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# Using Artifacts to Foster Historical Inquiry

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## The Importance of Historical Inquiry

Developing historical understanding is a central goal for social studies education, but it presents challenges for elementary teachers who wonder about children's readiness to engage in historical investigation. Many teachers are concerned that young children are disconnected psychologically, lack sufficient background knowledge about the past, and are missing concepts dealing with chronology that are required for any understanding of history.

These challenges are important considerations but they are not insurmountable. Various researchers have shown how engaging students in historical inquiry—turning the study of history into an interpretive practice—can be accessible and exciting even to young students. Children continually strive to make “human sense” of the world (Donaldson 1978), and historical inquiries can bring to life stories about people, places, and times that enhance this sense-making. Although children may feel disconnected from broad historical discussions of political movements, wars, revolutions, and so on, they rarely feel disconnected from discovering what life was like for their teachers, parents, and grandparents when they were children. From constructing personal timelines and learning to divide the past into recognizable eras based on family photographs, young students can build chronological sense using narratives found in their own homes and communities. These stories from the past provide starting places for acquiring and refining the concepts necessary for historical understanding.

Paramount in this enterprise is the teacher's role in engaging students in what might be called “disciplined inquiry” by harnessing and shaping the natural curiosity that bubbles up in the form of children's spontaneous questions. The authors of *Doing History* define disciplined inquiry as “purposeful investigations that take place within a community that establishes the goals, standards and procedures of study” (Levstik and Barton 1997, 13). The rich potential em-

bedded in historical inquiry is lost without a teacher framing and guiding the questions that students ask. Too often, questions encountered in the elementary social studies curriculum remain at very concrete and literal levels. Attention stays on gathering information and detail, sometimes at the expense of analysis or synthesis, and without sufficient regard for the “human sense” behind the facts. Unlike fact-finding questions that tend to shut down inquiry, the focus should be on questions that open up inquiry, go beyond recall, deepen understanding, and expand curiosity. Students can engage in sustained inquiries, even without considerable prior knowledge of history. In fact, as the authors of *Doing History* suggest, the inquiry can become the process through which students construct their understanding of historical themes. However, these authors caution that “authentic, disciplined inquiry is not easy; teachers must guide and support students at every step of the process—stimulating their interest, helping them develop questions, modelling procedures for collecting information and so on” (77). Despite these requirements, the rewards of inquiry are worth the effort.

## The Role of Artifacts in Inquiry

Before introducing an extended scenario about a primary classroom inquiry, I want to comment on the value of artifacts as starting points for purposeful historical investigation. Levstik and Barton write that “although young children who are still developing their reading skills will have trouble using some kind of written primary sources—particularly from more remote time periods—analyzing photographs and artifacts allows them to use important historical materials in an authentic way” (77). There are several reasons why study of a single historical artifact presents an imaginative entry into larger investigations of the past. Children are attracted to the details about people's everyday lives; physical objects make these lives seem more real and accessible. The opportunity to handle and use physical artifacts stimulates curiosity about “things that work,” and engages children's

natural inclinations to be active and involved in their learning. Manipulation of hand drills, old egg beaters, and other implements from various eras is absorbing and fun, and importantly adds to children's first-hand knowledge of tools and technologies.

In my own work with young students, I have found that investigations of historical artifacts introduce the past to students in a way that is rooted in something concrete and easy to grasp, but can easily grow to something more. For example, the examination of a glass inkwell or a slate chalkboard can lead to important historical questions about continuity and change in society as reflected in schoolrooms over the last hundred years. I now want to illustrate this potential by describing the inquiry that evolved when I brought a historic artifact to a grade 3 class.

## A Classroom Inquiry

As students are getting settled, I look around and see that inquiry is clearly valued in this classroom. There's a large hand-printed letter to author Robert Munsch asking, among other things, "How do you think up your stories?" and "Who do you tell your stories to before you write them down?" On the windowsill are a dozen bean plants of various heights, each with a graph attached and questions about conditions for healthy growth. It's a pleasant jumble of a room, a mixture of works-in-progress and remnants of last week's literary performances and yesterday's science experiment. Stretching

towards the door is a blue rug and on it twenty children are now gathering after a stretch. They are more or less sitting in a semicircle of barely contained energy.

