Reviewed Article:

Exploring the Potential of Shared Authority Projects in Open-Air Museums

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As our societies become more diverse and the demographics of heritage visitors change, many open-air museums are concerned about how to remain relevant. Making a shift to an activist approach is one way museums can evolve to better serve their visitors and community. Many traditional museums have adopted this approach, but relatively few open-air museums have done so.

The experiment presented here tested the potential of a shared authority project in a 'virtual' open-air museum. Due to COVID, the study was done in an online format. Participants provided input on how to furnish a virtual roundhouse. They were surveyed before and after the activity about their ability to participate meaningfully in museum work, why they visit museums, and the goals of museums.

The virtual format produced two data sets. The high level of consistency between archaeologists and non-archaeologists demonstrates that the public is very capable of engaging in this work at a high level. The survey data reveal that most participants feel more confident about engaging with museum work after completing the activity, and they view museums as a tool for empowerment. The data show that these projects can be effective at engaging visitors and deepening their thinking about the museum.

> " When participants were surveyed, positive responses about the activity and the role of visitors in museums indicated that volunteers enjoyed being part of such a project and most feel that visitors can be involved in museums at a much higher level than has been common in the past. The vast majority of respondents also felt that museum involvement could be a tool for empowerment.

Activist Museums

With looming climate crises, increased racial tensions, catastrophic economic disparity, and armed conflict, our present-day world is changeable and complex (Janes and Sandell 2019b, 4; Lyons and Bosworth 2019). Against this backdrop, museums must adapt to survive economically, but also have the potential and opportunity to become leaders in supporting more peaceful and equitable societies.

For several years, there has been a trend among traditional brick and mortar museums towards becoming activist museums: museums which use their staff and displays to bring about social or political change (Nightingale and Sandell 2012, 3; Bennett 2005, 525; Gonzales 2020, 6; Janes and Sandell 2019a, xxvii). With few exceptions, such as St. Fagan's in Wales (Hughes and Phillips 2019, 251-252), Ryfylkemuseet in Norway (Brekke 2019, 274) and the Scottish Crannog Centre in Scotland (Collinson 2020, 2) open-air museums taking part in activist work are far less common. Open-air museums, even if interested in activism, may not see it as a good fit for their type of museum. Open-air museums are an ideal fit for activism, however. They can and should be doing activism work. Open-air museums draw people in, make them feel comfortable and help them to learn in a hands-on, effortless way. The experiences provided at these museums attract a wide variety of visitors and they often welcome visitors who may not be interested in more traditional museums (Goulding 2001, 566). There is huge potential for open-air museums to help their visitors see other viewpoints and have meaningful encounters with parallel human experiences through time.

One way in which museums can become more activist is to share authority. Sharing authority refers to systems in which responsibility for decision making in exhibitions, content and organisation of space is shared between museum staff, visitors and specific community groups (Gonzales 2020, 148-163). Sharing authority can range from consulting a small focus group to sharing authority for managing the museum with a community (Simon 2010, 190). Sharing authority is also an effective way to include more community groups who are underrepresented in museum staff and there is evidence that involving the local community in creating museum content is a way to bring about local social change (Fleming 2012).

Community Inclusion Experiment

Although there are numerous examples of community inclusion working well in traditional museums and in a handful of open-air museums, I wanted to test the efficacy of several strategies in a wider variety of open-air museums. As originally planned, the experiment would have tested a selection of community inclusion tools in multiple open-air museum settings, by engaging visitors to the museums in various tasks. At the time of my project, COVID-19 made in-person research impossible, so I instead designed a virtual version of the experiment. With the additional time and work associated with a virtual experiment, it was necessary to reduce the experimental scope to test a single museum strategy. I chose to focus on community inclusion as I felt it was the least dependent on the physical surroundings of the open-air museum and would therefore till be effective.

My virtual experiment was designed to provide two levels of data. First, the results of the activity itself tested the ability of the general public to engage in high-level debate about the authenticity of artefacts in order to furnish an Iron Age roundhouse. The second set of data is comprised of the answers volunteers provided in online surveys before and after completing the roundhouse activity. The survey questions were designed to reveal trends in volunteers' thinking about museums, their involvement in museums, and their feelings about social justice work in museums.

Hypotheses

- H1: There will be agreement on some of the roundhouse items, but those with uncertain provenance will divide participants. There will be a noticeable difference in what archaeologists and non-archaeologists choose to include.

- H2: Most participants will believe visitors can play a part in museums, but this will largely be confined to the more traditional visitor roles such as helping with exhibits, and few participants will agree the public could play a role in running the museum. Older participants will be less likely to see a role for visitors than younger ones.

- H3: Respondents will be divided on whether museum participation can translate into social empowerment.

Methodology

Participants were recruited through personal connections, social media and EXARC primarily in the UK, Europe and US. Participants were asked to complete an initial online survey asking broad demographic questions and about their beliefs about archaeology and museums. Survey results were collected anonymously, but the initial and final surveys were linked by participant number to allow comparisons of attitudes before and after their experience.

Participants took part in the roundhouse activity itself. They were sent a PowerPoint presentation with instructions and a painting of the inside of a roundhouse, empty except for a hearth. Paintings of eleven artefacts that could be dragged into or out of the roundhouse scene were placed around the edges of the roundhouse (See Figure 1). Participants were instructed that their goal was to move the items into the scene (or omit them) to accurately furnish a roundhouse built near modern-day Exeter, England with a date of around 800 BC (See Figure 2).

Participants were given information about the archaeological context of each artefact in order to make a decision about whether or not the evidence supported displaying the item in the roundhouse. All of the artefacts were real, taken from published finds both in Southwest England and the rest of the UK. Some of the items had excellent evidence, some scanty evidence; others had evidence that was later or earlier than the 800 BC date. The drawings of the artefacts presented them as fully intact reconstructions, to provide participants with a sense of the objects as they would have appeared. The artefacts were chosen both to allow volunteers to create a finished, homey roundhouse, and to spark debate about an appropriate level of material comfort versus the lack of hard evidence for some items.

Initially, 10 volunteers took part in pilot groups to test the process. During this phase, the volunteers completed the roundhouse activity over Zoom so I was able to observe how they approached the activity. After observing these pilot groups, I determined that participants would benefit from more historical and archaeological context for the time period; they struggled with making decisions about the artefacts because they did not know – even broadly – the level of technology and craftsmanship of the Iron Age. Many also struggled to keep track of the order of time periods. I thus made two changes. I added a fourth slide to the roundhouse PowerPoint that included a timeline of important prehistoric and historic events and I created a separate time period background document that was included with the roundhouse activity. The added information further illustrates the timeline by including photos of artefacts from both the Bronze Age and Iron Age to help the volunteers understand the level of technological sophistication and craftsmanship in prehistory.

