

Understanding Slavery Initiative

Why are objects and artefacts effective tools to teach Transatlantic slavery? (Video transcript)

Speaker: Jean Campbell

Time-code	Speech
00:00:08	Handling objects are brilliant for teaching transatlantic slavery for many, many reasons. In the first instance, they offer a multi-sensory experience. For example, have a look at this gorgeous object here. This is Benin leopard. I can feel it. It's really quite heavy, I was worried I was going to drop it. It's also got the most beautiful markings on it.
00:00:31	So I can feel the texture of it, which tells me lots of information about the quality of skills involved in the making of it. So we have this multi-sensory experience, and sometimes things can be smelt, shaken; we can listen to them. Another reason that it... they offer the opportunity to make a link between facts and the objects.
00:00:53	And I mean facts that may come in the form of texts, or indeed even images. So it's like... it sits between other kinds of information that students may be offered, and they can ground what they're learning via their sensory touch. An example then, of making a link between facts and objects, and the business of handling it as a way of grounding that information, is this piece of sugar cane.
00:01:20	This is desiccated, it's dried out. But normally sugar cane is heavy. Just a small piece like this would be... you'd feel it. It would weigh something quite... at least a couple of kilograms. Now, one stalk is approximately around six metres high. The liquid that comes from one stalk is the equivalent of one sugar cube. This is the key crop within this history of transatlantic slavery.
00:01:49	The learning you've acquired from that is much more deepened because you've felt the sugar cane and you've made the direct connection. So what I'm saying then, is that the object literally is a way of you grounding your learning. It becomes a way of handling, in order to come to grips with this complex and difficult history.
00:02:11	Handling objects tells us a load of things. They tell us a huge amount of information, and to demonstrate that, I'm actually going to use these beads that I'm wearing. And in fact, this is an introductory activity that you can do with your students, whether it's in a session in the museum or in the classroom. You just divide them into pairs, and you get them to bring in an object. And they are to talk to their partners about what the object means to them.
00:02:41	So I'm going to tell you about this one I'm wearing. This was given to me five years ago by a friend. It is made of lots of different materials. It has beads that are made of pottery, beads made of glass. It also has sections on it that have been embroidered. This means a lot, in particular the shells, because I love the seaside.
00:03:03	So what have you learned from this object? You've learned a lot of things about me. Essentially, you've learned that this object here, this very simple object here, is a carrier of stories and a container of histories. And exactly the same thing applies to when we use handling objects to teach transatlantic slavery.