

teaching with  
o b j e c t s  
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a

object-inquiry unit

developed for the

WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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presented at the 1999 History Lab Summer Institute

## I. Grade Level

A. Applicable K-12

## II. Areas of Study and Integration

### A. SOCIAL STUDIES

1. The understanding of objects as historical sources often falls under the category of Social Studies. Within Social Studies, we draw from history to develop a context or setting for the use and relevance of the object; geography to determine where it came from; economics to try to understand to possible impact of the object on local and world economy; and civics to determine whether any laws may have been in place that affected the production and distribution of the object.

### B. SCIENCE

1. Prior to the application of Social Studies disciplines and the contexts they provide, it is necessary to employ some scientific methods in the analysis of the object to determine what materials it is made of and, in some cases, whether it is authentic.

### C. MATH

1. Mathematics is used in artifact analysis to determine the dimensions, weight, and possible volume, distribution factors, and economic impact. Additional math skills—such as determining scale—are utilized in relation to visual arts in Activity 4.

### D. VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

1. This unit advocates the use of visual and performing arts to demonstrate student assimilation of the information about an object and its historical context. Visual arts are used in the contextualization phase to create an environment in which the object would have played a central role. Performing arts (script writing and reading) are utilized to recreate interaction with an object and demonstrate that action to others.

### E. LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Language arts are woven throughout the unit, manifesting in reading, descriptive writing, and script writing. The unit focuses on the six traits of Analytic Writing: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Character, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, and Conventions.

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### III. Defining the Topic

- A. This unit focuses on ways in which teachers can use objects for effective classroom teaching. We examine and analyze artifacts of historical significance to develop an understanding of the artifact as a “tool of the history trade”—a source of historical information. The methodology presented in this workshop is based on the earlier models of material culture analysis presented by E. McClung Fleming (1974) and Jules Prown (1982).
- B. In general, the term “material culture” refers to artifacts, images, artwork, and ephemera. The term “object” can be used to refer to both artifacts (objects made, used, or altered by humans) as well as natural history specimens (fossils) and pre-historic archaeological and paleontological finds.

### IV. General Objectives

#### A. CONCEPTS: ANALYSIS, DOCUMENTATION, AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

- 1. Analysis
  - a. Analysis requires the careful study of an artifact to determine the process by which it may have been made and used, the purpose it fulfilled, and the precedent from which it evolved or that it set. To determine these things, one must examine the artifact as objectively as possible, at times using scientific methods to determine the materials from which it was made and the technology it represents.
- 2. Documentation
  - a. This concept is necessary to proving or disproving the hypotheses derived during the analysis phase. Here the researcher identifies other applicable sources (artifacts, ephemera, books, periodicals, people, letters, manuscripts, catalogs, images, etc.) that relate to the artifact being studied. The basic steps in this phase often include finding a similar object with a documented history, locating an image of the object in use, questioning an expert or obtaining oral histories, using maps to determine locations of origin and trade routes, determining

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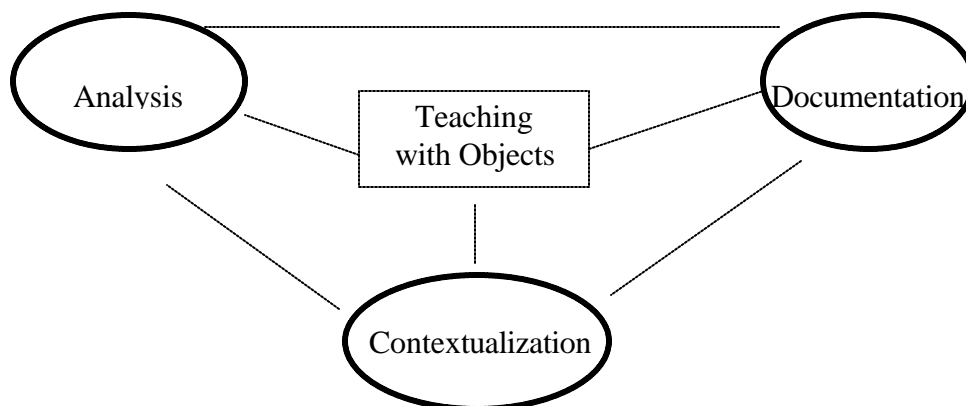
time period by assessing the technology utilized by the craftsperson, and doing a cross-cultural comparison for function.

