

The Use of Artifacts to Teach Ancient History in the Elementary Classroom

Artifacts serve as a way to interpret the story of a people. People define themselves by the art and music they create, and students can examine works to define a people. Students need to examine events within a cultural framework to explore art, music, and events.¹ Students evaluate the aesthetic qualities of the artifacts to illustrate a culture; the story of a people and a cultural framework help students to learn about ancient history. The teacher uses these experiences to get the students talking and thinking about the topic. The student use artifacts to establish connection to people in the past and present places on earth.

Artifacts serve as a way to focus instruction; understanding occurs when students examine ideas in depth. One mark of excellent instruction consists of organizing and developing limited content to focus on key understandings.² Students use artifacts to construct their understanding of crucial social studies concepts; artifacts serve as a primary source of information about a culture. Students use thinking skills through the discovery method to interpret objects. In this particular case after the students gather the information they can then use it to interpret historical events though drama. In social studies students learn to sift evidence themselves before information interpretation occurs for them.³ Students use evidence from artifacts to form insightful conclusions. The artifact helps the student focus on examining evidence; when students use evidence, artifacts become primary sources to learn about people and their lives.

Students share a fascination with art and music; they link their experiences and the experiences of others through the media of art and music. Teachers help students incorporate music, dance, and art into their class. Instruction and enjoyable social studies

is about real people; elementary students find artifacts laden with the fascinating story of people.⁴ The work and play in the lives of common persons as well as the famous or the infamous can be illustrated through artifacts. Elementary students can then assume the role of any of these personalities based on the interests sparked by the tools and possessions of the individual. Students see the effort and incitement of emotion needed by a person to create a work. Arts get them to interpret because art renders both invention and human voice which is often transparent.⁵ Students take an artifact and read a story of another person into it. While they see artifacts from retrospect, they depend upon the connection between an artist and society to help the student make generalizations about a society. Lievrouw and Pope view social art knowledge from art history as retrospective while the sociology of art informs the links between artists and their world.⁶ Artists always create within a social context and reflect their perceptions of society through their work for another to interpret. Students bring contemporary views and attitudes to help make connections with the past; students bring knowledge to school that they can use to extrapolate about real people.

Students grow in historical thinking as they examine artifacts. Artifacts lead students from an affective bond through an artifact with other people whom they have not yet met. Engle calls upon teachers of the social studies to take an “affective orientation.”⁷ Through capturing the imagination of students those students link emotionally with peoples of the past; the affective orientation allows students to examine values within the context of a culture. Teaching social studies provides opportunities for teaching about critical thinking and the analysis of values.⁸ Students engaged in critical thinking make decisions as to the nature of the worth of a culture using their value system

and their contemporary point of view. Those students who use analysis, syntheses, and evaluation to gather information from artifacts develop thinking skills they use in both social studies class and in their life. Artifacts serve as windows to examine culture, evidence, connections, and thinking skills.

Whole Class Experiences

Music

The teacher of the sixth grade students often starts a class with music by encouraging students to interpret sounds and what they may mean to people.⁹ He plays a brief selection from a CD to set a mood or challenge them with a type of music or sound foreign to their experience. While the music is not what the students listen to on their own time, they do remain open to it and listen carefully to sound that is alien to their life. The teacher plays music at the beginning of the class and has students close their eyes, put their heads down and imagine if this were music of the Romans how would it make them feel? When the students raise their heads, they must come up with one word to describe their feelings; next the class members share their words.

Artifacts

Students behold all sorts of wonders from exotic plants to textiles, swords and weapons of ages past, tools and artifacts from the cultures of the world; objects of art and artifacts serve as the focus of some learning centers. JB said, “He would tell me about his . . . medieval swords . . . my friend Noel [and I] . . . were both in his class. We both like medieval [artifacts], and, after Christmas break, he called me and he got these swords.” Student interest focuses on artifacts. Their eyes light and their hands gravitate to them; almost exactly the same thing occurs when the drums for talking about non

western cultures appear in the room. Amazingly the students' hands keep moving across the artifact all the time; they never stop exploring the artifacts. It is as if the artifacts feed some incredible starvation. Art prints and examples of rich color serve as stimuli for other learning centers drawing the students' attention to them. Students learn about ancient history to establish a context for exploring geographic and current events.

