Artifactual Literacies
Ch 3

• CHAPTER 3 •

Artifacts, Talk, and Listening

My favorite object is probably a tiny little babygro, this big.
When I had my little girl, she was only two pounds
so her babygro fits her Barbie doll now, (ohh)
despite the fact she is now fourteen
and I can't believe she ever was that small
but it reminds me of her

—A class teacher describing her special object
for the My Family, My Story project

WHAT IS THE ROLE of material objects in social interaction? In this chapter, we consider the relationship between artifacts and talk as well as how artifacts both stimulate talk, leading to stories, and can be talked into being, as students create artifacts in interaction, through talking to each other. Artifacts evoke emotions, as can be seen in the opening quotation. In this chapter we examine how material objects can enter into meaning making, that is, semiosis, the making of signs, as defined in Chapter 1. Objects can be described as "semiotic" when they are bound up with an act of meaning making. We consider how the material can become semiotic, and we examine closely how the "translations" that occur between talk and the semiotic object make this possible (Michael, 2004).

Talk involves the recontextualization of other people's voices, drawing on overheard conversations and other people's stories, and has the following functions (Maybin, 2006):

> Children's talk is simultaneously referential (representing the world), interpersonal (creating relations with others) and emotive (expressing inner states in the speakers). It is also always evaluative, expressing a position and making some kind of value judgement, explicitly or implicitly, on its subject matter. (p. 31)

The creation of talk is itself a process that is like the creation of an artifact, in that it involves an accumulation of different situated experiences of hearing other people's talk and the subsequent recontextualisation of that talk in a new setting (Dyson, 1993). Like all meaning making, talk is always

transformational. There have been many illuminating naturalistic studies of children's talk in classrooms (e.g., Maybin, 2006; Rampton, 2006). Within talk, stories are recounted, drawn from other stories or crafted anew for the situation. People habitually tell stories in everyday life, and these stories are performed in interaction with others in families and in communities (e.g., Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Wortham, 2001). Narrative involves talk and the telling of small stories as well as larger stories. Small stories are stories alluded to or incorporated into a wider intertextual chain of stories that cannot always be recognized as "story" but over time can be seen as being the smaller parts of a story (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Storytellers tend to include other people's voices in the telling of their stories (Shuman, 2007).

These stories can be observed in classrooms, as children swap small details of each other's lives, tell each other's stories, and recontextualize the experiences they have shared as they perform schooled tasks. In everyday life, talk can become story very quickly. Talk and story can also be connected to literacy. From small stories, bigger stories can grow. For example, Ben, aged 6, was involved in a classroom project about the story "Jack and the Bean Stalk." Ben had been discussing the giant's big boots, was interested in making some giant boots, and shared his idea with a friend. He then composed and wrote a story on paper about the giant's footprints.

Language, like literacy, can be seen in terms of events and practices. The term *language event* could be described as being "any social event in which language is nontrivial to that event" (Bloome et al., 2008, p. 10). This definition acknowledges the situated study of language and literacy (Heath, 1983). In homes, oral language is privileged over other modalities, as families share stories and create conversations. Educators need to acknowledge the "funds of knowledge" that families bring to literacy (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). It is important to describe and document studies that look at the nexus between artifacts and talk and foreground their importance in meaning making. Hymes (1996) noted that life itself is a source of narrative and that narrative is shaped through telling and retelling.

