

Turning the Pandemic Upside Down: Development of Object Based Learning Professional Development

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Abstract

This article is a reflection and narrative of three history teachers, one from Massachusetts, one from Long Island, New York, and another from Nebraska, who decided to continue a relationship that they had formed in the summer of 2019. During the upheaval and shift from in person learning to remote learning in the Spring and Summer 2020 caused by the Covid-19, the three of us decided to turn this pandemic into an opportunity to expand our own teaching practices and create additional resources to allow other teachers to incorporate object-based learning into their classrooms. The following article will examine the process of how three teachers from different parts of the country formed a bond around object based learning and began developing professional development programs and resources for their fellow teachers.

Object Based Learning

As object based learning is not a pedagogy that is covered extensively in teacher preparation programs, it is critical to define this teaching style. Object based learning is a student-centered learning approach that uses objects to facilitate deep learning and thinking. Object learning teaches students how to think, not what to remember. Objects may take many forms, small or large, but the method typically involves students handling or working in close quarters with and interrogating physical artifacts. The objects can be brought into the learning environment for small group instruction or large group lectures. In this way, the use of objects can act as multi-sensory “thinking tools” to promote learning and engagement (Romanek & Lynch, 2008). This style of learning was pioneered by Swiss educational reformer Heinrich Pestalozzi in the early 19th century and continued through Pestalozzi’s disciples into the 20th century (Carter, 2018). The approach faded away as new technology, rote memorization, and passive learning replaced critical deep thinking and a student centered approach to learning. (Carter, 2018) Fortunately for educators, the 21st century learning demands a focus on higher order thinking and is student centered, which provides students the opportunity to think and learn. Object based learning is the perfect approach to facilitate that type of learning in the 21st century.

Background: Meeting in France

In terms of our ‘journey’ toward object based learning, we are all in different places and have different experiences. Brian Sheehy is the History Department Coordinator at North Andover High School and the mastermind behind his high school’s History Learning Lab. Through various grants, fellowships, and other funding, he has purchased thousands of objects and is truly a high-level innovator in this approach. Brian has developed partnerships with local museums, libraries, and historical societies and is bridging the gap between these historical sites and the classroom. Many of the objects that he secures have global implications and connections throughout multiple curriculums. Some of these items include his collection of WWI uniforms and medals, WWII letters and postcards, vintage cameras, and so much more. Classes across several disciplines have utilized these objects for their courses. These objects are used to develop thinking skills and enhance what the teachers are already doing in their classrooms. Brian has bridged the gap between schools and museums and archives. Through student aides and an afterschool History Club, students can also learn preservation techniques, cataloguing, exhibit design, and engage in authentic research with primary resources. His overall goal is to develop a love and passion in his students for history. Not every teacher, however, will be able to afford or create their own History Lab, but there are other ways to utilize the power of object based learning.

John Heeg is an 8th grade social studies teacher at Deer Park Long Island, NY and we initially despaired whether a Yankee and Red Sock could ever coexist. Despite their rivalry in the bleachers of Fenway Park and Yankee Stadium, John, like Brian, shares a proclivity toward object based learning. He does not possess a fully stocked History Lab, but he has been increasing his object collection since 2016 when he was exposed to the idea at the National World War I Museum where he met with museum curator Doran Cart. While serving as a fellow at the World War I Museum, he created a lesson on using objects entitled “Thinking Like a Historian” that would be featured in the educator’s section of their website. Heeg has acquired his collection with generous donors and what his limited budget allows him to purchase on ebay and antique stores. John’s teaching demonstrates that even a small object collection can have a large effect on student learning and engagement.

Finally, Michael Sandstrom is a teacher at Chadron High School in western Nebraska. Aside from his geographic distance from John and Brian, Michael is also more of a novice in terms of object based learning. Early Americans believed that the Great Plains were a ‘Great American Desert,’ which ended up proving false. However, finding school funding for objects has proven drier than the Mojave Desert in this rural location. Yet, Michael has found a way through images, videos of objects, and visits to local museums to incorporate many of the same principles of object based learning without the cost associated with securing these items. From our experience, object based learning does not need to look the same in every classroom nor does it have to be a teacher’s exclusive focus, students will benefit from the engagement offered by this pedagogical approach as it asks them to think, question, and develop conclusions on their own.

