

# OBJECT BASED LEARNING IN MUSEUM EDUCATION

HOW TO IMAGINE  
A NEW INCLUSIVE  
HERITAGE

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MUSEUM EDUCATION  
OBJECT-BASED LEARNING  
HANDS-ON  
INCLUSION  
HERITAGE EDUCATION

The use of effective methodologies in terms of knowledge acquisition and transverse competences promotion is one of the most successful solutions for the promotion of social and cultural inclusion within museums and heritage fruition contexts. Object-based learning is one of the most effective methodologies in terms of users' engagement and transverse skills promotion, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, promoting participants' social inclusion and well-being. Users who come

into direct contact with museum objects decrease their levels of irritability, nervousness and sadness by becoming more interested in the museum environment, participating actively and enthusiastically in the activities of object manipulation. Since several years, the Centre of Museum Studies, based at University of Roma Tre, conducts educational research based on the use of Object-based learning within museum contexts to support knowledge acquisition and skills development at different educational levels.

For several years, the Centre of Museum Studies, based at University of Roma Tre, has been engaged in the design and realization of educational paths within museum contexts aimed at promoting the inclusion of all social categories through artistic and cultural institutions operating in a specific territory.

Museums always have a very strong connection with the territory in which they are situated. The knowledge that can be acquired through museums, even from an artistic and cultural perspective, is strongly connected with the visitors' knowledge about the territory they live in and its history. Thanks to the study and understanding of the phenomena characterising the environment surrounding them, visitors come into contact with the culture of the territory itself, thus increasing their understanding and acquiring skills useful to actively participate in social life. The lack of a valid educational contribution on the matter is the reason of the limited culture of the territory among our population and, consequently, of the wrong perception of the value of the environment, the society and the culture as a whole.

Furthermore, more in detail, certain members of the society seldom take part in the social, culture, artistic life of the territory they live in. As a result, they cannot contribute to the building and sharing of the collective memory of the region and, more in general, of the country they live in. The superfluous knowledge of the territory in which such groups of people live, depending on the lack of participation in the social life and the exclusion from the places in which culture is promoted, such as museums, leads to their worrying exclusion from active citizenship, with dire consequences such as social exclusion and, sometimes, social tensions.

The use of effective methodologies in terms of knowledge acquisition and transversal competences promotion is one of the most successful solutions for the promotion of social and cultural inclusion. Over the last two decades, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world, *Object Based Learning* (OBL) –learning through objects– has been known and used as an important learning resource for everybody who learns, from primary school pupils to adults (Durbin et al., 1990; Wiley, 2000; Par-

is, 2002; Lane and Wallace, 2007). OBL is a didactic method based on the direct contact with the object itself and its interpretation through the use of all five senses. This methodology is a form of active learning (Freeman et al., 2014) based on a socio-constructivist approach, which uses objects to promote deeper levels of learning (Romanek & Lynch, 2008). The OBL main aim is to achieve global knowledge of the object and be able to give an interpretation. Objects offer, in fact, a tactile experience that stimulates learners to question themselves about it and to conceptualize their own thinking.

Moreover, using objects in the classroom or in learning pathways can stimulate activities in all curricular areas, students are actively engaged in the subject they are studying and such engagement can be achieved by arranging learning

**Fig. 1** Handling activity at Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome.



activities for the students, rather than making them listen passively. Object-handling has a long-lasting effect and relationship with memory, more so than text-based learning often has (Romanek & Linch 2008, 224). For these reasons, OBL has been introduced in the field of museum didactics: learning activities based on the study of museum artifacts can enrich and deepen learning through specific knowledge acquisition and skills development. In the UK, the use of OBL in the field of museum didactics has become an integral part within University curricula at the UCL (Chatterjee & Hannan, 2015): “Despite a strong tradition of using lectures as a way of delivering the curriculum, the positive benefits of ‘active’ and ‘experiential learning’ are being recognised in Universities at both a strategic level and in daily teaching practice. As mu-

seum artefacts, specimens and art works are used to evoke, provoke, and challenge students' engagement with their subject, so transformational learning can take place".

Furthermore, the latest research in the field highlights how the use of the OBL within museum supports the promotion of the visitors' well-being (Desmarais, Bedford, & Chatterjee, 2018). Users who come into direct contact with museum objects, especially those with mental and/or mental disabilities or senile dementia, decrease their levels of irritability, nervousness and sadness by becoming more interested in the museum environment, participating actively and enthusiastically in the activities of object manipulation. Handling activities and OBL group sessions support collaboration and communication between participants, creating a positive and stimulating learning environment and supporting inclusion at cultural and social level.

**Fig. 2** Activities of description and drawing of the museum object using the OBL methodology. Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome.



In light of this, OBL proves to be an effective didactic method for the development of visitors' wellbeing and social inclusion. Imagining, designing and carrying out OBL activities in museum contexts and providing guidelines for OBL activities to museum operators, also through digital tools, are necessary actions in the context of inclusive cultural heritage fruition.

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