

Article

# Local Knowledge in American Archaeology: A Study in High Context Communication

Lawrence E. Moore

Bureau of Reclamation, Albuquerque, NM 87102, USA; lemoore59@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Over the course of twenty five years, approximately 1990 to 2015, American archaeologists grew to accept the regular use of local knowledge, in the form of Native American and local community knowledge, in their development of archaeological knowledge and in cultural resource management. This change mostly pushed archaeologists to engage with groups of people that would have been ignored previously. This transformation is part of a larger process of Modernism becoming Post Modernism via the expanded use of high context communication, a concept from Communications Studies, throughout American culture. This paper briefly describes the use of local knowledge and summarizes structural changes in cultural resource management, especially consultation practices, that highlight a wider usage of high context communication.

**Keywords:** local knowledge; high context communication; phatic communication; American archaeology

## 1. Introduction

In early 2005 the journal *North American Archaeologist*, Vol. 26 (1), released a memorable collection of essays. The lead essay by Jay Custer [1] criticized the profession for not engaging with Native Americans while doing the work of prehistory. In the abstract Custer claimed that archaeologists must “come to terms with the unethical aspects of our discipline’s past and our current actions, enter into meaningful interactions with American Indian people, and cede most of our power and privilege to Indian people in order to develop a truly useful set of archaeological ethics in a real moral world [1] (p. 3)”. There were fifteen responses to Custer, and they covered a wide range of opinions. Most did not like his tone and hyperbole. Some agreed that a few things needed to change. Some were just angry replies while others claimed that what he was arguing for was already being done. Several offered personal stories about interactions with tribal members. The publication provides insight to the emotions of American archaeologists as of 2005. By 2015, this topic would no longer be debated as most American archaeologists came to accept the basic idea that tribes and other stakeholders need to be engaged in the process of research and historic preservation, and that local knowledge can inform archaeological claims and preservation decisions.

Collaboration between archaeologists and non-archaeologists, often called indigenous archaeology and community archaeology, is a type of high context communication because it involves building meaningful lasting relationships. High context communication means that there is more familiarity, understanding and knowledge between interacting parties. By collaborating with non-archaeologists, archaeologists add varieties of social and meaningful contexts to their endeavors.

For this paper, American archaeology refers to the profession in both the United States (US) and Canada, and in academia and culture resource (heritage) management (CRM). I am most familiar with the US so there is emphasis on it. While I have made a living as a professional archaeologist I do not think of archaeology as ‘the study of the past by analyzing material culture’ or something similar. That is a textbook statement. Sociologically, the profession consists of numerous communities of practitioners [2] who



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continually jockey for status and roles, power and authority, prestige, and creditability [3]. They defend their professional boundaries as best they can from those who are not part of the profession. So, acceptance of local knowledge is an interesting concession.

The concession also reflects a much broader transformation, the one from Modernism to Post Modernism that America went through during the last decades of the twentieth century. The change was structural that began with communication styles shifting from lower context to higher context (explained below). Archaeology is also a cultural entity within its host society. It is a fractal reflecting the values, beliefs, and customs of the host. As America shifted into Post Modernism so did American archaeology. Archaeologist's acceptance of local knowledge is a small example of the processes of Post Modernism that continue to change the way people live, act, and understand life.

## 2. Basic Concepts

The high and low context communication discussion comes from Anthropologist Edward T. Hall's *Beyond Culture* [4]. The two concepts describe communication differences between societies. High context refers to societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behaviors are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other. Your family is likely a high context environment. Low context refers to societies or groups where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, cultural behaviors and beliefs often need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave. All societies contain both modes within them with one being more dominant; they are a continuum. Dominance can be soft or strong. If quantified into percentages, societies may have a mix of 60/40 high/low or 75/25 low/high. Cultures can also shift up and down the continuum as they change over time. The concepts are core ones in Communications Studies and are widely used by consultants training people to understand multicultural situations.

Archaeologists engaging with tribes and other groups may sound like the low context approach. But it is high context because the intent is to have meaningful consultation and collaborations, and long-lasting agreements and interactions [5].