The remainder of the volunteers completed their roundhouse individually and emailed the completed document back to me. After participants completed the roundhouse experiment, they were asked to complete the second online survey, which repeated many of the

questions from the initial survey to gauge changes of opinion, and also included an expanded section about the experience and their thoughts about archaeology.

Results

Seventy participants took part in the study. Of those, 62 completed both surveys and 57 returned roundhouse documents. Only answers from those who completed both surveys were included in the analysis. Of the 62 surveys analysed, 31 were from the US, 27 from the UK, and four from other European countries. The four European participants were grouped with the British participants as heritage attractions are broadly similar in the UK and Europe. Thirty-four percent of all participants had a professional or academic background in archaeology, and 66% did not. Participant ages ranged between 18 and over 70 years.

Artefact Inclusion Data

When participants completed the roundhouse activity over video calls, participants naturally fell into a similar decision process. They quickly realised they needed to compromise on object accuracy to allow for the overall roundhouse impression to be accurate. Groups of participants were able to decide on each item relatively easily; there was much discussion but little disagreement and participants felt decisions about all artefacts fell somewhere on the sliding scale of accuracy, rather than being black and white decisions. In addition to the archaeological evidence, groups also discussed whether items would be stored in a roundhouse (or a separate building), and whether items fit the social status of the roundhouse. They consulted their background documents and asked questions to make better informed choices. Groups were enthusiastic about the exercise and provided positive feedback upon completion of the activity.

There is a remarkable degree of agreement about the artefacts between archaeologists and non-archaeologists (See Figure 3). For most items there was 75% to 95% agreement about whether it should be included; for items that were largely excluded, the agreement was still greater than 70%. The mirror and tablet artefacts divided participants slightly more, but otherwise rates of inclusion of artefacts differed by only about five to ten percent between archaeologists and non-archaeologists. Most participants chose to include all of the more utilitarian items, and none of the three more decorative items, even when the provenance of a decorative item was very similar to that of a utilitarian item.

Artefact Inclusion Discussion

The data from the roundhouse activity were striking. Members of the public with no archaeological background quickly understood the tension between object accuracy and the duty to portray a realistic overall impression. With this understanding, and the small amount of reference material they were given, participants made well-informed decisions that agreed

with those of the archaeologists about 90% of the time. Contrary to my hypothesis (H1), the degree of agreement on each item is surprisingly high and exhibits some interesting patterns.

While there is certainly a good correlation between the strength of the evidence and an item's inclusion, the use of the object also played an important role. The evidence provided for the knife and ladle, for example, comes from Glastonbury Lake Village, with dates of 250 to 50 BC, making them at least 550 years later than the target time period of the roundhouse. Despite this, both items were included by most participants– archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike. The fibula and mirror were both left out by the majority of participants, yet the dates of these items are around 400 BC: 150-350 years closer to the target date than the knife and ladle. Differences in the wording of the evidence may well have played a role, but it seems likely that the perceived necessity of the item helped sway a decision. Often during the video chat meetings, participants argued for including the knife or ladle, reasoning that certainly people were able to cut and strain even hundreds of years earlier. Such an argument was not made when it came to objects participants felt were less utilitarian and more decorative.

Further research is needed to control for the way each item's evidence is presented, but it seems as though all of us – archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike – are more likely to include an item with weak evidence if it seems utilitarian and fits our preconceived notions of what people at the time would have had access to. Although not surprising, it is important to be mindful of this bias as this can lead to overgeneralisation and a tendency to portray past times as more primitive than they may have been. Overall, however, the close agreement between the items archaeologists and non-archaeologists included in their roundhouses suggests that the public is indeed very capable of engaging in shared-authority projects at a high level, and that museums can depend on high quality results from such projects.

The roundhouse experiment was well-received. Many participants commented that they enjoyed it, found it engaging, or were surprised that it had worked so well in the digital format. While a virtual roundhouse is a far cry from the immersive experience of the sights, sounds and smells of a real one, the positive feedback and percentage of participants who said it felt more meaningful than a simple walk through a museum show that there is value to this format. Even post-COVID, museums could use similar tools as a way to welcome a broader public and to engage visitors more deeply with certain aspects of the museum before or after their in-person visit.

Survey Data

A number of trends emerged from the two surveys. The most common answer to the question 'Why do you think learning about the past is most important?' across all groups was 'to maintain perspective on modern technology/culture' (See Figure 4). Connecting to family history was not a common motivator for any group aside from young participants, and about a quarter of each group answered 'to help make decisions about the present/future' and 'to

learn ways of doing things we may have forgotten'. A small but consistent group of non-archaeologists reported they visit heritage attractions to learn new things; no archaeologists reported this same motivation.

When asked a multi-choice questions about what museums should portray, 'reasonable interpretations of archaeological facts' was the most popular answer, followed by 'stories that give life to archaeological facts', 'the most realistic big picture impression of the past', 'cultural and political problems/conflicts in the past', and 'topics that apply to the past and present', respectively. The only option to receive less than 50% agreement in most groups was 'objective truths' (See Figure 5).

The majority of 18-30 year olds felt visitors can play a role in determining artefact authenticity in museums (See Figure 6). That view decreased with age, and relatively few participants over 50 believed visitors could play such a role. After taking part in the roundhouse activity, the number of participants who agreed with the statement increased across all age groups. Archaeologists were slightly more favourable about visitors being involved than were non-archaeologists participants.

Although all respondents felt visitors could play some part in the museum, they were divided over what that role should be (See Figure 7). The option with the most support was 'reflecting what is important to the local community' followed by actions such as helping determine courses and raising money. There was little support for public involvement in the running of the museum, or supporting political or social movements. Just under half of non-archaeologists reported feeling they have the skills to engage in shared authority work with museums, with little change from the initial survey to the final survey (See Figure 8).

Of the non-archaeologists, 49% strongly agreed or agreed that completing this activity changed their feelings about archaeology and museums whereas only 19% of archaeologists experienced a change (See Figure 9). The majority of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that taking part in this activity was more meaningful than a passive visit to a museum (See Figure 10). Non-archaeologists felt the experience was more meaningful than archaeologists, with 68% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. Among non-archaeologists, 48% reported that they will definitely seek out ways to work with archaeology or museums in the future, although 15% of these said that they were already doing so before taking part in this study. 31% said they would possibly seek out experiences in archaeology or museums, and only 21% said they would probably or definitely not do so (See Figure 11). Of all participants, 58% reported feeling better prepared to take part in shared authority projects with museums in the future after completing the activity, with similar figures among archaeologists and the general public (See Figure 12).

