

What we've learned about learning from objects

Practical tips on using museum collections for learning

If you're displaying collections of objects...

Visitors respond well to beautiful, valuable, nostalgic or striking objects, and like seeing 'the real thing', but most visitors do not think of most objects as being 'iconic', worth seeing for their own sake.

Effective interpretation is therefore crucial to establish an object's **significance**.

Effective displays give visitors a sense that they can interact with the object and its story, through direct physical experience (touch, hearing or smell as well as sight) or by offering any of a range of ways of finding out about the object (seeing a picture of who owned it, watching a video clip of it working, hearing oral history, starting a discussion with another member of their group about how it works).

Physical access to objects is important – far-away, barriered objects are not engaging. Good lighting and design really helps attract visitors' attention.

If you're interpreting objects on display...

Visitors look for a **guiding story** behind an exhibition and if it is missing they are often very disappointed and confused.

What really engages visitors is the context and the stories that go with an object. Interpretation can give different visitors' appropriate ways in to an object, depending on their interest and learning styles. Ever-popular are reconstructed scenes, immersive displays or dioramas designed to show how, where and when something was used.

Effective text encourages visitors to look longer and think more deeply about the object. Visitors like objects to be individually labelled so it's obvious what is what.

If you're using 'mystery objects' to provoke discussion...

Good mystery objects look unusual, but have a very common or definite purpose that people can relate to once they know what it is. Medical and household objects work well, particularly if they are shocking or curious. Historical and modern objects can both create interest, especially if they have a

good related story. Less successful objects are those that are parts of a bigger object, or which have hidden properties which you can't see even once told about them.

If you're using questions to help people learn about an object...

In a workshop session, use **questions** to enable people to work things out for themselves. Can you describe what you can see? What is it made of? Why do you think the maker chose those materials? Is it old or new? Who might have used it and where? What kind of person might have owned it?

If you're using objects that people can touch...

Handling collections (objects people can touch) deserve respect and should be packed carefully, handled with gloves and so on. Exceptions can be made for visitors with visual impairments. By being able to touch objects, visitors engage more senses than just sight, and this can be very powerful. A handling collection is useful for outreach at history groups, nursing homes, schools, reminiscence groups and so on, allowing the museum to go out to groups who may not be able to visit the museum itself.

Further resources:

Come on our training course **Learning in Museums** to find out more about how museums promote informal learning. Contact us on learning@sciencemuseum.org.uk to find out more.

Find out how to use objects to spark science discussions in the classroom, by visiting the Talk Science website <http://www.talkscience.org.uk/content/stimuliobjects.aspx>

Come on a **Talk Science** training course for teachers interested in generating class discussions on contemporary science topics www.talkscience.org.uk.