The power of object-based teaching and learning

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My colleague Tom is a curator of Modern Money at the British Museum. We sit in his office and he hands me a small, dull, silver disc.

I instantly notice its weight: it feels heavier than it should, altogether more coin-like than any coin I have held before. ‘What is it?’ I ask, but Tom is not ready to reveal all. ‘It’s a solid silver Spanish Dollar minted in 1796.’ A quick glance reveals that it was minted under the reign of Charles IV of Spain. I should point out that I’m not a historian, at least not a fully-fledged one, so with this Spanish Dollar in my hand my mind already starts wondering about all the things related to it that I desperately want to be true – treasure chests, armadas, a battle, empire, even a curse! I now begin to pore over it – object-based learning is in full swing and my relationship with this object will last a lifetime.

I go for a ‘long look’ – an observation technique to really look, not just a quick Instagram-esque ‘oh yes that’s nice’, but three solid minutes turning it over and over, even smelling it, formulating questions, and, to coin a phrase (and blatantly cash in a few puns), the more I looked the more I saw. Try it now with the picture below just for one minute. It’ll be worth it, I promise...

When you consider that every aspect of this object – every unintended and intended mark, the very metal itself – makes up its fascinating history, my first question seems too simple, especially with a living coin encyclopaedia sitting opposite me. ‘So what’s with Charles’ clothes?’ I think I know the winner of a Roman emperor lookalike competition when I see one. Charles IV ruled over the first truly global empire, and who best to model oneself on than the all-powerful Roman emperors who had ruled Europe and beyond over a thousand years before him? He looks exactly like the emperors on the many Roman...
coins in the Museum, right down to the laurel wreath on his head. This is about the projection of power: a mass produced, mass-distributed, tidy little piece of propaganda. Nice one, Charles, and well done me!

The next one is difficult. On the back there’s an M with a little o above it – is it a statement of value? The type of silver? Tom to the rescue. It turns out that the symbol tells you it was minted in the Mexico City mint – not in Spain, but a perilous voyage away in the New World, which for the Spanish contained whole mountains full of their greatest prize: pure silver. The silver was mined in horrific conditions by nameless thousands of the declining indigenous population and the increasing African slave population. The coin feels heavier. From the mountains to the mint, then out to oil the cogs of empire: this 8 Reale coin reveals incredible success and unimaginable depravity.

Next is the big round stamp in the middle and the curious Chinese-looking marks around it. The stamp is at least partly readable. ‘So has this coin been used in a mill in England?’ ‘Scotland actually.’ says Tom. ‘The coins were of a uniform size, weight and quality of silver so they became a standard. Industries could assign a value, in this case four shillings and six pence, and pay their workers with them.’ So this Spanish coin had been minted in Mexico City and had ended up in 1820 in the grip of Britain’s industrial revolution. Later, I discovered (on Wikipedia, sorry purists) that the coin was minted in the very year that Spain allied with France to declare war on Great Britain; peace had only been reached 12 years before its stamping in Scotland. This coin had seen war between three global empires. This coin could have been in a pocket at the battle of Trafalgar!

Back to Tom’s office and the Chinese-style symbols. They are chop marks made on the coin’s surface to test the metal because the Chinese standard was based directly on quality as the value. ‘Hang on! So it’s been to China?’ I can’t help my grin. ‘Yes, the Reale was the first truly global currency – whole countries and economies adopted it.’ My head is spinning. So much learning, so many avenues still to explore, so much detail drawn from its three surfaces, the brain of an expert, some textbooks and the internet, and still my mind wanders to the beautiful unknowable. The hundreds of slight scratches on this coin, how had they got there? In the hands and pockets of merchants, sailors, soldiers, tradesmen, women or mill workers? A single coin sitting in a drawer in the British Museum, one of a few jingling in a leather pouch, one of a thousand in a wooden chest in a Chinese merchant’s abode, or one of hundreds of thousands on a Spanish galleon being pursued across the Gulf of Mexico by ruthless pirates... because if you know your Robert Louis Stevenson, you may have twiggd that this coin is in fact a legendary piece of eight. It turns out that everything I wanted to be true about this coin just might be!

The simple truth is that you can use any object. I chose the piece of eight because I could, but I could have just as easily used the Leamington Spa Brick Company house brick I found in my garden, something from each of your students’ homes, or any of the millions of objects on display at local museums.

The benefits of selecting and producing an object, or (sorry again purists) an image of an object, or even a 3D print of an object are huge. Objects help students examine evidence and promote the need for further research. They trigger discussion and argument, and so often wonderment. Interrogating an object appeals to all kinds of learners, whatever the pedagogical zeitgeist of the day. They draw out and then cement knowledge, and they hone a whole range of learning and historical skills. Objects can link us directly to past people and places, take us to times unimaginable and then allow us to plot a route right back to the now; they make our world’s histories tangible, interesting and relevant. Also, importantly, they can facilitate incredibly creative and joyful, productive teaching and relationships with students through (and I love this phrase) ‘imaginative unknowing’, adding another taut string to your teaching bow.

If you’ve never tried object-based teaching, want to give it another go or are already a seasoned practitioner, then there’s help out there. www.teachinghistory100.org is a website where the British Museum, supported by the DfE and in partnership with museums across the British Isles, has brought together one hundred objects with resources and teaching ideas to inspire you.

I hope if nothing else I’ve whet your appetite for object-based teaching and learning. Whet, whetstone, now that’d be an interesting object...