Another set of core concepts is phatic and emphatic communications [6,7]. Phatic statements are about establishing social relations, social bonding, and every day etiquette. It can also be flowery and "over the top". It leads to more gregarious behavior and tribalism. It used to be denigrated as "small talk" but its importance to communication is well documented. Emphatic statements convey information and are often direct statements, such as recipes, telegrams, and giving directions. Most of science emphasizes emphatic communications. The two usually go together. The famous statement "American Archaeology is Anthropology or it is nothing" [8] (p. 2) is a good example. The first part is a true statement because in the US archaeology is generally considered a subfield of anthropology. The last part is the phatic signal. It proclaims the authors to be members of the anthropology tribe because to them archaeology is a member of the anthropology tribe, or it belongs to no tribe.

In the US phatic statements are often misunderstood as emphatic ones. George Lakoff [9] (pp. 271–282) wrote a chapter asking: how can American conservatives love their country and hate their government at the same time? To him these people have conflicting thoughts in their heads and conflicting behavior. The mistake is to take everything literally and to not pay attention to context. Conservatives sitting around a table berating the government is social bonding, phatic communication. And when conservatives wave the American flag, it is likely more emphatic than phatic communication. There is no contradiction.

Thus, the phatic-emphatic and high-low context concepts have a positive association. Lower context cultures emphasize emphatic communication, and higher context cultures emphasize phatic communication. Higher context phatic communications lead to show-

manship trumping content. I have sat in many meetings with tribal members who orate as if they are on stage giving a performance. Most of what they say is phatic commentary and cannot be understood emphatically. In the current broader American society phatic communications dominate social media [10–12] turning much of it into kabuki theater.

Local knowledge is also known as traditional knowledge and generally refers to knowledge systems embedded in the traditions of regional, indigenous, or local communities. Anthropologists are familiar with the term as it is the title of a popular book by Clifford Geertz [13]. Archaeologists have long used local knowledge but prior to the 1990s it was done in an ad hoc manner. Simply, researchers will use useful bits of information whenever they can. The difference today is that planned projects of any large scale need something akin to a public involvement plan (discussed below) to ensure that indigenous or descendent communities are consulted and brought into the research process, if possible. It is now viewed as a moral and ethical issue; it is considered to be “the right thing to do”.

A good example of local indigenous knowledge being used to help interpret archaeological deposits is Clark and Custer [14]. Clark, a member of the Nanticoke tribe, and Custer reinterpreted a “trash pit” with human remains to be an actual burial. Artifacts in the pit are viewed as having ritual and symbolic meaning rather than being random trash. Clark was teaching Custer about Nanticoke customs. Together, they explored tribal history, oral history, and different ways to understand archaeological deposits. This is an example of the work that led to Custer’s evolution. Previously, he was known as a solid environmental archaeologist [15] who generally ignored Native American local knowledge.

A good example of community archaeology is the project that investigated the Tulsa, Oklahoma, race massacre of 1921. Back then, the Afro-American Greenwood district of north Tulsa was destroyed over several days, many Afro-Americans were killed, and the city was left shattered by what had happened. As the centennial approached the City of Tulsa set up a Centennial Commission, worked with the Greenwood Cultural Center and built a new Afro-American focused museum, Greenwood Rising. For an archaeological investigation the city brought in the Oklahoma Archaeological Survey and the University of Tulsa. The goals and focus of the study were defined by the commission and Greenwood’s black leadership. The goals were to find graves from the massacre and provide geographic information systems mapping of known sites associated with the massacre. A lot of fieldwork, archival research, forensics, and oral history was done. The first report is excellent [16] and field work continues. Unfortunately, the centennial ceremony was derailed by contemporary politics around the Critical Race Theory debate. The state governor, a Centennial commission member, was voted off the commission. The planned centennial celebration was abruptly cancelled days before the event was to happen, and the equity debate, as they call it in Tulsa, continues. Healing is hard. Good high context archaeology may or may not heal old wounds.