Stories can be related to material objects. As material objects are taken into meaning making, they become semiotic. Material things can be recontextualized and can become social objects and subject to a semiotic gaze. They are then placed within the sphere of discursive practices, that is, talk (Keane, 2003). Different modalities—that is, different modes including the visual, tactile, or gestural—open up different kinds of opportunities for different kinds of talk. Material objects, artifacts, create an intervention in a space that can change the kind of talk that happens. The creation of material objects using craft materials offers opportunities for different kinds of semiotic interventions. In her study of 5-year-olds making dolls in a township school in South Africa, Stein (2003) was able to observe how the children produced different kinds of stories when they made small dolls, noting,

> that these 3D figures provide an important identity function in the semiotic chain. Through their physicality—their shape, weight, density and use of materials—they become embodiments of "ideas" and "images" of characters in the children's imaginations which they become attached to and identify with. They can be felt, touched, held, gazed at, moved from place to place and destroyed in ways that 2D drawings cannot be. It is for these reasons that I think the 3D figures in the Olifantsvlei story project were absolutely central in shaping the children's narratives and providing them with something literally to hold on to in the making of meaning (p. 134).

Stein observed that it was the physical "holding on" to the dolls in the making of meaning that opened up the storytelling. The artifact actually intervenes in the discursive practice and makes an exciting space for storytelling. Once we realize artifacts can become semiotic, we recognize that they themselves are relational and offer opportunities for children and adults to enter into a dialogue with them. Crafted artifacts such as shoeboxes created in classrooms carry the traces of their making within them, and many objects created at home are embedded within everyday practice, the today-ness of children's lives, their habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). Found artifacts are themselves storied in interaction, and it is this story-making we explore here.

Found artifacts have different voices as well. In the Ferham Families project (see Chapter 2), the K family described how, when they came to the United Kingdom, duvets, or comforters, were important for keeping warm in the cold Yorkshire winters. However, this object had two meanings and was described as having different meanings in two languages. The object had a different name in the context of its original use in Pakistan. The word used for the object in Pakistan was *Ralli quilt*, which is a traditional quilt from Pakistan and India that can be used as a bedspread as well as a blanket. In England, the term used was *duvet*, as they were used as bed coverings. Objects often have different meanings in different contexts. The project team wanted to display this object in the exhibition, but the duvets had been lost; the family said these were now in Pakistan. The name and the artifact can also become lost in translation, both metaphorically, as with the switch from *Ralli* to *duvet*, and in actuality, as the journey from Pakistan to Rotherham led to many objects being mislaid.

Artifacts themselves speak with many voices. They can be co-constructed in interaction, and one created object can tell several stories. Bakhtin (1981) tells us that many people draw on a number of voices when they use language. Language itself can be described, because of this, as "double-voiced" when speech is interwoven with a number of strands. Like the double-voicing in talk, we consider how objects, too, can be double-voiced as they are realized within semiosis (Bakhtin, 1981). Artifacts hold diverse memories and heritages. They can create opportunities for a richer type of storytelling. When a student brings in a special object from home, the student can

tell a different kind of story, one that connects the child to the spaces of home. When an educator listens to a parent tell of a child's favorite object, he or she enters into a dialogue with the parent that has a different quality. It honors home practice and weaves home practice together with things that happen at school. When parents, children, and teachers all tell stories of their favorite artifacts, they enter into a more equal relationship. Artifacts can create listening opportunities as well as tell stories.

In this chapter, we specifically look at the relationship between artifacts and talk. Educators can use talk about artifacts to create learning opportunities that draw on everyday experiences. They can do the following:

- Listen to children and families in new ways
- Create learning opportunities that respect cultural diversity
- Bring personal experience into the classroom
- Co-construct narratives about artifacts with children
- Help children create new stories and narratives
- Connect these artifact stories to other stories
- Link these stories to more general experiences in the classroom

Through the linking of the object in the home to the object created in the classroom and the semiosis created by that interaction of object and talk, talk and classroom learning can become richer and more extended (Thompson, 2008).

CRAFTING TALK, TALKING CRAFT

Shoeboxes are simple things, but they have enormous potential. They can be turned into miniworlds, filled with miniature people, animals, birds, and other tiny objects. They can become a repository for an "All About Me" project, in which a child might take photographs of his or her favorite objects at home and then place these photos in the box. The box can be decorated and made beautiful. It can hold special objects, to be taken out and described to the class. The box has an inside that can represent one thing and an outside that can represent something else. The box, therefore, has the capacity to speak with many voices. The making of the box, however, is a tool for the creation of opportunities for a special kind of talk that can be called "world making" (Pahl, 2010). It calls up home stories and creates imaginary worlds. In the project described below, children used shoeboxes to create special narratives of identity that led to the development of talk, narrative, and story.

