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“What Makes Me Who I Am?”: Using Artifacts as Cosmopolitan Invitations

As a classroom researcher, Tiffany DeJaynes revisited the curriculum of an English elective she helped design and found students using artifacts to investigate personal identity and create community.

Objects surely don't talk. Or do they?

—DANIEL MILLER, *THE COMFORT OF THINGS*

In her artifact presentation, Sara held up a ring her father gave her from Guatemala and said, “It makes me feel like I have my family with me wherever I go.” As she walked the delicate silver ring around the room, she explained that the figure of a quetzal, a brightly colored bird with an iridescent green back and red chest, represents freedom and independence in the country her father hails from. Her peers followed with “warm fuzzies,” verbal and written feedback her teachers had set up to give her peers a chance to reflect on what they learn about peers from their artifacts and to offer encouragement. Afterward, Gretchen shared her favorite records, and Peter pulled his first football out of his backpack, a worn and beloved hand-me-down from his father. One peer’s “warm fuzzy” was “I love when it’s a generational pass-down thing, I’m a sucker for that.”



Young people who walk the same halls, pass through the same scanners, eat lunch at the same pizzeria, and sit in classes together often know relatively little about one another. In my role as a classroom researcher and participant observer, I see the artifact presentations in this tenth-grade class as something of an interactive, New York City version of anthropologist Daniel Miller’s *The Comfort of Things*—a study

of the home objects valued by thirty Londoners living on the same street. The meanings made of objects by the students in Christopher Curmi’s English classroom are as surprising as those made by multiage, polyglot Londoners. The artifacts they have chosen to share with each other are both extraordinary and quotidian, objects they cherish and take for granted. Miller noted that, “increasingly, people’s lives take place behind the closed doors of private houses” and asked, “How can we gain insight into what those lives are like today: people’s feelings, frustrations, aspirations, tragedies, and delights?” (3). Artifacts are material traces of stories, perspectives, and experiences. Working with artifacts—writing about them, composing multimodal stories that explore their materiality (i.e., sounds, smells, textures), and sharing them with colearners and educators—grows self-knowledge and builds community. In this article, I posit that artifactual literacy invites the cultivation of cosmopolitan habits of mind by asking youth to reflect on their own values and thoughtfully consider the values of their peers and teachers.

“Artifactual literacy,” Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell explain, “is about exchange; it is participatory and collaborative, visual and sensory. It is a radical understanding of meaning-making in a human and embodied way” (134). Using artifacts in the literacy curriculum creates opportunities for students to bring their home cultures into school. By tracing personal stories through artifacts, youth and their teachers connect, share, see, and learn to value each other.

They also have the opportunity to develop alternative perspectives, think more critically about systems of belief, and question assumptions and biases—core characteristics of a “cosmopolitan” view of the world.

Educational philosopher David Hansen writes that cosmopolitan-minded people “*hold* their values and beliefs in ways that keep them open to the concerns and perspectives of others” (87; italics in original). Teachers recognize that the young people in their classrooms will encounter increasing cultural differences and changes in their lifetimes, given the rapidly widening arc of globalization. A cosmopolitan orientation offers a way of approaching our shared humanity and the confusion that forces of globalization sometimes create.

In 2018, invitations for compassion, connection, and solidarity in classrooms stand in contrast to the often-divisive political rhetoric youth are exposed to and are actively engaged with as citizens of the world (DeJaynes and Curmi). Despite the displays of caring in the classroom vignette I share above, I do not wish to propose a simplistic vision of learning spaces affected by the realities of globalization. Instead, I acknowledge that cultural exchange can foster democratic ideals such as collaboration and belonging and it can also lead to tensions. Nonetheless, a reflective process that involves students and teachers curating, writing about, and sharing personal, familial, and cultural artifacts can foster a kind of “everyday cosmopolitanism,” a daily, lived sense of openness to divergent perspectives (Hull et al. 267).

SETTING THE CONTEXT

The classroom described in this study is a tenth-grade course called Qualitative Research, a required English language arts elective at a small public high school in New York City. The course is part of a four-year research sequence, which includes core quantitative and qualitative courses and upper-level electives such as sociology and epidemiology. I taught the course for its first two years and have been a mentor and teacher-researcher in the class for the past four.

The curriculum begins with a semester-long “Where I’m From” auto-ethnography project, which

explores the questions “Who am I?” and “What makes me who I am?” while also training the students in ethnographic research methods such as artifact collection, observation, and interviewing. The final product is a “Where I’m From” film that combines multimodal artifacts (e.g., images, songs, short film clips), reflections on the self-study, and lines of poetry drawn from data. The films are then shared with peers in class and with the larger school community. This project reflects pedagogical commitments to multimodal literacies and to creating learning spaces where youth see themselves as researchers and generators of knowledge. As a research genre, ethnography is rooted in descriptive writing, primary data collection, and looking closely at objects, places, and stories we think we know in an effort to understand them better or view them differently.