### 3. Structural Issues

The direct impulses nudging American archaeology into higher context communications come from structural changes that started in the mid-1960s. Three US laws, and their enabling regulations, have been significant in pushing archaeologists to engage with non-archaeologists: the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA), and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA). These laws require federal agencies to consult with the public, tribes, and other stakeholders to address possible affects to important cultural resources (a term used in CRM that combines archaeology with other historical resources) due to planned projects, and to repatriate tribal human remains, if possible.

Initially the NHPA competed with older archaeological laws related to reservoir and highway projects and the salvage of archaeological sites, such as the Moss-Bennett Act of 1974. An amendment to the NHPA in 1980 placed it center stage for US CRM. Its mandates to consult with tribes and other interested parties is one of its progressive traits as previous historic preservation and archaeological laws did not have such a requirement. In the 1980s

the idea of having to go out to the public and ask if planned projects are valid, useful, or possibly harmful must have been a headscratcher to planners, engineers, and archaeologists. Over time agencies got better at consultation although it is far from perfect. Consultation, especially meaningful consultation, is difficult to do and time consuming. It takes practice, experience, and training in multicultural communications.

Early on, the NHPA had a provision within it that allows tribes to establish Tribal Historic Preservation Offices/Officers (THPO) and only a handful of tribes gained that status by the early 1990s. In 1996 the US National Park Service revamped the program and twelve more tribes applied in that year. By 2016 there were 169 THPOs and in 2022 there are 208 [17]. While it is well known that the NHPA requires federal agencies to consult with State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPO) about their actions that may affect cultural resources, that type of consultation does not expand the context of communication too much because it is basically CRM specialists talking to each other. However, THPOs may be tribal members, they may not be CRM specialists, and they advocate the agenda of the tribe. Consulting with THPOs does expand context because tribal interests are usually different than agencies' interests or the interests of the archaeological community.

Tribal consultation can take many forms; two of them are more formalized. Government-to-government consultation is the most formal. Here senior agency managers talk with tribal leadership. It will be one agency talking with one tribe. If a meeting is held that has more than one tribe present then it is just a meeting, not government-to-government consultation. The other type of consultation is staff-to-staff. It is at this level that federal archaeologists communicate directly with THPOs and other tribal staff. These types of consultations were developed in the 1990s and continue to be refined. Also, federal agencies only consult with federally recognized tribes. If a Native American group does not have federal recognition, they may be considered an interested party or a non-governmental organization (NGO). Federal archaeologists must be careful to not treat a non-recognized entity as a federally recognized tribe. High context communication requires a stronger understating of the other party.

My agency, the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), manages rivers, dams, water works, and reservoirs in the western US, and constructs numerous water management projects. Often the work is for tribes and on tribal land. If a tribe has a THPO then consultation is generally simple because no one is going to argue with a tribe about what to do with their own cultural resources. If a tribe wants to modernize a 500 hundred year old irrigation system Reclamation will likely help them.

The NHPA also allows federal agencies to enter into programmatic agreements (PA) as a method to comply with the law. If a federal agency conducts regular and routine actions that may affect cultural resources then signing a PA with SHPO, and possibly the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation (ACHP), is a method to streamline the compliance process and designate classes of actions as exempt from compliance. Once simple documents, over time, PAs became more about higher context communication (consulting and collaborating) than streamlining the process.

Reclamation has signed many PAs over the years. In 2005 the Albuquerque office of Reclamation signed a PA with the New Mexico SHPO and the ACHP to streamline Reclamation's regular operations and management of a large portion of the Rio Grande in New Mexico (a river that runs from north to south splitting the state). The area covered by the PA includes several historic dams, many miles of historic canals, hundreds of archaeological sites, and an American Civil War battlefield. The 2005 PA was a three-party document. Reclamation did not consult or negotiate with any other entity beyond the signatories. Today, after a couple of extensions, the PA needs to be renegotiated. SHPO and ACHP are now asking Reclamation to consult with the customers and landowners along the river who get drinking or irrigation water from it, or who may have an interest in the history of the river. This includes as many as 30 tribes, a regional water district, four additional federal agencies and possibly environmentalist NGO activists. Under the NHPA, preservation has taken a backseat to communication.