Sally Bean, a teacher in South Yorkshire, designed an environment shoebox project for her class of 6- to 7-year-olds. The children created panoramic boxes designed to represent an environment, such as the ocean or the Arctic, using clay to make the animal inhabitants. The children worked in small groups, and Sally put a strong emphases on the children's decision-making process as they decided what would go in the boxes and how they would create their boxes and the animals. Her focus was on furthering collaborative talk in the classroom. She had noticed that in a previous project, the children were much better at deciding what they would do and how than she had anticipated, and she wanted to nurture this particular quality in the classroom: "The ideas that came up from the children were fantastic, and I think I learned from that you know it's good for them to make the decisions about what they want to learn" (Sally, interview, November 1, 2005).

It was with this idea in mind—children as decision makers—that I (Kate) began my study of the environment box project in spring 2006 (see Capturing the Community, Appendix A). I took an *ethnographic perspective* (Green & Bloome, 1997), which is explained in Chapter 1. Although I did not do a full ethnography, I visited the same classroom repeatedly over a 2-year period. I paid attention to the perspectives of the children and the teacher, and I listened for cultural stories that made sense of their text-making. I was particularly interested in how an artifactual approach opened up new opportunities for talk. As the boxes were being made, I placed a tape recorder by the children and asked them to take pictures of what they were doing. I also interviewed the children at the end of the project and listened to Sally Bean's account of what she was doing. Sally also researched her own practice. Her focus was on a project that gave the children agency over their learning and on creating opportunities for children to extend their talk in the classroom.

The artifactual nature of the project opened up a number of key aspects:

1. It affirmed the children's identity and cultural worlds (Holland et al., 1998).
2. It offered opportunities for problem solving and talk that focused on creating solutions to material problems.
3. It created opportunities for world making and sociodramatic play.
4. It enabled children to bring in funds of knowledge from home and mix these with schooled contexts (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

The children created boxes that represented the ocean, the jungle, the desert, and the Arctic. As the children researched the animals for their habitat, they made connections between their experiences out of school and the animals they were making from clay and other materials. Connor was

interested in Arctic foxes and researched them for his box. He decided to tell a story about his experiences in Lanzarote in the Canary Islands and the Arctic fox:

> CONNOR: At Lanzarote, there was these [pause] Arctic foxes.
> TIMOTHY: What's that?
> CONNOR: There were an Arctic fox, and this man who owned the Arctic fox came up to it, and he got into the sea, and he went to this right big stone . . . er . . . and he put his finger on top of it, and then the Arctic fox came and jumped on top of t'stone, and I didn't know what it were doing, and then when it got off, it just sort of rolled on its back um . . . and then that's it [laughs]. (Taped interaction, February 8, 2006)

Here, Connor tells a story about the Arctic fox, merging the out-of-school experience of going to Lanzarote and his in-school experience of Arctic foxes. Although the actual reality of an Arctic fox appearing in Lanzarote is unlikely, the story tells of a real experience of a man with an animal, retold for effect. Stories such as this occur in conversation—and they can surface very quickly—and then the conversation is resumed. Sometimes children return to them, and they become currency that is recalled and alluded to later. As he makes the animal and works on his box, Connor recalls an experience of watching a fox while on vacation. Stories often surfaced in relation to home events as the children were engaged in making the boxes. Carl described his king cobra in relation to an actual experience he had had of the snake in the Philippines:

> CARL: We found a real cobra in the book over there.
> KATE: Can you show me?
> FRANCESCA: We need more red.
> KATE: Have you seen one on the telly?
> CARL: I have seen one in the zoo. I saw a real one in my cousin's house in the Philippines. He has got a real king cobra in his house; he has got it locked up in his cage. He's in the Philippines.
> KATE: What colors was it?
> CARL: Black at the top and steely and brown at the bottom.
> KATE: Were you scared?
> CARL: He went ssss like that. (Taped interaction, February 8, 2006)

This small piece of dialogue made a link between Carl's home experience of seeing a king cobra and the object he was creating from clay. The animation of the object included the sound the cobra made, "ssss," as experienced

by Carl. As the children made the boxes, they brought in home "funds of knowledge" and created internal links between their home experiences and stories and the animals they were creating (Gonzalez et al., 2005).

The children also worked at problem solving and tried to create solutions themselves to realize their visions. One group of girls found it difficult to get seaweed to stand up in their box, and they were struggling with how to get over the problem, as Emma explained:

> First we got a box, and my partner was Sophie. Secondly we painted our box, and then we added some things to it. My partner tried to make seaweed, and we couldn't. We tried everything we could think of and then teacher Mrs. Bean had a bolt of lightening, and she thought of something, and we did it, but we haven't tried it yet, but I think it will work. I hope so. (Fieldnotes and tape, February 20, 2006)

Here, Sally Bean is described as having had a "bolt of lightening," and her ability to problem-solve is extolled by her students. The discussions around how to make the seaweed stand up on its own took up a great deal of time as the box was made. Talk can occur where problem solving and learning happen, particularly talk that is relational—that is, it is between children and has a dialogic quality—as children make sense of the world in interaction with each other (Maybin, 2006). Children's talk is where things get done, problems get solved, and they co-construct their material and social worlds. In the completed box, the seaweed was standing up, and the translucent effect of seaweed was created by mixing green paint with glue and painting this onto acetate (see Figure 3.1).

Thus, the artifactual nature of the project focused on problem solving, on researching animals, and on ways in which children made connections with these animals and engaged in different kinds of talk with narrative potential. In some cases, as with Connor, these were stories that evoked experiences outside of school. In other cases, as with Carl, the story of the cobra called up a new "fund of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 2005) about the way the cobra went "ssss." In the case of Emma and Sophie, the girls used the box experience to test a new hypothesis about the material nature of the seaweed. The creation of the environment boxes opened up the talk and created a space for telling new stories. Another group of girls created a story about a dolphin school, which resulted in a complex narrative that involved many home–school crossings (Pahl, 2009). Artifactual literacies, therefore, are not only about found objects, already created, that have histories and that create reactions in those who look at and touch them, but also about the material creation of an artifact and, in the process, the talk that is opened up through the process of creation.

Figure 3.1. Seaweed box.

The talk that happens when students create craft activities is something that remains relatively undocumented. However, anecdotal evidence reveals that when children are engaged in craft activities, they feel safe and are ready to share (Alison Clark, personal communication, March 2009). Many educators who have carried out projects, such as quilt making, collage, or art projects, with students have reported that deep and meaningful conversations happen while students are engaged in such activities. As the material object is crafted, opportunities within the object change the nature of the talk. The overall semiotic output, produced in interaction with the material object as it is created and the talk, is greater than both the talk and the material object. It lies between both and is a product of both. This is because the reference to the object, together with the situated experience, brings more depth to the artifact as it is crafted. It sits within a context that links to the life-worlds of the meaning maker. The agency given to the meaning maker through the invocation of life-worlds is greater in the act of creating the artifact.