Examples of Artifacts in Learning Centers

In small groups the students move among four learning centers; the learning stations give the students background information about the content under study. The students focus on discovery when they use the questions written on a one to three poster board sheet at the learning center; students learn to use questioning, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation to interpret a picture, artifact, or graphic attached to or sitting near the poster board sheets. The following learning center helps students to interpret life in the Bronze Age. The first artifact is a flattened, sphere shaped, light weight, shiny black box with carved disks inlaid with mother of pearl in a random pattern.

Three new station posters:

Station #1

1. Do you think the round black box was made for rich priests or poor farmers?
Why do you say this?
2. What do you think the design might symbolize? Back up your hypothesis with evidence.

The second artifact is a stylized bronze antelope in mid-flight springing from its pedestal stand; the other artifact is an original knife blade.

Station #2

1. Is this a statue of the hunting god or of the mother god (Inanna)?

Why do you think this?

2. How is the other artifact used?
3. What natural resources were used to construct each of the artifacts?
4. What natural resource were the people of Mesopotamia first to use?

The students examine the artifact, interpret them, and in a small group discuss their significance before moving to the next station. The final artifact is a life sized cast bronze head that has turned green from age, displaying a curly, flowing beard with open slits for eyes and a cap.

Station #3

1. Is this Mesopotamian art connected to the hunting animal god (Nanna) or to the mother god?
2. Why do you say this?
3. What natural resources did the people use to made it?
4. Is it sophisticated art?
5. Why do you say that?

Using station number two students in several groups respond to the questions and artifacts. The students seem to have run through the first question quickly, but the second seems to give them more pause to think. The teacher wants the students to flick the green cast bronze head with their fingernails; because it is bronze and it will ring like a bell. The green color fools many students. They think it is ceramic, but getting them to test it will help them determine the statue consists of metal. The teacher expects students to use their senses to gather information; from their observations students learn to gather evidence, draw and support their conclusions. Students touch the statue and then start to evaluate its esthetic qualities. Through questioning, the teacher asks students if metal technology could be adapted to warfare, and the students rapidly see the connection. The students require open-ended hypothesizing skills to learn from the stations; the teacher redirects their attention to focus the students on what the student just learned in the learning stations.

Teacher: . . . If you look over here--was this the mother god or the animal god?

Why do you think so? What do you think this is used for, and what were the Ur Mesopotamian people the first to be able to use? Who was grader for you?

Taylor? . . What were both of these made from?

A different person serves as the grader of each class every day; the grader functions to call on people. The teacher gives the student an A on the spot for a quality oral answer; the grader then records the grade given. People get equal opportunities to respond; the students are running the class by calling on people and recording the grades. The

students know ideas are important and participation counts; the students have good ideas affirmed immediately before their peers.

Taylor: I will call on Lynette.

Teacher: What were they both made out of?

...

Lynette: Metal.

Teacher: Raise your hand if you agree. Metal. A lot of you were smart enough to remember that up until this point in history it has [been] called [the] stone age, but now in Ur - Mesopotamia for the first time in history we have metal. OK. . . Here is another example of Mesopotamian art. What is it made of?

The teacher works with the class to define sophistication; he uses both examples and non-examples with the art. First, the students determine the station assignment and purpose; second, students explore the station. Third, the class reviews the station, artifacts, and questions; finally, the class defines a concept together. Besides the next three learning stations, the students focus on hypothesizing by using the data to draw implications about a culture.

The first station contains pictures of a ziggurat; the statue on the inside of the ziggurat temple shows a fierce male bearded god.

Station #1

Please look at the pictures then talk with your group to decide what you think is the answer.

1. How was the large building in the center of this 6000 BC farming village used?
2. What evidence do you have for saying this?
3. Inside the building is this statue. Is the figure male or female?

Students interpret the community plan and its social importance by using the pictures to spark their discussion; they then interpret the social implication of the menacing male statue within the temple. Station two features a cast bronze statue of a bull mounted on a pedestal; the bull seems to be in the process of either walking or bending down to graze.

Station #2

Religion about 8,000 BC

1. What god does this statue represent?
2. Why do you think so?

Students give reasons why this was an important symbol for the culture and how it relates to the people. A colorful picture of a religious festival in a temple courtyard depicts dancing, the priesthood, and offerings.

Station #3

Religion about 8000 BC

1. What do you think is occurring in this illustration?
2. Please back up what you say with at least two well explained reasons.

