

## Building a Learning Legacy

### Advice Notes: Learning from Objects – some ideas to inspire, wow and wonder

Objects are a key feature of many heritage organisations, particularly museums. The way in which we interpret and use those objects has moved on from simple label and display. These advice notes give an introduction to working with objects and explore innovative ways of using them in a learning programme.

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#### Introduction

Objects or artefacts form the core of our work in museum learning. Handling them gives us 'active learning'. For example, the large group photographs produced at Erddigg show staff with their 'object of office' - a gardener with a hoe, a parlour maid with a duster. The objects used give us information and the relationship that artefacts have with each other and the situation in which they are found gives us their context.

Objects are what people left behind and can tell us about themselves, about the people who used them, about change and about the past. They can be powerful tools to help deliver the National Curriculum for Wales which emphasises the importance of skills development in learning (See 'Making the most of Learning – Implementing the revised Curriculum in Wales'). As well as extending knowledge, they can be used to develop skills such as: investigation, evaluation, historical understanding, forming an opinion, speaking and listening. Objects can be used to inspire for all learning styles if used in a variety of ways and it is important that we address this when looking at how to use our collections.

Objects can become passageways into history. They can connect a moment in time, a person's life, a set of values and beliefs.

But, as is made clear by the stated aim of the National Trust - 'to preserve in perpetuity for the nation' 'for ever for everyone', learning from objects presents a conflict between preservation and education that we as museum educators need to resolve.

Where we cannot use an object itself we can use a replica in the real context – our sites – alongside the original object. A separate handling collection can be built up from donations if it is specified that they will be handled. For example, a class of KS1 pupils can use many more flat irons in a wash day session than you would want to display.

## **What can we gain from using objects?**

Learning from objects is a core element of a museum visit - whether the objects can be handled or not; whether they are in a small museum or a stately home.

Object based learning can offer something to all learners whatever their learning or intelligence type. It can facilitate the development of many skills - observation, questioning, prediction, weighing of evidence, justifying proposals – and it allows for the use of most of the senses.

Gail Durbin et al writing in 1990 refer to ‘the ability to interpret objects aids our understanding of the world’ (see Section 6). They point out that just as we learn in a variety of ways, so we have a variety of responses to objects and varied levels in those skills. It is important to move away from the concept of a ‘right answer’ so that the visitor can feel free to try out their theories and ideas. We need to ensure that our visitors appreciate that museums have objects which are mysteries to the museum staff too.

The following sections aim to provide a bank of ideas, techniques and links to other sources to help you develop effective object-based learning.

Before getting started, try and answer the questions below. They will help to focus your thinking on what you want to achieve from object-based learning:

- What do visitors take home from our museum?
- What have they gained from their visit?
- Have they been able to gain access to our collections?
- What did they expect or want?
- Did we help them to achieve that?
- What did we want the visitor to take away from their experience?
- What are our desired Learning Outcomes? (See ‘Inspiring Learning for All’ for much more information about this way of approaching learning in a museum - <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/inspiring-learning-all-home-page>)

## **Finding out about objects**

As well as gaining factual information, working with objects can also extend the range of learning skills. These ‘finding out’ skills may include investigation and evidence based learning as well as the development of questioning skills. All these transfer well to formal or classroom learning as well as lifelong learning. The flexibility of object-based learning means that it can also suit a range of learning styles.

Much has been published on this topic (see Section 6). Here is a selection of approaches to finding out about objects.

### *Focusing on an object*

This resource idea comes from the MLA South West Museum Learning Initiative project. Unfortunately the resource is no longer available online, but a description of the resource can be found below.

Three concentric squares are labelled:  
‘what can you see’ in the centre square  
‘what can you guess’ in the second square  
‘what else would you like to know’ in the outer square

This idea is based on the concept of limiting the field of vision initially and then expanding the questioning.

#### *Analysing an object*

Some writers have suggested a three-step object analysis:

10 descriptive words or phrases

5 questions

1 statement of conclusions

#### *Investigating an object*

Objects can be valuable primary sources but in-depth knowledge is not required. However, a structure for finding out about objects can be very helpful. Glasgow Museums and Museums Galleries Scotland have produced 'hands on', a resource for use with early years and primary aged pupils. This is available both as a hard copy and as an online version. The online version also provides materials for direct use on interactive whiteboard.

<http://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/what-we-do/learning-and-access/formal-learning-and-museums/what-is-hands-on/>

They identify four categories of question – describe, deduce, interpret and classify – and provide a questions framework expanding these categories.

#### *Other ideas*

A classic text on this field is *Learning from Objects* by Durbin, Morris and Wilkinson and they comment 'Interest in them (objects) and their power to motivate is cumulative so that as pupils learn to put themselves in a position of wanting to learn more'.

More of their ideas include the following:

- Slow down
- Value powers of observation
- Engage with the object
- Draw from memory
- Try 'blindfold partner' drawing
- Try scale or 'giant' drawings
- Try using the same skills on a very familiar object such as classroom crayon
- Twenty questions
- A 'left luggage' mystery – what is certain?
- The broken plate

### **Presenting an object: from display to handling**

#### *Displaying an object*

The presentation of an object can have a significant effect on the impact it has.

It is worth using a simple checklist such as the one below to ensure that objects are displayed for maximum effect.

- How is the object displayed?
- Could the 'wow' factor be increased?
- Could the space allowed or the lighting be changed?
- What difference could interpretation make?
- How will it be presented to the audience/group/visitor?