TALK EVOKING ARTIFACTS IN THE TELLING OF STORIES

Museums and art galleries are spaces full of found artifacts of different kinds. These can elicit stories, such as of recognition or links to memories. In the My Family, My Story project, I (Kate) worked with the local school

and a small museum called the World of James Herriot, where Jenny Wells was the Education Officer (see Appendix A). James Herriot (whose real name was Alf Wright) was a practicing veterinarian who wrote a series of best-selling books about his experiences of being a vet in a small town in the north of England (Herriot, 1970/1976, 1973/1978). The museum was actually his family home in a rural part of North Yorkshire, which is characterized by rolling farmland and upland farms where sheep are reared. Sheepdogs are kept to herd the sheep, and there is a culture of keeping animals. Our project worked with a group of children and families from the local school, which was on the edge of the town and could be described as semirural. The rural literacies context (e.g., Brooke, 2003; Edmondson, 2003) is useful here. Like many small towns in the U.S. Midwest, this was a town that relied on farming and possessed a determination to survive.

Five families were recruited to the project, each of which had one child who was between 7 and 8 years old. Some of the families had younger children as well. The aim of the project was to support the family members in creating digital stories about their favorite objects (see Chapter 6). The families were encouraged to photograph their favorite objects and to describe them. One parent, Karen, told us of her favorite objects: "I'm Karen and, not sure what want to choose" [pause of about 2 seconds] "my dogs, I love my dogs. They are my favorite objects [laughs]." Karen continued to mention her dogs as well as other animals, and her final digital story was about a kitten that got lost in a garbage can but was later found.

As part of the project, the families visited the World of James Herriot museum (see Figure 3.2). As Karen wandered around this old Yorkshire stone house, with its flagstone kitchen and 1930s-style furniture, all evocative of an age before the Second World War, along with the vet potions and instruments used at that time, she recalled an earlier memory. Standing in what is now arranged as the kitchen area, she said that she had been in this room before, when it was a consulting room. She spoke of the vet, James Herriot:

KAREN: Yeah, I remember seeing him when I was 16 or 17, I think.
KATE: You used to come here, and he was the vet?
KAREN: Yes!
KATE: There's a memory!
KAREN: And then I dealt with his son, Jimmy. (Recorded talk, January 25, 2009)

Karen recalled that her father had a dog who used to be taken to the vet when he was ill: "He was a border collie. He only worked for me dad. He used to work the sheep. He only worked for me dad. He didn't work for any body else [laughs]. . . It does bring back memories for me. Because I was there [laughs]." (January 25, 2009)

Figure 3.2. Objects in the home of James Herriot.

Here, the experience of visiting the museum, and being in the space, called up a memory, of visiting the vet, James Herriot. The museum itself, full of objects, was a connective point for Karen, a place where she could recall her childhood and memories of her father. Many people have memories of visiting a local museum and recalling similar objects or experiences that they can link to. This can call up new stories. Museums are places of connection, of continuity and discontinuity between everyday life and "other" spaces, and these connections are there to be explored both for memories, for stories, and for feelings.

TALK, ARTIFACTS, AND FELT EMOTIONS

We often think of objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or provocations to thought (Turkle, 2007). People's feelings in regard to artifacts have been described by anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and psychoanalysts. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) describe how artifacts "serve to express dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people and the total

environment" (p. 43). Artifacts convey meaning and create new conditions for meaning making in our daily lives. Winnicott (1971) wrote about "transitional objects" that children hold on to, that express deep feelings of being both "me" and "not-me." Artifacts can be seen as "biographical" and can be endowed with the characteristics of their owners (Hoskins, 1998). Artifacts offer a way into mediated relations and offer many different narratives of the self in their telling (Holland et al., 1998).

Emotional Significance of Artifacts

Artifacts can become lost, but even lost objects have power, as they are remembered with feeling (Bissell, 2009). Objects call up deep emotions. A group of educators, when asked to name an object special to them, described specific objects such as a button box handed down from a grandparent, a note from a child saying "sorry," small objects such as the band placed round a baby's wrist when it is born, photographs, and jewelry. Object stories can go to the core of a person's being.

