Handling Objects in Primary and Secondary Educational Settings

Facilitating Educational Processes and Challenging Heteronormative Gender Constructs: The Case Study of Mobility of Objects Across Boundaries 1000–1700

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Fig. 1: »The key to the chest that holds all of the secrets. The chest that holds the letters with the plots. The plots with the well thought out plans to overthrow the king. The plans that if they go the slightest bit wrong could end with me guilty of treason. The key that holds the letters with all my secrets, the secrets that could end my life.« Pupil, Padgate Academy, Warrington

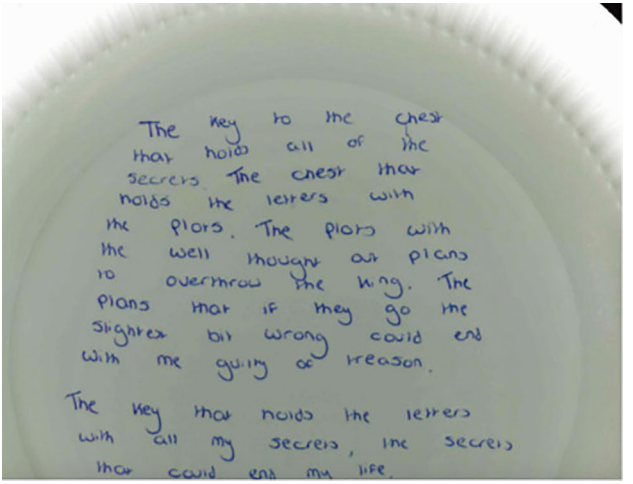

Fig. 2: »I think this is a tile and a stonemen carved it. Stoneman OR Stonelady.« Pupil, Year 5, Oldfield School, Chester

The quotes detailing a key that unlocks the secret plot to overthrow the King, a tile that may have been carved by a man or a woman, and a much-loved broken work shoe are just some of the historical observations made by learners on paper plates from their medieval and early modern object handling sessions in schools across Cheshire, England and Flintshire, North Wales. Using a case study from a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council Funded project, *Mobility of Objects Across Boundaries 1000–1700*, this chapter seeks to investigate the way in which object handling sessions of original Museum objects in classrooms from age 6–16 for c. 400 pupils can engage students with the discipline of History and challenge hegemonic and heteronormative gender constructs in educational settings.[1]

1 This work and article was made possible by the Arts and Humanities Research Council funding of a Network Grant and a grant for Follow on Funding For Impact and Engagement in 2018–2020 and 2021–2022. It involved collaboration between the department of History and Archaeology and Children and Education Services at the University of Chester. Information regarding the project can be found here: https://mob.chester.ac.uk/ [accessed 27 October 2023].

Using Objects in Educational Settings: A History

The object handling work undertaken by the *Mobility of Objects* project draws on a long history of using objects in educational settings and reflects on debates concerning the various ways objects facilitate educational processes. During the Enlightenment, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) conceived of a schoolroom where children held objects in their hands and responded to open-ended questions about objects to actively investigate the material object. An underpinning thesis of Pestalozzi's work was that »observation is the absolute foundation of all knowledge«.[2] Elizabeth Mayo's 1839 book, »Lessons on Objects: Their Origin, Nature and Uses«, advocated that student investigations must be guided by teachers' questions but not shaped by them.[3] As Mayo tellingly states in the opening to her work, »One principal fault, into which Teachers are liable to fall, is that of telling too much to their pupils, who welcome the information with pleasure, but allow their minds to remain almost passive, and acquire the habit of receiving impressions from others, at a time when they ought to be gaining in strength, by an exertion of their own powers«.[4] Following Mayo's model, the questions for each object lesson should be open-ended in nature, pushing students to engage in their own learning about the subject. In her first lesson »Glass« the questions begin from first principles. As she outlines, »Teacher: What is that which I hold in my hand […?] You have all examined this glass; what do you observe? […] What can you say that it is?«[5]

Key to both Pestalozzi's and Mayo's object lessons were sensory experiences for learners. For Pestalozzi, learners must begin from real objects to develop their faculties of mind, perceiving the object with all their senses, seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and even tasting it.[6] In Mayo's model lessons, the lesson started by passing an object around pupils to be examined by each individual. Every lesson then required detailed scrutiny of the object with direc-

2 Bruhlmeier, Arthur: Head, Heart and Hand. Education in the Spirit of Pestalozzi, Cambridge: Sophia Books 2010, p. 14.

3 Mayo, Elizabeth: Lessons on Objects: Their Origin, Nature and Uses: For the Use of Schools and Families, Illustrated with 52 Engravings on Wood, Haswell: Barrington and Haswell 1839.