- b. The sources noted in a. are then used to prove or disprove the hypothesis derived in the analysis phase. Should the hypothesis be disproved, the researchers shall revise the hypothesis and proceed through this phase once again.

### 3. Contextualization

- a. In order to have enough information to truly place an artifact in its proper historical context, the researcher must have concluded the analysis and documentation phase. The compilation of this information will lead to identification of the object.
- b. This concept requires the notation of the contextual elements relating to an artifact. These elements include: Time, place, viewpoint, impact, user, cultural and technological significance.
- c. The third aspect of contextualization is conducting both a synchronic and diachronic study of the object. Synchronic study forces the researcher to concentrate on a single period of time in the history of the artifact. Diachronic study compares the object to objects with similar functions from different time periods.

The following chart shows the relationship between the topic and the concepts.



## B. GENERALIZATIONS

1. Analysis of an object is critical to understanding its historical context.

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2. Analysis leads to a hypothesis of use and significance, and proving that hypothesis is reliant upon documentation.
3. Documentation in its many forms is necessary to accurate contextualization.
4. Understanding the context of an object can lead to a fuller understanding of the process by which it was made and used, the purpose it served functionally and associatively, and the object and idea precedent that influenced its creation. Theorizing process, precedent, and purpose are part of analysis.
5. The concepts of analysis, documentation, and context are cyclically connected, with one influencing and refining the other through a system of inquiry.

### C. ISSUES

1. Is it necessary to collect and preserve artifacts, buildings, ephemera, and documents?
2. Is it practical to use objects in the classroom, and can kids really learn from them?
3. Should we be concerned with the decomposition factor of objects in the present-day design and production of them?

## V. Instructional Objectives

- A. That students develop an understanding of how to analyze, document, and contextualize objects.
- B. That students gain skills in “reading” objects.
- C. That students recognize and utilize interdisciplinary connections between the analysis, documentation, and contextualization phases of object-based study.

## VI. Major Guiding Questions

- A. What is material culture?
- B. How do people learn from objects?
- C. How does the study of objects span the disciplines?

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D. How can objects be incorporated into the classroom curriculum?

# Activity 1

## Storytelling Through Objects

- A. OBJECTIVE: To demonstrate the power of emotional response to artifacts and the similarities and differences in “free form” interpretation for each student involved.
- B. OVERVIEW: This activity is used to demonstrate the power of emotion, assumption, and association in the interpretation of artifacts. The activity allows participants to build upon their own knowledge and experience to create a story and short performance relating to an object. Documentation and contextualization are intentionally left out of this activity to demonstrate the necessity of these additional inquiry steps.

### ••• The Plan •••

ACTIVITY	TIME	MATERIALS	DESCRIPTION
Assemble groups, assign objects to each group	10 min.	Selection of 10 artifacts, some that relate directly or indirectly to others	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Place artifacts on tables or chairs in various locations throughout the room.</li> <li>2. Divide students into groups of four or five.</li> <li>3. Assign each group an object and have them assemble near the object. Students may not yet handle the object.</li> </ol>
Immediate Impressions	10 min.	as above	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. While sitting in a circle, each member of each group will hold the artifact and without saying anything else, use one adjective to describe the object. No adjective can be spoken twice within a single group.</li> <li>2. Group members pass the artifact from person to person, saying nothing but their chosen adjectives until all have spoken.</li> </ol>
Second Sights	10 min.	as above	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Using the same technique as before, groups pass the object from person to person, this time each member uttering a single verb that they feel applies to the object.</li> </ol>
Constructing Sentences	15 min.	as above	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Now each group member constructs a sentence that uses both the verb and the noun to either describe the object or the feelings/thoughts it provokes.</li> </ol>
Building Stories	15	as above	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The objects once again are placed on their tables or</li> </ol>

