

Object handling in the archaeology classroom – Strategies for success

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Abstract

Direct encounters with archaeological materials are an effective way to teach the practical side of the discipline while developing transferable skills such as observation, deductive reasoning, critical analysis and group working. This paper draws on the authors own experiences to develop guidelines for object handling in the university classroom. Good preparation, informed implementation, consolidation of gains and integration of such sessions into the wider curriculum are key elements of an effective strategy.

Introduction

Material culture provides a tangible link between the past and the present. Handling objects can make that past more real, with the opportunity to filter the physical and unfamiliar through our own networks of association and experience. The immediate and personal nature of the encounter makes it memorable and can generate rewarding levels of enthusiasm amongst students and teachers alike. It is not surprising then that object-based learning (OBL) has been a core element of archaeology education for some time (e.g. BEAZLEY 1989), and indeed a recent QAA benchmark statement for archaeology defines OBL as fundamental to the way archaeology should be taught (DOONAN & BOYD 2008, 108). Yet despite this there is little formal instruction offered in showing tertiary staff *how* to teach with objects, and the majority of lecturers at my own institution seem to have developed their own pedagogic strategies through a matter of trial and error. While this has led to some excellent and innovative teaching practices, busy schedules mean that staff rarely have the time to share their methods with others, lessening the long-term impact of their work. This paper aims to redress this situation by sharing my own reflections on effective ways to teach archaeology through object handling. These are based on an evaluation of surveys and in-depth interviews with UCL staff on how they use objects in their teaching (KÖSTER 2005 and unpubl. reports by N. Merriman 2000 and K. Piquette 2008), along with observations of object handling sessions, discussions about teaching practice with my colleagues, and the field testing of different strategies.

Organizing a successful object handling session

Most students enjoy working with objects; however a poorly planned session can also leave students bored or confused. To avoid this, good preparation is essential. Object handling sessions are sometimes scheduled as optional 'extras' to a course, but this sends out the message that the class is not important. So the first step should be to ensure that the session is seen to be an integrated and relevant component to your course. Scheduling is equally critical: will the session be introducing new knowledge or techniques, or building upon them? A misplaced handling session can undermine all you hope to achieve.

The next step is to identify suitable material for your class. In archaeology, this is usually sourced in one of three ways: personal handling collections (drawn from fieldwork, research material, purchased replicas and modern items), objects borrowed from colleagues, and departmental or museum collections. Personal handling collections give you more control on how you access material, but museum collections generally provide a better quality and range to choose from. For those who decide to use museum collections, it is important to develop good relations with curatorial staff and to negotiate any potential conflicts in your respective interests (HOOPER-GREENHILL 1985). Table 1

suggests practical ways in which such conflicts can be resolved. The final stage is to assemble suitable support equipment. This might include items to enable a safe handling environment, such as gloves, surface padding for tables, and trays to move objects around the room, as well as equipment that help students to interact more closely with objects such as lamps, magnifying lenses or calipers. Laminated instruction sheets, reference material to help put the artifacts in context, activity worksheets and handouts can also be useful aids.

Curatorial wants	Teaching wants	Solutions
Controlled access that meets national standards with regard to storage security	Open access to speed up preparation and setup time	Teachers are given good access to material prior to class. Curatorial staff deliver objects to class on the day, or teachers are given secure cupboards for their objects within teaching spaces.
Record object movement for collections management	No paperwork – just get objects and go	Collections staff assist with paperwork or do it for teachers. Teachers give collections staff adequate warning of coming classes.
Limit handling to prevent damage	Artifacts for intensive handling	Create teaching collections of duplicate or replica objects. Rotate objects in use so handling contact is reduced for individual items. Coat metal objects with barrier wax for safer handling; provide Perspex boxes for fragile objects.
Limit risk to high value or important objects	Quality objects that are interesting, well provenanced and well researched	Curators work closely with teachers to find suitable material and to research chosen items. Unique objects are made available only through associated displays. Other material safeguarded by controlling object delivery, teaching environment, and setting handling conditions.

Table 1: Perceived teaching versus curatorial demands in object-based learning

Teaching strategies

When it comes to running an actual object handling session, the structure of the session will have an impact on the type of interaction that takes place within it. Constraining factors include the size of the class, room layout, class length and how many facilitators are available. Approaches can range from 'demonstration' mode, where one person leads the entire class, to group activities and independent work.

Object demonstrations are one of the most common forms of teaching with objects, perhaps because it is the closest in format to a traditional lecture (fig. 1). In the demonstration model, learning is largely teacher-driven. A facilitator stands in front of a group and 'explains' each object to them. It may be a didactic process, with the teacher pointing out features then passing objects around so the students can observe them directly. It can also be more query-driven, in which the teacher uses prompts or questions to help students discover features for themselves. This type of teaching requires a single table that is large enough for all the students to stand around, and is generally suitable for smaller classes sizes of up to 12–15 students. It also tends to work best in a short session format of no more than an hour.