### *Language and objects*

Think about which key words to use to create the learning environment surrounding an object. The idea is to stimulate interest and a desire to know more:

Try:

mystery

puzzle

hidden

detective

investigate

old/rare/precious

unique

### *An object-handling session*

Planning:

- Decide on desired outcomes
- Determine 'rules' e.g. 'stay seated
- For school groups agree number of adults to help
- Decide on 'how to keep safe' rules
- Decide on and create atmosphere
- Stress absence of 'right' and 'wrong'
- Stress 'investigate', 'mystery' or 'detect'
- Decide on one or two methods
- Keep questions open

Choosing objects:

- Something unfamiliar to encourage observation and deduction
- Something showing wear or damage to provide clues
- The effect of using objects with visible dates
- The effect of using a timeline
- Have a policy for using real and/or replicas

Running the session:

- How is the object introduced and presented
- How to excite the audience

### **Accessing virtual objects**

If you are unable to use a physical object, why not try working with virtual objects? Many museums have online collections that can be accessed readily.

Have a look at the following websites:

[National Museum Wales](#)

[Wolverhampton](#)

[V & A](#)

[Imperial War Museum](#)

[Pitt Rivers Museum](#)

### **Object stories: Bringing objects to life**

Learning from objects does not have to include touching them. We can help our visitors access our collections in many other ways; the following ideas are from the Interpretation Officer for Stoke on Trent Museums where there is a nationally designated collection of ceramics. The stories behind some of the objects, recounted as really 'gripping yarns' are a powerful tool for interaction with them.

The Untouchables – bringing the precious things to life

Reasons why objects can't be handled by children:

- They are too fragile
- They are too precious
- They are already in glass cases
- They are dangerous to handle (weapons, machinery)

Sometimes it's possible to make a virtue out of necessity. Explain why the object cannot be handled. Even the lightest touch will damage it over time. I make a great display of removing watch, jewellery, badge, not having any buttons etc before I get the Greek pots out, and have the children guess why I have to do this. If it's not generally on display you can explain that it's so precious that normally it's kept hidden away in the stores and we have got it out especially for the children. This softens the blow of not being able to touch it and makes the children feel a bit special – they can see things ordinary visitors to the museum can't. emphasise the special nature of the object, its age, beauty, value or special associations – “This pot was old before Jesus was born!” – and point out how lucky the children are to be able to see it.

Establish a safety zone around the object. Explain that the safety zone is out of bounds and can't be stepped on/jumped over/reached over. A brightly-coloured blanket on the floor is more practical than a table because:

- It can be a moat, a force field, the sea – anything they can't cross or touch
- It is much more difficult to knock something off a blanket than off a table or plinth.
- It is easier for small children to see something at floor level so they can examine and sketch it
- The blanket can be folded away when not in use and ideally kept with the other items used for the session

Because they can't handle the objects there does tend to be a lot of sitting and looking. You can counteract this up to a point by making the session as interactive as possible in other ways:

- Asking lots of open-ended questions rather than just talking
- Telling stories or anecdotes associated with the objects
- Relating objects to the children's experience
- Getting the children to sketch the objects
- Having other work associated with the objects for them to do (for example designing their own whatever it is, drawing or writing about its original owner, devising a haiku label for it, writing its autobiography...)

If you can get hold of really good replicas of the untouchable items by all means use them. We haven't been able to source copies of the Greek pots that we feel are really worth handling. Commercially available reproductions are of different pots and feel entirely different from the originals in terms of weight and surface texture. We have tried commissioning our own reproductions but it has been impossible (so far) to replicate the colours and textures of the originals with modern electric kilns. It seems to me pointless to offer reproductions that misrepresent the feel of the originals so until we can source authentic-feeling pots I prefer to manage without rather than hand out poor-quality reproductions for the sake of having something to handle. For textiles you can supply pieces of appropriate fabric. Any items they can handle should tell them something about the handling qualities of those they can't – size, weight, texture, flexibility...

However, we have produced handling resources for blind children. Although they can't handle the objects they can get an idea of their shapes from two-dimensional plywood

shapes of Greek pots. Other resources to illustrate things like patterns on the pots or idealised Grecian profiles were made from neoprene foam glued on to stout cardboard.

Things in glass cases are almost boring by default. It often happens that the artefacts you want the children to focus on are lost in a sea of similar objects. Some children seem unable to see beyond the case itself. Sketching is particularly helpful here as it obliges the children to look at the objects:

- Ask them to look out for particular features.
- Provide clipboards so that they don't have to lean on the cases.
- Forbid the use of rubbers if time is short as once they start rubbing out they never finish anything
- Ask them to study several artefacts in no particular order as you'll avoid a massive crush round one object that no-one can actually see
- The production of a piece of artwork is incidental; the point is to look carefully at the artefact. Reluctant artists can be reassured that the sketch doesn't have to be perfect or even good.

### **Further reading and web resources**

Queensland Museum in Australia has a range of [object-based materials](#) and an extensive [loans kit service](#).

Reading Museums has an extensive [loans box service](#) and provides free resources for teachers to maximise learning from objects in the classroom.

[University College London](#) has conducted research into the benefits of object-based learning.

“Learning from Objects” Gail Durbin, Susan Morris and Sue Wilkinson. Published by English Heritage - ISBN 1-83-074259-6 – For a comprehensive overview of learning from objects.

Sandra Dudley, *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things*, Routledge, 2012

Sandra Dudley (ed.), *Museum Materialities*, Routledge, 2009