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	min.		<p>chairs for safe keeping</p> <p>2. Each group works together to create a story about the object using, where possible, the sentences or adjectives and verbs to tell a story about the object.</p> <p>3. Each group member must prepare to share one sentence of the story as part of a group presentation.</p>
Adding Movement and Dimension	20 min.	as above	<p>1. Each group must identify a way to use their bodies to kinesthetically support the telling of the story. All members must participate.</p> <p>This may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• still poses</li> <li>• movement that suggests the use or function of the object</li> <li>• movement or shape that suggests how the group feels about the object</li> </ul>
Presentation	30 min.	Space for group presentations	<p>1. Each group places their object on a chair in front of the class so that it is clearly visible during the presentation.</p> <p>2. Each group presents their story, with the format being the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginning “shape” is assumed by the group</li> <li>• Each member speaks a sentence of the story in turn</li> <li>• Movement is incorporated as necessary to support the story</li> <li>• Presentation is not to exceed 5 min per group</li> </ul>

end of Activity 1

## Activity 2

# Apple Buckets to Airplane Parts

A. OBJECTIVE: To teach students the first step of artifact analysis.

B. OVERVIEW: Participants divide into teams, and each team is given an artifact to examine and analyze based on the “process, precedent, and purpose” method. Teams then develop a hypothesis that will be proven or disproved in Activity 3.

### ••• The Plan •••

ACTIVITY	TIME	MATERIALS	DESCRIPTION
Introduction	30 min.	Overhead projector and transparencies or computer with projector	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Review Activity 1 and discuss the differences between emotional response to artifacts and analytic analysis.</li> <li>2. Describe the activity and the “3-Ps” approach to artifact analysis.</li> <li>3. Explain that this approach is intended to begin with an objective view of the object and conclude with a more subjective hypothesis that can then be supported through research conducted in Activity 3.</li> <li>4. Divide group into teams of two people each, then: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign artifacts to each team</li> <li>• Post an Inquiry Organizer for all teams to see or provide each team with a copy</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
Process Survey	30 min.	Artifacts for each two-person team  Microscope  Samples of known materials  Reference books of makers marks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Begin by explaining the method by which materials can be identified and how material can provide clues to location and time period.</li> <li>2. Teams begin by answering the following questions (rationale for each answer must be included, even if they are simply based on assumption): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the artifact made of?</li> <li>• Does it have any use marks? Where are they and what do they look like?</li> <li>• Does it have any manufacturer’s marks? If so what do they say?</li> <li>• By what process was the object made?</li> <li>• Do you think that the object was used by the same people who made it?</li> <li>• How was the object intended to be used?</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

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Purpose Survey	20 min.	as above	<p>1. Teams continue observation of the object to answer the following questions (including rationale):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the object’s intended use? Are there any indicators of altered use?</li> <li>• What culture might the object represent? What aspects or values of the culture does the object suggest?</li> </ul>
Precedent Survey	<p>Step 1: 20 min.</p> <p>Step 2: 10 min.</p> <p>Step 3: 15 min.</p>	<p>as above</p> <p>set of contemporary artifacts (1 for each team)</p>	<p>1. Teams work together to answer the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What technologies does this object suggest were available to the people who made and/or used it?</li> <li>• What time period do you think the object represents? How do you support this?</li> <li>• What objects or ideas came before this artifact that “set the stage” for its development?</li> </ul> <p>2. Teams identify one of the contemp. artifacts set out by instructor that bears a relationship to their object.</p> <p>3. Teams prepare a short presentation on their object and its contemporary counterpart.</p>
Conclusion	<p>Step 1: 3 min per team</p> <p>Step 2-3: 30 min</p>	<p>table on which to place artifacts during presentation</p>	<p>1. Each team presents their artifact and its contemporary counterpart to the group.</p> <p>2. Discussion of “precedent” and its relationship to studying objects.</p> <p>3. Discussion of synchronic and diachronic analysis of artifacts.</p>

end of Activity 2

## Activity 3 Mission Fact find

A. OBJECTIVES:

1. To teach the many options for researching and documenting objects.
2. To use a variety of source materials to prove or disprove hypothesis about the object's use and cultural significance.