Fig. 1 - Working in demonstration mode: ceramic pot marks are used to generate discussion on symbols and early writing systems.

The advantages of this approach are that the teacher retains control of what ideas are being explored, ensuring that the appropriate material and knowledge is covered during the session. This is particularly appealing to those who have concerns in delivering a set amount of core knowledge. The disadvantages are that students do tend to look to the facilitator for information, rather than trying to discover it for themselves (CURTIS 1997, 32), while

not all students may have an equal opportunity to participate. One common problem in the way this type of session is implemented is that there is often a time lag between an object being introduced to the class and students examining it for themselves. One solution is to bring several examples of an object type to the table, so that they circulate more rapidly. Another is to vary the way the objects are handed out, so that each student has the chance to be the first to see and discuss at least one item.

An alternative approach is the 'activity workstation', where students are assembled into small groups around objects and discussion of the material is created within each group. There may be a set task provided, but it should be up to the students to explore the material themselves and draw their own conclusions. Teachers can move between groups to provide guidance, and use general discussion time or supplementary fact sheets to provide the students with further information at the end of the exercise. It requires a flexible room arrangement with groups of smaller tables and material that can be divided up into several activities. Groups can be static, remaining at a workstation for the whole session, or mobile, rotating between activities. How large a class can be accommodated depends on the teaching space, but generally it suits around 10 to 30 students. Within this groups should be kept

small; a minimum of two is required for interaction, and up to five people works well. The more you add to this, the greater the opportunity for non-participation (LAWSON 2000, 642). If the activities are well designed, this format can also support longer sessions of up to three hours.

The advantage of this method is that it is a student-driven approach with greater levels of interactivity than demonstration classes. As discussion takes place primarily with peers, students feel less constrained in what they say, while the teacher is left free to observe the class and take note of how individual students are responding to the activity. The disadvantage of this model is that it is more time-consuming than a demonstration class, and strict time keeping is essential. Not all groups may work at the same pace, and there is the risk that some may get distracted and start to socialize rather than work. If this happens, you need to think whether the activity is too long, too easy, or if the students simply lack the conceptual or practical skills to carry it out, which may affect how much they are able to learn from the experience (GOODHEW 1980, 17).

Another tactic is to give students access to objects for individual or group research projects. This mode of OBL has certain requirements. The teacher must schedule one or more classes in which the projects and methodology can be introduced, and then either a series of follow up sessions in which students are given research time, or flexible access to material outside class hours. It may require greater contact time and hence be more difficult to organize. However it can also offer the greatest rewards in terms of student understanding as there is increased cumulative contact between student and artifact, while students learn crucial research skills.

A holistic strategy for object-based teaching

These models are only some of the ways in which object handling may be presented. Additional class types could include object practicals where individual skills and techniques are explored (experimental archaeology, drawing classes, photography, statistics, conservation), hypothetical exercises where students employ role-play to engage with material, one-off museum or site visits, and longer fieldwork or museum placements. While each method can work independently, in practice a combination of approaches is often key to forming an effective OBL strategy over a wider course or degree. Students can be introduced to object working through using the demonstration mode, testing or honing their ability to observe and make deductions, before moving on to group activities. Practical handling sessions can be combined with research that lets students apply the skills they have begun to develop. Lessons learnt can be reinforced in formal lectures, where visual aids can reflect back upon material the students have handled themselves.

The final step is to embed any OBL sessions into a course by adding some element of assessment to activities, so students can see that their participation will have a tangible outcome. This could be done in a variety of ways, such as by designing essay topics or exam questions around material they have engaged with, or through the use of reflexive logs, activity portfolios and object vivas. And on a wider scale, OBL should be a fully functioning part of a broader curriculum (HOOPER-GREENHILL 1991, 114). At the Institute of Archaeology, this is currently achieved by building in critical OBL elements into core parts of its degrees, such as a mandatory 70 days of fieldwork and involvement in its experimental archaeology field course, as well as integrating various forms of OBL into the many optional modules on offer, with assessment type and design linked to student progression.

Conclusions

A successful OBL session is not an accident. It comes about because the facilitator has:

1. Thought carefully about what the activity is supposed to achieve
2. Considered the logistics involved (CAIN 2005, 3–4).

3. Developed a structure suited to the group and environment
4. Successfully communicated the purpose of the class and methods to be used
5. Is alert to the needs of the students on the day
6. Is mentally prepared to deal with any unexpected factors that may arise
7. Rewards the students for participation so they feel the session has an outcome
8. Embeds the session into the broader course and curriculum

The key to success lies in adequate preparation, informed implementation and subsequent consolidation of the gains made by students. While all of this requires considerable planning and investment of time, the rewards can be considerable. As students become more engaged with their own learning the quality of their work should improve, while classes should become easier to run and more enjoyable to teach.

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