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How inclusive is object-based learning?

Jenny Lelkes, Assistant Academic Support Librarian, London College of Fashion

Abstract

Already widely used across the historical and cultural sectors to engage audiences and visitors in different collections, object-based learning (OBL) is increasingly being adopted by librarians as a pedagogical practice to engage students in their special collections. This article calls into question the seemingly inclusive nature of two methodological approaches used at the London College of Fashion (LCF) Library (UAL) to teach introductory sessions to its special collections. It suggests ways OBL can be used as a tool to critique library collections.

Keywords

object-based learning; critical pedagogy; inclusive pedagogy; special collections; library; librarianship

Introduction

Part of University of the Arts London (UAL) Library Services, the special collections in the London College of Fashion (LCF) library contain historical and contemporary printed materials covering all aspects of fashion. These materials are used in the delivery of introductory sessions to further education, undergraduate and postgraduate students across the college. These sessions are currently taught as standalone sessions outside of the core curriculum at the request of course teams, throughout the academic year.

Critical and inclusive pedagogies study oppression within education. They give individuals a language to name, analyse, deconstruct and change both the dominant hegemonies within education and the inequalities marginalised groups face in terms of educational opportunities. This article critiques the methodological approaches devised by Jules Prown (1982) and Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim (2015), which are employed by special collections librarians at LCF Library in these sessions, and discusses in more detail the wider intersections OBL has with these pedagogies and librarianship.

Object-based learning: a brief overview

OBL is a student-centred, experiential learning approach that 'involves the active integration of objects into the learning environment' (Chatterjee, Hannan and Thomson, 2015, p.1).

During the planning stage for the introductory special collections sessions, course teams were offered a choice of a number of exercises, with the majority opting for an object-based reading exercise. This exercise requires students to answer a series of questions about a special collections object that they have chosen from a variety of printed objects tailored to their course or unit of study. These can be historical (for example, books and periodicals from the historical collections of the Cordwainers College Library or Tailor and Cutter Academy) and/or contemporary (such as the avant-garde fashion magazine *Visionaire*, or self-published zines from the Fashion Zine collection).

The exercise draws upon two OBL approaches. Within the wider field of OBL, Prown's (1982) approach has been used by educators and curators in art history and museology to teach and discuss sociocultural, political and historical ideas embodied within material culture in its broadest sense

(Barton and Willcocks, 2017; Chatterjee, Hannan and Thomson, 2015; Paris, 2002; Rose, 2016). Mida and Kim's (2015) approach takes Prown's (1982) ideas further by applying them specifically to the study of dress history and fashion objects.

Both methodologies consider objects to be 'powerful pedagogic tools' (Hardie, 2015, p.21) and ask students to:

1. *Describe the object.* Prown (1982) introduces this first stage as 'description' whilst Mida and Kim (2015) refer to it as 'observation';
2. *Think about their own knowledge of, interactions with and reactions to the object.* Described as 'deduction' by Prown (1982);
3. *Speculate about how the object relates to wider society.* Prown (1982) describes this final stage as 'hypothesis'. In their methodology, Mida and Kim (2015) combine Prown's second and third stages and rename them 'reflection'.

The intended aim of adopting these approaches at LCF Library has been to 'explore myths, challenge accepted knowledge and address cultural bias' (Willcocks, 2015, p.45) (see also, Meecham, 2015; Steele, 1998) embodied within its special collections.

Object-based learning: intersections with critical and inclusive pedagogies

OBL presents many opportunities for embedding inclusive learning theories and practices within library teaching. One of its strengths is its social constructivist approach, which encourages students to attach their own meaning and construct their own knowledge by engaging with an object (Willcocks, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). This enables students to draw upon their own knowledge and experiences, which hooks (1994) argues is essential for liberatory education.

Another strength of OBL is that it lends itself to a more communal and democratic process of knowledge creation within the learning environment (Willcocks, 2015). This is because by incorporating aspects of enquiry-based learning, OBL encourages educators and students to work together as partners in learning and coproducers of knowledge (Freire, 2017; Kahn and O'Rourke, 2005). This approach draws upon feminist pedagogy, which sees the classroom as a collaborative, democratic and transformative site (Accardi, 2013; hooks, 1994), and also, critical pedagogy. This is because it offers educators an opportunity to dismantle their authoritarian presence within the classroom and abandon the passive transmission model Freire (2017) identified in the banking concept of education.