First I introduce the term "artifact," then "historic artifact," and write both on the board with a brief definition. The artifact I have brought is a curious object, a solid wooden sphere the size of a tennis ball with a turned handle protruding two inches from one side (see photograph). I hold up the sphere for students to see and I invite them to raise their hands to ask me what they are curious about. I explain I won't answer right away because there will be so many kinds of questions, and I will need to think about them. Students begin posing their questions:

"Is it really old?"

"Why does it have a handle?"

"Who gave it to you?"

"Is it a toy?"

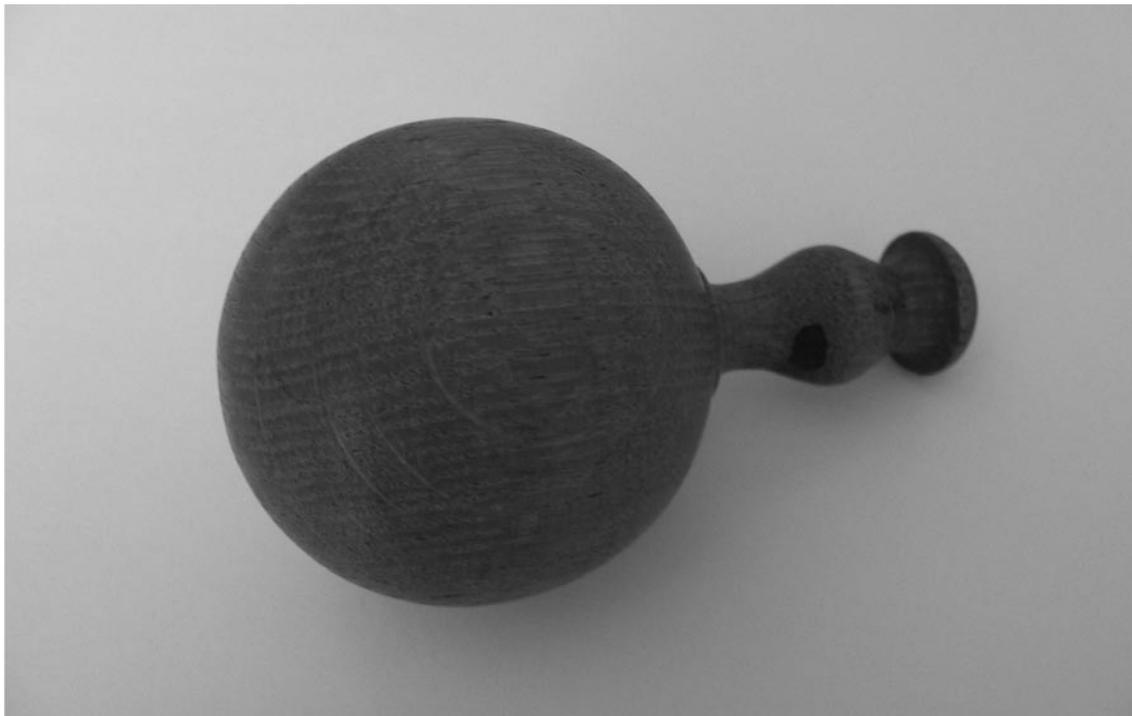
"Do you have any more of them?"

"Is it breakable?"

"Is it worth a lot of money?"

"Is there something inside it?"

I stop them after the eighth question and say, "You have asked so many questions that I am getting confused. How can we keep track of them?" Someone volunteers that we could make a list and we are off and running with the first stage of our inquiry lesson. I begin recording the questions on the board, but one student notices that some questions are "like other ones kids already asked." Soon it is obvious to some stu-



*Photo by author.*

dents that there are different sorts of questions and we should find a way to organize them.