In the summer of 2019, the three of us met in France during National History Day's *Memorializing the Fallen* program and commenced a lasting friendship. The purpose behind *Memorializing the Fallen* was to research local veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice during WWI and provide a eulogy at their gravesites in Belgium and France. Throughout our twelve-day journey, we visited all of America's World War 1 cemeteries and countless other sites from the Great War. A few of the highlights included traversing through German trenches, investigating underground caves at Chemin des Dames (Road of the Ladies) that witnessed fighting between French and German forces, and visiting the Verdun battlefield and museum. We all understood the importance of 'walking the ground' and experiencing what actors in history experienced to the highest degree possible. As National History Day guided us through the French countryside, the three of us occupied the back of the bus, shared a few laughs, and bonded over our common interests in history. We all saw the value and power in seeing and experiencing topics that we teach in our classes. However, what has brought us back together, during the Covid-19 pandemic, was our shared belief, as educators, in object based learning.

In France, each of us expressed our belief in the importance of revitalizing history education and helping it to evolve in the face of our twenty-first century world. In the context of Covid-19, and ever-evolving technologies like Zoom, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and other platforms, many administrators and legislators are placing their bets on technology and the internet as the future of education. Yet, ask any history teacher, especially after our first national "trail-by-fire" with these interactive technologies, and, in our estimation, most would argue that students are craving something more tangible than devices and screen time. As such, we are proposing a much older, but refreshingly novel, approach to teaching history, object based learning. Object based learning, the careful study of objects to promote historical thinking skills and engagement, is a pedagogical style that can be adapted to any classroom. We also believe that it has the potential to change the way that history is taught in K-12 schools, but that is not where this article begins, it is where it ends.

The Case for Object Based Learning: Bringing History To Life

In order to explain our passion for object based learning, we will need to return to our common experiences in France and Belgium. As we stated above, walking past row after row of the headstones of fallen American servicemen was an extremely powerful experience. In addition, "meeting" the soldier from our hometowns who made the ultimate sacrifice was both powerful and rewarding, but National History Day's program also allowed for experiences that were irreplaceable. First, walking inside a German trench and imagining this common experience shared by millions of soldiers on the Western Front was transformative for our teaching practices. Similarly, we stood in shell craters at the former battlefield at Verdun and watched the craters continue for as far as the eye could see. Trees and grass eventually returned to Verdun, but they cannot cover the carnage that occurred over a century ago. The power of standing in those craters and being prevented from entering areas of France due to the potential

danger from unexploded ordinances, were a visceral reminder of the Great War and its legacy. Those experiences are priceless to us, but we cannot provide these to all of our students without incurring an astronomical expense. That is where object based learning comes in.

If you cannot walk in a trench, the next best alternative might be to wear a French helmet, don a German uniform, or handle a soldier's mess kit. The student can still experience a small part of a historical figure's life and become an active participant in studying their lives. As Enlightenment thinker John Locke stated in his work *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* all ideas come from sensation of reflection, from one's actual experience of the external, physical, material world or from consideration of the internal workings of the mind. Locke felt that sensory input was necessary for the learning to become more tangible. When students can touch, pick up, or manipulate an object they are more apt to understand and appreciate that object and how that object fits into the context of the time period. (Locke, 1979)

The benefit of object based learning does not stop with war-related items; instead, objects help students empathize with the basic human experience before technology streamlined our daily lives. For example, what might help a student appreciate their families' relatively easy access to clothing than to clean and separate wool, by hand, and operate a loom? Modern students, living in a mechanized and technology-driven world, cannot fully appreciate an experience that would have been commonplace to New Englanders only two centuries ago. Operating, or attempting to operate a telegraph, might make students more appreciative of their smartphones. Rotary dials are even becoming a relic to our twenty-first century clientele. When thinking about historical thinking skills, looking at how objects changed over time can be a great activity to get students to understand and see changes. The point is that teachers are only limited by their access to certain objects and their imagination because the purpose of object based learning is not to dictate what students think about an object, but to get them thinking in the first place. In our view, engagement comes first and that engagement will facilitate great conversations, which will allow the educator to guide student learning.