The school brings together a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse cohort of learners who also performed well on state middle school exams. Learning from diverse others is more acute in an urban classroom with youth whose global reaches extend to Albania, Colombia, China, Dominican Republic, Haiti, India, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, and Vietnam.

LOCATING “EVERYDAY COSMOPOLITANISM”

This article is informed by six years of involvement in this course, first as a teacher-researcher and later as participant observer and mentor. From 2012–14, as a teacher, I kept a blog, journal, and audio recordings of classroom noticings as part of a practitioner inquiry study. In my notes, I recorded pedagogical choices, student responses to curriculum, moments that puzzled and delighted me, and moments of disconnection. Since 2014, I have been a participant observer and mentor for the course; in this role, I have collected artifact blog posts from forty participants; kept field notes on in-class lessons and artifact presentations; and collected the students’ written feedback to peers and their final reflections on the “Where I’m From” project.

As an element of my analysis, I wanted to better understand the impact of the cultural exchange

fostered by artifactual literacy work in the classroom. Cosmopolitan habits of mind are formed by (1) nurturing one’s familiarity and attachment to one’s own history and heritage, what Hansen calls cultivating “reflective loyalty to the known,” and (2) responding with openness to the stories and experiences of diverse others or cultivating “thoughtful receptivity to the new” (1). I coded the data for Hansen’s concepts to better understand the moves teachers and students made that cultivated invitations to knowing and being known. For “reflective loyalty to the known,” I coded for themes such as “pride,” “heritage,” “memory,” “family,” and “community.” For “thoughtful receptivity to the new,” I coded for “openness,” “curiosity,” and “connection across difference.” Notions of “belonging” cut across both categories as I observed the students’ connections to their home cultures and the sense of “us” they were forming as a classroom community.

Identity work is an explicit goal of the curriculum. Mr. Curmi has refined the curriculum in which objects can, as Miller notes, “talk,” that is, reveal information that will support youth in answering their research questions, “Who am I?” and “What makes me who I am?” Through a series of assignments, students examine their cultures and think carefully about the ideas, people, objects, habits, and communities that inform their lives. After students have completed a teacher-guided literature review on identity from an anthropological perspective, they move on to data collection. To introduce the data collection part of the “Where I’m From” unit, Mr. Curmi shares a lesson slide that defines artifacts as “any product of social beings or their behavior (objects, texts, visual media, buildings, machinery, audio, music, folktales, myths, pottery, documents, laws, books, poems). The list literally goes on forever!” He explains in his discussion that artifacts help us to understand the practices, habits, and cultures of people, including ourselves in an auto-ethnography unit.

Classroom activities include naming and discussing artifacts found in student backpacks, neighborhood walks to identify artifacts significant in the community, and creative noticing activities (i.e.,

mapping cracks on a sidewalk or creating museums of tiny objects) adapted from Keri Smith’s *How to Be an Explorer of the World: Portable Life Museum*. These activities foster a spirit of discovery and make the practice of “doing ethnography” active and engaging. Readings of anthropological analyses such as excerpts from Miller’s *The Comfort of Things*, photo analyses of artifacts such as the fashion choices of everyday New Yorkers featured on the blog *Humans of New York* (humansofnewyork.com), and photo-stories of the objects carried by refugees provide models of how artifacts teach us about the world.

MAKING OBJECTS TALK

In *The Teacher and the World: A Study of Cosmopolitanism as Education*, Hansen asks, “How do you encourage your students to engage in ethical work—to carry themselves in ways that draw out their aesthetic, moral, and intellectual capability?” (46). Cosmopolitanism encourages “reflective loyalty” to local concerns, commitments, and values; it espouses rootedness, that is, an attachment to values close to one’s heart and mind. This groundedness operates in tandem with a mindful openness to the wider world and its possibilities for learning and transformation. To model this kind of thinking for students, the teachers cocreate the curriculum by sharing their own artifacts and stories.