The NAGPRA law of 1990 stunned many American archaeologists. Its requirements to repatriate Native American human remains and associated burial items back to tribes immediately pitted many archaeologists and tribes against one another. Over ten years of legal battles ensued. The most high-profile case came to be known as skull wars [18]. The law also forced federal agencies, universities, and museums to inventory their collections, publish the inventories, and seek out possible associated tribes who could receive a repatriation. Likewise, tribes were motivated to pursue repatriations. Consultations under NAGPRA eventually became formalized and routine. By the early 2000s there was a sea change in American archaeology, especially in CRM: accommodate the tribes, within reason, was the message. Added to this was: accommodate any group that has a reasonable claim. This perspective continues today.

NAGPRA also encourages agencies to prepare a document called Plan of Action whenever a project may encounter Native American burials. This document outlines what is to be done if a burial is found. When working on tribal land Reclamation archaeologists often co-author the document with tribal staff. And the tribe may even have its governing council pass a resolution to affirm it.

The NEPA law also has the progressive requirement to reach out to the public, stakeholders, and interested parties to gather information and opinions for or against planned projects. For larger NEPA analyses a federal agency will conduct public ceremonies called scoping meetings and open houses. In the early days of NEPA these events had low success rates often due to low public participation. Over time agencies improved their communications with the public. Much of this improvement was due to bringing in communications consultants. By the early twenty-first century environmental planners and the archaeologists supporting them had evolved a set of values that continue today. Basically, these values relate to understanding why public involvement is important. Such as, input from the public leads to better decision making, and public involvement processes lead to greater understanding between planners and various interest groups and stakeholders. Planners are also trained in better communication skills, including learning how to demonstrate empathy (empathic communication), practicing active listening skills, learning how to answer hard questions, and developing skills to handle hostile situations. Applying these values and skills is believed to build trust and credibility. These values and skills all reflect aspects of high context communication.

Large NEPA projects can take a couple years to complete, and the final analysis document is called an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). This document will describe a proposed project, explain why it is needed, and describe and evaluate the impacts a project may have on the environment and to minority groups. Early in the EIS process a Public Participation Plan will be prepared. It will outline all the various ways that an agency will reach out to the public, such as how many public meetings there will be, where will they be, what federal and state agencies need to be contacted, which politicians need to be contacted, what land owners need to be contacted, what newspapers will be used to announce to project, and decide if there will be a project newsletter, and if so, a mailing list needs to be maintained. In other words, significant preplanning is done.

Near the end of the EIS process there is a public comment period, likely 90 days, where the public has a chance to review the EIS and comment on it. The final EIS document will have an appendix that lists all comments and an agency's response to each one. Lastly, chapter five of the EIS summaries all the public outreach that was done. Under NEPA an agency must plan public involvement, implement the plan, and then document it. An archaeologist will be involved in every part of this process if important cultural resources may be affected.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusions**

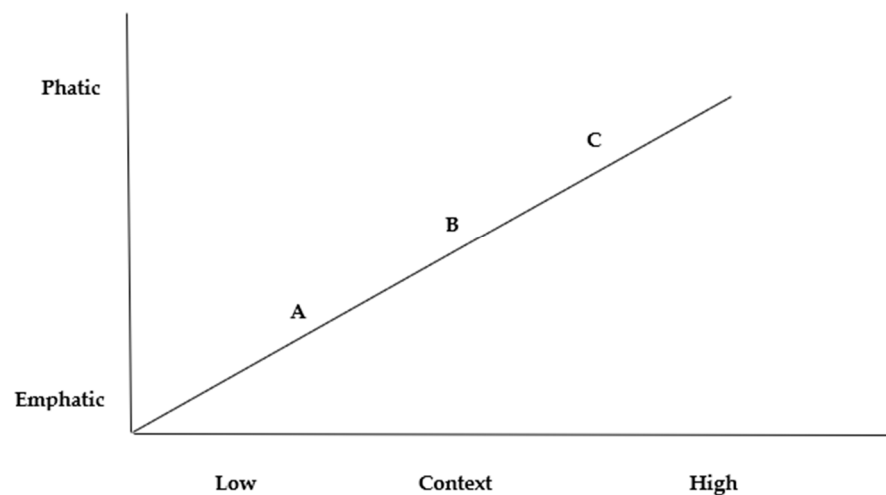
People reflect the values and lifestyles of the times in which they live. If the times change significantly, such as the shift from Modernism to Post Modernism, expect a lot of people to change, adapt to the trend. Thus, dozens, maybe hundreds, of American archae-