Covid- 19 Brings Us Back Together

As Covid-19 impacted our classrooms and forced teachers around the country to retreat into remote learning, we decided to get together on a Zoom meeting. We wanted to continue to work together on a project and saw a possible opportunity in making videos modeling the inquiry-based approach and provide a history of object based learning. In the spirit of remote learning, we met on Zoom and, in each episode, we took an object or series of objects and modeled how teachers might use these objects in their classrooms. We covered objects ranging from a French helmet from World War 1 to a pair of wool carders to a cobbler's iron. In each episode, we used a line of questioning meant to foster student thinking on the object's purpose and how it might fit into the larger themes covered in class. We asked questions about what the object was made of, how heavy it was, if it had markings, etc. The goal being to model a slow looking approach that truly examines all aspects of the object. These are many of the thinking

skills and activities promoted in Harvard's Project Zero program (Tishman, 2017). Finally, we discussed how teachers might incorporate each object into their courses from our various specialties and perspectives. All three of us were surprised at how much we learned from each other bouncing ideas off of one another. We recorded these Zoom sessions and uploaded them to YouTube so that other teachers could access and utilize these videos. This is an example of good professional learning happening organically. We created this content in a time when none of us were doing much professional development. So this provided us with a great way to improve our teaching practice and, in turn, we also shared the great discussions we had during this process. Creating these videos provided an avenue for us to share our mini-professional development sessions with a much larger audience.

Pandemic Creates Concerns for the Future of Object Based Learning

One of the most perplexing issues with object based learning, however, in the context of Covid-19, is how to handle the concern about 'handling' objects. One of the key tenets of object based learning is the experience of holding, wearing, or using an object. Yet, in our current environment, that is not safe. Therefore, we are moving toward a temporary reliance on 3D imagery and video to allow students some of the benefit without exposing them to potentially dangerous consequences. As such, Brian and his History Learning Lab will be investing in a 3D camera that will allow his students and other audiences to examine these historical objects. One of the goals of his lab is to develop a love and appreciation for history. Many museums and historical societies are also moving more and more of their collections online so this is also an opportunity for students to gain real live experience of what people are doing in the museum field. We hope that life will eventually return to a situation where people do not have to fear touching common surfaces, but we need to be ready to meet this new environment. The line of inquiry and thinking can still remain the same even with the object being online.

Our Optimistic Take on the Future of Object Based Learning

In the upcoming years, we will continue to share our vision for the importance of object based learning in classrooms and for the promotion of professional development. One of the great things to come out of this was a dialogue that we commenced with museums and local historical societies on creating opportunities for teachers. While our conversations with these organizations are in their beginning stages, we have had the opportunity to demonstrate how meaningful professional development can take place in these uncertain times on a virtual platform and beyond. Museums and historical societies can be excellent partners for teachers as they attempt to navigate through this new pedagogical technique. We also hope that colleges and universities will agree that this approach is worth implementing, at some level, in their pre-service training. We are firm believers in the usefulness of object based learning and hope to team up with more teachers and organizations to help bring teacher training to more educators across the country.

Few educational reformers would deny the need to revitalize and improve history education, especially at the pre-service level. In fact, there are prodigious efforts being made at this point from organizations like Stanford History Education Group, National History Day, Gilder Lehrman Institute, and many others, but we believe that an emphasis needs to be placed on student engagement and enrichment. In our technological world, the digitization of education is inevitable; yet, we hope to return history to its base components, documents and objects. Much like an ignored younger sibling, object based learning may not be the answer for every student but it can be a great way to bridge the gap between students of all ages and ability levels. Every object based lesson may not be the answer for every student, every time, but we are attempting to diversify the toolbox for educators across the country. After all, what else could bring together a Red Sox, a Yankee, and a Cornhusker, but a common desire to improve the profession that we love. Our diversity is our strength and we believe that object based learning can be the wave of the future (and the past) in history education.

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