B. OVERVIEW: Teams exchange information about their artifacts, trying to identify connections between their artifact and one or more of the other teams' artifacts. Assumptions are made about these connections and are then proven through documentation. The ultimate product of this inquiry phase is identification of the objects being studied.

### ••• The Plan •••

ACTIVITY	TIME	MATERIALS	DESCRIPTION
Introduction	10 min		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide advanced organizer that outlines the activity and its expected outcomes.</li> <li>2. Discussion of inquiry and assumption process and intro to the hypothesis/ documentation phase to be accomplished in Activity 3.</li> </ol>
Idea Exchange	Step 1: 15 min.	Overhead with transparencies to map artifact relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In marketplace situation, each team identifies at least one other team who has a related artifact (this relationship can be based on function, construction, culture group, time period, or material type). Each team joins with one other team to form a working group of 4-5 people.</li> <li>2. Team groups share their objects and describe the supposed relationship between them. Instructor maps each team's artifacts, drawing lines between them and noting the described relationship.</li> </ol>
Deduction	15 min	team artifacts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Each expanded team forms a hypothesis about their artifacts' use and cultural significance based on collected data.</li> <li>2. For each artifact, list two additional questions or unknowns.</li> </ol>
Speculation	1 hour	Resource	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Testing of hypothesis and answering the unknowns</li> </ol>

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		materials, books, magazines, catalogs, and photos	through research—comparison and utilization of other sources.  2. Formation and testing of new hypothesis or refinement of existing hypothesis if research uncovers conflicting information.
Identification	Step 1: 20 min  Step 2: 10 min	Student notebooks; sample collections forms	1. Verify object's identity—utilization, maker, user/owner, cultural significance.  2. Participants notate the following and hand in: -time; place of origin; place of use; cultural signif.
Conclusion	30 min	as above	1. Instructor reviews the work of each team to make sure that all necessary information has been gathered in preparation for Activity 4.  2. Discuss availability of research resources for classroom use.

end of Activity 3

## Activity 4 Making A Scene

A. OBJECTIVES:

1. To provide students with a sample project that builds first-hand understanding of the contextualization phase.
2. To place the object in its historical context, while also conveying to others the its significance as a functional or cultural object.
3. To assess the participants’ historical knowledge and critical thinking skills.

B. OVERVIEW: Based on the information previously gathered, students plan a movie set and a short story that describes the action intended to take place there.

C. NOTE: This activity is considerably condensed in the workshop setting. The Culminating Activity explores ways this activity and others can be used in the classroom.

### •••The Plan•••

ACTIVITY	TIME	MATERIALS	DESCRIPTION
Introduction	Step 1: 10 min  Step 2: 45 min	Overhead transparency or white board 7 markers for posting organizer; videos (2); final product example	1. Present advanced organizer that outlines activity and its expected outcomes.  2. Present examples (film clips, non-fiction and fiction stories, samples of end products)
Identification	Step 1: 30 min  Step 2: 10 min	Reference materials (photos, catalogs, etc.)	1. Drawing from information gathered in Activity 3, students identify a time, place, and situation on which to base a “movie set.”  2. Write a short description describing the setting.
Script Writing	30 min		1. Write a short script that involves character interaction with the object. • Script may involve up to four characters
Set Decoration	Step 1: 10 min  Step 2: 20 min	Resource materials as above	1. Identify five aspects of the setting that are unknown— for example, other objects, architecture, costumes, graphic elements.  2. Research one of these items to verify and ensure historical accuracy.
Building the Set	1 hour	Resource books, copy machine,	1. Create a set illustration that identifies each aspect of the setting, including the objects and characters.