We decide to make three columns. We label them, “Questions about what the artifact is like,” “Questions about where it came from,” and finally, “Questions about what it is for.” Our purpose in creating these categories is to frame the questions and eventually the hypotheses that students will generate about the artifact. More questions are asked and students help me decide where to place them in our categories. Then I ask the class to think of how we might find answers to their questions. “We can ask you!”

“What makes you think I will know the right answers?” I reply.

“It belongs to you, so you know.” With this response noted, I ask them to imagine that this historical artifact just appeared on their windowsill. How would we learn about it then? They suggest the following methods:

- look in a book;
- ask a grown-up;
- go to a museum or a place with old stuff.

At this stage I want students to understand that we will start building our knowledge of the artifact so we can discover not only what it is, and how it is used, but also how it fits into a historical context. “What do you know about it before you look in a book or find an expert?” I ask. I encourage children to pass the artifact around so that everyone has a chance to touch it, sniff it, and roll it around in their palm. We talk about careful and respectful treatment of artifacts and establish a few rules for handling—no throwing, no hitting it against something, and no dropping.

Next, students work in groups of four to write down everything they already know about the artifact. Collaborative effort is productive in building understanding. Students learn that by observing carefully and putting their observations together they know quite a lot. The object is round, hard, smooth, heavy but not too heavy to hold, somebody made it because it wouldn’t grow like that, it’s made out of wood, you’re probably supposed to hold it by the handle, it probably won’t bounce, it is darker in some places than others, and it probably floats. Direct observation has led to additional knowledge and new questions that we add to our three lists.

I invite students to ask me any of the questions we have generated, but I tell them I can answer only “yes” or “no,” and I will not answer the same question twice so they will have to keep track. This means that they will have to rethink the form of some of the questions on the board and listen carefully to make sense of my replies. If they get stuck, I may offer another piece of information. They will hear many clues and then they will be asked to form hypotheses about the identity of the artifact.

Through questioning me, students eliminate possibilities and collect further information: No, it was not carved. Yes, the sphere and handle were both created using a special carpenter’s tool (a lathe). Yes, it is older than me and my mother and even my grandmother. No, it is not part of a spinning wheel. No, it has no other parts. No, the artifact is not a toy, nor is it furniture. Yes, it is useful, but no, not for cooking or in the kitchen. Yes, more women than men used it, but men traveling on their own (such as gold miners and cowboys) would have found it helpful. Yes, it was used to fix or mend something. Yes, it fixed something most people needed. Yes, other things, most notably burned-out light bulbs once electricity was in wide use, served the same purpose.

There are a few tentative hypotheses offered: it’s something for weaving, a tool for knitting. I assure them they are very close and that they have done wonderful work. It is time to demonstrate the artifact in use. I take out a hand-knitted wool sock with a hole in the heel, a thick blunt needle, and some strong white thread. Even those children who have never seen someone darn know exactly what I am trying to do. They can see that the round ball provides the right curve to support mending a hole in the heel. What a useful tool! They are delighted with their efforts as investigators (even though they were not completely successful) and they are eager to hear the story of my artifact, which I can now share.

The artifact is a late nineteenth-century darning ball that came from the family of a friend in the Maritimes. It is made of eastern white oak (a common hardwood in the forests of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick). The wooden ball and handle were turned on a lathe, probably by an amateur woodworker who gave it to his wife, my friend’s great-grandmother. The decorative handle bears a strong resemblance to details on country furniture built in the 1870s and 1880s. I hadn’t previously seen one like it and it surprises me that darning balls are not more common in attics, antique stores, or at flea markets. Presumably most nineteenth-century European Canadians wore hand-knitted socks that developed holes in their heels. The darning ball is a household object that was at one time rather commonplace. In later decades, burned-out light bulbs were used for the same purpose. There are countless other examples of functional objects that were once familiar in North American homes: hand-held irons, primitive toasting racks, copper bed warmers, wooden butter paddles, carved butter presses, and metal thimbles. Any of these artifacts can lead to “disciplined inquiry” beginning with questions such as, “What are some household inventions that have changed family life since your great-grandparents’ day?” This in turn could be linked to other historical questions such as, “What are some ways in which our society has adapted to changing conditions and demands?” Related ideas and topics include:

