



Post Fellowship Reporting - Project Summary

Report Title: Walking With Neanderthals: A Survey of Paleolithic Culture
Name: Chris Dolgos

Other Team Members:

Program: EL Education Program

Trip Dates: 06/27/2011 - 07/07/2011
Location Visited: Les Eyzies, France and Neanderthal, Germany

Post Fellowship Reporting Template: PFR Template 02

Project Summary: Who were the Neanderthals? What can our hominid ancestors teach us about being human? What drives people to create? These questions guided my journey to better understand the lives of Neanderthals, the interplay between these humans and the arrival of Cro-Magnon (modern) humans from the west, and the lasting legacy both groups of humans have had on creativity and the arts. For the first part of my journey, I traveled to the Dordogne region of France, an area rich in both Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon art and artifacts. I was able to hike, bike, and explore the dig sites and caves that were home to two species of humans. Inside the nearby limestone caverns, cave art took on new meaning as I viewed the awe-inspiring, artistic legacy left by earlier generations of humans.

I then travelled to Neanderthal, Germany, home to where that older species of human was first discovered. Working with educators at the Neanderthal Museum, I came to better appreciate the complexities of Neanderthal extinction theory and how earlier scientific hypotheses were being challenged by new interpretations of artifacts and the sequencing of Neanderthal DNA. I learned that the mystery of the missing Neanderthal is not due to any one single cause, but rather a series of events ranging from climate change to Cro-Magnon technological superiority.

The last phase of my fellowship was to learn the ancient art of flint-knapping, creating stone tools using the methods of our ancestors. I discovered rather quickly that it's not as easy as it looks. Enrolling in a stone tool workshop allowed me to learn from a master and get feedback on my technique. Failure was more common than success and it was only after breaking lots of rock and speaking with other experts that I realized it would be months (if not years) before I would be making something as complex as a Mousterian spear point, like the ones made by the seemingly "simple-minded" Neanderthals.

My fellowship allowed me to become immersed in two Paleolithic cultures. At a time when we can be "virtually" anywhere, I am grateful for the opportunity to physically stand in the forests, caves, and rock shelters of early humans and see the world through their eyes. The experience will help me integrate science and the prehistoric arts into our school's curriculum, which includes in-depth study of pre-history and the first people.

Career Impact: Wearing the hat of a student is a humbling experience. Struggling with a foreign language, deciphering scientific journals, and learning flint-knapping from a master teacher were exercises in elation at some points, but more often than not, were just simply frustrating. These experiences will be useful when we talk about courage and perseverance as a class. I have a deeper appreciation and empathy for the needs of my students as a result of my fellowship.

I have deepened my understanding of the Paleolithic Era and have been able to challenge some of my own misconceptions about culture - both prehistoric and contemporary. While it's not easy admitting you were wrong, it feels better than always boasting you are right. It was interesting to speak with scientists and educators about how we view "the other." The Neanderthal has been vilified, rehabilitated, and made victim, and now speaks to us through genetic and forensic science. The time I spent with these experts allowed me to better understand how scientists make meaning of the world around us.

Classroom/Community Impact: Conducting research and studying the collections at the Neanderthal Museum and French National Museum of Prehistory will help me create a richer and more scientifically focused Learning Expedition about early people. Students will be able to use my notes, photos, videos, and collected artifacts to construct their understanding of the Neanderthal.

There are many opportunities for arts integration in our school's pre-history curriculum. Working with the arts team, we will be able to elaborate on the story of human creativity across time, examining the role of the arts in prehistoric times by looking at specific case studies, such as the cave art of Font de Gaume or the controversial Neanderthal bone flute. A final product for our expedition will call for a "Museum of the Prehistoric Arts," where students will not only create works using the tools and methods of our Paleolithic ancestors, but also explain how scientists came to understand and interpret these findings.

There will also be opportunities to share resources with the Expeditionary Learning community through EL Commons, an on-line community of more than 4,000 EL teachers and leaders, and at local and national conferences.

Open Response: * "Walking With Neanderthals," a Learning Expedition for upper elementary students that will include information gathered as a result of the fellowship, with a focus on arts integration and scientific inquiry.

* "Learning Lives Here," a blog originally created to document the fellowship will continue as a chronicle of my role as a teacher and as a learner.

* Future professional development opportunities, such as facilitating workshops on curriculum planning and inquiry-based learning.

Quote: From the cave opening, I could see the entire valley and in my mind's eye, the world of the Neanderthal came to life.

Photos:



These caves sheltered generations of humans - both Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon.



My visit took me to several prehistoric sites, including Roc de Cazelle.



The limestone cliffs of the Dordogne are dotted with caves.



Neanderthals have come a long way from their brutish, 19th century image.



The biface spear point, state of the art technology 20,000 years ago!



Trying my hand at flint-knapping - an exercise in Success & Failure.



Early humans adorned caves with art, such as carved images of aurochs.



Hours of research at the Neanderthal Museum yielded bold, new insights.