When asked whether they believe engaging in this type of work with a museum can empower people in the community, no participants disagreed and 93% of all participants agreed or

strongly agreed. Among archaeologists, the numbers were even more decisive, with 100% agreeing or strongly agreeing (See Figure 13).

Survey Discussion

Consistent with data from the tourism sector (Paardekooper 2015, Atkinson 2016, The Audience Agency 2018), younger participants were much more positive about visitors playing an active role in museums than were older participants (H2). This is not a surprising finding, as museums have shifted from a more traditional role to a less-rigid way of working over the last twenty years. It is a good sign for museums wishing to engage with activism work. Younger visitors – who will make up more and more of museums' visitor base – are open to many types of collaboration between museums and visitors. Younger participants were most supportive of visitors being involved in helping the museum reflect the community, raising money for causes, and helping to steer and design exhibits. Clearly, younger museum goers are willing to participate in activist museums.

The responses to the question about whether museum involvement can lead to empowerment were also very promising. A surprisingly high number of participants thought that it would, including 93% of non-archaeologists and 100% of archaeologists (H3). Such strong support for the idea is encouraging, as it means respondents are ready to think of museums in this context. These results show that visitors are ready for museums to offer them a bigger role, and more challenging material.

Limitations

Originally, my research was intended to take place in several open-air museums with participation of museum visitors. Due to COVID, I reworked the experiment to test a similar set of hypotheses virtually. The virtual study is, by nature, less complete than originally designed, which gives rise to some potential study limitations.

One potential drawback of the virtual experiment is how representative the participants are of actual museumgoers. The online format excludes those without access to a computer, the knowledge of how to use a computer, and the time to complete the project on a computer. Such exclusions potentially bias responses by sampling a more highly educated and higher income population than a random sample of museum visitors. With unreliable school and childcare due to COVID, it was likely difficult for participants with children to find time to complete the study, so parents could be underrepresented relative to actual visitation at open-air museums.

In light of these concerns, I compared my data asking participants' motivation for visiting heritage attractions to data from studies that have been completed at open-air museums to determine the reason for patrons' visits (Cameron and Gatewood 2002, Goulding 2001 and

Falk (2012). My participants' responses to the survey questions match these studies remarkably well. Although it seems that a very different population would take part in a virtual roundhouse experiment than would choose a day out at an open-air museum, with respect to their motivations the experimental group is more representative of actual visitors to open-air museums than I hypothesised. The comparison increases my confidence that my data compare well with that of real-life museumgoers. The age breakdown of my study was also surprisingly similar to figures for actual museum visitors in the Audience Agency's 2018 study. These comparisons show that the experimental data are broadly comparable to real museum visitor groups.

As well as being limited in economic diversity, my study was also limited in racial and cultural diversity. My reliance on personal contacts, social media and museum social media groups to recruit volunteers disproportionately underrepresents minorities. This is an important limitation, as minority visitors are one of the main targets of my research, and should be the main target of future research on this topic.

The virtual experiment differs from a visit to an open-air museum in a number of obvious ways. It is more academic than experiential and lacks the trademark sensory, immersive experiences and human interaction open-air museums provide. These limitations notwithstanding, if a virtual experience can produce satisfactory results, it is likely safe to infer that an actual museum setting would do this much more powerfully.

Future Research

The next step is to repeat and expand this experiment in person in open-air museums. A second study would allow for a more representative sampling of visitors who chose an open-air as a fun day out, and capture the full immersive experience. More detailed demographic information and more targeted recruiting could attempt to quantify opinions of less well-represented groups (those in poverty, BAME visitors, religious or cultural minorities, etc.) at open-air museums. Future experiments should also carefully control phrasing in the artefact provenance information section. Such experiments would help to clarify how exactly visitors are making their choices, and to explore the role of the utilitarian/decorative object bias.

Conclusions

As few open-air museums are involved in activist work at present, I designed an experiment to test the efficacy of a project in which the public shared museum authority. My virtual experiment demonstrated an extremely high level of consistency between archaeologists and non-archaeologists about what should be included in a roundhouse exhibit. The experiment demonstrates that the public are able to take part in such projects with only basic background information, and that museums can be confident in the results.

When participants were surveyed, positive responses about the activity and the role of visitors in museums indicated that volunteers enjoyed being part of such a project and most feel that visitors can be involved in museums at a much higher level than has been common in the past. The vast majority of respondents also felt that museum involvement could be a tool for empowerment. Clearly, both archaeologists and non-archaeologists are ready for this new direction. Museums have only to lead the way.

Keywords   archaeological open-air museum
public
education

Country   United Kingdom

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. THE ROUNDHOUSE DOCUMENT AS PARTICIPANTS RECEIVED IT. ILLUSTRATION BY KATE SHEAR

