Supporting Language Learning Using Smithsonian Online Museum Resources
Teaching yourself to teach with objects

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Written in an easy-to-read style, this chapter explores some of the reasons why and how to teach with museum (and other) objects. Writing from practical experience, the author describes some of his own experiences working with objects in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Although this paper is written from a particular perspective in a particular environment, both the teaching methods and the conclusions about the value of using objects in learning are valid in a more general sense.

Trying out some of the ideas suggested in the paper is an excellent way to begin to practise teaching (and learning) with objects. New ideas and new methods emerge all the time.

At the centre of all our programs at the Nova Scotia Museum is a belief in the tremendous power of objects to educate. In fact, we think it is as important for people to learn to use objects as a means of discovering things about themselves and their world as it is for them to learn to use words and numbers.

I have worked at the Nova Scotia Museum now for four years and I am still fascinated by what I'm learning about the power of objects to educate. Furthermore, the longer I'm at it, the more I'm convinced that a museum approach to education has a great deal to offer classroom teachers. Unfortunately, learning how to use objects effectively in your teaching is not quite as easy as falling off a log. As is the case with acquiring other important teaching skills, it takes both some time and some effort. To get right down to it, what this means is that you have to learn to teach objects as skillfully as you have already learned to read our printed language. And as in all skill development, there is no room for fudging the basics. 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.

Since you probably were not trained as a child to read objects, it may be even harder for you to begin to learn this skill than it will be for your students. But don't worry: you don't have to become an expert in order to begin to use objects with your students, and as soon as you do begin you can start to reap some of the benefits.

So perhaps as a first step in helping you learn how to teach with objects, we should look at some of the advantages of this approach.
“READING” PORTRAITURE AT A GLANCE

The two key elements to reading portraits are looking and analyzing.

LOOKING

Sitter
Describe the sitter’s pose.

Symbols
What objects are seen in the portrait?

Adjectives
Use adjectives to describe the sitter.

Clothing
What clothing is the sitter wearing?

Medium
What medium was used to create the portrait?

Setting
What is the setting of the portrait?

Time Period
In what period of history does the portrait appear to be set?

ANALYZING

Sitter
Who is the sitter? Why is this sitter significant to American history?

Symbols
What might the objects tell us about the sitter?

Attributes
What personal qualities might we attribute to the sitter based on the portrait?

Clothing
What might the sitter’s clothing tell us about the sitter’s profession, personality, social status, or place in history?

Artist
Who is the artist? Why is the artist significant?

Setting
What might the portrait’s setting tell us about the sitter?

Time Period
When was the portrait created? What was going on in history when the portrait was created?
October 01, 2009

**Using objects with English language learners**

I work at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. But I spent last year teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a public elementary school in rural Taiwan. Why would a self-proclaimed museum nerd leave the Smithsonian to spend a year in a classroom?

Museum educators love to use objects, artworks, and live collections to make connections to the past, with a different location, or to get a glimpse into the mind of another person. Trained as such, I was really curious how I could use objects to cross cultural and linguistic divides. I loved how the tangible solidness of objects could tell stories in America, so why not see how far I could stretch it?

I imagine that what I learned about using objects for English as a Foreign Language would apply to English as a Second Language (ESL) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students in America, as well.

- **A picture’s worth a thousand words:** When having a shared vocabulary is a problem, photographs can serve as important springboards for conversation and sharing content. I know many ESOL/ESL teachers are challenged with conveying subject content (like history or science) to students who are behind in English language skills and images are one way to share information without having words as a boundary. For my students, this meant using photographs of my childhood Christmas celebrations to give them a cultural introduction to me, rather than needing to translate a description of what Christmas was like for me.
Video
The Smithsonian isn’t just one museum…

It includes 19 museums and galleries, the National Zoological Park and nine research facilities.

The total number of artifacts, works of art and specimens in the Smithsonian’s collections is estimated at over 137 million!

FUN FACT: The Smithsonian owns 35 million insect specimens!
I, James Smith, son to Hugh first Duke of Wellington, and Elizabeth, wife of the late Duke of Wellington, do hereby make and declare this twenty-third day of October, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five, to be my last will and testament. I direct that the whole of my property of every nature and kind, among my tenants, be disposed of in the following manner: and I direct that my said executor, to put my property under the management of the court of Chancery to John Fitzwilliam, formerly my servant, but now employed at the London dock and residing at 3rd Jubilee Place, to dispose of the proceeds and profits as he shall see fit, and to the order of my will. I give and bequeath the annuity of one hundred pounds, the sum of one hundred pounds, to be paid to him, or his assigns, for his life to be paid to him quarterly, free of legacy duty and all other deduction of the first payment to be made to him.
Collections Database
(collections.si.edu)
Research
All kinds of people become scientists. And scientists do all kinds of things. Watch and read about these scientists at the Smithsonian. What kind of scientist would you like to be?

Look for these icons to find:
- video
- profile
- extras
Collections + Research = Learning Resources
“Smithsonian In Your Classroom” Publication

Making connections between the Smithsonian collections & experts to teachable moments

– The Arts
– History
– Culture
– Science
EXPLOR
With Smithsonian Experts
a film series for students and teachers

Smithsonian Institution

Video
Smithsonian

Smithsonian Quests
Anytime Anywhere Experiential Learning

SmithsonianQuests.org
Use Smithsonian Quests to...

Explore Interests
Build Skills
Try Out New Roles
WING-ING IT
A Conversation about Flight
with Dr. John Anderson
and Michael Hulslander
from the National Air
and Space Museum

Smithsonian
CONNECTED CLASSROOMS

Thanks @airandspace @smithsonian had fun w/ #googlehangouts Ss learned how important aspectratio isl @ReachTeacher
7:34 PM - 21 May 2014
1 RETWEET 4 FAVORITES
Cool! RT @Plummersclass: Our class is having a Google Hangout lunch w/ the Smithsonian learning about flight. #cbcspic.twitter.com/4HB1mzS0RU
National Museum of American History

Courtesy of Ted Eytan via the Creative Commons license
• What do you observe about the object?
• What is it made of?
• When was it used?
• What is its purpose?
• What story does it tell?
How big is the nugget that started the California gold rush?
Object Portraits
Object Portraits for Middle School
Object Portraits for Fifth Grade
Object Portraits for Kindergarten
If you walked in my shoes...

Creative Writing Prompts

- Write about a historical event from the object’s perspective.
- Write about the person behind the shoes.
- Write about what your shoes say about you.
http://historyexplorer.si.edu
National Portrait Gallery
Mission

The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery tells the stories of America through the individuals who have shaped U.S. culture.

The Gallery presents the wonderful diversity of individuals who have left—and are leaving—their mark on our country and our culture.
Inquiry and Reading Portraiture
Elements of Portrayal
Elements of Portrayal

- Expression
- Hairstyle
- Pose/Posture
- Clothing
- Setting
- Objects
- Medium
- Scale
- Artistic Style
- Color
“30 Second Look”
Jumping In
Compare and Contrast
Matoaks alias Rebecka daughter to the mighty Prince Powhatan Emperor of Attanoughkomouck alias Virginia converted and baptized in the Christian faith, and Wife to the Wor." Mr. Tho. Rolfe."
Puzzle Activity
Learning to Look Strategies

• Compare and Contrast
• 30 Second Look
• Jump-in
• Puzzle Activity

TO NAME A FEW…
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National Museum of American History
National Portrait Gallery
Smithsonian Center for Learning & Digital Access
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