4 Ibid., p. 21.

5 Ibid.

6 A. Bruhlmeier: Head, Heart and Hand, p. 14–15.

tions from Mayo such as, »Take it in your hand and feel it«.[7] Reflecting on the place of object lessons in nineteenth century American classrooms, Sarah Anne Carter makes the observation that educators came to hope that, »through object lessons, children would learn to derive meaning from the material world and to reason both critically and morally based on this knowledge«.[8] For many during this period, simplistic thinking was viewed as a basis for the failures that led to the American Civil War.[9] Thus, in nineteenth century America, the goal of an object lesson was to teach a child to think for themselves and avoid superficial reasoning. A strong tradition of using objects to facilitate learning also existed in the British Isles during the nineteenth century, but object learning became more prescriptive as the century progressed. Children learned rote »facts« about the objects to recite, parodied by the author Charles Dickens in the work »Hard Times«.[10] In addition to object learning becoming no more than rote learning, contemporary commentators also considered teachers as simply unable to deliver object learning. Peter Knupfer uses the evidence of one critic of the method from 1866 who suggested, »It is too high a kind of instruction […,] it requires more available knowledge, tact and experience than most teachers can command.«[11]

Handling Objects in Educational Settings: Engaging Learners in History

Our 2020 »Teaching History« article began a consideration on the ways that original medieval objects from Museum collections, handled by learners, could create engaging, unique and insightful learning opportunities, grounded in an

7 E. Mayo: Lessons on Objects, p. 23.

8 Carter, Sarah Anne: Object Lessons: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Learned to Make Sense of the Material World, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018, p. 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Leighton, Mary Elizabeth/Surridge, Lisa: »Object lessons: The Victorians and the Material Text/Leçons de choses: les Victoriens et le texte dans sa matérialité«, Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens (2016), https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.2864

11 Knupfer, Peter B.: »Learning to read while reading to learn: Marcius Willson's basal readers, science education and object teaching, 1860–1890«, Paedagogica Historica (2020), p. 1–20, p. 17, https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2020.1864423

evidential and experiential approach to »doing history«.[12] The works of philosophical and developmental psychology by John Dewey in 1899 and then Jean Piaget in 1929 support this importance of learning from experience, emphasizing that learners must reflect on the experience and undertake problem solving to apply new knowledge from actual practice through a process of experimentation.[13] Our knowledge of the significance of the dialogue process intertwined with the haptic handling of the medieval and early modern objects by learners, is already well-established in several pedagogical studies. In 1978 L.S. Vygotsky proposed that the development of higher cognitive activity in children arose through practical activity in a social environment.[14] Shawn Rowe's important work in 2002 on the role of objects in meaning making in museums, formally established how important objects were for pupils in terms of making meanings, meanings co-constructed in a group or other social situations.[15] For Rowe the haptic experiences of using objects were pivotal, aiding investigative, inferential and inclusive learning in learners. Haptic experience was replicated in our classroom practice in England and North Wales, where once the medieval objects were picked up and handled by learners, an open atmosphere of engaged and spontaneous conversation ensued.

In addition, our »Teaching History« article suggested that the use of authentic museum objects in the classroom can have important consequences for the discipline of History. History is a discipline which demands detailed analysis of primary source material, critical thinking and questioning. However, in many UK schools it is perceived by learners as a potentially »difficult« subject, full of »facts« to learn. Terry Haydn's and Richard Harris's work which presented some of the disaffected perspectives of pupils on the subject of History in the UK, revealed that numerous pupils regard it as a subject of knowl-

12 Bird, Michael/Wilson, Katherine Anne/Egan-Simon, Daryn et al.: »Touching, feeling, smelling, and sensing history through objects«, Teaching History 181 (2020), p. 40–48.

13 Dewey, John: Lectures in the Philosophy of Education, 1899; Piaget, Jean: The child's conception of the world, London: Routledge 1929.