FIG 2. AN EXAMPLE OF A COMPLETED ROUNDHOUSE. ILLUSTRATION BY KATE SHEAR
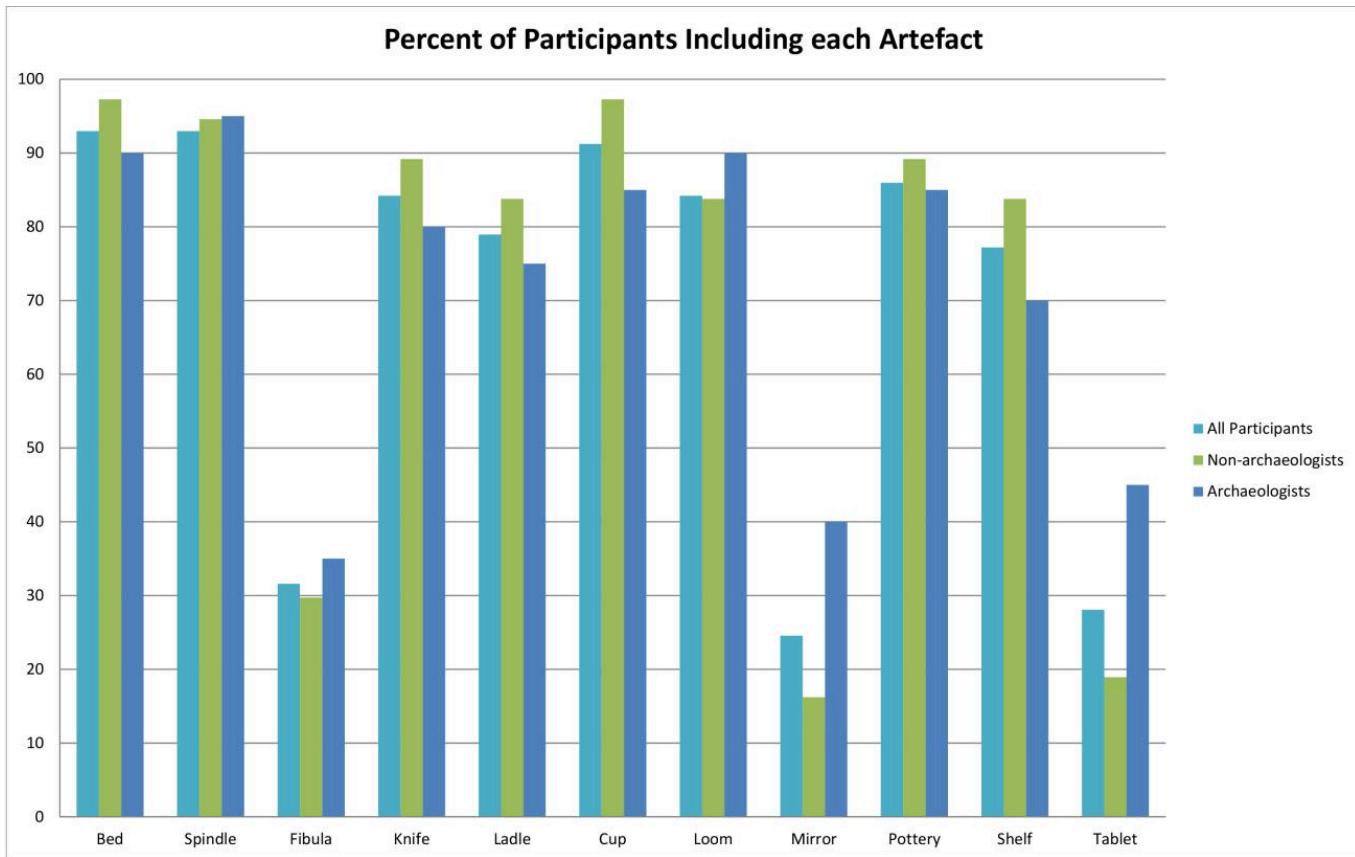
FIG 3. PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE WHO INCLUDED EACH ARTEFACT, BROKEN DOWN BY ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
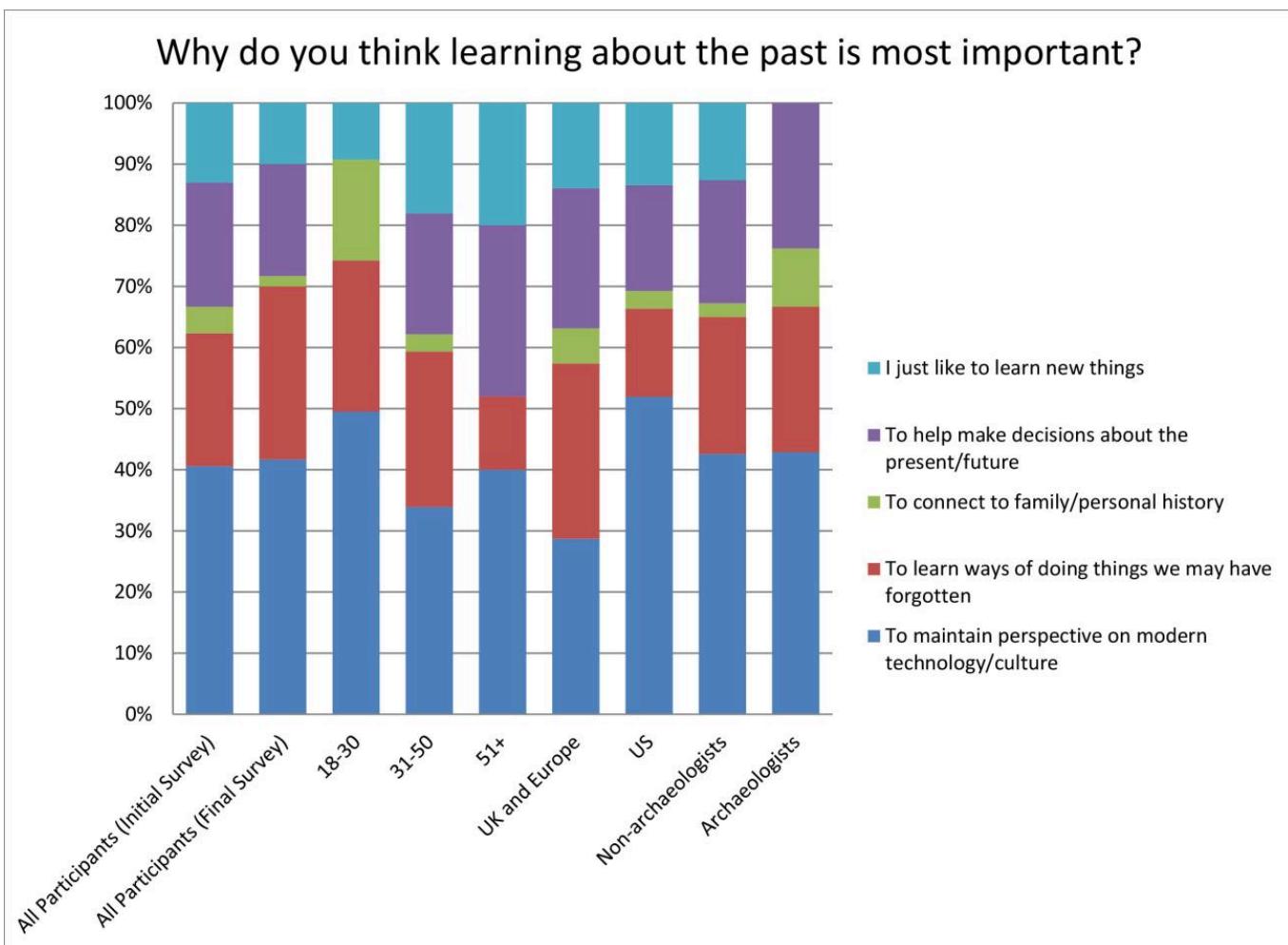
FIG 4. PARTICIPANT RESPONSES ON THE VALUE OF LEARNING ABOUT THE PAST, BROKEN DOWN BY PARTICIPANT AGE, LOCATION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR

I Feel Museums Should Present...
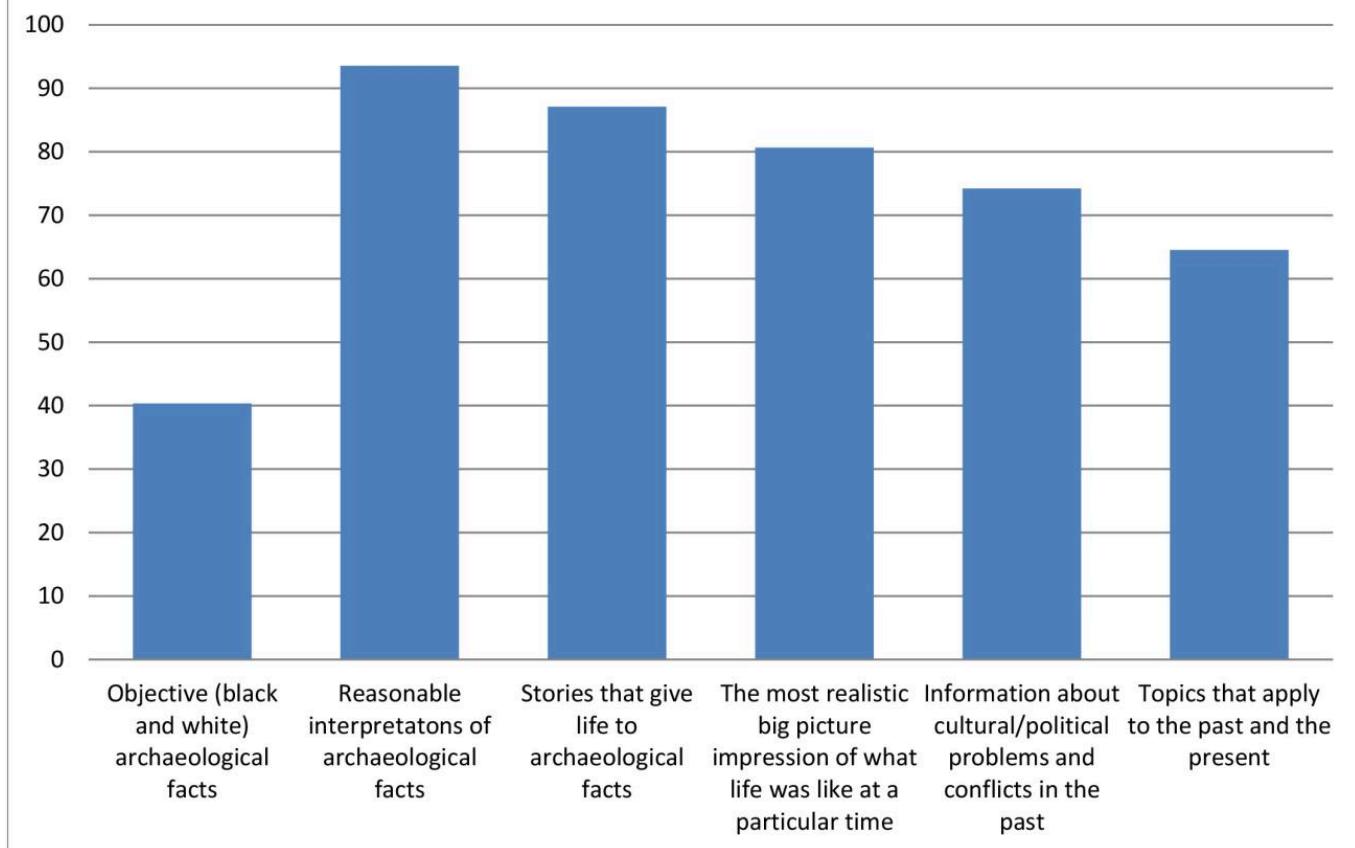
FIG 5. PERCENTAGE OF ALL PARTICIPANTS SUPPORTING DIFFERENT STYLES OF MUSEUM PRESENTATION, AVERAGED FROM THE INITIAL AND FINAL SURVEYS. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
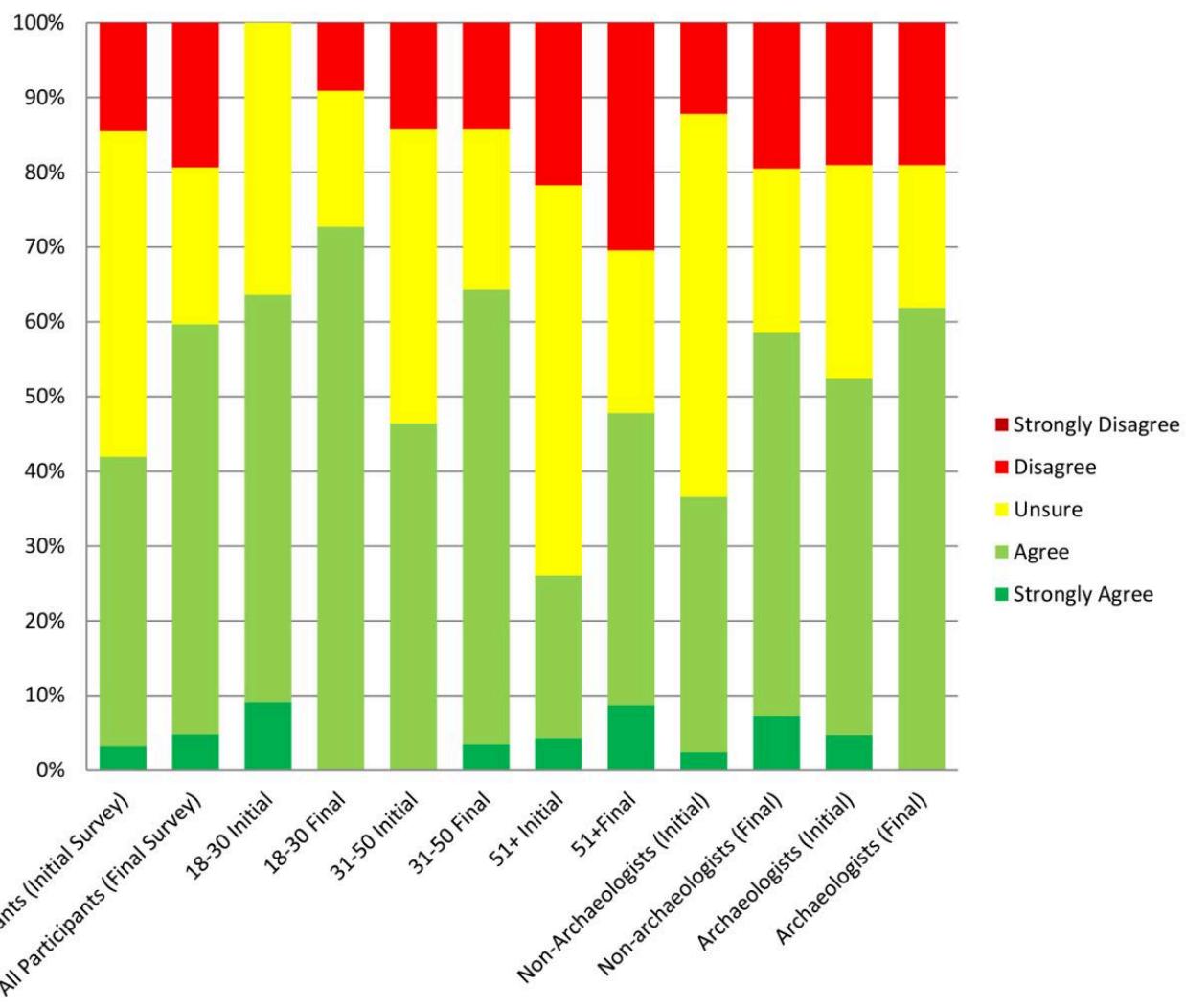
FIG 6. PARTICIPANT OPINIONS ABOUT SHARED AUTHORITY WORK WITH MUSEUMS, BROKEN DOWN BY PARTICIPANT AGE, LOCATION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
