



# Buttoning Up a Hands-On History Lesson

## *Using Everyday Objects to Teach About Historical Change*

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Introducing elementary school students to history concepts is difficult because, due to their age, they have few reference points for comprehending change over time (Thornton & Vukelich, 1988). A historical collection of everyday items can provide concrete examples to help students construct a concept of change.

Artifacts of the past are all around us. Items found in the home, school, and community have a history and have undergone change. Even something as common as a button can be surprisingly useful in revealing how technology, fashion, and the physical materials for creating clothing have evolved over time. Likewise, the consistent patterns of socioeconomic and other differences across history can be identified.

Student interest might guide the selection of items for study. Dolls, toys, comic books, cameras, tools, quilts, clocks, jewelry, keys, shoes, etc. all reflect a history and could lead to meaningful investigations. Collections of a particular item might be discovered among family members, located through collector's clubs (see your local history society for referral), or developed in the classroom (by soliciting the donation of particular items or securing them at garage sales or rummage sales). Any small, inexpensive, easily stored item that has

undergone style, material, or technological changes will work well as a basis for lessons of this type. The investigation of a collection, particularly one that students have contributed to or one containing familiar items, can help students recognize their own relationship to the past. This article will concentrate on using a button collection to illustrate historical change.

### *Developing Process Skills*

- *First, the lesson concentrates on the important process skills of making observations and inferences and classifying real objects* (Taba, 1967). Begin the lesson by dividing students into small groups. Give each group a representative set of eight to ten buttons to explore. Students will be surprised at the tremendous variety of buttons. Allow them ample time to discuss and record their observations and inferences. What different characteristics do buttons have? How are individual buttons different? What can you infer about the age of a button from these characteristics? (See Figure 1.)

After they've had some time to make observations and inferences, ask students to arrange their buttons in a timeline from most recent to oldest, based upon the information they've gathered. While their information is limited, this activity

will help students consider differences they have noted and utilize any prior knowledge they have that relates to changes in button design or materials. For example, one student may remember reading that plastic did not come into wide use until the late 1950s. Another student might note a previously popular rock star or commercial logo on a button. The utilization of prior knowledge builds connections between the new learning and existing information. Students' timelines may be inaccurate but they represent their current knowledge and enable the teacher to informally assess that knowledge. Have them think about how buttons have changed through time. Table 1 contains information that may be helpful. Why are buttons from one time period different from those of another? Each small group should record its ideas on a list and then share their findings.

- *Next, the whole class brainstorm different characteristics of button design and draws them as a web or concept map.* See Figure 2 (Sunal & Haas, 1993). As characteristics are identified, have students show buttons which demonstrate these characteristics.

- *Then the class considers factors that affect button design and webs them.* Identify as many examples of these as you can. Then ask the students if they can think of examples

**Figure 1. How Can You Tell That Something Is Old?**

Physical changes that may have occurred in the item:	
Color change to gray, white	People's hair, gorillas' fur
Yellowed	Magazines, newspapers, fabric, ivory
Faded	Dyed fabrics, plastics, painted items, paper
Stained	Fabrics, paper
Wrinkled	People's skin, paper, fabric
Chipped	Glass, pottery, wooden items
Threadbare	People's hair, stuffed animals, carpets, fabrics
Torn, frayed	Electric cords, ribbons, fabric, paper
Brittle	People's bones, rubber, elastic, paper, plastic
Rusty, tarnished	Nails, metal tools, buttons, statues
Moldy, mildewed	Food, wallpaper, fabrics
Deterioration, disintegration	Paper, fabric, wooden items
Insect damage	Horn, wooden, food items

that will link the two webs together. After they've done so, choose a few button examples and call on students to classify the characteristics of each button to see where it would be located on the web.

**Understanding  
Factors for Change**

• *At this point the expert (collector or teacher) steps in to broaden and deepen students' knowledge* (Lawson, Abraham, & Renner, 1989). The expert shows students new examples from the button collection, demonstrates how button design has changed over time, and makes connections between economic, political, and cultural characteristics of the past and button design. For example, in the late 19th century manufacturers sought a substitute for ivory, which was

becoming increasingly rare, and celluloid, originally developed as a substitute for billiard balls, became a popular medium for buttons. Also at this time, "vegetable ivory," made from nuts of the South American tagua palm was used extensively. Some men's suits sold today still have old stock vegetable ivory buttons.

• *Students should compare their timeline arrangement of buttons with the new information they have received.* The expert should answer questions and discuss the examples.

• *Then a chart of events affecting button design is completed.* See Figure 3 for example.

**Linking Personal Lives with  
"The Big Picture"**

• *Personal significance of artifacts such as buttons is connected to*

*larger historical realities and can be related to modern trends as well.*

Discuss for example:

1. Why are most buttons now sold in stores plastic?
2. What motifs (patterns) do we find today on buttons? Snoopy, Ninja Turtles, and dinosaur buttons have recently been sold in stores. How are these related to popular television shows and movies? What other motifs are common today?
3. Why are the beautiful glass buttons of the 1950s no longer popular? Could this be related to the popularity of spin washers and tumble dryers?
4. What about the recent trend of selling ornate removable button covers for plain blouse buttons? Does this save buttons from the rigors of automatic washers and dryers?