14 Vygotsky, Lew S.: Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes, Harvard: Harvard University Press 1978.

15 Rowe, Shawn: »The Role of Objects in Active, Distributed Meaning-Making«, in: Scott G. Paris (ed.), Perspectives on Object-Centred Learning in Museums, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 2002, p. 19–36.

edge transmission.[16] One pupil reflected, »I don't think we need it, yeah it's ok for telling stories but that is it (I think they make us do it to bore us all out of our brains)«.[17] Another surmised that History was primarily a subject, »So that you can know a bit more knowledge you don't use much«.[18] In addition, the pressure of testing and exam results at both primary and secondary levels in the UK has led teachers to question the value of »creative« activities associated with the subject.[19] Thus, we were well aware when starting to use objects in the classroom without contextual knowledge, that some pupils tend to expect or seek to offer »right answers« or »pre-processed responses« drawing from knowledge they have previously internalized.[20] However, our work using authentic historical objects in classrooms presented a further issue for investigation. Was it also possible that the use of objects, particularly objects without known historical narratives, might challenge heteronormative gender constructs for pupils?

Handling Objects in Educational Settings: Construction and Gender Experiences

A significant body of work exists investigating the construction and experiences of gender, especially in the primary or pre-school classroom. Research exploring objects in relation to gender in classroom settings, has tended to focus on the ways that the material environment of the classroom constructs gender, and the ways in which this by turn establishes problematic heteronormative gender constructs or entrenches gender inequalities.[21] Carol Taylor's consideration of objects, bodies and space in the classroom reminds

16 Haydn, Terry/Harris, Richards: »Pupil Perspectives on the Purposes and Benefits of Studying History in High School: A View from the UK«, Journal of Curriculum Studies 42 (2010) 2, p. 241–261, https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270903403189

17 Ibid., p. 250.

18 Ibid.

19 Hosack Janes, Karen: »Objects of curiosity: How old master paintings have been used in the primary classroom to provide pupils with cognitive challenge and creative agency«, Thinking Skills and Creativity 41 (2021), p. 1–11, p. 2, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2021.100861

20 M. Bird/K.A. Wilson/D. Egan-Simon et al.: Touching, feeling, smelling, and sensing history, p. 42.

21 Martin, Adrian D.: »The Agentic Capacities of Mundane Objects for Educational Equity: Narratives of Material Engagements in a Culturally Diverse Urban Classroom«, Educa-

us how even the, »mundane materialities of classrooms do crucial but often unnoticed performative work in enacting gender power«.[22] The effect of objects in establishing or reinforcing this entrenched gender power should not be underestimated. Jennifer Lyttleton-Smith points out that the heteronormativity of education for all learners, »has been located as a damaging phenomenon through the rigidity of identities it supports«.[23] To emphasise just what an important issue this should be to all educators, Lyttleton-Smith asserts how hegemony of heteronormative masculine and feminine identities in educational practice leads to »non-normative experiences, feelings and performances being ignored, invalidated by a lack of recognition, or actively discriminated against«.[24] Given the critical need to break down and challenge hegemonic heteronormative gender constructs in all education settings, is it possible that handling authentic museum objects, particularly everyday objects without known historical narratives, might help to break down or challenge heteronormative constructs and provide a space of non-normative gender for learners?

The Mobility of Objects Across Boundaries 1000–1700: Case Study

To investigate these issues this chapter will use a case study undertaken as part of a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded network and follow-on funding for impact and engagement called *Mobility of Objects Across Boundaries 1000–1700 (MOB)*. From 2018 to 2022 the project visited 6 schools in Cheshire, England and Flintshire in North Wales to undertake object handling workshops for over 400 pupils aged 6–16.[25] Our project identified the need to create sustainable handling experiences of Museum objects for schools at both

tional Research for Social Change 8 (2019), p. 86–100, https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2018/v8i1a6

22 Taylor, Carol A.: »Objects, Bodies and Space: Gender and Embodied Practices of Mattering in the Classroom«, Gender and Education 25 (2013), p. 688–703, p. 688, https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2013.834864

23 Lyttleton-Smith, Jennifer: »Objects of conflict: (re) configuring early childhood experiences of gender in the preschool classroom«, Gender and Education (2017), p. 655–672, p. 656, https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2017.1332343

24 Ibid., p. 658.

25 https://mob.chester.ac.uk/ and https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FR00546X%2F1 [both accessed 27 October 2023].

primary and secondary levels, vital to the delivery of the English KS1–4 and GSCE History strands. This need was further informed by educational reports during the lifecycle of the research project which clearly demonstrated that despite the proven need for activities such as Museum visits to help narrow the disadvantage gap, UK schools were experiencing difficulties in funding enrichment experiences for their pupils.[26]