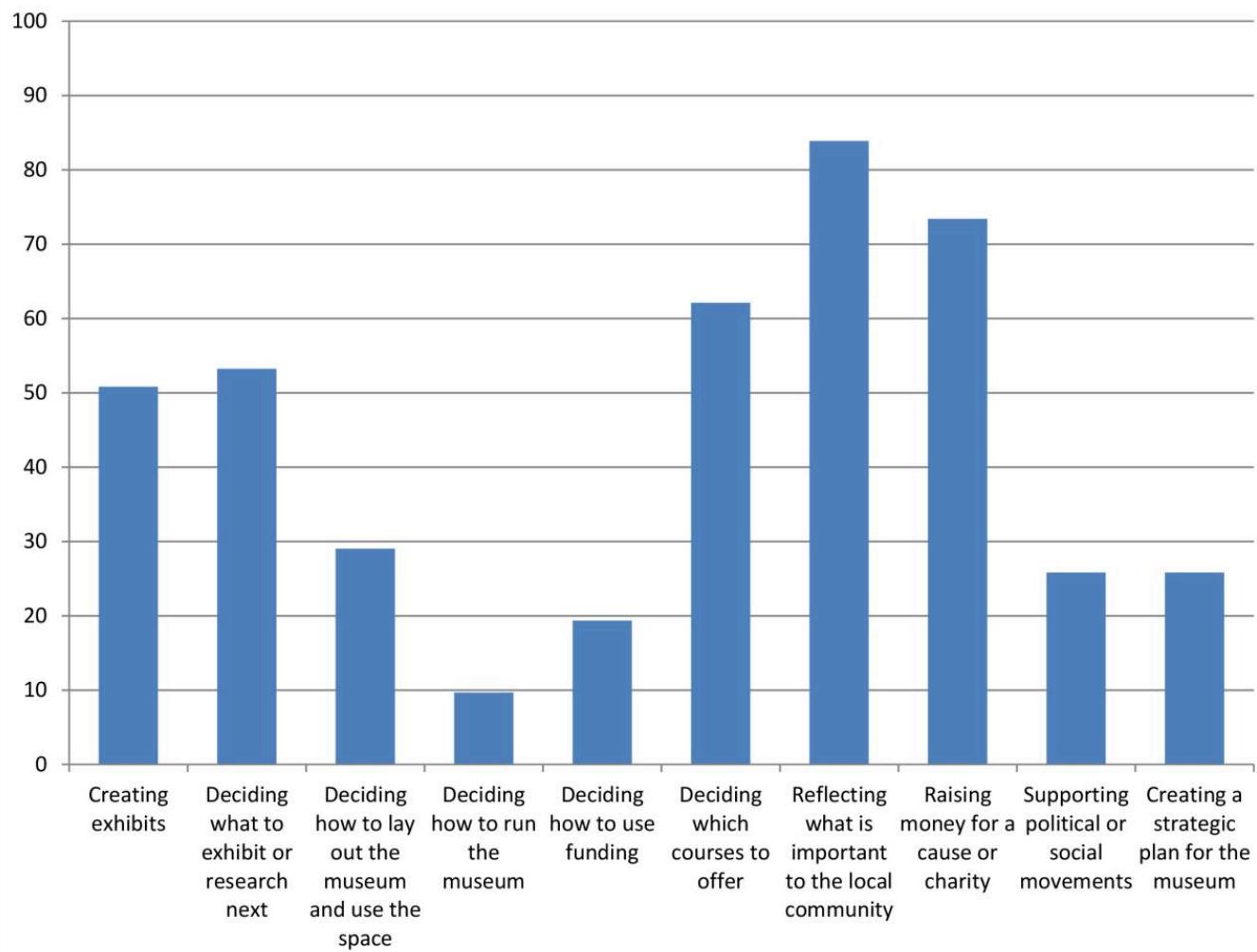
FIG 7. PERCENTAGE OF ALL PARTICIPANTS SUPPORTIVE OF DIFFERENT FORMS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN MUSEUMS. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
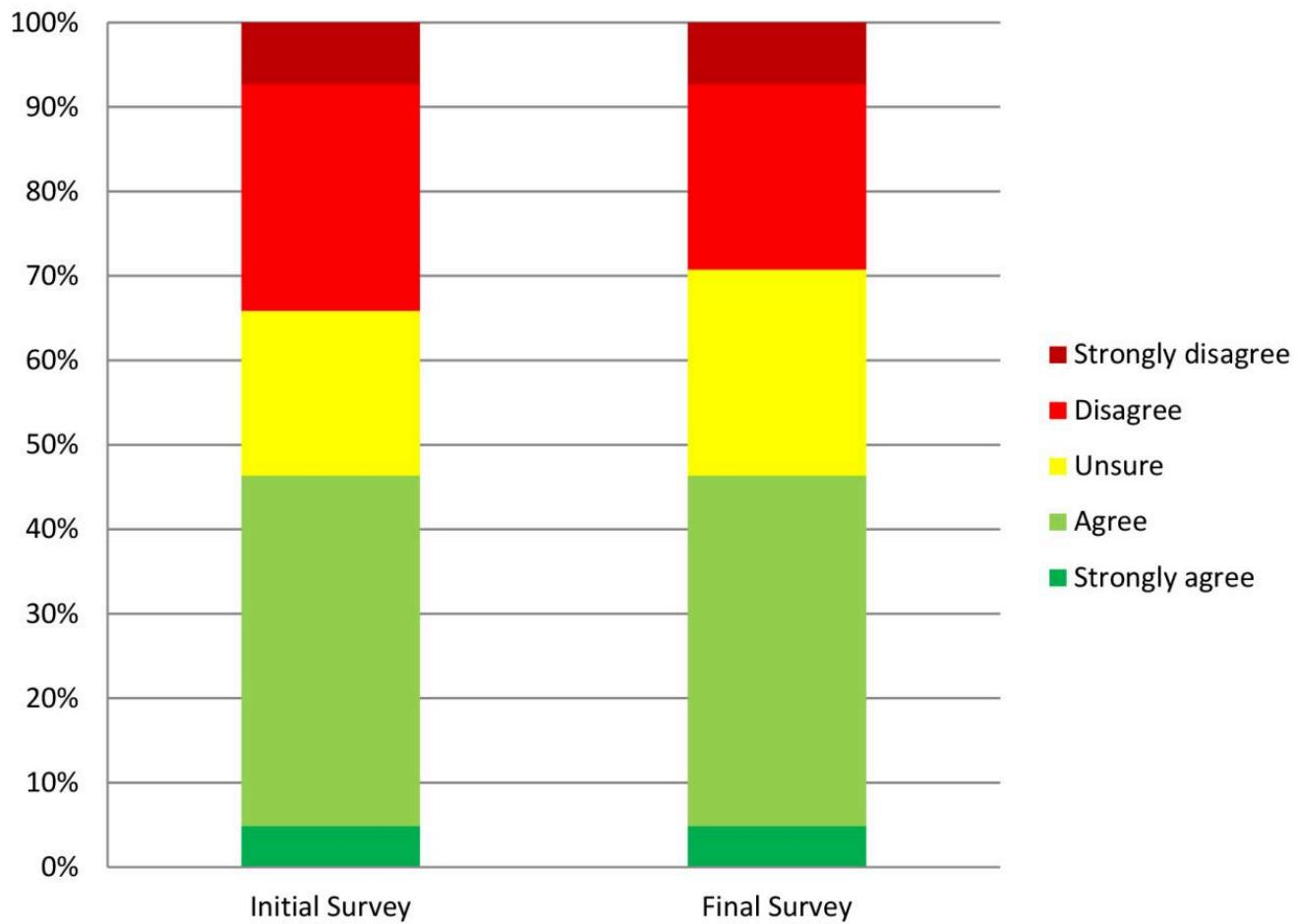
FIG 8. RESPONSES OF NON-ARCHAEOLOGIST PARTICIPANTS WHEN ASKED WHETHER THEY FEEL PREPARED TO ENGAGE IN SHARED AUTHORITY WORK. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
