



Back to basics: using artefacts in the classroom

Kate Rigby

While most teachers recognise the importance of artefacts in history education, knowing how to use them effectively can often prove more challenging. This article suggests ways to investigate historical objects and provides a framework to support children's observations.

Why use artefacts?

Artefacts are simply any object used by people in the past for practical, aesthetic or cultural reasons – this could be anything from a Victorian flat iron, to a Roman coin or even an iconic Mary Quant miniskirt. These objects give us valuable information about a broad range of people and societies, particularly those where there is little written evidence. In fact, it is often only through objects that we can explore the diversity of past peoples, since they are a universal part of human experience.

For children, objects provide a fascinating insight into the past and allow them to develop a deeper historical understanding. Not only is object-based learning accessible to nearly all pupils, but it also helps develop the wider skills of deduction and working collaboratively. Through the context of objects, concepts such as change and continuity can be brought to life.

Choosing artefacts

Knowing where to find and select artefacts can sometimes be a barrier to using objects in the classroom, but choosing items doesn't have to be complicated or expensive. While many schools opt to purchase pre-prepared artefact boxes, it is just as effective to source individual items from a variety of sources. Perhaps a parent or grandparent has an interesting item they are willing to share or your local museum can loan a selection of objects? What is more important is ensuring that any historical artefacts are actually suitable for using with the children. I'd suggest focusing on three Rs:

1. *Relevance* – are the objects related to the key points of historical learning?
2. *Robustness* – are they sufficiently robust to be handled by children?
3. *Range* – do they represent different aspects of life (e.g. tools, clothes, domestic equipment)?

Example activity: Jubilee objects



1977 Silver Jubilee crown



Silver Jubilee commemorative mug



Souvenir keyring for the Silver Jubilee

Step 1: Observe and investigate in groups

- In small groups, provide the children with one object to explore and observe. Guide them to investigate physical characteristics, design, function and value.
- Record or present findings to the rest of the class. What are the most important pieces of information about the artefact?

Step 2: Compare and contrast objects

- Move from looking at the objects as individual items to seeing them as a collection. What are the similarities and differences between the objects? Are there any common themes or images?

Step 3: Interpret the evidence

- Return to the main enquiry question(s). What do these objects tell us about the Silver Jubilee? How are jubilees commemorated?
- Reflect and generate further questions for investigation.

Children need to be taught to handle historical items with care and to understand how artefacts can deteriorate over time. Clearly delicate or rare objects may be unsuitable for use in the classroom, but replica items can often be sourced as an alternative.

Investigating artefacts

Once you have collated artefacts to support historical learning, you need a clear framework for investigating them with the children. If children are unfamiliar with handling objects, they may need support to systematically observe and examine artefacts before they can make any



Resources

Crawford, H. (2016) 'Using artefacts to develop young children's understanding of the past' in *Primary History* 72, pp. 6–7.

Wilkinson, A. (2020) 'What can you tell about the Vikings from a chess piece?' *Primary History* 85, pp. 30–33.

Teaching History with 100 Objects
<http://teachinghistory100.org>

Historical enquiry – Huge History Lesson
www.tes.com/hugehistory/historical_enquiry.html

Objects – primary teaching methods
www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/793/module/3657/primary-teaching-methods/3665/objects

BBC – A History of the World
www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/

<https://microsites.museum.ie/bronzeagehandlingbox/teachers-strategies.html#>



informed deductions. Grouping questions into categories can be a helpful way of prompting more detailed observations and scaffolding historical thinking:

Physical characteristics

What does it look like? (colour, shape, size)
How does it feel? (texture, temperature, weight)
Is the object complete? Is anything missing or broken?
What condition is it in? Has it been adapted, repaired or changed?

Design and construction

What material(s) is it made of? Why might these have been chosen?
Was it made by hand or with a machine?
Is it made up of one piece or several parts?
Is it decorated or plain?
How might it work? Is it easy to use?

Function

How might it have been used? What was its purpose?
Who might have used it?
Where might it have been used?
What skills were needed to use it?

Value

What difference did the object make to people's lives?
How important was it to the person who made it?
What does it tell us about the people who owned it?
Is it culturally/historically/sentimentally valuable?

Once children have had the opportunity to observe and handle artefacts in detail, they will be able to start forming hypotheses and conclusions about both the object and its contemporary society. This might provide evidence for an existing historical enquiry or prompt further enquiry questions for later exploration.

Strategies for using artefacts

One big advantage of incorporating artefacts into your history teaching is that they are a hugely versatile resource. They can be used individually or as part of a collection; to introduce a new period of history or to make links between periods; to prompt retrieval of existing knowledge or simply to promote historical thinking. Some common approaches include the use of mystery boxes or suitcases, creating mini museums or incorporating artefacts into timelines. Would an archeological approach be beneficial, allowing children to experience the process of uncovering objects for themselves?

Regardless of how they are used, it is the way that objects are introduced that can make the experience truly magical. Having to unwrap multiple layers of packaging can build a sense of anticipation, while slowly revealing an object bit by bit can help children focus on the detail. Magnifying glasses or microscopes can help children see themselves as real historians. It is sometimes said that artefacts are absent people – what will you uncover about someone in the past?

Kate Rigby is an associate lecturer in primary history, geography and professional studies at the University of Cambridge and a member of the *Primary History* editorial board.