The objects were specifically selected from the collections of the Grosvenor Museum in Chester. The Grosvenor Museum has an internationally significant, if often overlooked, collection of medieval and early modern materials drawn from significant finds taken from the city of Chester and its surrounding areas.[27] In the period 1000–1700, Chester was the largest port in North West England, attracting international merchants, shipping and objects from across Europe and beyond European boundaries.[28] The city was a hub for pilgrimage and learning through its significant religious sites at St Werburghs (later Chester Cathedral) and St John's.[29] The Mobility of Objects project sought to use everyday objects from the Museum's collections, and specifically targeted objects that did not have known historical narratives, identifiable owners and included objects that were fragmentary in nature.[30] It used five types of objects (keys, chests, shoes, tiles, ceramics), pottery, pilgrim badges and devotional tokens. The department of History and Archaeology in collaboration with the department of Children and Education Services at the University of Chester, asked PGCE History trainee teachers to develop a lesson plan to deliver the handling workshops to pupils for approximately an hour. The trainee teachers and the leaders of the project were keen to establish workshops that allowed learners enough time to handle the objects and to engage in teacher to pupil and pupil

26 Dickens, Sarah: School trips and uniform costs hitting poorest pupils, BBC News, March 2019.

27 https://grosvenormuseum.westcheshiremuseums.co.uk/ [accessed 27 October 2023]; Griffiths, David W./Philpott, Robert A./Egan, Geoff: Meols: The Archaeology of the North Wirral Coast: Discoveries and Observations in the 19th and 20th Centuries, with a Catalogue of Collections, Oxford: Oxford School of Archaeology 2007.

28 Laughton, Jane: Life in a late medieval city: Chester 1275–1520, Oxford: Windgather Press 2008.

29 »Later medieval Chester 1230–1550: Religion, 1230–1550«, in: C.P. Lewis/A.T. Thacker (eds.), A History of the County of Chester: Volume 5, Part 1, The City of Chester: General History and Topography, London 2003, p. 80–89, British History Online, http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/ches/vol5/pt1/pp80-89 [accessed 27 October 2023].

30 https://mob.chester.ac.uk/ [accessed 27 October 2023].

to pupil dialogue on the objects using basic questions. The handling and conversations about the objects then acted as a scaffold to the concluding activity. Here, learners were asked to select an object with which they had made a connection, then to think about if the object was speaking, or who had owned or made the object, or where it had traveled or been used. Learners then produced a short piece of creative writing on the object.

Shawn Rowe notes how, »the museum object or text is also a ›thinking device‹, a cultural tool for generating meaning«.[31] But objects are even more important to the discipline of History in another way. As Serena Dyer advocates, »[…] objects are more than witnesses to history, they are autonomous agents in the creation of that history«.[32] In this way, original museum artifacts are essential tools for teachers and learners of the discipline of History. However, we would advise that it is also important that object lessons include handling, observation and discussions of the objects using questions from first principles, without provision of prior contextual knowledge to spark and develop the comprehension of learners. Thus, our object handling questions were purposely designed to force learners and educators to engage with the objects through haptic, visual and material means, before moving to engage learners with questions regarding possible uses and owners of the objects. The handling questions included: What colours/designs/pictures can you see? What does it feel like? What do you think it was made of? What do you think this is? How do you think it was used? Do you think it moved or traveled? Who do you think it belonged to? The 40 minutes or so given to the handling and discussion of the objects, both learner to learner and teacher to learner, allowed different forms of historical knowledge to arise and be discussed, relating to the material and visual forms of the objects, their manufacture, the people who may have owned them, their transformations and movements over time and places and their completeness and incompleteness as historical sources. The creative work subsequently produced by the learners on one of the objects they had connected with was a product of their haptic experiences and dialogues they had experienced during the object handling session. Space given in the classroom to dialogue while handling was crucial. As Sophie Woodward reveals, »How people talk about things is a way to create and extend meaningful relationships

31 S. Rowe: The Role of Objects, p. 28.

32 Dyer, Serena: »State of the Field: Material Culture«, History 106 (2021), p. 282–292, p. 285, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-229X.13104

towards things – as language can then ›define‹ and ›recast‹ material culture«.[33] For Robin Alexander, »talk matters« in the classroom and dialogic teaching is good for students and teachers and is more than just, »classroom talk«.[34] As Alexander reflects, dialogic teaching »[…] makes the processes in which they are jointly engaged more visible […] explicitly valuing evidence and mutuality above supposition and gamesmanship«.[35]

Two key educational processes related to pupil development in the discipline of History emerged in our object handling work. The first relates to connecting and developing historical knowledge for learners, the second in allowing pupils to develop their historical inferences through creative work driven by the objects. Our methodological analysis for this chapter of the c. 300 creative works produced by pupils ages 6–16 in Oldfield School, Padgate Academy Warrington and Bishop's School, Chester in object handling sessions is purposely qualitative in nature, seeking to draw out key themes addressed by the pupils in terms of historical issues and in relation to gendered constructs. Thus, our work in this chapter is not intended as a definitive conclusion, but rather as a starting point for researchers to continue to investigate the potential of authentic object handling sessions in classrooms relating to the facilitation of educational processes for the subject of History and in challenging heteronormative gender constructs.

