

The power of objects

Source: Anra Kennedy

The power of museums and galleries as learning resources lies in the objects they collect, safeguard, interpret and display. Whether a museum houses priceless paintings and fragments of faraway civilisations or Victorian saucepans and parish council records, the principle is the same. Objects, or material things, are all evidence of somewhere, something or somebody and as such all have stories to tell.

Give a pupil an object to look at and you'll almost always engage their interest – the crucial first step to learning. Unlocking the enormous potential of objects as tools for learning depends on how we look at, think around and talk about those objects – it depends upon asking the right questions, questions which spark off conversations and reflection.

So where to start? The most useful first step is in learning to look at objects yourself. These words from John Hennigar Shuh, written in 1982, still hold true as the advice is timeless.

The foundation of your being able to use objects as a teacher is your learning how to use them yourself for your own continuing self-education

(John Hennigar Shuh – Teaching yourself to teach with objects, Journal of Education 7 (4) (1982): 8-15).

It is important initially to understand why objects are such a valuable teaching resource.

Shuh advocates the use of objects as aids to teaching for three main reasons. First, objects are not age specific. As a teacher you can use an object with children of any age, only the methods of questioning and conclusions drawn will vary.

This applies too with children of differing abilities – a particularly precious benefit in today's classrooms, the classrooms of highly defined literacy and numeracy skill groups. Children don't need those skills to make a valuable contribution to a lesson using objects. Objects can be used to draw a class together and encourage whole class conversations.

Secondly, objects can be used to look behind the history of great art and great rulers and concentrate instead upon the lives of ordinary people. This is where regional and local museums in particular come into their own through their conservation of objects relating to people, events and traditions rooted in their own communities.

Shuh's third, and I believe most compelling argument for the use of objects, is that:

it gives them the chance to develop their capacity for careful, critical observation of their world

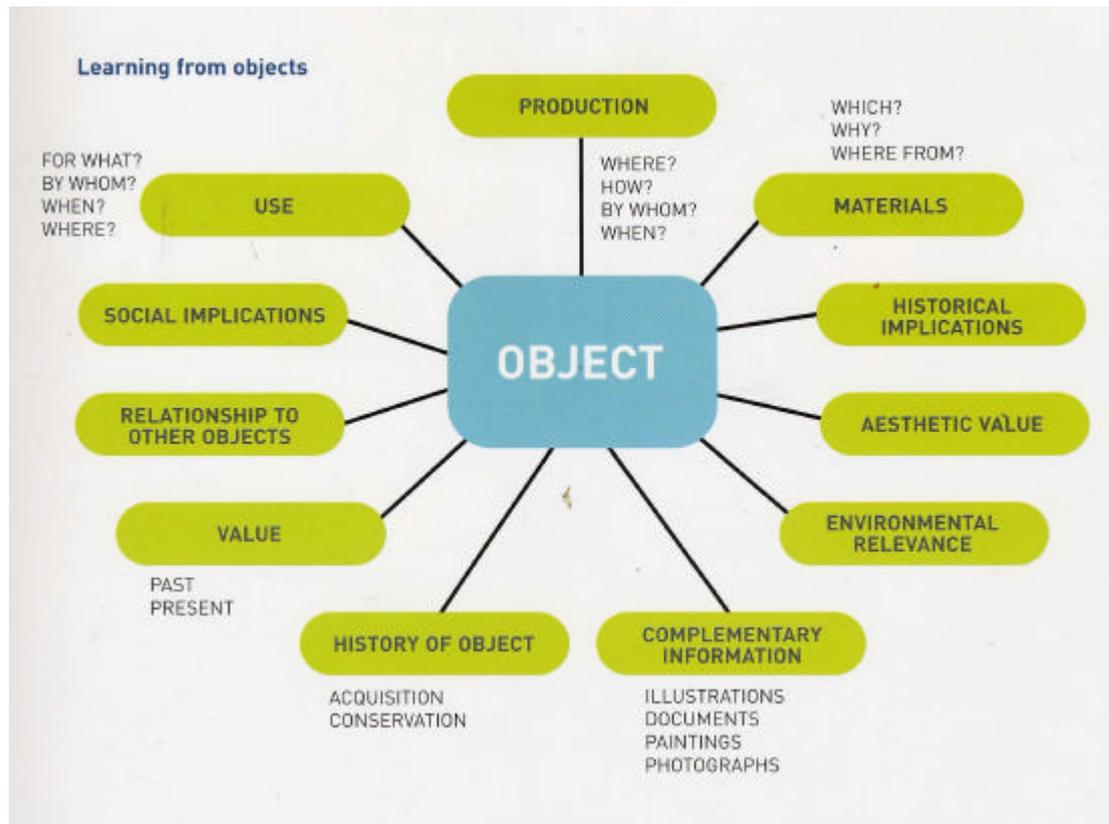
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By this he means that introducing pupils to real objects, real evidence of the world around them and of the past, encourages them to think beyond their everyday experience. As teachers we can use objects to nudge pupils down avenues of research and observation based on the evidence before them, which will hopefully

encourage a thoughtful and considered approach to other aspects of their learning and understanding too.

Questioning and looking at objects

An object can be looked at and discussed on many different levels. The questions we ask of that object can be used to steer pupils towards a range of conclusions or learning outcomes. The DfES Museums and Galleries Education Programme publication *Learning Through Culture* summarises the different questions or learning pathways leading from an object in the diagram below.



'Learning from Objects' diagram. DfES publication DfES/0159/2002, page 11. Published by RCMG, Feb 2002

Within this wide range of categories we need also to consider the skills we're asking the children to employ when answering.

In answer to 'what colour is it?' a child is making a straightforward visual observation. In answer to 'how much does it weigh?' they could be making a scientific measurement. In answer to 'what does it feel like?' they're making a sensory, tactile judgment. A child answering the question 'do you think it's beautiful?' would be making a personal, subjective judgement.

In answer to 'how much do you think it is worth?' an older or more able child might be able to apply prior knowledge of the object's history, social and political implications and aesthetic value to make an educated 'guesstimate'.

Objects can also be used to gather opinion on wider issues, when placed in a wide-reaching context. When teaching creative arts or literacy, all sorts of objects can be used as inspiration for imaginative flights of fancy.

When using an object in the classroom the physical aspect of the observation process has to be considered. Ideally children should be able to touch, feel, smell,

hold and listen to the object – their sensory experience of that object is a crucial part of the learning and exploration process and is what differentiates object-based teaching from looking at a picture in a book.

When planning lessons with objects it's best, if possible, to factor an element of small group work into the process, to give time for the children to get close to the object.

However, in situations where this high level of interaction isn't possible, where the object is too fragile and wouldn't withstand thirty sets of probing fingers, there is still plenty of scope for worthwhile interaction with that object. Choosing one or two children to touch something and describe it to everyone else for instance, can work well.

Teaching with objects needn't be restricted to history or science sessions. Objects can be a catalyst for learning right across the curriculum. Literacy, science, drama, dance and music all lend themselves particularly well to object-based teaching.

Trying out the theory

You might like to take a look at the 'Questioning objects' activity, which gives you a framework in which to try out the different ways of questioning an object, based upon looking at a mobile phone.

There is practical information on accessing historical objects for use in the classroom in the 'Accessing Museums and Galleries' resource in Activity 2.