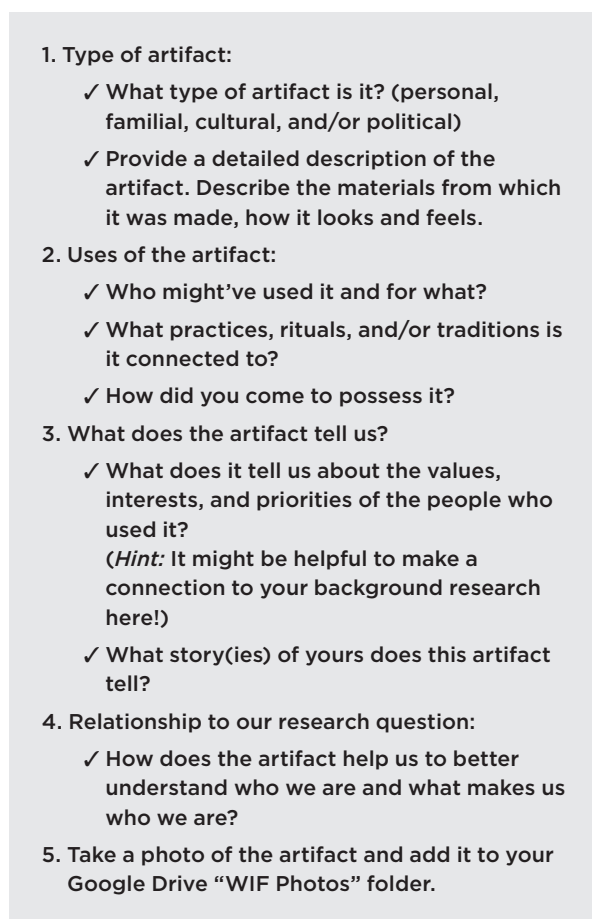
When I observed his lesson modeling how to use an Artifact Analysis Guide, Mr. Curmi shared artifacts from summers spent in Malta with his family. Students giggled when he shared a photo from his teenage years, sporting spiked blue hair, arms around cousins wearing matching, hand-sewn floral costumes for a celebration in his parents’ hometown of Ġhajnsielem, Malta. His writing described a festival, late nights eating “bread snacks” with cousins, and watching the sun rise on the beach. Students were delighted by his hand-sewn costume. When Mr. Curmi asked the class if anyone makes costumes for celebrations, hands went up all over the classroom.

In writing descriptively about his memories, Mr. Curmi was not only teaching artifact analysis, unearthing the stories and meanings to be found in

objects, but also modeling Hansen’s cosmopolitan notion of “reflective loyalty to the known” or pride in one’s own culture and heritage. We often think of “modeling” curriculum as showing students how to write within a particular genre or engage in other academic tasks, but in an artifactual curriculum, teachers must first demonstrate a commitment to their own traditions and customs by making their identities visible with sensory descriptions of objects they hold dear. It’s important that teachers participate in curating their own treasured objects and sharing their own writing and analyses. Mr. Curmi’s *id-drop* sits alongside his co-teacher’s quotidian pair of striped socks and a tea tin from her father.

Mr. Curmi builds “sociocultural conversations” about artifacts by training students to locate and analyze artifacts from their homes that hold cultural, personal, familial, even political significance. To support young people in making discoveries about themselves and their heritage, he offers a great deal of scaffolding for artifact selection. For example, he asks students to jot reflections about family traditions and celebrations, draw maps and write observations of familiar and important places (e.g., a bedroom, kitchen, or local park), and peruse family photo albums. He then asks them to identify artifacts significant in these places by circling them in their writing or on their maps. He also offers young people the option to describe or create artistic representations of lost artifacts that they hold in their memories. The time spent on artifact selection widens the ethnographic lens, inviting the students to interrogate memories and visually study spaces. When it comes time to make the artifacts “talk,” Mr. Curmi asks the students to read each one carefully, supporting their analysis with the Artifact Analysis Guide (see Figure 1).

Tee had selected and photographed several artifacts: a sports pendant, a dance video game, a jewelry box with ballerinas, a Cabbage Patch doll, a sketchbook, a music player, and a statue of an Egyptian queen. When she interrogated the artifacts using the guide, she decided to write about the three that pulled most strongly on her identity and culture: her



The image shows a grey rectangular box containing a list of five numbered steps for analyzing an artifact. Each step includes a checkmark and a brief instruction. Step 1 asks for the type of artifact and a detailed description. Step 2 asks about uses, who used it, and how it was acquired. Step 3 asks what the artifact tells about values and interests, with a hint to connect to background research. Step 4 asks how the artifact helps understand identity. Step 5 asks for a photo to be added to a specific Google Drive folder.