Handling Objects in Educational Settings: Status and Power

Many of the students in the Year 7–9 groups from Padgate Academy, Warrington, used the non-elite historical objects to reflect on their contextual knowledge of status and power relations during the medieval period, particularly situating the objects with peasant, working class or impoverished individuals in the period. We see learners using material culture as »evidence of past lived ex-

33 Woodward, Sophie: »Object interviews, material imaginings and ›unsettling‹ methods: interdisciplinary approaches to understanding materials and material culture«, Qualitative Research 16 (2016), p. 359–374, p. 362, https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794115589647

34 Alexander, Robin: A Dialogic Teaching Companion, Oxon: Routledge 2020, p. 1, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351040143-1

35 Ibid., p. 1–3.

periences«.[36] One creative work describes, »The Freeman is working, on a hot summer's day, the merchants are lurking, trying to earn their pay. The King was wearing a pin. It was like a sword. The badge took away his sin. It was from the Lord.« Here we are neatly presented with the learner's application of their knowledge of some of the key social groups from the medieval period. Social groups were also brought to the fore in the work of one Year 9 learner. They used a medieval key to suggest that, »this key would have been of great importance to someone in the employment of the Lord of Frodsham«.

Other plates considered the conditions or the stories of working individuals from their handling of the objects. One learner wrote, »I am a working class man and this ring belongs to me. It is my wedding ring which has been passed down through generations. I wear it everyday as a symbol of my marriage, but I also like wearing it because it suggests I have quite a bit of money.« Another pupil from the same year group reflects on the story of a shoe relating to an individual named Harry. The narrative on the plate relates, »Harry was a working class man who worked as a labourer at the iron works. He worked hard to support his family, but poverty meant he could only afford one pair of shoes for all occasions. When they eventually broke, his wife stitched them up, he had too much pride to go out in broken shoes.« For others the handling of a key prompted sobering reflections of impoverished lives. One learner described, »This key belonged to a mother of five children, she tried to look after them on her own and her husband had died during war. They were a very poor family and she didn't work and the family was relying on the older son who worked everyday to at least be able to buy some food once a week. The key was a key to a old left behind house which had a hidden room where her husband left some money for his family so that they can use it when they have financial problems.«

Interestingly, younger learners from Year 3–6 in Oldfield Primary, Chester were also prompted to reflect on status from their handling and discussion of the objects, frequently ascribing the ownership or use of the objects to »rich« or »poor« people in the past. One Year 6 plate labeled its drawing of the fourteenth century St Peter's spoon from Rome, with the inscription, »I think this is a teaspoon which belonged to someone very important and wealthy«. Another Year 6 learner's suggestion from handling a key was that, »The key is very rusty and it probably belonged to someone who was rich enough to have his/her house

36 Gaskell, Ivan/Carter, Sarah Anne: The Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199341764.001.0001

locked up. It could have also belonged to a King.« The plates of several Year 3 pupils were also inspired by the medieval keys. One learner had chosen to illustrate a stick figure with the identification »rich person« holding a »gold key« to open a door to a »soldier graveyard« while another learner from the same year wrote beside their drawing of a key, »Castle Door Key. To a bedroom for a visiting king.«

Many learners used their handling and discussion of a range of medieval keys to reflect on asymmetrical power relations in the Middle Ages, particularly the relationship between elites and individuals further down the social scale. One Year 7 learner chose to imagine themselves writing a memoir, noting, »Dear Diary, I finally got the position of a jail guard. The king himself trusted me with the jail key. I have a very dangerous criminal in the cell and I have to make sure no-one goes in or out of the cell.« However, in this learner's reflection the jailor has only acquired their jailor status through possession of the key and thus danger still lurks in their newly acquired position. The learner adds ominously, »The key is very heavy and when I finish my night it will be given to the other guard. The guard before me got executed for helping a criminal escape.« Allusions to asymmetrical power relations from the handling and discussion of the medieval objects was also present in a plate of a Year 4 learner. They chose to write beside their drawing of a key, »This key used to be shiny. Maybe it could be for a cell in a castle.« For another Year 5 learner, inequalities in the past were again brought to the fore by the medieval keys, observing, »I think the key was a key that might of opened maybe a [an] old dungeon which kept slaves or prisoners in«.