In a number of projects, artifacts have elicited powerful and deeply felt stories, telling of fear and danger (Scanlan, 2008). Everyday life can be hard. One educator, Clare, working with a group of migrant parents in Ireland, heard a story of a woman who had come from Iran. She told how her favorite artifact was a pair of gold earrings. At one point, she had no money, and as she was going to the market to sell the earrings, her mother came to her with the money she would have got for them. This meant she didn't need to sell them but could keep them. As she told the story, she began to cry. A male student, from Iraq, offered her his handkerchief. This story, which comes from a project called My Story in a Box, was recounted by Clare as an example of the power of artifact stories in both recalling and eliciting emotion in a group.

In a project called Art, Artists, and Artifacts in which I (Kate) was involved (see Appendix A), two artists responded to the object collection in a museum service that lent objects to schools. The collection was called Artemis and based in Leeds, in the north of England. When they looked at the collection of objects—which included Egyptian and Greek artifacts as well as Victorian household items including clothes, rocks and stones, memorabilia, scrimshaws, old documents and instruments, and artworks and china—the artists, Kate Genever and Steve Pool, responded very differently. Kate Genever looked at the function of objects, what they were used for. She connected this with the way objects were used on her family farm, where her father made the tools they used. Steve Pool looked at what emotions the objects called up. He devised an "aura scorer" whereby objects could be scored for their emotional significance and importance. As part of

the final exhibition, he asked visitors to the exhibition to select their most important object and put it in a glass case for people who came afterwards to examine. These objects could be very small, apparently insignificant, but all were tied to personal experience. The project included teacher training, and as part of this, teachers were asked to respond emotionally to objects, to their aura, and asked not to think about objects as part of history but to respond more directly and emotionally to the experience of handling and looking at them. I, along with my fellow researcher, Lou Comerford-Boyes, used this new space to engage more spontaneously with objects. We tried on Victorian dresses, exclaimed at old washing implements, and became playful in the face of this plethora of objects. Artifacts can create spaces for play that are unorthodox and challenging, offering spaces for new identities to be tried out and played with.

Transformational Power of Stories

When artifacts create new opportunities for storytelling, it is important to allow the space for students to tell their stories and become heard. Sometimes witnessing a story can become a moment of transformation for a student, creating a shift in the student's way of seeing the world. Here, we turn to the work of scholars in thinking about the transformational power of artifacts. In their study of 315 lower-income and middle-class families in Chicago and their objects, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981) describe the power of objects to evoke buried emotions and to engage with the subconscious. They argued that "cherished possessions attain their significance through psychic activities or transactions" (p. 173).

They take the concept of transaction from Dewey, who suggested that any act of intelligence gains its meaning only in the context of the transaction itself (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). The interaction between people and objects therefore involves a relational movement between person and object that, in its psychic power, creates the potential for transformation. Specifically, Dewey makes the distinction between what he calls *perception* and *recognition*. Dewey sees recognition as a process that draws on previous experience in an encounter with an object, whereas perception is a process that is essential to aesthetic experience and leads to psychological growth and learning. Sensory engagement with an artifact, he suggested, can therefore lead to new learning experiences. The relation between artifact and person is therefore a chance to experience a transformation, a shift in consciousness. Household objects particularly are a part of the experience that is "home" and therefore they are caught up in the "flow" of everyday life. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) identify the concept of *flow*

as being critical to this state of total involvement with experience, and the object experiences are meshed with this state of involvement.

Artifacts, therefore, offer a way forward, both in terms of the response to objects, the flow that objects create, and, most important for educators, a link to the outside world. This quote below, from an 8-year-old boy in Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's study, sums up the powerful psychic and transformational learning experience that artifacts offer. When asked what all of his objects mean to him, he replied:

> They make me feel like I'm part of the world. Because when I look at them, I keep my eyes on them and I think what they mean. Like I have a bank from the First National, and when I look at it I think what it means. It means money for our cities and for our country it means tax for the government. My stuffed bunny reminds me of wild life, all the rabbits and dogs and cats. That toy animal over there (points to plastic lion) reminds me of circuses and the way they train animals so they don't get hurt. That's what I mean, all my special things make me feel like I'm part of the world. (p. 193)

This wonderful quote provides educators with so much food for thought. The question of how educators can draw on objects in the home and make connections with learning in schools is answered by this boy, who provides links constantly between the objects and the world. His psychic energy is channeled through these objects to the wider world and the goals of keeping animals safe, keeping his country prosperous, and protecting the environment.