- obsolescence
- technological innovation
- consumables
- household inventions
- the Industrial Revolution
- textile mills

This time, the darning ball proves to be a catalyst for a social studies unit on recycling and reusing. Part of the study is an investigation of changing societal values. Once socks were mass-produced in knitting mills, people generally attached much less value to them. (See Ulrich 2001, especially chapter 11, “An Unfinished Stocking.”) Instead of owning only two or three pairs of socks as people did in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, today many people own lots of relatively inexpensive machine-made socks. However, if a favourite aunt or other relative had spent the time it takes to knit a pair of socks, the recipient would likely treasure these socks.

We read *Ox-Cart Man* (Hall and Cooney 1979), the story of a farm family who makes almost everything it uses. Students draw elaborate illustrations of the way that members of this family grew food, collected goose down for stuffing quilts, built furniture from trees on the property, and so on. On one page of the book, the mother sits by the fire mending torn clothing. The children search Barbara Cooney’s illustration for evidence of a darning ball and conclude it must be in the basket of mending at her feet.

The next day, I bring in a colourful pair of warm, hand-made Peruvian socks. They prompt stories of special socks, shoes, and other favourite pieces of clothing that we save even after we outgrow them. This exchange naturally leads to a rich discussion of what we mean when we say we value something. We read Pablo Neruda’s poem about a favourite pair of hand-knit stockings called “Ode to my Socks” (1968). I read each line first in Spanish and then the translation. The poet thinks the socks are too beautiful for his old, tired feet. He calls the socks twin parrots and later in the ode he refers to them as two woven flames. The students look at their feet. They might throw away socks when they get holes (or perhaps turn them into puppets), but it wasn’t always this way.

I recite a short poem that my grandmother had cross-stitched on a sampler because it speaks of an important domestic value common to families even two generations ago:

Use it up,  
Wear it out,  
Make it do,  
Or do without.

The darning ball has done its job—it has stimulated powerful questions that guide our inquiry.

## Lessons Learned

Through this inquiry, students were introduced to the kinds of standards and procedures that are integral to historical study (for example, we must have reasons or evidence for our conclusions; we have to think for ourselves, the teacher won’t always give us the answers; we can tell a lot by looking for clues; we can pool our individual observations). Students worked together to generate both questions and knowledge claims about the artifact. By working as a community of inquirers, the children entered into the practice of actually doing history. Concepts relevant to understanding the contexts in which the artifact might have been used were introduced naturally and informally as questions arose from the students themselves. The students were given opportunities to make sense of important historical themes (for example, technological obsolescence, shifting values, and change and continuity). Throughout the inquiry, the teacher’s role was to stimulate children’s thinking, help students focus and organize their inquiry, prompt students to think for themselves, help students learn from each other, and, most importantly, raise for consideration the bigger issues embedded in the particulars of their inquiry. In our inquiry, the important point was not the specific fact that we no longer darn our socks. Instead, the broader point was made that things that once had value in our society may no longer be appreciated. A related theme concerned losses and gains associated with technological advances. Certain technologies have qualitatively changed how we live our lives.

Identify a topic in the curriculum dealing with a past event, period, or person. Think of possible artifacts that might be used as an entry point to raise important themes connected with the historical topic you have identified. List several questions you might ask of students to guide them to the bigger issues raised by the artifact.

Clearly, there are countless humble artifacts that could be enlisted as tools to help young students make sense of history. Items need not be expensive or rare to be useful for historical inquiries. Even objects that were commonplace in your own childhood can present wonderful mysteries to young students. The primary criterion for selection is the potential for an artifact to raise important historical ideas (for example, self-sufficiency, changing values, enduring traditions). The artifact is simply the vehicle for grounding and drawing students into a historical inquiry. Other criteria to remember when selecting artifacts include the following. Artifacts should:

- have the potential to excite children’s imagination and to personalize history;
- not be too fragile for young children to handle;
- not be dangerous or cause damage (for example, stain clothing); and
- be easily displayed in a classroom (not too big or too small).

