

# HISTORY, ARTEFACTS AND STORYTELLING IN THE 2011 PRIMARY CURRICULUM

— Grant Bage

## Introduction

This article will argue that although history can seem a 'hard' discipline for young children, it can be made accessible and exciting through telling stories about objects. The article does not contain advice about obtaining objects: that can best be found elsewhere in this Journal and from many other sources. What it does do is to summarise seven learning approaches to foster 'English and Communication' (particularly speaking and listening) alongside 'Historical Understanding'. All these approaches have artefacts at their heart.

But before thinking about objects, let us contemplate the subject...

## History as Subject

History is what we make of the past, with 'make' meaning both to understand and to manufacture. What we make history *from*, when we are 'doing history' well, is 'evidence'. Evidence of, and from, the past is the raw material from which history is hewn.

So where, as busy educators, can we find 'historical evidence'? And having found some, what should we do with it?

## Evidence and 'Doing History'

The imminent and reformed (2011) English Primary Curriculum, like all its predecessors since 1989, stipulates historical 'evidence' which children should handle and analyse. The ultimate aim of such handling is for children to learn how to think and communicate like historians. Historical evidence in the curriculum is described as 'primary and secondary sources, artefacts, documents, photographs, film, accounts' (Historical, Geographical and Social Understanding, p.5) alongside visits to 'historic buildings, museums, galleries and sites' (ibid p.3). The list is helpful, the document is well meaning, the curriculum is statutory ... and it really is slimmer!

The curriculum: evidence, facts and imagination. The only trouble with curricula, even national ones, is that they do not actually teach anybody anything. It is only when we, as educators, breathe life into curricula that they do any real work at all. This is especially true for a subject like history, in which the fostering of imagination is fundamental. Of course history as a discipline relies upon the 'facts' that evidence suggests: but singular historical facts mean nothing (quite literally) without imagining the realities into which those facts once fitted.

## Historical facts and artefacts

Indeed, the analogy between historical facts and historical artefacts is striking. An authentic historical artefact, washed up in the present and far from its homeland, is strikingly similar to an isolated and abstract 'fact'. As an object it has become divorced from the time, place and people who fashioned it. To make it work again, but on this occasion for educational purposes, we need to find ways to explore with children how to reconnect the object with its lost past. This will involve us examining, analysing, speculating, discussing and deducing who might have used it, when they might have used it and for what.

## Motivation and mystery:

'Making History': a highly motivating sense of mystery can be evoked, as children puzzle about an object's purpose. And at appropriate moments, teachers can use this journey of discovery as an analogy, to help children visualise the broader processes of history as a subject. For piecing together the story of a particular artefact, by linking facts, probabilities and observations, mimics faithfully in miniature what we mean by 'making history' on those broader canvases children will visit in books, on screens or during visits to museums and historical sites. In essence, exercising our historical imagination to reconstruct an object's life story, alongside the life stories of its owners, is an exciting 'historical method' for young children to enjoy.

## Imaginative teaching approaches

What follows are some imaginative teaching approaches to help children learn through talking about artefacts (particularly relating to English and Communication, Speaking



and Listening E1. Also to Historical, Geographical and Social Understanding, Essential Knowledge. Many originate from long before this national curriculum, or indeed *any* national curriculum. Yet they fit rather well within the 2011 curriculum, promoting as it does inter-disciplinary thinking, speaking and listening. More significantly, most draw on the original discipline of human culture: storytelling.

## History as Object

### 1. Lucky Dip

After pulling one item from a box or bag (e.g. a Victorian penny, an old fashioned sweet, a reproduction toy) a child describes this 'historical artefact' to other children, who have their backs turned or may be blindfolded. Needless to say, the person describing is not allowed to name the object but only to describe what they can see, feel, smell, etc. The audience 'guess' what the objects are, before moving on to devise explanatory text or labels for these objects, in their class museum.

### 2. Story boxes, boards and maps

Using a small collection of genuine or reproduction objects as stimulus, ask children to devise stories, descriptions or explanations about the people who made, used or owned them. Variations can include the following, centred on an historical period or theme:

- Impromptu stories based on a single object drawn out of a bag.
- Giving different children the same three objects and comparing the variety of resultant stories.
- Devising a museum display for a particular group of objects and then 'guiding visitors' around it.
- Asking children to make their own story boxes representing a time in history – but drawing from 'common materials' of the day (e.g. grain, wax, leather, flint, paper, bone) alongside models or drawings of actual historical artefacts.

Extending these approaches we can also ask children to tell the story of an object, or collection of objects, in sequences of pictures. *Storyboarding* does this by imagining a series of scenes, sketched in rough form with matchstick figures and simple labels. *Story mapping* similarly uses pictures and arrows to explain relationships between individual objects or elements of a story, but without necessarily boxing them in chronological order.

### 3. Talking Objects

A facsimile or imagined object (e.g. Roman oil lamp, Tudor quill) is 'brought' to a group. They are asked to imagine, describe and explain these stages in the artefact's life:

- Making
- Using
- Losing
- Finding

This prompts further questions about the object's possible owners, journey, purpose and 'experiences'. It can act as a warm-up to the more detailed approach below.

### 4. A Storied Production

The story of an object is told through the actions or materials needed to produce, transport, sell, utilise and preserve it. This is described more fully elsewhere (Bage,

G. 1999 *Narrative Matters: teaching and learning history through story*, London: Falmer Press). The example cites an experienced museum education officer who used stages in the life of an ancient Greek vase to prompt children to question, demonstrate, mime or listen to the story of its making in these stages:

- Digging clay by slaves
- The potter and wheel
- Firing and fuel
- Transport by pack animal
- The agora
- The purchaser and the purchaser's house
- The vase's 'final' resting places and why
- Archaeologist
- Museum conservators and visitors

### 5. An Expert with Objects

In this activity tasks are set up which allow children to practise and grow into 'experts'. Adopting roles such as archaeologist, museum manager, documentary maker, teacher, journalist, conservator or antique dealer, children are asked to:

- Enact a specific job e.g. 'You are an archaeologist. The phone rings with news of an exciting find. What do you pack in your bag?'
- Approach a piece or collection of evidence to solve an historical puzzle, e.g. 'How might we turn these objects and pictures into an interesting museum display to tell people about?'
- Report on an interesting case, e.g. 'How would you write up finding a rare painting in an attic for a local newspaper?'

### 6. Role Play and Artefacts

Numerous role play possibilities exist with single objects or collections of artefacts. Most obviously, they can be used as a stimulus to suggest storylines for a short drama, or a single scene as a 'frozen picture', in which an artefact is being used in the historical period from which it originates. But the key to success in such role play is for children *to rehearse and perform without using the object itself*. It is your decision whether to let children handle the object *before* they role play, or after. Either way, because they can see the object but not use it as a prop, children are forced to examine it really closely: and to model their mime, movement, gesture and perhaps speech not by using the actual object, but around their imaginative representation of it. For case studies and examples of this approach, consult *Primary History* 48, Spring 2008.

### 7. Any Questions?

Having been given artefacts to handle and discuss, children prepare to interview their 'former owners' about the object: what it meant to them, how they used it and what their last memory of it was. With a collection of objects about the same period or person, a familiar format (e.g. news, chat show, magazine) can be used. Children and/or an adult can then 'answer' these questions in role, perhaps using research skills to do so.

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