

# How to Use Artifacts in Your Course

Tenn TLC: the Tennessee Teaching and Learning Center

"How To" Pedagogies # 5

## THE IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT ON STUDENTS: WORKING WITH OBJECTS

Experiential learning is powerful because during the experience the individual must construct meaning for him or herself. The individual creates order by associating the experience with past learning and re-orders thinking based on new input. The activity also has more impact on student learning and long-term memory because students are engaged through multisensory experiences.

"Experiences result in feelings of 'really knowing' something. Compare the feeling of reading about a foreign country and then the feeling of visiting it: the learning is qualitatively different. A visit to a museum offers an object-based experience; objects encode histories, memories and cultures and can be made meaningful in multiple ways. These are rich and powerful sources of learning with both short- and long-term impact."

*Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and Education*

Visiting a campus museum will enable your students to connect what they are learning in the classroom with the "real thing." Interactions with museum contents are multi-sensory experiences.

The museum object has been called a "message bearing entity," like a "bottle at sea with a note in it, which alerts the finder metaphorically and metonymically to the word to which the object belonged in its precollected state." (Susan Pierce and philosopher Hilde Hein, *The Museum in Transition*).

According to consultant Nina Simon, social objects are the "third thing" that invites us into a shared, social dialogue. "In a physical setting, I've found that successful social objects tend to be provocative, relational, active, or personal. Dogs and stuck elevators are social objects. Exhibits that visitors point at or photograph themselves with are social objects. Exhibits that ask visitors to work together or compete are social objects. Social objects help us connect with others, and they become focal points for conversations with friends and strangers alike....When we ask students to get involved through a creative assignment, fact-finding mission, or team assignment, we enhance the

## ARTIFACTS IN EXHIBITS AND IN THE HIGHER ED CLASSROOM

**Visual, media and object literacy:** When viewing objects, students may benefit from a review of or consideration of visual and media literacy, so that they know how to "look" deeply.

**Visual Literacy** instructions can help students notice aspects of visual representation such as line, texture, depth, and structure. In *A PRIMER OF VISUAL LITERACY*, Donis Dondis lays out four aspects of visual literacy:

1. Visual comprehension increases our familiarity with visual conventions in media.
2. Visual literacy enhances our cognitive experiences in other ways (such as awareness of spatial relations).
3. Awareness of visual manipulation and of artistry through visual devices leads us to recognize how meaning is created visually.
4. Visual awareness encourages informed aesthetic appreciation.

[Literacy for the 21st Century](#) and the [International Visual Literacy Association \(www.ivla.org\)](#).



exhibit experience and create a more memorable experience. We can get them to work with this "third thing." (2010, Museum 2.0)

# Using Artifacts

## PLANNING A SITE VISIT

### The McCLUNG MUSEUM

**Teach outside the box – use an exhibit** as a launch for writing assignments, research papers, or special interest projects. The Museum offers free programs throughout the semester, and other departments also schedule lectures in the museum auditorium. Check the McClung Museum website [mcclungmuseum.utk.edu](http://mcclungmuseum.utk.edu) for information. To schedule a visit, contact Director Jeff Chapman or Assistant Director Deborah Woodiel.

### The BAKER CENTER

**Modern Political Archives** collections include documents, photographs, and memorabilia from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reserve a room and let students examine materials directly! "The System Works: Participating in the American Republic" is a permanent exhibit on the political process, with exhibits which allow for student interactivity ([www.bakercenter.utk.edu](http://www.bakercenter.utk.edu)).

### *References*

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Simon, Nina. 2010. *The Participatory Museum*.  
<http://www.participatorymuseum.org/> (see chapter 4 on Social Objects)

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Possible learning outcomes for working with artifacts include developing visual, media, and object literacy and skill sets (close reading, mathematical competency, or critical analysis). Determine how the assignment fits into course outcomes.

- Do you want students to practice research skills?
- Do you want them to examine objects up close and look critically at details?
- Will they write about their observations?
- Do you want them to refine their critical thinking skills?
- Do you want them to learn some specific information related to your discipline?

These questions can all be turned into student learning outcomes. Just turn your question into a statement on your assignment: "students will practice research skills during our museum visit."

### **Types of assignments:**

Question sheet

Scavenger hunt for objects or details within objects

Reflective paper

Creative response (storytelling, poetry, art)

Critical Analysis assignment

Gaming ("Jeopardy" questions, for example)

Report on an artifact (students create a "tour" appropriate to the course content)

*"How To" sheets are places to start. For more information, contact the **Tenn TLC** by calling 974-3807 or by email [tenntlc@utk.edu](mailto:tenntlc@utk.edu). Visit our site <http://tenntlc.utk.edu> and follow our blog <http://tenntlc.blogspot.com> for publications and faculty development information!*

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