

## **Becoming History Detectives: Finding History in Things**

For grades 3-6 with modifications for younger and older students.

Prior Planning:

1. The instructor should collect 10-12 common place objects to use in Part II.
2. The day before this lesson, ask students to bring an object from home that is important to them.

### **Introduction**

This lesson invites the young historian to begin to see history through objects. Through a Show and Tell session with personal items, an in-class exercise that is aimed at developing skills of inquiry, and a take home assignment that asks students to ask questions about household items, students will begin to see how objects hold stories from the past. It is the further intent of this lesson to both encourage creative inquiry and respect for historic materials.

### **Background**

Please see essay following the lesson.

### **Objectives**

Students will:

1. Recognize that objects are points of inquiry into the past.
2. Explore their place in history through a personal object.
3. Practice the skill of historic inquiry to read history from artifacts.
4. Practice the skill of historic inquiry with older relatives or friends.

### **Key Terms**

Artifact

Inquiry

### **Materials**

Suggested commonplace/historical items:

can of tuna	thimbles
can-opener	marbles
fountain pen	a skate key
compass	a floppy disc
wooden spoon	a tv remote device

Worksheet templates I, II

### **Discussion**

Introduce the subject to students: People and places have layers and layers of stories that we call history. There are many ways to learn about history. Reading history books, reading stories that are based on history, listening to your history teacher at school or going to museums are some examples of ways to find out about the past. Another way is through objects not just the objects that are carefully displayed in museums, but in the things of everyday life. That old

basketball in the garage, a lamp at your grandmother's house, a toaster on the kitchen counter, and even a pair of shoes in the back of the closet hold stories that connect real people with particular places in time. It's interesting to see how regular objects that you might see everyday can also be keys to the family, local, and even national history.

## Activity

### PART I: Show and Tell with items brought from home

Have each student discuss their item following the leading questions listed below:

1. What is it?
2. How was it used?
3. When was it used?
4. Why is its historical significance? - does it connect to family history, local history, or national history? Allow students to be creative with their answers but make sure they understand the question.

### Part II: Being History Detectives

Break the class up into teams of 3 or 4 students

Assign an object from the commonplace/historical items collection to each group.

Allow each group the study the object.

Have each group use Template I worksheet.

1. The first section asks for empirical data (What is it? What is it made out of? What does it do?)
2. The second section asks the group to generate a list of 5 questions to "ask" the object.

These questions should focus on uncovering connections and directions in history. Let students know that they will be presenting their questions and will be asked their reasoning for their direction of inquiry.

Have each group present their questions.

Ask each group the reason behind their questions. If their questions focus on a particular group or era, ask them what led them to that topic. If their questions deal more with social issues, ask why they made that choice.

### Part III: Finding History at Home

Homework assignment: Template II worksheet

Have students find an object in their homes a lamp, a piece of furniture, a picture, a piece of jewelry. Have the student ask an older family member about the item. See Worksheet II for homework questions.

Set an appropriate due date for the activity and worksheet to be completed and handed in.

When projects are due, have students present their at-home findings.

- Ask for reactions to assignment.

## Conclusion

Things carry history. They carry their own history what they are made of, who made them, how they were made. But, importantly, things also carry the histories of all the people who came in contact with the object and histories of all the places the object has been. Things are keys to the past. Whether you are looking at an object in a museum or a thing in your house, material items have the potential to tell wonderful stories. It is the historian who has the skills of creative inquiry who knows how to ask excellent questions who can help keep those stories alive.

## Modified Lesson

## K-2 Part I: Show and Tell session:

Make sure the students can answer the following questions out loud about their object:

1. what is your object
2. how did you get it Was it given to you? Did you find it?
3. What does your object mean to you? Does it make you think of a person, a place, a special occasion?

## Part II: Practicing Inquiry Skills:

Have younger students sit in a circle on the floor.

Pass commonplace/historical items around the circle.

Ask students questions about the objects:

1. Do they know what the object is?
2. What do they think they could be used for?
3. What do they think about when they touch the item?

Ask students if they have ever found an object and been curious about where it came from or who might have had it before.

Close lesson with a swift read through the story *House on Maple Street* by Bonnie Pryor.

## Extended Lesson

### 7-12 Telling Community History through Objects

Have older students reach deeper into the material culture of their communities. Have each student present a short (5 page) research paper demonstrating how one object connects to the history of the community. If possible have them visit a local house museum or local history center. If this is not possible, make suggestions as to particular objects that may have been important to your region or community. Some suggestions might be:

Fishing tools

Agricultural tools

Furniture

Musical instruments

Jewelry

Recreational Equipment

Once each student has decided on their object, have them research their object through written history as well as through at least two informal discussions with local community members.

Impress that each item can offer many different types of questions. For example, a wooden spoon “asks” not only who used it but also what were the other utensils being used along with it and even what was being stirred by it Wax? Soap? Dye? Batter? Other questions that could follow include how was the production of the item changed with the introduction of the new utensil, and did the introduction of the new utensil alter any traditional processes.

If answers are not readily found, make sure the students demonstrate an intended trajectory of questions. Emphasize the importance of honing the skill of creative inquiry.

## In Class Worksheet I

Names: \_\_\_\_\_

### Finding History in Objects

Description of the Object:  
What is it?

What does it look like?

What do you think it is made out of?

Asking Questions:

Take some time to think about who might have used the object. Consider what they might have thought about when they used it or how their lives might have changed because of it.

As a group, think of 5 questions to “ask” your object.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

## Worksheet II Homework Assignment

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Finding History at Home

Find an object at home that you would like to learn more about. Find an older family member or older friend who knows about the object. Ask the following questions to find out how the object connects to the bigger picture of history.

1. How old is the item?
2. Do you remember where it came from?
3. Did other families have this object also?
4. Does this object make you remember a special day or time in your life? Please describe one or two memories about this object

## Reading History From Things:

In his book, *In Small Things Forgotten*, James Deetz finds that it is the task of the historian to recognize the stories of human experience held in material objects. Objects are neither static nor silent. Objects carry messages from their makers, from those who used them, and from the places in which they occupied or were put to use. Importantly, in each object there is a potentially endless web of historic inquiry.

Interpreting history from objects requires the skill of inquiry. To find history in a can of tuna, for example, the historian needs to ask questions that include all aspects of production of the item. The historian must ask who labored to create this product and where was this work done. What benefits did this can of tuna provide and who was most likely to consume it. Further, did this canned food item represent a trend in food production and, if so what were the reasons for that trend.

This type of process can be applied to any object: an American colonial quill pen, a mariner's compass, or a Lakota copper pot. Looking at the copper pot, it can be exciting to consider its historical significance. When used in the Plains Indian culture, it most likely altered the time it took to cook over a fire and also introduced a new metal that could be made into decorative objects or adornments. As a result, time was spent differently, and a perhaps a new sense of decorative beauty evolved. Pushing the investigation further, the copper pot also presents an inquiry into food production and men's and women's responsibilities.

In Steven Lubar's essay, "Machine Politics: The Political Construction of Technological Artifacts," he states that artifacts both shape and are shaped by the society that uses them. Objects solidify human experience, connecting the maker and the user to the world around them. Objects also perpetually "create the world anew;" by their very existence, they require shifts in social behaviors. By way of material items anthropologists, archeologists, and of course, historians, can uncover cultural, economic, and political contexts and conflicts. Object analysis guides historiography the art of writing history. Material objects can reveal both subtle and dramatic changes in a society. As a result, roots of our present-day culture can be seen.

## References:

Deetz, James. *In Small Things Forgotten*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996.  
Lubar, Steven. *Machine Politics*.