Students use logical-mathematical intelligence to interpret the archeological evidence provided; the evidence gets students to hypothesize in exactly the same way professional archeologists base their assertions on evidence. The teacher provides this information on poster boards that he attaches to the bulletin boards; the teacher also provides examples of real artifacts on the front table.

The graves of ten rich people have been found in the Iraq-Iran area from circa 6000 BC. In the graves archeologists found six female and four male skeletons. Make a pie graph to show this information.

Make two hypotheses to explain which gender had more power in 6000 BC

Example:

Mathematical and logical intelligence in 6000 BC:

Model pie graph:

1. I think ___ gender had more power because ___ found in the graves or it could be ____ .
2. I think ___ gender because ____ .

The following artifacts were found in 100 graves of poor people from 6000 BC:¹⁰

- 75 containers of harvested grain

- 15 spears
- 10 tools that could be used for several purposes

Please make a pie graph showing the proportion of artifact types found.

Form a hypothesis based on this data.

"I think these early farmers were (peaceful or warlike) because ____."

Example:

Mathematical-logical intelligence in 6000 BC

Because of this data I think these early farmers were ____ because ____.

Model pie graph.

After gaining insights from the stations, the students use the context of the information as a staging area for the examination of how an archaeologist thinks. They spend their time speculating and hypothesizing rather than memorizing. They create products to show examples of their skills of hypothesizing rather than doing workbook sheets to demonstrate the students' ability to conduct factual recall of information.

Critical Thinking

The students spend time sharpening their critical thinking skills; an educated citizenry in a democracy requires its members to think in order to solve problems. Lee said, "He brings in a lot of topics, . . . he really gets us thinking, and he gets us to ask a lot of questions." The students understand to think requires them to be questioners, not just the questioned, and the class environment provides an introduction to thinking. A group of five students go to one of the four learning stations set up in the room; at one learning station is a poster with a couple of questions asking the students to identify the

bronze statue of a stylized antelope as either an animal god or a mother god. The questions at the learning station prompt the students to justify why they picked the response they did; the final poster at the learning center asks the students to determine the materials used to form the statue. The conversation starts in a learning station when the students evaluate the materials that a culture used to produce its art. The students must argue their hypothesis and use sensory information to determine the natural resources used to make the statue. Students brought background information to help them reach a decision; the students were quick to apply their information about mother gods or animal gods to the station. They were a bit slower to apply their knowledge of how wood and metal looks and feels; later in the class this information involves students in the processes of analysis and evaluation to solve problems. Once students solve problems through critical thinking they apply their knowledge to decision making.

Conclusions

Students establish connection to location of cultures and understanding for people from the past. Students gather information through classroom procedures to examine music and artifacts. The implication of working with artifacts for the social studies field includes students getting opportunities to do critical thinking when they use the experiences they bring with them from their life into the classroom and use these to interpret the lives of people from their artifacts. Student behavior focuses on interpretation through critical thinking. Critical thinking as a part of social studies supports the idea of students becoming decision makers; students can evaluate a culture or the present by the artifacts it creates and leaves behind. Preservice teachers need experience designing discovery activities in their university methods classes; in addition,

they need experience in both observing and working with children in field experiences where artifacts are used in classroom teaching. Teacher educators need to provide models of artifact instruction appropriate to primary, intermediate, and secondary students; moreover, teacher educators need to develop complex questioning strategies to guide young teachers as they help students to develop their thinking in progressively more rigorous experiences.

NOTES

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3. L. S. Levstik, "Narrative Constructions: Cultural Frames for History," *The Social Studies* May/June (1995): 113-6.
4. I. Dawson, "The Schools' History Project--A Study in Curriculum Development," *The History Teacher* 22 (1989): 221-38.
5. M. S. Gabella, "Beyond the Looking Glass: Bringing Students into the Conversation of Historical Inquiry," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 22 (1994): 340-63.
6. L. A. Lievrouw and J. T. Pope, "Contemporary Art as Aesthetic Innovation: Applying the Diffusion Model in the Art World," *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 15 (1994): 373-95.
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8. J. Brophy, "Teaching History for Understanding and Higher-order Applications," *The Elementary School Journal* 90 (1990): 351-417.
9. R. V. Morris and M. Welch, *How to Perform Acting Out History in the Classroom to Enrich Social Studies Education* (Dubuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt, 2000).
10. P.R. S. Moorey, *Ur 'of the Chaldees'* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).