



REVIEW

Criticality and things: the power of objects for learning development

Kador, T. (2025). *Object-based learning: Exploring museums and collections in education*. UCL Press. ISBN 9781787354302

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Object-based learning (OBL) has become increasingly visible in higher education (HE) over the past ten years. Thomas Kador's *Object-Based Learning: Exploring Museums and Collections in Education* provides a thorough and approachable introduction to using objects as vehicles for critical thinking and development among educators, students, and practitioners in HE. Rather than presenting OBL simply as a teaching tool, Kador situates it as a reflective, ethical, and inclusive practice. He suggests that objects might serve not only as illustrative aids, but as prompts for enquiry, uncertainty, and the making of meaning.

The book is organised thematically, beginning with the foundations of OBL and the history of collecting, before moving on to methods of object analysis, exhibition practices, digital technology, and ethical considerations. It draws primarily on practice-based evidence, including case studies, teaching examples, and reflective exercises from both museum and HE contexts. The text weaves together theoretical discussion with practical activities, such as slow looking, composing object biographies, and questioning established histories and their authorship. Throughout the book, Kador successfully argues that engaging directly with objects—through observation, analysis, and interpretation—can foster deeper learning, critical thinking, and inclusivity.

Importantly, Kador does not treat objects as neutral teaching tools; rather, he acknowledges that they are situated within social, cultural, and political contexts that inform their meaning. His approach arises from his background as an archaeologist and from the expertise he has gained through many years of teaching with collections at UCL, including his work with items that have problematic histories. Kador is particularly attentive to the challenges posed by such objects, for example, those linked to eugenics or human remains, and he offers sensitive guidance for interdisciplinary engagement. He suggests that thoughtfully designed OBL activities can help to reveal these contexts and encourage learners to question authority, uncertainty, and power in the production of knowledge. The range of examples provided allows readers to consider how OBL might be adapted to their own contexts. Particularly useful are activities that do not require access to collections, including the final exercise: 'What do your everyday items say about you?'

A strength of OBL, as presented in this book, is the focus on slow observation before interpretation, intended to foster evidence-based reasoning and a sense of epistemic humility. This arises from developments in visual culture practices across adjacent disciplines (for example, Art and Design histories, Archaeology, and Museum Studies) over the past 40 years. Kador builds on established material culture scholarship, including Jules David Prown's (1982) foundational work on object analysis, which emphasises close description and interpretation grounded in evidence. Kador does not position Prown's model as a dominant framework, however. Instead, he extends beyond Prown's three-stage analysis (description, deduction, interpretation) to include a range of collaborative and dialogic pedagogical activities that emphasise learning processes and student agency.

Kador also draws on more recent OBL scholarship, notably the work of Helen Chatterjee, with whom Kador previously co-edited *Object-Based Learning and Well-Being* (2020; see also Chatterjee, 2010). This is particularly apparent in the attention given to engagement and multisensory learning. Yet while earlier OBL scholarship has often focused on pedagogical effectiveness and engagement, Kador brings ethics and power more clearly into the conversation. The chapter 'Objects, Collections, and the Colonial Legacy' stands out for its critical engagement with institutional authority and historical injustice, situating OBL within the broader field of critical museum studies. Rather than presenting OBL as inherently inclusive or emancipatory, Kador suggests that its value lies in critical and reflective practice.



Although he encourages interrogation of collections, he does so largely within existing institutional structures. In this sense, OBL is framed more as a means for reflection than as a catalyst for structural change.

In this author's view, one of the most engaging chapters discusses the intersection of physical and digital—or tangible and intangible—objects. This is an area that could benefit from more discussion, as Kador acknowledges and supplements with further reading. This book focuses on how digital objects are made and used in museums, and how we might experience them in a tangible sense (including 3D printing and 'completion' of ruined objects). It also touches upon debates around authenticity, grounded in Walter Benjamin's influential *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935/2008), which is a common starting point for material culture subject-specialists. But this is perhaps one of the more discipline-specific areas of the book and might not be familiar to many learning developers. I would argue, however, that it is a germane subject in our highly digitised, technology-enhanced world. We will increasingly find that students' regular engagement with born-digital objects becomes the norm, whether in video games, online shopping, or social interaction. How can OBL engage with this constructively, recognising digital things as having their own agency and authenticity?

Although *Object-Based Learning* is not explicitly presented as a learning development (LD) text, it resonates with many of LD's core principles. Kador's emphasis on learners' capacities to observe, question, and interpret reflects LD's shift away from deficit models and towards fostering epistemic agency. Many of the activities he outlines translate readily into LD contexts—whether as workshop tasks, prompts in one-to-one appointments, or embedded disciplinary exercises. For example, Kador's seven-step 'Object Biography' exercise (Box 6.1) guides learners to describe an object in detail, mapping its 'life stages' and reflecting on cultural and ethical contexts. This can be used in LD workshops in a wide range of disciplines to scaffold slow, evidence-based observation before interpretation. Such structured, dialogic tasks help students externalise their thinking processes, practise constructing meaning from observable evidence, and recognise how disciplinary knowledge is built and contested. The multisensory and experiential qualities of OBL therefore offer useful alternatives to more text-centric academic practices, supporting LD's role in helping students navigate disciplinary conventions through observation, meaning making, and critical questioning. Additionally, the reflective and ethical orientation of OBL resonates with LD's critical turn: by encouraging



interrogation of provenance, representation, and authority, OBL provides a material route into critical academic thinking that complements LD's traditional approaches.

Object-Based Learning represents a thoughtful, accessible, and pedagogically rich contribution to HE scholarship. Its main strength lies in reframing learning as an embodied, ethical, and interpretive process rather than a purely cognitive one. While it does not fundamentally reshape existing OBL frameworks, the book brings together theory, practice, and ethics in a coherent way. By making learning processes more visible and participatory, it aligns well with LD values. This volume is likely to be of interest to learning developers who are seeking to freshen their classes with interactive, inclusive, reflective, and adaptable teaching activities. It is a welcome addition to the literature on object-based learning, and notably, it is available as an [open-access book](#).

Disclosure statement

The author used the following generative AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript: CoPilot. The tasks performed by CoPilot include: text search for literature references and organisation of their own notes for an outline of the text. It was the author's first time using AI as a research tool for writing because she wished to take the opportunity to experiment to better understand how students might proactively and ethically use such tools. The author has complied with the journal's principles of AI use.

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