Artifacts Tied to Ruling Passions

Artifacts are objects to grow with. Many students have a favorite stuffed toy that they recall from early childhood, that they still treasure. Children also identify the stages of childhood through their objects. Here is Sam, age 8, talking about his objects (see Pahl, 2003, 2005):

> I've always been changing my subject. When I was a baby I liked wheels, then I liked Thomas the Tank engine, then I liked robots, I liked space, then I liked Pokémon through 7 and a little bit of 8, then I'm into Warhammer, now I've moved on from the rest of my—I was getting bigger all those 8 life years. (Interview, November 20, 2001)

Sam has identified growing with changes in his favorite objects. This provided some challenges for his mother, who described struggling with having to replace his Thomas the Tank curtains, but it is through objects and ruling passions that Sam identified his growth. The concept of "ruling passions," from Barton and Hamilton (1998), also connects with artifact stories, many

of which connect to strongly held passions and feelings children build up over time.

Ruling passions are tied up with histories, dispositions, the everyday, habitus (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). There is nothing predictable about objects and the stories that they hold, and it is precisely this quality that gives writers a voice. In the following quotes, two teenagers from the Princeton study (see Chapter 5) provide their perspectives on ruling passions:

> For every artifact I was assigned I wrote my sincere thoughts, and put the images in my head into images on paper. I love visual arts and I absolutely love to draw. I'm still not as good as I'd like to be (not by a long shot), but with every stroke of my pencil I improve in some way, and through doing my project I've learned a lot of things about proportion, color, stroke weight, and drawing. (Sienna, June 2008)

> My artwork makes me proud because there are many things about it that are hard to do, let alone be good at. One of these things is throwing clay on a wheel. I hope that by the end of the year that I will be able to make a reasonable size pot well enough to be fired. (Mark, June 2008)

There is a power in artifacts to throw ruling passions into relief and to connect contexts. Objects can be used to think about ruling passions.

Family Stories of Objects

In the My Family, My Story project, as families described their favorite objects, some were very emotional. On the first afternoon, after school, the teacher, the children, and the parents told us about their favorite objects. Here are some of their stories:

> CORAL (age 8): My name's Coral, and my favorite object is my rabbit Floppy, and it is very old.
> VALERIE (Coral's mother): My favorite object is an old biscuit tin my nan gave to me just before she died.
> LUCY (a parent): My name's Lucy, and my favorite object is my children because they are always there for me.
> LAURIE (a parent): If I was to take one, I probably would take one of my Laa-Laa.
> It's one of the teletubbies [laughter].
> When I worked at the pub that's what I was called, that was my nickname.

> And I was convinced that Laa-Laa was . . . me [laughter].
> Because she is as mad as I am! [laughter] (Taped discussion, November 24, 2008)

The children and the parents created shoeboxes that were to hold their favorite objects. In the photo, Laurie's shoebox is surrounded by her favorite objects, including her Laa-Laa. The box is decorated with pink feathers to signal the positive, loving feeling she has about her home objects, and her box is a vibrant representation of who she is and her playful representation of herself as a cuddly yellow toy (see Figure 3.3).

The museum educator, Jenny, handed out disposable cameras at the end of the session for each family to take photographs of their favorite objects. The families met for 6 weeks and also visited the local museum, as described earlier in this chapter. Using digital methodologies (see Chapter 6 for more details), the families created films that told stories of their favorite objects. The stories grew and grew. Coral's story of her rabbit, recounted above, became much longer over the period of the project, becoming a story about how the rabbit had to go in the washing machine and how this upset Coral so much. The parents and children interviewed each other about their favorite objects.

