

Introductory Lesson 1

The “Key” to Understanding Artifacts

The Basics

Age Range: 4th grade to adult.

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.

Prerequisite:

1. A video of this lesson in action can be found on the Spurlock Museum's website at <https://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/educators/borrow-objects/profiles/aas-intro.html>. You may wish to view this video as part of preparation.

2. Teach the participants the definition of the word “artifact:” something made or used by human beings. Stress that this is across time and geography. The definition does not include any version of the words “old” or “past” or “archaeologist.” Point out things they have that fit the definition to emphasize this point (e.g. “Your glasses are an artifact.” “Your pencil is an artifact.” “Your shoes are artifacts.”). Explain that artifacts are one type of primary source: “something that comes directly from a group of people.”

Estimated Materials Preparation Time: 5 minutes.

Duration: Instructor discretion.

Materials Provided in the Box: a variety of keys, including one adult key fob, one toy key fob, and one electronic hotel room key; information sheets on the history of keys and key fobs. The history of keys pdf is a lesson plan from the Locksmith Career Diploma curriculum of Penn Foster Career College

Materials to be Provided by the Instructor: smartboard, chalkboard, or easel pad, plus associated writing materials. Paper and pencils/pens for the group discussion.

Other Notes: Have the participants sitting in small groups.

Concepts/Vocabulary

- **Artifact:** something made or used by human beings.
- **Culture:** a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

- Primary source: a document or physical object that was written or created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event.

Procedure

Preparation: Have the keys out and ready for distribution.

Introduction/Instruction: Explain to the participants that their artifacts can tell us a great deal about the cultures they come from. For example, an object made of a material not readily found in that culture 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," therefore *An Artifact Speaks* is the name given to this series of activities.

It is often best, when talking about artifacts, 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 culture.

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 about 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 small group of keys and a piece of paper and pencil. This works best if each group has a nice variety in terms of size, shape, material, and use. (You may wish to set rules for key handling (no dropping, scraping, tapping, etc.). Have them discuss what things keys tell us about living in Illinois. Have one group member record the group's ideas. Circulate among the groups to help move the discussion or offer suggestions.

Ask one member of each group to read their group's ideas, collecting all ideas on the smartboard (easel pad, etc.).

Here is a short list of some of the things the participants might come up with 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.
- c. We use keys to provide transportation.
- 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 read to the participants:

Expansion of #1:

- a. In Illinois, we have division of labor. Not everyone works metal, or grows crops, or teaches school. 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. Hold up the adult key fob and the electronic hotel key. Discuss with the participants what they are, and add to your written list anything new they tell us about living in Illinois today. Then hold up the toy fob. Ask the participants why someone would make a toy model of an adult "tool." The most frequent answers are these. If one of these answers is not given, you can ask a question to lead them to this discussion.

- a. So kids won't play with the parents' fobs/keys and lose them, turn on the car, or stick the keys up their noses.
- b. So that when the kids grow up, they are already familiar with the tool and understand the basics of how it is used. Ask the participants to list other toys in this category. The most often mentioned are toy phones, computers, kitchen appliances, cars, and lawn mowers. Dolls are also an excellent example. Let

the four-year-old learn how to diaper a baby on a doll, not on his/her younger sibling.

With the toy fob as the artifact, see if the participants can come up with even more things keys tell us about living in Illinois today.

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. Have the participants repeat the definition of an artifact and ask them to remember it for future lessons. Discuss this question: How did this activity change your thinking about artifacts? You may wish to share facts from the information sheet on keys.

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!)
- Do Lesson 2: *My Artifact Speaks*.

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