1. Type of artifact:
 - ✓ What type of artifact is it? (personal, familial, cultural, and/or political)
 - ✓ Provide a detailed description of the artifact. Describe the materials from which it was made, how it looks and feels.
2. Uses of the artifact:
 - ✓ Who might’ve used it and for what?
 - ✓ What practices, rituals, and/or traditions is it connected to?
 - ✓ How did you come to possess it?
3. What does the artifact tell us?
 - ✓ What does it tell us about the values, interests, and priorities of the people who used it?
(Hint: It might be helpful to make a connection to your background research here!)
 - ✓ What story(ies) of yours does this artifact tell?
4. Relationship to our research question:
 - ✓ How does the artifact help us to better understand who we are and what makes us who we are?
5. Take a photo of the artifact and add it to your Google Drive “WIF Photos” folder.

FIGURE 1.
Artifact Analysis Guide

sketchbook, the doll, and the statue. Her sketchbook evoked stories of her grandfather’s murals in her neighborhood, political acts that “beautified” her African American neighborhood, which is being gentrified. She reflected, “I think I got my talent from him.” Her artifacts were situated among people and memories, physical objects calling up moments and stories that have influenced her life.

Her childhood doll Nijah evoked Tee’s everyday life and personal history. She examined the doll’s materiality—the texture of Nijah’s hair on which she learned to braid, the doll’s role as an attachment object and a symbol of her parents’ care for her well-being, and the doll’s features, “chocolate brown skin and brown eyes,” as a source of pride. In interrogating the meanings and traditions the objects

hold, Tee saw them as a prism into the larger auto-ethnographic research question into who she is.

My childhood doll Nijah is familial and cultural; she is a 1986 authentic Cabbage Patch doll. She has long black twisted yarn hair, and a brown face with chubby brown cheeks and light brown eyes. Ever since I got her at the age of 4 she has always worn a long red jeaned dress with white stars, and red flowers; two pockets are sewn on each side to fit anything we discovered from our daily adventures. When I was little I loved dolls like any other kid, but my parents were always picky with what dolls they wanted me playing with. It never made sense to me until I was older, my parents wanted me to have dolls that looked like me. Nijah was the first doll I had that shared the same skin tone and features as me. My mom believed that your first doll was always going to be the doll you remembered. It needed to hold a symbolic meaning to you that represents who you are as a person. Nijah had black braided hair, chocolate brown skin and brown eyes. Nijah helped shape my identity, helped me understand myself as an African American and what it is like to be a part of such a beautiful background.

Pahl and Rowsell write that stories evoke space and time; “in telling stories about objects, the object becomes realized as material and sensual” (11). Tee’s



FIGURE 2.
Tee’s artifact, her doll

thoughtful writing is a consequence of the time she spent analyzing her artifacts for their material and aesthetic traits and unearthing the stories they tell. In analyzing, writing about, and presenting her artifacts, Tee honored her heritage and made visible parts of her identity. She “read” the objects’ form and shape. Her description of Nijah’s “long black twisted yarn hair” and “chubby brown cheeks” uses visuals, texture, and color to make her argument for cultural pride, demonstrate the importance of well-chosen dolls for Black girls, and acknowledge her now-mature understanding of her mother’s choices for her. Tee’s artifacts came to life as she interrogated their situated histories in her home and culture and considered how to share them with a diverse group of peers.

During a lull at the end of the final day of artifact sharing, she asked, “Can I share another one?” Granted permission, she went to the front of the room and projected a photo of a heavy white stone statue of an Egyptian queen from the classroom computer. She had written that the queen, her namesake, “was beautiful, a wise, powerful, intelligent leader; like the glue that kept her empire from falling.” The statue enabled her to deepen the argument she made with her doll, to explain the power and symbolism in her name. As she described the statue to the class, she offered a short history lesson and narrated how and why her family is drawn to Egyptian names. When a peer asked if she was Egyptian, Tee said, “Yeah, all the way back.” Her seemingly casual response reveals an understanding of heritage and a rhetorical capacity to share her mother’s lessons with the class.

FOSTERING EXTRAORDINARY OPENNESS

The activity that asks students to share personal artifacts, which sets the tone for the auto-ethnography project, emerged spontaneously from the process of developing the course. In the first year we offered the class (2012), my co-teacher and I noted the beauty of the artifacts about which students were blogging. We were moved by their writing, and our understanding of the young people we taught deepened (and in some cases was transformed) by reading about the objects they deemed important. We had

a hunch that students would be similarly moved and shaped by hearing about each other's artifacts. It was in this moment that we recognized some of the ways in which artifacts could be "invitations" to larger cosmopolitan habits of mind.

