Object-based learning

A pedagogical approach that we have been exploring throughout our microfiction workshops is ‘object-based learning’ or ‘object-based reflection’. In short, using physical objects as vehicles for learning. For this purpose we have assembled a ‘Treasure Chest’ (a real chest) which we fill with objects of interest and intrigue that we carefully curate around the room before each session, much like a portable wunderkammer or ‘cabinet of curiosities’.

We begin by bringing the objects to life by anchoring them to pieces of microfiction, and then return to the objects throughout the workshop programme, using them in two main ways:

- To construct stories which eventually become the subject of microfiction; and
- To use as metaphors and mnemonics in reflective exercises.

For example, at the end of workshop programme we ask participants to...

Choose an object which represents one thing that you are going to take away from today’s session which will allow you to approach writing, reading, thinking, or revising more effectively in the future, and be prepared to say why.

This rich use of metaphor has proven very popular and effective. Some of outcomes of this approach are cited below.

Student examples of object-based metaphors for learning

*The crab says* – don’t walk sideways – don’t skirt around the issue – get to the point – and always keep your argument moving forward

*The car says* – move fast – if you keep things moving forward you are not wasting your time or your reader’s time – remember Parkinson’s Law and the importance of using time (and word
limits) effectively

The helicopter says – start off on firm ground, then take off – always keep in mind a bird’s eye view of your assignment, but have your binoculars to hand!

The parcel says – you need to be able to wrap ideas up tightly and neatly, but also unpack them

The columns say – remember the architecture of your work – always have a firm structure – make sure your ideas and arguments are built on strong foundations

The wedding photo says – every picture tells a story – an image is worth a thousand words – but a few well-chosen words can be worth a thousand unedited words

The binoculars say – always look ahead – know what you want to say and where you intend to get to right at the beginning – start by looking at the end point – bring things into focus when you need to

The baby shoes say – something small can do exactly the same job as something larger – put the shoes on, tie the laces well, and you will be mobile!

The egg-timer says – time is of the essence, use it wisely – remember that you can do most things in less time than you think, and that setting yourself time constraints can focus creativity and concentration

The giraffe mask says – the structure of the essay may just be the surface, but it allows you to reveal and express the depth of your thoughts

Staff examples (in ten words or fewer)

Binoculars
- ‘Turned around, everything was put into perspective.’
- ‘It may seem far away but it is in sight.’

Columns
- ‘Like an ancient column, structure is beautiful in itself.’

Rug

Egg-timer
- ‘Time taken is not equal to sense made.’
- ‘Treat your ideas like an egg-timer. Turn them over and over.’
- ‘The clock is ticking.’

Parcel
- ‘See what's inside with one quick peak.’
- ‘Hold the thread. Discard the wrapping. Reveal the thought.’
Giraffe mask
  • ‘Flabby giraffes get shot.’

Magic potion bottle
  • ‘Constriction allows for creativity. Anything could be inside the bottle.’
  • ‘Remove cork. Let it out. Reign it in.’