



If Pennies Could Talk: How We Can Learn From Artifacts

Overview

We often think of printed resources - words and pictures - as the records that tell us about the past. However, objects have stories to tell, too, if we know how to look carefully and ask questions. The following activity is designed to give students the opportunity to read the stories of a single artifact.

Objectives

Students will:

- observe an artifact carefully
- make inferences and connections
- analyze details and features
- examine assumptions
- assess the characteristics of a society based on the analysis of a single coin

Core Standards of Kit

2.2 Problem Solving Process

6.4 Historical Connections

6.6 Being a Historian

Age level

Grades 4-12/Ages 9-18

Time

1 hour

Materials

- paper
- pencils
- penny for each group
- copies of "Looking Carefully" worksheet



Background

The term artifact refers to anything that is made or used by people. An artifact can be a coin, the purse that coins are carried in, or the building in which they were produced. Studying an artifact can provide us with all sorts of information about the people who created it and used it.


Of the millions of objects we have from the past, often a single object can provide an inordinate amount of detail about a society. A coin is a good example because it has the potential to reveal information about leaders, values, technological achievements, language, political structure, a numerical system in operation, or the date of manufacture.

Studying a United States penny, students can gather certain information about American society, such as:

- People have access to minerals, presumably through mining or trade.
- Men wear or have worn facial hair.
- They believe in a deity.
- They wear clothing.
- They construct open-air monumental architecture.
- They have knowledge of the Latin language.
- They have a numerical system.
- They are organized into a number of affiliated states.

This activity introduces students to using artifacts as evidence. When examining an artifact, they should start with a basic description. They might think about shape, color, texture, size, smell, and other characteristics. Small details, like the tiny letter stamped below the date of some pennies, can provide important clues about the artifact. Often, examining an artifact leads to even more questions, some of which can be researched (where were pennies manufactured?), but some of which may never be known (who used this penny?).


The temptation may exist to make inferences from the coin based upon actual or modern knowledge -- for example, that Americans know how to mine or that they construct buildings of stone. Both facts are true, but does the information on a penny really prove them?



Historians are often faced with similar dilemmas when objects suggest something, but further proof is needed. Armed with circumstantial evidence, historians develop new questions to test as they proceed with research. Sometimes they must state their conclusions by noting that something "may have" or "probably" occurred.

Procedure

1. Divide students into groups of two to three students each. Distribute one penny to each group, and tell the groups that one member is responsible for recording the findings.
2. Ask students to imagine that they are examining a single artifact, found alone, from an unknown society. Have them assume that they can read and understand the words on the coin. Their task is to make as many interpretations as possible about the people who made the object by studying the coin. Give the students the "Looking Carefully" worksheet to fill out, using only clues from the artifact. Their findings must be based upon evidence found on the coin. Allow 10-15 minutes for the students to compile their lists.
3. When the time has elapsed, ask the groups to present their findings and questions. See the "Looking Carefully" example sheet for a range of possible answers. Also, have students describe the processes that they used to reach their decisions. Using these observations, what kind of interpretations can they make about the culture that used this artifact? Encourage the students to be creative. They might conclude that "it was a Social Security card for Mr. Lincoln," or "it was obviously of ceremonial significance."
4. Lead students in a discussion about the details that can be derived from artifacts and the accuracy of their interpretations. Ask students if their interpretations of the artifact would have been different if it had been found in a cash register drawer with other coins and paper money. Define the term context (the situation in which something is discovered), as this is key to understanding how the science of archaeology is conducted.
5. Summarize the key ideas of this lesson, which are that artifacts studied out of context may yield faulty information, and that it is important for



archaeologists to observe and interpret data in context. This is how the artifacts that they study will help us understand the past.

NOTE: *Motel of the Mysteries* is a good book to read in conjunction with this activity because it demonstrates, in a silly and exaggerated way, how historians and archaeologists might misinterpret evidence.

Evaluation

You may wish to have the students react in writing to this exercise, or assign another artifact (one that truly is a mystery) for interpretation, using the "Looking Carefully" worksheet.

What next?

This activity provides students with a familiarity in examining artifacts, which is the basis for many of the lessons in this kit. Once students have completed this activity and are comfortable with how to examine an artifact, you can move on to the "What is a Tool?" or "Cultural History Mystery" lessons, both of which give students an in-depth chance to examine a culture through its artifacts.



Looking Carefully at a Mystery Penny

Archaeologists learn from the artifacts they find. Imagine that you are an archaeologist examining this artifact for the very first time. Answer the following questions.

OBJECT NAME:

DESCRIBE IT.

WHAT DOES IS MAKE YOU FEEL OR THINK ABOUT?

WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT IT?

WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN YOU MAKE ABOUT IT?

Answer Key

Looking Carefully at a Mystery Penny

Archaeologists learn from the artifacts they find. Imagine that you are an archaeologist examining this artifact for the very first time. Answer the following questions.

NAME OR NUMBER:

DESCRIBE IT. *(answers will vary)*

flat and circular. Orange in color and shiny. Raised lettering on one side: "IN GOD WE TRUST," "LIBERTY" and "1992". On that same side is the profile of a man from the shoulder up, with a beard. On other side, the lettering reads, "UNITED STATES OF AMERICA," "E PLURIBUS UNUM" and "ONE CENT." Image of building with 12 columns.

WHAT DOES IS MAKE YOU FEEL OR THINK ABOUT? *(answers will vary)*

Money - economy

Metals

Symbols

Alphabets - languages

WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT IT? *(answers will vary)*

What was it used for?

Who is the man featured?

What was the building on the back?

Was it valuable?

WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN YOU MAKE ABOUT IT? *(answers will vary)*

The man portrayed, named "LIBERTY," was very important, perhaps a religious leader. The building on the back was the temple where his followers came to see him, and this piece of metal is an admission pass to the temple. Because it is metal and an unusual orange color, it was very valuable and treasured.