Handling Objects in Educational Settings: Mobility of Objects

In other plates we see learners drawing on their historical context and knowledge regarding the movement of objects for spiritual journeys and the personal meaning these objects held for their owners. In one Year 8 learners' beautifully written circular reflection, we are presented with the journey of a pilgrim badge. This plate recounts, »The pilgrim's badge belonged to a religious man called Edward Beckett. He went on a pilgrim[age] around the world to very religious places that he could afford to travel to. He went on pilgrim[ages] to symbolize how much he believed in God and he wore this badge everywhere with him. He had it on a necklace with a leather strap and the writing symbolises his belief in God. On the journey he met many people who had similar

badges however his was very unique because of the writing. When he got to the end of his journey he threw his badge into the sea for it to be kept forever.« In other works by learners we see both the knowledge of, and the reflection on, medieval spiritual journeys to effect alleviation from pain and suffering. One plate presents the hope that travels to obtain a gourd full of holy water will effect a miracle from the pestilence. The plate recounts, »For many miles I have travelled to obtain a gourd for Saint Thomas Beckett's holy water to cure my only son. He has been struck down with the fever and may soon perish, but with the intervention of the Martyred Archbishop of Canterbury, hopefully, he will be saved!« Alongside the intricate drawing of a medieval pilgrim brooch, one Year 5 pupil posited that, »I think this is a badge that shoun [showed] people that they traveled to a holy place«.

What is evident from the work of the learners above is the value that creative work can have for the discipline of History in terms of developing historical connections and inferences. As Karen Hosack Janes makes clear, while it is acknowledged by many educators how valuable it is to give learners the freedom to explore and experiment with ideas, *how* this is undertaken in educational settings is »not universally accepted or clearly understood«.[37] In fact, one study that considered teachers' perceptions of creativity, »found that behaviors such as ›taking chances‹ or ›being impulsive‹ and ›autonomous‹ were thought by some teachers to be ›undesirable‹«.[38] Interestingly, creative work was considered by many teachers to be entirely separate from »project based activities«, »research«, »enquiry based activities« and »challenge based activities«.[39] When the *Mobility of Objects* project held a teacher workshop to design the sustainable teaching resources for the Object Boxes of Museum artifacts to be loaned to schools in 2021, we found a similar perception existed regarding the creative paper plate work after the handling and discussion session for some of the secondary teachers, a perception that interestingly was not present for the primary teachers in attendance. However, beginning from first principles, from primary evidence, is *fundamental* to the discipline of History and is exactly what established historians do from a variety of evidence types. As Laurel Thatcher Ulrich makes clear, »When used as primary sources, artifacts can transform, rather than merely illustrate our understanding of broad his-

37 K. Hosack Janes: Objects of Curiosity, p. 1.

38 Ibid., p. 2.

39 Ibid.

torical processes«.[40] Other professional historians also advocate for a return to first principles when using objects in historical work. Ivan Gaskell and Sarah Anne Carter emphasise, »[…] the successful use of material culture in history depends on testing such sources-material things of many kinds – not as illustrations to picture already developed arguments about the past – but as key evidence«.[41] Objects as History has important consequences for the discipline in the future, opening up global connections and de-centering national narratives if we simply give, »[…] the force of things more due«.[42] Thus, asking school learners to closely investigate original historical artifacts from first principles and produce creative work on an object they established a connection with, in the manner the *Mobility of Objects* project has sought, establishes for learners the fundamental research tools of the History discipline.