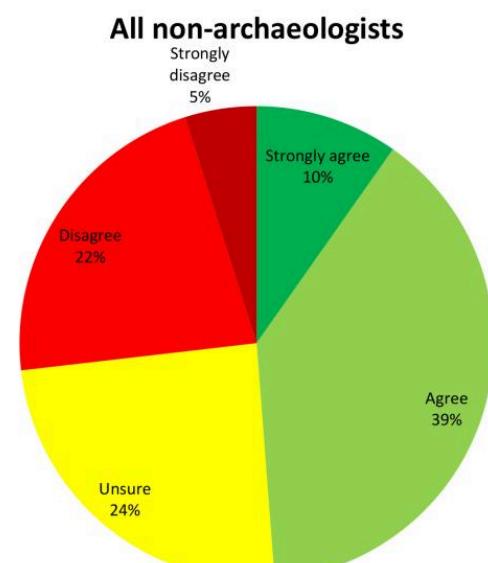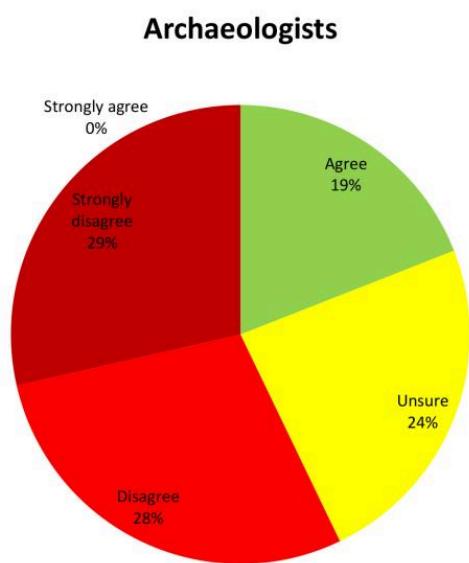
FIG 10. RESPONSES ABOUT QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS AFTER COMPLETING THE ACTIVITY. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
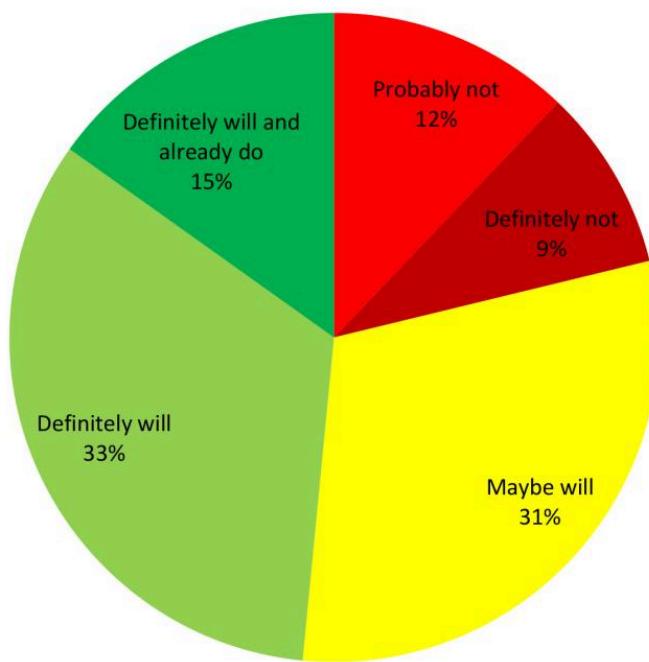
FIG 11. RESPONSES ABOUT FUTURE WORK FROM NON-ARCHAEOLOGISTS. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
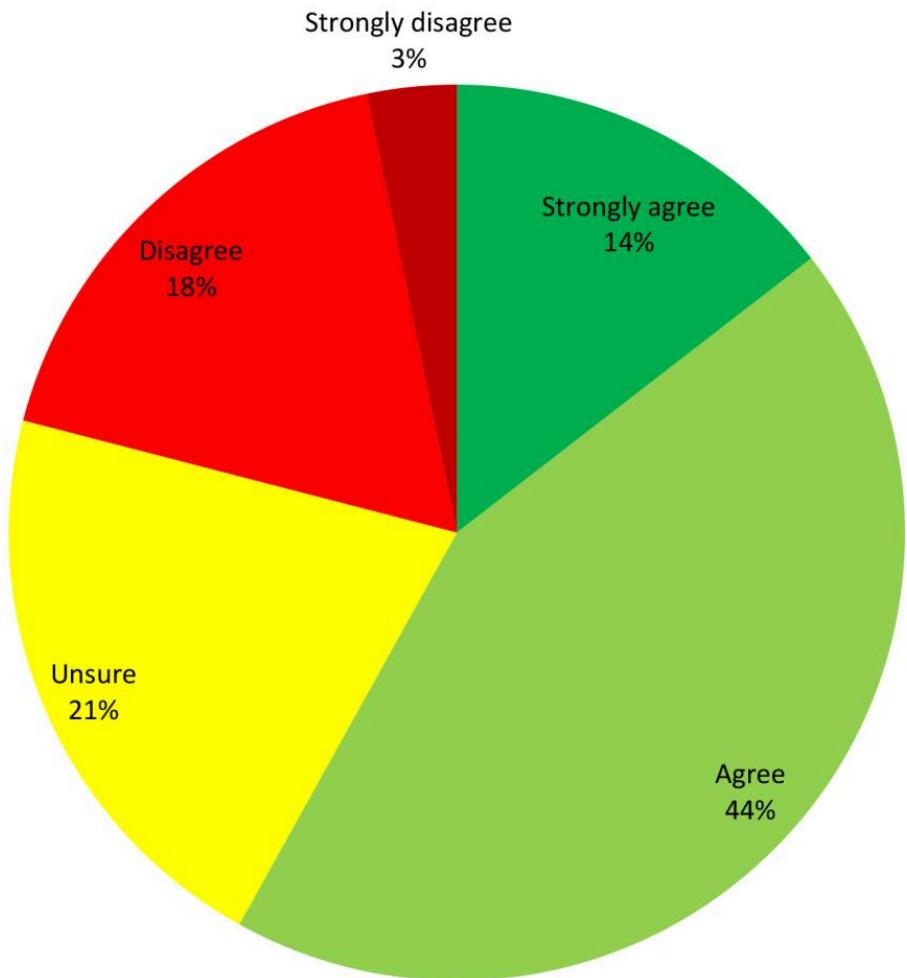