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		glue, posterboard, drawing materials, tape, exacto knives, rulers	
Conclusion	15 min p/team		1. Presentation of all student projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• description of setting</li><li>• reading of script, demonstrating interaction with object</li><li>• justification of research and choices</li><li>• comment on classroom application</li></ul>

end of Activity 4

## Activity 5 Review, Reflection, and Application

- A. OBJECTIVE: To review the methodology of analyzing, documenting, and contextualizing artifacts as a source of historical evidence.
- B. OVERVIEW: This activity culminates the unit by providing the opportunity to examine related disciplines and their potential sources of information as well as to review the guiding questions listed in section VII.

### ••• The Plan •••

ACTIVITY	TIME	MATERIALS	DESCRIPTION
Review of Methodology	Steps 1 & 2: 30 min	Overhead projector or laptop w/projector; bulletin board and push pins	1. Post each team's products on bulletin board.  2. Review all, drawing comparisons and identifying additional connections between objects.
Interdisciplinary Reflection	Steps 1 & 2: 45 min  Step 3: 30 min	as above	1. Identify what disciplines are represented in the group's projects.  2. Identify and discuss other disciplines that could provide additional information or methodology to any of the activities.  3. Object mapping exercise that allows a participant to select a hypothetical object and map the disciplines related to it or its analysis.

end of Activity 5

## VII. Assessment

- A. Each activity outlined in this unit requires the production of at least one product. These products will help the instructor evaluate how well the students are learning. These products include:
1. ACTIVITY 1: The creation of an artifact-based group story and performance
  2. ACTIVITY 2: Completion of a data chart that records the results of the analysis activity
  3. ACTIVITY 3: Completion of a research organizer from which identification of an object is determined
  4. ACTIVITY 4: Creation of a two-dimensional rendering or collage depicting a scene for a movie in which the team's object is central to the story *and* placed in historical context
  5. ACTIVITY 5: Completion of the object/discipline chart and brainstorm activity
- B. Students will also be evaluated on how well they grasp the concepts of analysis, documentation, and contextualization. This aspect of evaluation will be determined through participation in discussions and the instructor's observation of interaction with other participants.

## VIII. Resources

- A. SELLERS OF HISTORIC REPRODUCTIONS (suitable for classroom use)
1. Amazon Drygoods General Catalog  
2218 E. 11th Street, Davenport, Iowa 52803  
Fax 319-322-4003  
800-798-7979 (orders)  
319-322-4138 (questions)
    - Fur Trade and Victorian era costumes, tinware, glassware, books, music, and patterns
  2. Lehman's Non-Electric Catalog  
P.O. Box 41, 4779 Kidron road  
Kidron, Ohio 44636  
216-857-5441
    - 19th & 20th Century farming, kitchen, heating, cooking, woodworking, and logsmithing hardware
  3. Cumberland General Store

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#1 Highway 68  
Crossville, Tennessee 38555  
800-334-4640

- 19th Century cookware, baskets, lanterns, ironwork, games, handpumps, beekeeping supplies, farm implements, horse drawn carriages & harness, and books.

4. Crazy Crow Trading Post  
P.O. Box 314  
Denison, Texas 75021  
903-463-1366

- Fur trade era beads, cookware, and costumes.

5. Goose Bay Workshops  
990 Greenwood Road  
Crozet, Virginia 22932  
540-456-8717  
fax 540-456-6990

- 17th and 18th Century handmade “historic reproductions” and “historically inspired” cookware, trunks, kitchen implements, tools, and sporting goods.

6. *The Historical Supply Catalog: Newly Manufactured Items from the Past Available Today*. Alan Wellikoff. Charlotte, VT: Camden House, 1993.

- Names, contact information, and description of artifact reproduction makers and sellers of “newly manufactured items from the past.”

### B. STORY AND FILM EXAMPLES

1. *The Piano* (film—underwater scene with woman and piano)
2. *The Necklace*. Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). Illustrated by Gary Kelley. Mankato, MN: Creative Editions, 1993.
3. “The One That Got Away.” Nick Howe. *Yankee*, (May 1997): 152.
5. *Jefferson in Paris* (film—clip of copying machine)

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