Handling Objects in Educational Settings: Challenging Gender Constructs

Serena Dyer reveals a further strength of using material culture for the discipline of History lies in, »its ability to look beyond the restrictions imposed by the white, patriarchal and class based systems which have shaped written sources«.[43] Indeed, the strength of material culture to challenge these constructs lies in the fact that there is no single way of engaging with material culture, and that objects can be used to construct multiple meanings and constructs.[44] Handling sessions with authentic museum objects for learners may provide crucial places in education settings to challenge hegemonic heteronormative gender constructs in learners, which become especially ingrained as learners grow older. In the work undertaken by the learners from Year 3 to Year 9 we see plenty of evidence of hegemonic heteronormative gender constructs which reinforces Jennifer Lyttleton-Smith's and Carol Taylor's points of how

40 Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher: »Objects in the Classroom«, Magazine of History 17 (2003), p. 57–59, p. 58, https://doi.org/10.1093/maghis/17.4.57

41 I. Gaskell/S.A. Carter: The Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture, p. 3.

42 Bennett, Jane: Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things, Durham (NC): Duke University Press 2010, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv111jh6w

43 S. Dyer: State of the Field, p. 287.

44 Richardson, Catherine/Hamling, Tara/Gaimster, David R.M.: The Routledge handbook of material culture in early modern Europe, Oxon: Routledge 2016, p. 4, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315613161

quickly they become fixed for learners, objects and spaces in educational settings.

For example in some of the learner's plates, we see the gendered assumption that men in the medieval past would work to support women and that women were unable to support themselves, despite plenty of evidence from the medieval period of working women in all social groups across Western Europe.[45] If we return to the Year 9 learner's plate which tells the story of Harry, »[…] a working class man who worked as a labourer at the iron works. He worked hard to support his family, but poverty meant he could only afford one pair of shoes for all occasions. When they eventually broke, his wife stitched them up, he had too much pride to go out in broken shoes.« In this narrative, we observe that Harry's wife remains unnamed, assigned to the role of the repair of Harry's shoes. The patriarchal role of familial provider reoccurs in another Year 9 plate which notes, »He owned this shoe for most of his life working, walking on that shoe all day. He walked in fields and the town. The man who owned this shoe was a tall man who was very bulky/stocky and had a family to look after […].« The gendered construct that women stayed at home while men were »active« emerges in one Year 8's creative observation regarding the manufacture of a medieval tile. The learner asserts, »I think the tile was used to decorate a church/important building because of mainly the patterns and it's clear that someone took time so it was probably for an important building. I think it was made out of brick with some sort of like polish or maybe lead for the indents because it has the look of a really pressed down pencil. I think probably a man made it because they used to do more brickwork and women would make clothing and were generally stay at home mums […].«

In other plates, the makers of the objects are assigned to male, rather than female individuals, especially where there is an imagined blacksmith. One plate observes, »The blacksmith's key was no ordinary key, he found the key in Royal gardens where he was doing some work on a king's sword«. In addition,

45 Goldberg, P.J.P.: Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992; Bennett, Judith M.: Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World 1300–1600, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999; Howell, Martha C.: Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990; Wilson, Katherine A.: »Women Suppliers of Medieval Courts: Materially Constructing Social Relations« (forthcoming).

when the learners imagine a wealthy or rich individual as the owner of the object, the owner is most commonly ascribed to a male, rather than a female figure. As several learners note when reflecting on the medieval keys, »[…] not any average person would have a key but a rich man would have this to unlock a safe under-ground in the dungeon« and, »This key was used to open a box full of jewelry and gold. It was used by a wealthy man and he kept his gold box in Chester castle and only he knew where it was.« A further reflection on the handling and discussion of a coin observes, »The wealthy man, beaming, held up his new silver coin, wondering what to spend it on […]«. Only a very few of the plates consider women as wealthy during the medieval period based on their handling and discussion of the objects. One exception to this gendered assumption arises in the plate of a Year 4 learner who has drawn the figure of a woman holding a key to open the chest. Inscribed beside the picture is, »This is a rich person opening a chest with all her goods in the chest […]«.

However, importantly the majority of the creative writings on the objects by learners demonstrate little evidence of gender constructs. The use of the pronouns »he« and »she« are often absent when pupils connected an object to an individual, instead the use of »I« dominates the reflective work on the plates. Several of these works were related to the pilgrim and devotional tokens handled and discussed by the learners. One Year 9 learner noted, »We have all been given our badges today, mine is small yet detailed and will remind me of my purpose throughout my long journey. I have pinned it to my sleeve so I can always see it.« Another reflection recounted, »After travelling for weeks, I finally reached Walsingham, the sight of the church. As I pinned my new pilgrim badge I felt pride and happiness. It was extremely shiny with small intricate writing that said ›Jesus of Nazareth‹. All the walking was worth it. When I got home people stared at it with jealousy. I had a deep fear of losing it as it was so precious and meaningful.«