In the 2017–18 academic year, Mr. Curmi refined his curriculum to help students locate hard-to-spot cultural artifacts in their homes and communities. In our conversation about this revision, he noted that the artifact presentations "changed the tone of the classroom and got kids thinking about talking about one another's experiences in curious ways, in ways that came from wanting to understand." Similarly, the students noticed that their relationships with their peers had changed. "I knew no one in this class, and I feel like I know so many more people now," one student wrote in a reflection on the assignment. The development of these deeper personal connections is not surprising. Artifact presentations often lead to "relational learning" and "empathetic listening" (Pahl and Rowsell 108) because young people share artifacts that are powerfully connected to their identities.

To prepare the students for artifact sharing, Mr. Curmi explicitly invites openness and sets expectations for warmth and respect. I observed a lesson during which he and his co-teacher demonstrated what they were expecting of the class. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates the camaraderie between the two teachers and also represents the tone of the conversation they were asking the students to emulate.

MS. M: This is not easy for everyone. People are sharing parts of themselves that maybe they haven't shared before. They're taking a risk, so please be respectful of that. After each presentation, we're going to ask people to share "warm fuzzies"—something positive and supportive. I also want you to be thinking what artifacts teach you about each other.

MR. CURMI: Cool, Ms. M, can you start us off with your artifact?

MS. M: (picks up tin off her desk) While I'm using this on my desk to hold pencils, it's

actually a tea tin. It used to be full of the Iranian black tea my dad makes. I grew up drinking this kind of tea every night with my family and eating a date. Persians love dates. They would be on the table. My mom would tell me how healthy dates are and why I needed to have one with my tea. I'd eat one mostly to please her. It's still why I eat dates. (laughs)

MR. CURMI: An example of a "warm fuzzy" would be that I learned her family is Iranian and that tea was an important part of her evening routine as a kid. Drinking tea was a family ritual. It also is a thing that reminds her of her dad. I also like that it's an ordinary, everyday object. It just sits on her desk.

MS. M: Sara was brave enough to volunteer to go first. Does everyone have the "warm fuzzy" hand-out? It's kind of like putting down a "glow" and then what the artifact teaches you about the presenter.

The "warm fuzzy" feedback form prompted, "Share some love! What did the presenter do particularly well in their presentation? Be specific." And it then included a follow-up question with roots in anthropology: "What did you learn about who the presenter is or what makes them who they are from their artifacts?" With the "warm fuzzies," the teachers intentionally created space in the classroom for "thoughtful receptivity to the new." Hansen notes that a cosmopolitan orientation is agentive, participatory, and responsive; it bespeaks an "extraordinary openness to others and new ways of doing and being" (103).

As they continued to share "warm fuzzies" and anthropological noticings, many students were moved by shared connections to popular cultural or geographic affiliations. Responses included: "I love that song too" and "I had no idea that Jess also celebrated J'Ouvert [a Caribbean festival] and had family from Barbados like me." Even in this classroom in one of the world's most multicultural cities, Marcy, a youth with Haitian roots, mused, "I didn't realize everyone is as diverse as I am," a commentary on the too-often-invisible multiplicity of her community. Tee noted that she hadn't realized a peer was

“from St. Lucia” or another from “the Bronx.” As cosmopolitan invitations, artifacts harness collective knowledge and the cultural pluralism of contemporary classrooms.

LISTENING TO OBJECTS

If objects do indeed “talk,” as Miller has noted, then inviting them into the classroom creates an opportunity to listen to them. In her final reflection on the “Where I’m From” project, Tee wrote, “I think that

As cosmopolitan invitations, artifacts harness collective knowledge and the cultural pluralism of contemporary classrooms.

[artifacts are] a powerful way to tell your own story because they create a completely different side to how people see you. It’s also interesting in what ways you show yourself in comparison to who people tell you

you are.” Objects tell stories of lives in ways that language may not be able to; they help youth and teachers move beyond rehearsed stories and identity categories and into a richer sense of self and others (Miller).

Artifacts invite the cosmopolitan practices of self-awareness and curiosity about others in part because they “expand the differences and similarities in view” (Hansen 54). Even seemingly homogenous communities are far more diverse than we sometimes recognize. By offering windows into students’ homes and communities, artifactual curriculum nurtures a sense of unity across wide swaths of difference. **EJ**

NOTE

All student names are pseudonyms.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

When students make real-world connections between themselves and their community, they can participate in authentic communication activities based on issues that matter to them personally. In this activity, students research a decade in their school’s history, with small groups researching specific topics. Within each group, students take on specific roles, such as archivist, manager, techie, or researcher. Students become active archivists, gathering photos, artifacts, interviews, and stories for a museum exhibit that highlights one decade in their school’s history. The final project can be shared and displayed in your classroom, in the school auditorium, or in the library.
<https://bit.ly/2QAgheJ>