FIG 12. RESPONSES ABOUT PERCEIVED ABILITY TO TAKE PART IN SHARED AUTHORITY PROJECTS FROM ALL PARTICIPANTS AFTER COMPLETING THE ACTIVITY. GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR
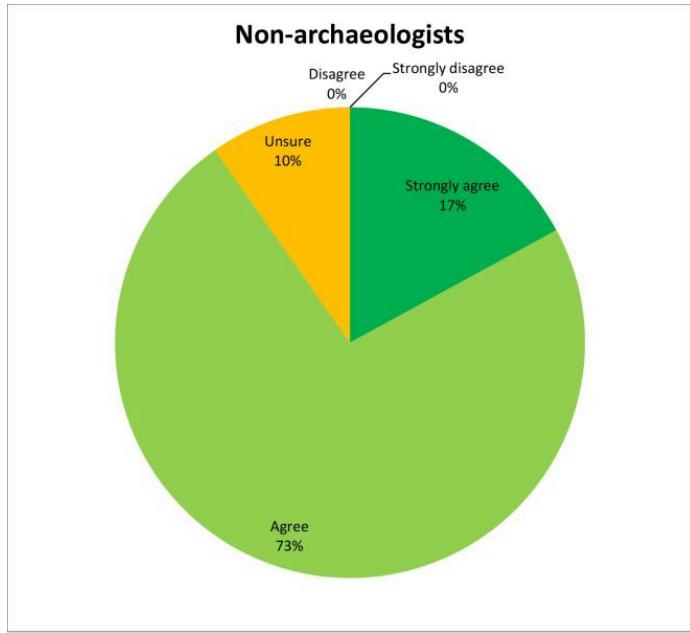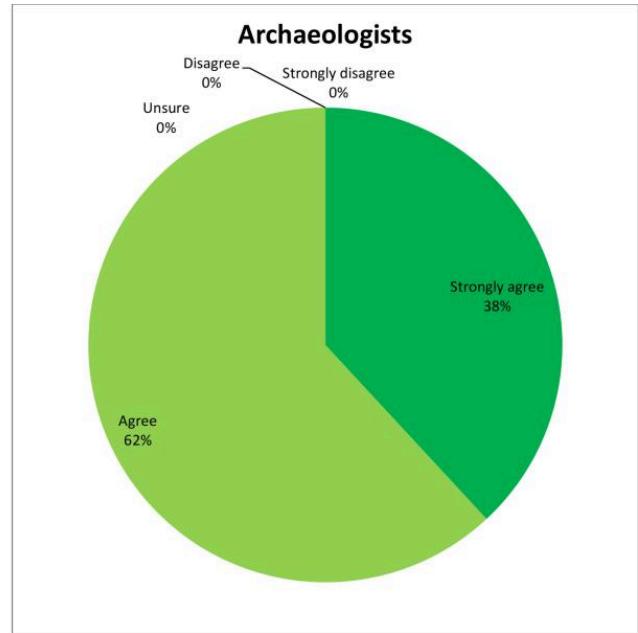
FIG 13. PERCEPTION OF EMPOWERMENT POTENTIAL OF MUSEUMS FROM NON-ARCHAEOLOGISTS (LEFT) AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS (RIGHT). GRAPH BY KATE SHEAR