OBL further engages with critical pedagogy through the questions it asks in exercises, which encourages students to develop transferable skills such as critical thinking (Hannan, Duhs and Chatterjee, 2013; Willcocks, 2015). Objects are signifiers of wider social and structural injustices, therefore framing the questions through a critical lens can raise students' consciousness and help them become more informed citizens (Downey, 2016; Freire, 2017; hooks, 1994 and 2010; Smyth, 2011).

Finally, OBL presents opportunities to re-evaluate cultural capital and taste within art and design education (Bourdieu, 1984; Hardie, 2015; Neil and Reid, 2011). The special collections in LCF Library are highly revered by students for their age, rarity or limited-edition status, and financial worth. Yet this reverence can be challenged through physical encounter, touch, and using avant-garde and everyday objects within teaching (Hardie, 2015; Tiballi, 2015). It could be argued that these are decentering practices that create a more level playing field for the interpretation of objects and their wider sociocultural significance.

Object-based learning: a critique

OBL lends itself to critical and inclusive pedagogies because it involves active and experiential learning techniques, which help to facilitate an inclusive learning environment for neurodiverse students (Pollak, 2009). However, it is my belief that the literature around OBL does not do enough to address bias or link it to the wider social justice aims that are fundamental to contemporary pedagogies within higher education. The following discussion offers a critique of Prown's (1982) and Mida and Kim's (2015) methodological approaches (outlined above) as used by LCF special collections librarians in their teaching practice.

Prown (1982) and Mida and Kim (2015) agree that objects are primary data that hold and embody information about the conscious and unconscious beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes and assumptions about the creator, commissioner, owner and, by association, the society in which they were made. Yet neither methodology explicitly questions the neutrality of objects and how they are 'implicated in the exercise of power' (Meecham, 2015, p.82).

Prown (1982) discusses at length the potential benefits offered by working with material culture, stating that 'objects can make accessible aspects, especially non-elite aspects, of a culture that are not always present or detectable in other modes of cultural expression' (Prown, 1982, p.4). However, when analysing his approach more closely, it does not offer special collections librarians any practical guidance on how to engage with wider social justice aims in their teaching sessions. This might be ascribed to Prown's historical context. He was writing at a time not only when the intellectual study of objects was privileged over physical engagement with them in the fields of art history, museology and material culture; but nuanced academic discussions about the dominant narratives surrounding gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, social class, faith and disability were in their infancy. Moreover, discussions around socially inclusive pedagogies in higher education did not begin in earnest in the United Kingdom until the introduction of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Therefore Prown's (1982) intention was to present a theoretical overview rather than provide example lesson plans or questions that special collections librarians could use to critique the dominant narratives embodied in the library collection.

In comparison, Mida and Kim's (2015) approach builds upon Prown's (1982) work and offers LCF special collections librarians a detailed checklist of over sixty questions to ask during an OBL exercise. Yet only five pertain specifically to different aspects of identity and lived experience:

- 'Does the garment have stylistic, religious, artistic or iconic references?'
- 'Is the garment stylistically consistent with the period from which it came? Does it seem to reflect the influences of that period or diverge from it?'
- 'Are you the same gender and size as the person who wore or owned the garment?'
- 'Did the maker want to invoke emotion, status, sexuality, or gender roles with the garment?'
- 'Do you have an emotional reaction to the garment? Can you identify a personal bias that should be acknowledged in your research?'

(Mida and Kim, 2015, pp.220-221)

In providing a list of suggested questions, Mida and Kim's (2015) methodological approach is more directly applicable to contemporary educators, especially in a fashion context. However, these questions only engage with social justice themes on a limited basis. For example, the authors acknowledge personal and sensory reactions to an object in relation to gender, sexuality, social class and faith. Yet it appears that they have, intentionally or otherwise, completely disregarded questions of race, ethnicity and disability.

Moreover, many of the questions throughout the reflection stage are vague and encourage only a surface level interrogation of the wider socio-cultural, political and historical issues objects embody (Downey, 2016). This can be seen specifically in questions pertaining to:

Provenance

Mida and Kim's single question is too narrow in its focus: 'what does this information reveal about the owner and their relationship to the garment?' (2015, p.221). In general, within a higher education setting, it could be argued that provenance questions need to be expanded in both number and scope to foster students' critical thinking.