Figure 3.3. Photo of shoebox.

Artifacts can also be sources of comfort. Many children have special stuffed animals that can be very important, like Floppy, Coral's rabbit. Children have passions for particular objects. People become attached to objects over a lifetime, and they can be linked to memories. As the power of objects within stories is articulated more fully, their sensory qualities also come to the fore. By using craft materials in creating their shoeboxes, linking to color and feel and shape, the families could articulate the home emotions and experiences that made their objects special.

ARTIFACTS AS A TOOL FOR LISTENING

Artifacts can become tools for empathetic listening among educators, children, and parents. Sharing artifact stories can equalize the relationship between educators and families. As previously noted, in early-childhood contexts, children sometimes have special "transitional objects" that they carry with them into the new childcare context (Winnicott, 1971). These objects can be a rabbit, like Coral described above, or a special toy, or even an animal. If educators let these objects in, they can be used as a tool for hearing about the child.

When I (Kate) was sitting in homes listening to people's stories about artifacts, sometimes they paused as they tried to recall where an object was. The Chapter 1 opening story of the suitcase that traveled the world was about a lost object. Lost objects, often signaled by the pauses that happen in a conversation when an object is recalled in memory (such as, "I am sure we have it somewhere . . .") also create spaces for listening. In some cases, a family that has escaped a dangerous situation may not have a lot of objects, but they will carry stories with them. These stories can still be told and heard.

In assessment contexts, listening methodologies can be used to chart progress. Carr (2001) offers a powerful tool to chart the learning that can take place in visual ways, such as using video and drawings to chart change. Clark, Kjorholt, and Moss (2005) outline the different ways they have worked with young children to elicit their stories and their responses to experience. These can include the use of photographs as well as active listening methodologies to hear children's stories. In the My Family, My Story project, I (Kate) used the listening that took place as evidence of the increased interaction of and improved communication between family members. Stories expanded over time. Children listened to adults' stories, and adults listened to children. The digital equipment became a tool for listening that opened up new stories that children could hear from their parents.

Listening using digital artifacts pays attention to everyday practice. Telling stories to the camera requires attention, and parents and children

and siblings can listen to each other and hear stories that they can tell and retell. Families hold shared repertories of narratives and practices that can be drawn on by educators in other settings. Children's stories can cross sites and modalities; they can be instantiated in drawings, models, paintings, gesture, and film. Part of the task of being an educator is to capture these moments of meaning making and trace where they came from, to ask for more context, and to do that involves listening more closely to what children say about their worlds. Sharing artifact stories is one good way to start an artifact project. Another method that is useful for creating storytelling opportunities is to have children create something artifactual and let the stories flow from there.

SUMMING UP: ARTIFACTS, TALK, AND LISTENING

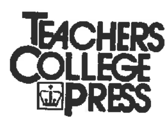
Artifacts come alive in interaction. Artifacts create a pedagogical space that invites sustained meaning making, a web of activity that includes talking, listening, crafting, cutting, drawing, gluing. They can be used by educators to start a discussion that can open up new spaces in the classroom. Kathy Schultz (2003) has described how listening is also a way of creating more equitable learning spaces. In the work described above, talk was created through craft opportunities, through a digital storytelling project involving museum visits, and through a group of artists asking educators to react to objects in emotional ways. Objects can call up many emotions; as educators, we have to handle these emotional responses with care. Some objects are more powerful than others. In the next chapter, the power of objects to unlock new stories and engage in a critical engagement in literacy is explored further.

Artifactual Literacies

EVERY OBJECT TELLS A STORY

Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell

Foreword by Lesley Bartlett and Lalitha Vasudevan



Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London
2010