The highlighted text, “Using Artifacts to Support Historical Inquiry,” includes suggestions for other activities that support historical inquiry using artifacts as the entry point.

Although it is desirable, especially with younger children, to have physical objects to share with students, this is not always feasible—some objects are too big, impossible to find, or are otherwise unavailable. Photographs of artifacts can be

useful substitutes for the “real” thing. Many museums have developed virtual collections of artifacts. For example, the Archives Society of Alberta has produced a virtual train station filled with artifacts from Canadian immigrant experiences ([www.archivesalberta.org](http://www.archivesalberta.org), click on “Letters from the Trunk”). Similarly, the McCord Museum of Canadian history, in partnership with seven museums, has produced “Keys to History” ([www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/keys](http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/keys)), a searchable database of nearly 110,000 images (dating from 1840–1945), of which 2,000 are fully documented.

The example of a slide presentation described in the highlighted text “Same or Different” illustrates how photographic representations of objects from ancient Roman times stimulated a grade 7 class’s historical inquiry into the differences between Roman and contemporary societies.

## USING ARTIFACTS TO SUPPORT HISTORICAL INQUIRY

- **Artifact study sheet.** Develop a chart, such as the one illustrated on the next page, to accompany artifact investigation that students conduct either in groups, on their own at home (if interviewing family members), or in other settings, such as on a field trip to a museum. Emphasize that students are to offer reasons or evidence for their answers: What clues can we point to that suggest an answer?
- **Old Main Street treasure hunt.** Most towns and cities have a neighbourhood that is full of antique shops, junk stores, second-hand clothing stores, pawnshops, auction houses, consignment stores, or thrift shops. These can be treasure troves for artifact collectors. Sometimes sources for historical artifacts are scattered throughout a wider geographical area. If it seems workable in your situation, consider a field trip for students and arrange for them to have a small amount of money to purchase an artifact or an old newspaper, catalogue, or calendar. If a field trip is not feasible, consider collecting artifacts in a treasure chest of your own. Among the items I have discovered on my own city’s Main Street include: biscuit tins, military uniform buttons, initialled handkerchiefs, roller-skate keys, eight-track cassettes, long-playing records, player piano music rolls, apple corers, meat grinders, embroidery hoops, decorative hair combs, stocking garters, hand-forged nails, and inkwells. Each of these offers an imaginative entry into studying how people lived in the past.
- **“Then and now” charts.** Many important questions about societal change and continuity over time can be raised by inviting students to sort artifacts (or representations of objects) into “then” and “now” categories. Primary students can be introduced to Venn diagrams to represent tools, toys, and implements that have changed over the years between the childhoods of their parents, their grandparents, and their own lives. Students can draw pictures of objects that fit into the circle labelled “then” or the circle labelled “now.” Certain items may have stayed the same over time and would be placed in the space where the circles overlap. Varying diagrams might be devoted to different themes (for example, kitchen tools, games and toys, women’s clothing).
- **Artifact timelines.** A good activity for building understanding of chronology is for young children to arrange artifacts in chronological sequence. Using investigative methods discussed in class, students find out as much as they can about objects brought from home or found in the teacher’s treasure chest. In small groups or as a whole class, students use the information gathered to decide where to place artifacts on a timeline. Beforehand, the teacher might write in significant dates, decades, historical periods, or personal time frames (for example, My grandma’s childhood, My parents’ teen years, When I was a baby). Using clothespins, hang drawings of the objects along a clothesline stretched across a corner of the classroom. Alternatively, arrange the actual objects on a windowsill or counter that has been organized into a timeline.
- **Invent the artifact’s story.** Invite older elementary students to write their own stories from the point of view of particular artifacts. Based on the knowledge acquired about an artifact and their own abilities to judge the plausibility of various hypotheses, students write a story which explains the following:
  - ◆ Who invented me? Why?
  - ◆ Who made me? Where?
  - ◆ Who has owned me?
  - ◆ Where have I lived? Where have I travelled?
  - ◆ What have I been used for? Have I been misused or neglected?
  - ◆ Does anyone use me now? Has a newer invention taken my place?

