and skills discussed in class. As an addition to this year's module, in November 2025, the managing director of a European partner to the US Defense POW/MIA Accounting provided our students with a case study-based lecture focusing on forensic archaeology and surveying techniques. When students participate with and analyse these materials, they are not working with hypothetical scenarios; they are engaging with real-world material. To implement these into a flipped-classroom approach aligns with new research which states that problem-based learning (PrBL) serves as a catalyst for a more dynamic and deeper learning that equips students with twenty-first century skills (Odell and Pedersen, 2025). Student engagement and enthusiasm are enhanced when the lecturer delivering the session is also the person who helped gather the material being presented. Feedback consistently confirms that students value these experiences because they make the profession real and seem more accessible. They can visualise themselves undertaking the work, not just learning about it.

A solid argument for delivering material in this way, is its positive influence on employability. The forensic job market is competitive, and it has been noted by employers and graduates that practical competence and confidence are as important as theoretical knowledge. Weinel (2025) emphasises that rising costs of education and living have sharpened students' focus on employability. This is equally true in forensic science. Students want assurance that their degree will equip them for their future aspirations. Authentic activity delivers that assurance. Embedding authentic activity within teaching and/or assessment supports the development of essential transferable skills, resulting in graduates who are more prepared, adaptable, and professionally competent.

Forensic science is well-positioned to model how universities can partner effectively with external organisations. Although it is hard for students to gain work experience in this discipline, to have academics with extensive collaborative networks in industry increases the likelihood of their finding

live, practice-based learning opportunities. Such partnerships also enrich teaching and boost research and knowledge exchange. The field missions mentioned above have brought in guest speakers, which, for one student in May 2025, post graduation, led to a position on a mission and subsequently, with this university, to continuing professional development in osteology:

"*It was an experience like no other. I was fortunate enough to learn from the best in the field about a subject I am fascinated by*" (Thurlow, 2025).

The forensic teaching team places great importance on responding to student feedback. Consistently, students express their appreciation for the integration of real-world scenarios that their lecturers can bring directly into the classroom. We introduced, in 2021/22, the module that most heavily incorporates this material; student satisfaction – measured through EvaSys (a module evaluation survey platform used at our institution) – has since then remained remarkably high, with scores of 4.8, 5, and 4.9 out of 5 across consecutive years. In its first year, the programme achieved one hundred per cent graduate outcomes in a national survey capturing graduate employment approximately fifteen months after course completion and, in 2024/25, student satisfaction in our National Student Survey (NSS) reached 92%. We are confident that our approach to teaching in this way is a major factor in achieving such strong results.

Conclusion

This university's 2030 target for student success sub-strategy key performance indicators is to increase both overall student satisfaction and the proportion of students achieving highly skilled employment. This piece argues that authentic approaches to teaching and assessment should be treated not as an optional extra, but as the core design principle for vocational courses such as forensic science. Maintaining laboratory accreditation depends not only on internal procedures and practices, but also on the quality and rigour of fieldwork. In forensic science, field investigations are often the primary source of evidential material available for laboratory analysis.

As it is already clear from student feedback that this teaching approach is highly valued, we continue to embed authentic activity within the programme across as many modules as possible. The authors' personal involvement in humanitarian missions over the past four years has transformed them as people and as academics; it has provided the students with a more personal and practice-focused approach to their studies. In a forensic science degree, research-led theory may serve as a firm and necessary academic foundation, but it is authentic practice which turns that into enduring applied expertise.

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