Objective: To help students to understand the process of archaeological study and to show them the value of cooperative learning.

For Discussion:
Archaeologists are challenged to put together the pieces of “puzzles” every day. They must take small remnants of the past and put them together to form the story of people, places, and events. The objects that archaeologists find are called artifacts. Artifacts are anything that has been made or used by humans. The more clues that archaeologists can discover about the past, the more they can understand about the way previous cultures lived.

Often, things that are left in the ground for three hundred years rot away and archaeologists can never recover them. They do not often find objects made of wood, cloth, or other biodegradable materials. Rarely do archaeologists find complete objects when excavating. They usually find only small pieces of objects. Sometimes, they might find many pieces of the same object. They can put these together and see what the object was and how it may have been used.

Materials: Six copies of enclosed line drawing; cut each into six pieces (as marked)
Enclosed color picture of the complete artifact

Procedure:
1. Students will pretend to be archaeologists excavating a site and finding only a small piece of an object at a time. Divide the class into six small groups. Each group should be working with their own complete set of “puzzle pieces.” Give each group one piece of their “puzzle” without showing anyone the complete object. Students should be told that the object they are working toward is a piece of pottery, it has blue and white decorations, and it was found on a 17th-century site in St. Mary’s City. Their drawing is the same approximate size as the actual object. You may want to give each group a different piece to start with and not let the groups know that they are working on the same object.

2. Ask each group to determine what their object might be based only on the small piece they have been given. Have them draw a picture of what the complete artifact might look like. Direct students to make some determinations about the object. What clues does the puzzle piece give you? Have you seen anything in your house that has a similar shape? What kinds of things have you seen that are made of pottery? What would be good or bad about making something out of this material? (Note: pottery can be highly decorated, but is also highly breakable.)

3. Once all groups have had time for discussion, give each group a second piece of their puzzle. How does their drawing change with this new piece of information? Do these pieces “fit together” if you imagine that they are pieces of a jigsaw puzzle?
4. Continue to give each group one additional piece of the artifact at a time. Allow time for discussion between each piece. As the groups begin to make some determinations about the nature of their object, ask them to think about how the object may have been used and who may have used it. How would its use affect the way it was made? (Note: the decorations might give you a clue that it was something that was meant to be displayed and shown off and the fact that it is breakable might tell you it would not be used every day.)

5. When all groups have a mostly completed picture, bring the class together to discuss the first drawings each group made and how they changed with additional information. Were there any drawings that looked alike? Reveal the true nature of the object and show the class the enclosed color picture. Did anyone determine what it was? What kind of challenges do archaeologists face when all they can find are small pieces of objects? (Note: they rarely find all the pieces of an object; they might have to make determinations from pieces as small as the ones with which the students started.) How else might archaeologists be able to determine what an object was? (Note: they can compare the fragment to objects still in existence from the 17th century or from artifacts previously identified or they might be able to get clues from other primary sources like paintings.)

A note to the teacher: The included object is a line drawing of a jug that may have been used to hold liquids and, because it has a spout, was probably used for serving. It is highly decorated, meaning it would have been more expensive than a plain jug that could do the same job. Virtually no pottery was made in Maryland, so it would have had to have been imported from England or Europe. This particular piece is from the Rhine area of Europe. This would not be an item found in every household because an average Maryland colonist would not be able to afford it. This object was excavated, in many pieces, at one of the archaeological sites within St. Mary's City. Archaeologists were able to recover all of the pieces and reconstruct the vessel.

Extension:

1. After showing the students the photograph of the complete artifact, lead a discussion about what this artifact can tell us about the people who used it. You might include questions such as:

   What kinds of skills would be needed to made an object like this?
   One would need to know how pottery is made and fired. The maker would also need the artistic skill to decorate it in such an intricate way.

   Do you think it would be expensive or inexpensive?
   This piece would be fairly expensive, both because it was imported and because it was highly decorated.

   Would that tell you what kind of people might have used something like this?
   The owner would likely be prosperous to be able to afford the piece and may have possibly been in a position to want to show off such a fine object as a symbol of his status and wealth.
If archaeologists found this at an excavation where a building used to be, what might this object tell you about the building’s owner? What might it tell you about the use(s) of the building?

Again, the owner of the building where the artifact was found might be prosperous. The building might be a place where people were eating and drinking on a regular basis. It might be a private home, or it might be a place where guests were being served (perhaps an inn or tavern).

How can archaeologists use many different kinds of artifacts to decide what kind of structure might have been on a particular spot? How would they use them to determine what life was like in colonial Maryland?

Archaeologists would need to find many artifacts at a particular location that gave them the same idea of the structures use and/or owner before they could make any determinations. For instance, if archaeologists found the remains of many kitchen items in a particular location, they might be able to confidently determine that a kitchen stood on that site. Finding only one or two artifacts would not give them enough clues. Often archaeologists will recover thousands of artifacts from a site before they are confident to hypothesize on its use. Consequently, archaeologists must find thousands of artifacts from different sites to make any determinations about what life was like in 17th-century Maryland. They will also use information from primary source records to confirm the hypothesis that they make using artifacts.

2. What could objects that we use today tell about us in the future? Bring in an object from home or use one found in the classroom and discuss the following questions:

- What would someone who found this object in three hundred years think of us?
- Would they be able to figure out what the object might be used for?
- What if they only had a small piece of it?
- Would the object last in the ground for three hundred years?
- What might be left?
- What might have happened to the rest?
- Do you think that they will still use this object or others like it in the future?
- Why or why not? What might replace it?