Institutional collecting practices and policies

The authors only ask students to find similar objects: 'does the museum, study or private collection have other garments that are similar, or by the same designer/ maker?' and 'do other museums have similar objects? Can you identify similar objects in online collections of dress?' (Mida and Kim, 2015, p.221). It could be argued that this narrow focus discourages debate around what an object can communicate about controversial collecting practices and policies, institutional biases in this process, and public image.

A potential reason for this is that Mida and Kim's (2015) checklist was written with the intended purpose of formally recording, for the first time, the skill set needed by fashion students, dress historians and curators to analyse fashion objects. Therefore, like Prown (1982), the authors did not explicitly claim that their approach would address inclusive and social justice aims.

Object-based learning and academic libraries: what can librarians do?

OBL is increasingly being adopted by academic librarians to engage students with their special collections. To enhance the use of objects in learning, it is my belief that librarians, at the very least, need to acknowledge the biases within OBL's different methodological approaches and be more progressive in how they use OBL to empower students to critique special collections and the wider hegemonic discourses they embody and express.

At LCF Library, the special collections librarians have started to challenge the methodologies of Prown (1982) and Mida and Kim (2015) by incorporating the following inclusive teaching practices:

Reviewing and rewriting OBL questions

To encourage greater critical thinking, the special collections librarians have unpacked broad questions such as 'what does the object tell you about the society or culture in which it was made?'. The exercise now includes a number of questions that explicitly address the gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, social class, faith, and disability of the creator, commissioner or user of the objects being studied; as well as wider concepts concerning an object's provenance, UAL's public image, and whether it reflects any institutional biases in the library's collecting practices. The aim is that, after each session, students will be able to identify, discuss and critique the ways LCF Library's special collections maintain or disrupt the hegemonic discourses surrounding these different facets of critical pedagogy.

Having a greater awareness of the power of language

In her seminal book *Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom*, bell hooks asserts that standard English 'is the language of conquest and domination' (1994, p.168), used by white supremacist, patriarchal society 'as a weapon to silence and censor' (1994, p.172) marginalised groups. This discussion on the English language's oppressive power is revelatory, and has heightened the team's awareness of the special collections materials being predominantly published in English but are used by an increasingly international cohort of students. In response, the exercise

now asks students to reflect on the object's publication language and consider how it maintains, replicates and challenges stereotypes, dominant ideas of taste and Eurocentric cultural values.

Aligning OBL questions with students' academic studies

Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that constructively aligning learning outcomes and activities to a formative assessment helps to increase the library's relevance for students. Through their academic liaison roles, special collections librarians have learnt that some students have difficulties making strong links between their creative practice and wider cultural and historical studies concepts and methodologies. To increase both the exercise and session's meaningfulness to students, new questions have been written to raise their critical consciousness to wider sociocultural issues in the fashion industry. For example, the exercise now considers what the object says about gender expression, heteronormativity, racism, ableism, social class, faith, and LGBTQIA+ inclusion, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

Having a greater awareness of question positioning within OBL exercises

It is important for librarians to be aware of question positioning when devising OBL exercises because a question's position relative to others can devalue its academic value and maintain invisible power hierarchies. For example, questions pertaining to cultural values have been moved to an earlier position in the exercise to increase their importance.

Aligning OBL questions with university initiatives

UAL Library Services have been working closely with the Arts Students' Union to diversify its collections as part of the *Liberating the Curriculum* campaign (Arts Students' Union, 2018). Special collections librarians have aligned the exercise to this initiative by incorporating questions that allow students to use their own knowledge to suggest new titles for purchase.

Conclusion

This article sought to question the seemingly inclusive nature of Prown's (1982) and Mida and Kim's (2015) methodological approaches as adopted by special collections librarians at LCF Library. In addition, it sought to offer educators practical directions for applying OBL in their teaching practice and acknowledging that it offers a deeper level of learning about library collections.

Although the work at LCF Library is ongoing, this article shows how OBL intersects with both inclusive and critical pedagogies in interesting, creative and progressive ways. Innovation within art and design education is expected by students, therefore it is my hope that embracing these two methodologies more openly within OBL has the potential to make libraries and their collections (special or otherwise) more relevant and meaningful to students.

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Biography

Jenny Lelkes is an Assistant Academic Support Librarian at the London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. In addition to working with the library's special collections, she supports fashion textiles, pattern cutting and garment technology undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as further education international students studying at the college. Jenny has pedagogical interests in information literacy, special collection librarianship and inclusive teaching and learning.