

# ***What is an Artifact?***

## **The Basics**

**Age Range:** Primary classes to adult. Aspects of the lesson may be adjusted to best fit the age of the group, or instructors with younger students may wish to do only the first activity.

**Objective:** To introduce participants to the concept of artifacts.

**Performance of Skill Expectations/Enduring Understandings:** The participants will explore specific artifacts, using and developing observational methods to describe them.

**Estimated Materials Preparation Time:** 5 minutes (once the keys are gathered).

**Duration:** Instructor discretion. NOTE: The individual activities can be done on successive days.

### **Materials to be Provided by the Instructor:**

1. A collection of keys. This works best if the keys are from different types of objects (houses, cars, diaries, lockboxes, suitcases, lawnmowers, etc.). If available, include modern variations, such as car remote controls and key cards. It is also interesting to have the participants bring an example of their own from home. If keys are brought from home, they should be labeled with the owner's name before they are passed around for observation and discussion. The Spurlock Museum has a set of keys that may be loaned. Contact Abigail K. Padfield Narayan at [akpn@illinois.edu](mailto:akpn@illinois.edu) or (217) 265-8981 for the availability of this set.

2. Smartboard, chalkboard, or easel pad, plus associated writing materials.

NOTE: Have the participants sitting in groups.

## **Concepts/Vocabulary**

- Artifact: something made or used by human beings.

## **Procedure**

**Preparation:** Have all of the materials ready for use.

**Introduction/Instruction:** Tell the participants that most museums call the objects they work with and display "artifacts." Have the participants give their own definitions for the word artifact. Many of the participants may use words in their definitions that designate that artifacts must be old things from the past.

Give the participants the definition (something made or used by human beings). Start pointing out things in the room that are artifacts (e.g. "Your glasses are an artifact." "Your

pencil is an artifact.” “Your shoes are artifacts.”). Have the participants join you in this activity.

Have the participants think about the idea that the older artifacts they can see in museums were once as new as the objects that they just pointed out. Ask them to imagine which things in the room might be around in 1000 years and what someone finding them might think about them....or think they are.

Explain to the participants that artifacts can tell us a great deal about the people who make and use them. For example, an object made of a material not readily found in that group’s part of the world can point to the artifact’s importance or to the people’s location along a significant trade route. Food preparation and serving artifacts help us to know what kinds of foods were eaten. Painted scenes of everyday life can give clues to clothing styles or interior decoration. Some people refer to this by saying that artifacts “speak.”

It is often best, when talking about artifacts and how they fit into the culture they are used in, to start with things that are very familiar. Once you understand how to look at a familiar artifact, you know better how to look at one from another time or place.

Have the participants pretend that you have walked into the room with a person from far away who has never seen a key before. This person is an anthropologist—a person who studies people and their cultures—and he wants to know what it’s like to live in Illinois today by studying our artifacts. The artifacts you will be starting with are keys.

### **Development:**

1. Give each group of participants a few keys and time to look at them, think about them, and talk about them. Ask them to discuss 1) what they physically see, 2) what the keys may go to, and 3) how the things they go to fit into our lives.

After a few minutes of discussion in groups, have the whole group share what the small groups came up with. Here is a short list of some of the things the participants might have discussed or that you may wish to lead them to. Write the list on the board (easel pad, etc.) as new things are mentioned.

- a. We are able to work in metals.
- b. We use keys to start engines (What things run on engines?).
- c. We use keys to provide transportation (Where are we going?).
- d. We use keys to protect our personal property.
- e. We used keys to protect our privacy.
- f. We use a writing system.
- g. We use a numbering system.
- h. We use decorative arts and symbols.

**Reflection:** Generate a short discussion with these questions:

- Were you surprised at the number of things in your list? How many did you think you would come up with before you started?
- How did you come up with your answers? How many senses did you use? Did you imagine yourself using the artifacts?

2. Note that each of the answers on the above list can be taken multiple steps further to add additional context to your cultural discussion. Here is one example that can be shared with the participants:

Expansion of #1:

In Illinois, we have division of labor. Not everyone does the same job. Here are just a few jobs that people who work with metals can do.

- a. Certain people specialize in working with metal ores so they can be purified and used to make things;
- b. Some people assemble things made of metal (artists, factory workers on a car assembly line);
- c. Some people sell the items that are made of metal (hardware store employees, car dealers);
- d. Some people run/control/drive things made of metal (construction workers, chauffeurs, race car drivers);
- e. Most of the people working the jobs mentioned above need other people in order to do their jobs (the person who sells the gas for the car used to get to work, the supervisor and human resources people at the car factory, the person the chauffeur drives around)

Have the participants try their hand at expanding one of the other items on their written list.

**Reflection:** Generate a discussion with these questions:

- Which of the items on the list do you think would be the hardest to expand?
- Do you think that you could connect any artifact to any other artifact through this type of expansion? If so, what does that say about life in Illinois today?

3. If your key collection includes a car remote control or key card, discuss the idea of artifacts changing or evolving. What things do keys go to now that weren't around 200 years ago? How have we changed how our keys are shaped or used?

**Closure and Reflection:** Look over the list together. Count how many things are on it. Reiterate the idea that one kind of artifact can tell us a great deal about the people who make and use it. Discuss these questions: How did this activity change your thinking about artifacts? Will you see artifacts differently when you visit the Spurlock Museum?

**Reinforcing Activities:**

- Ask the students to give examples of another artifact that would tell others a lot about Illinois culture. Do a "lightning round" with the participants that day or the next with that artifact (e.g., How many things can we come up with in 2 minutes? GO!)

**Assessment:** Evaluate the list. Do the participants' answers show that they understood the lesson?