Learners also chose to use the term »someone« rather than gendered pronouns in their creative work undertaken after the handling and discussion of the objects. One Year 10 learner, considering the pilgrim spoon from St Peter's Cathedral in Rome, reflected on the manufacturer and owner of the object, and did so in this gender-neutral way. This learner posits, »The person who created this, is very dedicated and must have been a specialist in making detailed pieces of work, the spoon must have belonged to someone important as this could have been expensive. It's in good quality considering they are 800–900 years old. It's an unusual design […].« Another learner in Year 4 also chose to use this term, drawing a gender-neutral figure making a pot with the inscription be-

low the image of, »This picture is of someone making a pot out of clay«. Other learners used the name of the object and the term »someone« rather than a gendered pronoun to drive their creative work. One Year 8 learner noted, »The key is rusty. The key is old. The key is important to someone. The key must be used to open a chest or a box. It must have been to hold something important to someone.« For another Year 3 learner writing on the medieval shoes and reflecting on the individual who manufactured them it was simply enough to say, »I think these shoes belong to a shoe maker«. For many of the younger learners, their objective was to label the space they felt was connected with the objects they chose to write about or illustrate. One Year 3 learner wrote »old key to open castle« another labeled, »The key of the old castle, this key is for the castle of Chester«. In others, the materials and haptic properties of the objects came to the fore. A Year 4 plate observed of a medieval tile, »feels heavy, sandstone, part of a picture of a gravestone, rich family owner«. Another plate from the same year group also focused on the material properties of a key, noting, »rusty, scratch marks, ust [used] to be red, unknown mechanism, sticky«.

For other learners who had handled and discussed the objects, the story of the object dominates in their written narrative without gender constructions. One Year 6 learner describes, »The broken, old key which unlocked a precious oak chest, was stored far, far away in an unknown place«. In addition, when gender is present in the work of the learners, the story of the object still tends to take precedence in the narrative. A Year 9 learner's story is titled »Concealment« and told from the key's perspective. It relates, »It's dark in here. Quiet. I don't get to leave this drawer much anymore. I remember a world of light and heat. Being shaped by rough and clumsy hands. The responsibility of the smith's apprentice. He stretched the metal a little too much. That was ok. It's a world of beauty and flaws out there. Not since I crossed hands, found what I was actually for. Concealing perfectly shaped parchment for stranger's eyes. Hiding the key to a lock to the true secret. The nervous traits of a small nervous man. Moving from the dark wood of the drawer to the dark leather of a pouch for a short while. Opening. Locking. Back to the drawer. I miss the heat.« Another plate from a Year 4 learner also suggests to us that the handling and discourse around the objects may have occasionally prompted learners to rethink their gendered assumptions. In this plate we have a detailed drawing of the medieval lion tile. The note from the learner states, »I think this is a tile and a stoneman carved it«. Then below this note we find a picture of two individuals with the label on the first, »stoneman« the word »OR« »stonelady«.

Conclusion

Why was it that pupils tended to avoid the use of gendered pronouns when they were asked to select an object they had connected with and produce a drawing of the persons, processes or life of the object? The questions from first principles that drove the handling and discursive sessions with the objects were purposely gender neutral, thus helping to create spaces where hegemonic heteronormative gender constructs were not automatically foregrounded. These questions forced learners to engage first with the basic material properties of the objects, what they could touch, see and smell, before they were then able to move on to consider the broader historical contexts for the objects. The creative work undertaken and produced by the learners from Years 3–10 was also underpinned by critical historical questioning and purposeful and cumulative dialogic interactions.

Therefore, the importance of using original museum objects in classrooms cannot be underestimated. Museum objects in classrooms, from whatever period, can provide innovations in educational processes for learners and educators in the discipline of History and spaces to break down or challenge hegemonic heteronormative gender constructs. The experience of bringing in authentic museum objects for learners to handle and work on positions children as social agents and meaning makers in the classroom. Learners themselves become co-constructors of historical knowledge along with their teachers, which can help turn the discipline of History away from any perception of simply being a subject of knowledge transfer and learning of facts.[46] As Timothy Carroll, Antonia Walford and Shireen Wallon posit, »[…] objects have biographies, but they can also produce futures […]«, and using authentic historical objects in the classroom can ensure that History as a subject in schools and thus as a discipline, has a long, innovative and inclusive future.[47]

46 Khoja, Nazeeha: »Situating Children's Voices: Considering the Context When Conducting Research with Young Children«, Children and Society 30, p. 314–323, https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12143

47 Carroll, Timothy/Walford, Antonia/Walton, Shireen (eds.): Lineages and Advancements in Material Culture Studies, Oxon: Routledge 2021, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003085867