ologists and anthropologists trained during late Modernism migrated to more intuitive epistemic frameworks over the course of their careers. Urban and Schortman [19] wrote a whole book about their theoretical changes. Early on, David Thomas wanted to “predict the past” [20] and then became an advocate of indigenous archaeology [21]. James Deetz defended archaeology as a social science [22] and then became a banjo playing folklorist [23]. Jay Custer was not alone in his transformation. His change may have been more dramatic because of a legacy that haunts him, being a descendent of George A. Custer [24]. (An America soldier who died gloriously or ingloriously at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876).

Several years ago, I described [25] a simple pattern that repeats in American culture, the alternation of rational and intuitive eras. There was the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century followed by nineteenth century Romanticism that was followed by twentieth century Modernism (a second enlightenment) and now the current Post Modernism (a new Romanticism). Metaphorically, the alternation is the switch from left brain dominance to right brain dominance, and back again [26]. And the eras are linked. Modernism revisited the questions and concerns of the Enlightenment; Post Modernism is revisiting the questions and concerns of Romanticism [27,28]. Each era is characterized by differing communication styles. The rational eras emphasize emphatic and low context communications. The intuitive eras emphasize more phatic and higher context communications.

The transition periods between each era are known as Awakenings which last twenty to twenty-five years. The most recent Awakening, circa 1964 to 1984, is often called the “sixties and seventies”. In American history it is also called the Fourth Great Awakening [29]. Awakenings are periods of heightened emotions, intellectualism, and creativity. American archaeology had these moments with the New Archaeology during the Fourth Awakening. Next came the processual/post processual debates as Post Modernism took hold of the profession. The change from Modernism to Post Modernism was structural. It pushed Americans from a lower context communication style to a higher context communication style. Using local knowledge in archaeological research, consulting with tribes and local communities, and reaching out to the public in general are all part of this ongoing cultural evolution. And Post Modernism is not done yet. As a heuristic, Figure 1 shows the relationship between high/low context and phatic/emphatic communications. As a visualization of the changes discussed here, point A is American culture circa 1960. Point B is current American culture. The change may not seem like much, but it does suggest a doubling in phatic and high context communication styles. As mentioned earlier, social media is rife with phatic conversations. Point C is where contemporary Asian cultures are. American culture will not get that far because the rising line also generally reflects the continuum of individualism and collectivism. The higher the phatic/high context culture the greater collectivism is in the culture. To get to point C American culture would have to abandon individualism, something I do not see happening. But point B could be pushed a little more upslope. Post Modernism with its social emphasis and tribalism is still expanding in American culture as this example of accepting local knowledge in American archaeology reveals. The next Awakening, wherein American culture likely slips back toward point A, and the Asians closer to point B, is still thirty years away. The grand intuitive climax is still ahead, and the great social circus continues.

So, at the end of the day, has American archaeology lost anything by accepting local knowledge into its work? Probably not. Many years ago, I thought it might lead to a form of de-professionalization due to giving up some professional authority. That did not happen. Today, the profession’s authority and credibility appear to be very much intact. Likely because archaeologists are willing to engage and listen to those they used to ignore.



**Figure 1.** Relationship between high context communication and phatic communication. Point A is American culture circa 1960. B is current American culture. C reflects current Asian cultures.

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