



Teaching With Objects

Traveling Museum Project

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“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. (1982). Teaching Yourself to Teach with Objects, *Journal of Education*, 7 (4), 8-15.

Objects can be presented to all ages and ability levels to guide student thinking towards a range of conclusions. They can be a powerful teaching tool, giving children meaningful and lasting memories. Every object has multiple entry points, creating endless opportunities for integrations into classroom instruction. Here are a few methods for integrating objects into your teaching.

Understanding the Object: Looking at Objects and Questioning

Here are some general categories of questions that can be asked about an object to generate conversation: the object's use, social implications, relationship to other objects, value, environmental relevance, aesthetic value, historical implications, production, history and materials. When using an object it is important to consider how to facilitate the observation process. If possible create opportunities for small group work to give time for the children to get close to the object.

- Can you write a description of it that would give a clear picture to someone who has never seen it before?
 - What are the measurements (height, weight, diameter)?
 - Why is it the size it is?
 - What materials were used to make it? Why were particular materials chosen?
 - How accessible were these materials to the maker of the object?
 - How was it constructed?
 - How fragile or durable is the object?
- What were the maker's intentions?
 - Who created the object?
 - What was the maker inspired by?
 - Does the object tell a story?
 - Where was this object made?
 - What kinds of symbols or ideas are represented?
 - What is the function of the decoration?
- Have you ever seen something like this before?
 - If someone fifty, one hundred, or five hundred years ago had seen it what do you think they would have thought about it?
- What was the value of the object?
 - What is the value of the object now?
 - What is the aesthetic value of the object?
- What design elements do you see?
- How does the object compare to similar objects?
- What other objects were made during the same time?

Example Activities—

- 1) Have students share what they know about the object, what they suspect about the object and what they would like to know about the object. Review information that compliments the object (i.e. detailed steps of the production of the object, information about the artist, what the images, symbols or text signify on the object, etc.)
- 2) Draw the whole object and a close up of the object. Write down 10 adjectives or descriptive phrases.

Context: Exploring People, Events, Traditions and Communities

Objects provide insight into the lives of ordinary people and look behind the history of great art and important historical events.

- What was the social significance of the object?
- What is the function of the object?
- How was the object used?
- What is this objects place in history?
- Does it reflect when and where it was made?
- Who interacted with the object?
- Who owned the object?
- Was the object made to be sold?
- Was the object shared by the community?

*Example Activity—*Draw a picture of the object in its original context. Read about the cultural or historical context of the object.

Creating Connections: Critical Observation of the World

Objects are evidence of the real world and encourage students to think critically about the everyday world. Objects are versatile and often illustrate cross-curricular concepts. Here are different ways to respond to objects and create opportunities to apply that knowledge.

Inspiration: Use the object as a jumping off point to explore a similar medium, theme, or style and extract ideas from the object as desired.

*Example Activity—*Look at the object's formal design qualities and determine what element of art is integral in the object (i.e. line, shape, color, texture, rhythm, etc.). Direct the students to explore that element of art and create their own artwork that emphasizes that element of art.

Opposition: Use the object as a reference to create something “opposite” or compare objects in opposition.

*Example Activity—*Discuss one aspect of the work and find a polar opposite you would like to investigate. For example if the object is an American modernist artwork, compare and contrast it with American folk art. Another example would be, if you are looking at a functional object compare it with a decorative object.

Imitation: Replicate the activity or thought presented by the object.

*Example Activity—*Study the quality of craftsmanship, the techniques and processes used. Begin by practicing the techniques and processes and then create a similar object. Discuss how the art form was taught to new generations and how long the style or tradition has existed.

Elaboration: Advance the artist's intentions or object's significance by continuing exploration on the same underlying concepts.

Example Activity—Identify the meaning or social significance of the object. For example was the object used to celebrate, honor an individual, bring people together, or teach folklore. Have students create their own artwork that meets the same need.

Translation: Internalize the underlying concepts and transfer or incorporate into personal narratives, styles, or themes.

Example Activity—Construct the various possible meanings or social significance of the object and then relate that concept to personal experiences. Have students create an artwork reflecting their own experience that incorporates personal symbols or imagery.

Additional Resources

Inquiry-Based Learning Using Everyday Objects

Alvarado, A., & Herr, P. (2003). *Inquiry-Based Learning Using Everyday Objects*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

University Collections and Object-Based Pedagogies

<http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/umacj/2012/simpson-75/PDF/simpson.pdf>

Exploring object-based learning: Hands On guide

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/e/exploringobjectbasedlearning/introduction.asp?strReferringChannel=resources&strReferringPageID=tcm:4-659440-64>

Teaching with Museum Collections—Examples from National Park Service

<http://teachinghistory.org/best-practices/using-primary-sources/19435>