*continued on next page*

	CLUES	CONCLUSIONS
Where did it come from?		
Who made it?		
How old is it?		
Who used it?		
For what purpose?		
Is there a modern counterpart?		

### SAME OR DIFFERENT?

The lesson was introduced using a photograph (shown opposite) of a clay model of a sheep’s liver. Explained in a manner intended to make the practice seem odd, students were told that in ancient times, fortune tellers or soothsayers would sacrifice an animal, slice open its belly, and pull out its organs, which were then “read” for any clues they offered about the future. This clay model was a teaching tool used in Mesopotamia to train would-be fortune tellers about what to look for when reading animal entrails. Each of the squares outlined on the clay model represented a different prediction. For example, a scar or blemish appearing in one part of the grid might indicate five years of good luck or suggest that the person would have many children. A mark in another area of the liver would signal poor health or great financial misfortune. After hearing this explanation, students were asked to indicate whether ancient soothsaying is very similar to or completely different from what happens today. The most common and predictable reaction was reflected in remarks such as “totally weird” and “strange.”

The teacher then asked students to more directly consider contemporary fortune-telling. The teacher and students discussed various modern forms (for example, horoscopes, tea leaves, tarot cards, and palm reading) and the basis for predicting used by each (for example, the position of stars and planets, the configuration of leaves in the cup, the symbols on cards, and the length and intensity of lines on the palm). The teacher then observed that instead of the location of the scars on the liver, modern fortune tellers consult the location of the stars in the sky or the lines on the hand. Students were asked to reconsider how different this is from past practices. For many students, what was once a bizarre practice now seemed much less foreign.

The lens guiding their inquiry was now in place—students would look beyond the obvious differences between present and

past practices to uncover more basic commonalities and differences. Students were then shown clusters of pictures of Roman objects on a common theme—pictures about entertainment showed the coliseum, gladiators, and chariot races. The stories behind each of these pictures were shared by the teacher. In small groups, students identified what they saw as the contemporary parallels for each practice—the parallels for entertainment included football stadiums, kick-boxing, and demolition derbies. They then considered whether or not the differences between then and now were significant. This routine was repeated several times with other aspects of Roman civilization (for example, water systems, architecture, transportation, politics). In each case, students looked at photographs of artifacts from Roman times and identified parallels in their own society. The fact that statues of famous Romans often had their noses and ears broken off was of particular interest to students. One reason for this originated in the time when Christianity took hold in Rome. In the eyes of some Christians, these statues encouraged idolatry and had to be destroyed. Because there were so many marble statues and they were difficult to remove or destroy completely, a common strategy was to mar the face of the statues by breaking off the noses and ears. Students were amused to realize that we still “deface” property—although now more frequently by graffiti than by knocking off appendages.

The culminating activity invited students to offer an overall assessment of the extent to which life in ancient Rome was similar to or different from contemporary society. As they debated their conclusions and shared their evidence, students understood that they were not simply talking about old relics but were engaged in an inquiry into the roots of Western civilization. As one student remarked, “I know why we study ancient Rome. Everything we do now, well, they did something just like it.”



Photo by Susan Duncan. Courtesy of the photographer.

Assemble several objects (or photographs of objects) that have historical significance. Design a lesson involving the use of these items to help students learn about some aspect of the curriculum.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how the use of artifacts, or images of them, can be an exciting and effective approach to developing historical understanding, especially in younger children. Historical objects offer accessible opportunities to involve students in historical investigation. The main challenges to effective use are to select objects that can connect with key themes in the curriculum, to engage students' curiosity through strategic questioning, and to support students in drawing out the bigger lessons from their inquiry into the artifact.

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