• *Close the lesson by having each student choose one button, describe it, and explain how it is consistent with its current or historical circumstances.*

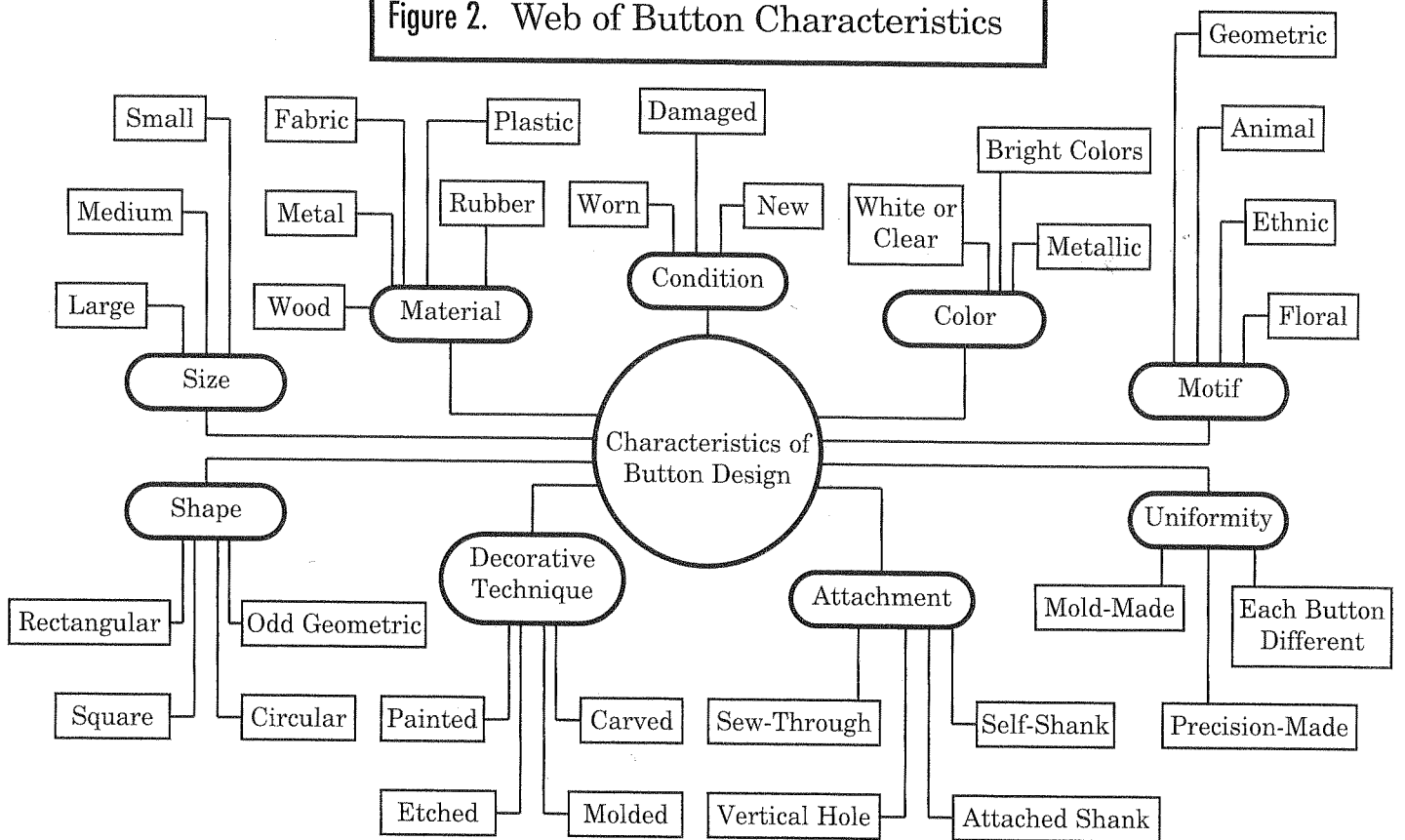
• *Teacher's goals are achieved as adequate background research and high level student thinking leads to significant generalizations.* Depending on the grade level of the students and the particular goals of the lesson, students may learn to connect resource concepts with business and marketing realities, and they may even evaluate the material and political culture in which they find themselves.

The depth and significance of the lessons will depend on the depth and significance of the teacher's own research and historical, social, and political goals.

**Button Collecting  
References and Resources**

Albert, A. H. (1976). *Record of American uniform and historical buttons*. Boyertown, PA: Boyertown Pub.

**Figure 2. Web of Button Characteristics**



<b>Dates associated with the item:</b>	
Patent, copyright dates	Buttons, mechanical items, books, songs, printed items
Mintage, manufacturing dates	
Written and printed dates	
	Coins, statues, cars, food packages
	Letters, contracts, calendars, diaries, quilts, samplers

<b>Characteristics of the place or manner in which the item was found:</b>	
In a container believed to have been sealed a long time ago.	Attic or basement trunk, safe deposit box, buried chest.
In an accessible area.	Items that slipped through cracks in floor or wall, inside stuffed furniture, under porches
Under a layer of dust, dirt, trash	Items found in an archaeological dig, discovered while digging.

<b>Style:</b>	
Mode of manufacturing	Hand carved, hewn, forged
Outdated art style or fashion	Art Nouveau, bustles, high-topped shoes

<b>Materials:</b>	
Materials no longer in common use due to scarcity	Pelts, horns of endangered or extinct species, ivory
Outdated materials	Pure linen or cotton items, celluloid

Albert, L. S., & Adams, J. F. (1970). *Essential data concerning china buttons*. Akron, OH: The National Button Society of America.

Ertell, V. B. (1973). *The colorful world of buttons*. Princeton, NJ: Pyne Press.

Houart, V. (1977). *Buttons: A collector's guide*. London: Souvenir Press Ltd.

Hughes, E., & Lester, M. (1981). *The big book of buttons*. Boyertown, PA: Boyertown Pub.

Lamm, R., Lorah, B., Lorah, L., & Schuler, H. W. (1970). *Guidelines for collecting china buttons*. Akron, OH: The National Button Society of America. From the same volume as Albert & Adams (1970) above.

Luscomb, S. C. (1967). *The collector's encyclopedia of buttons*. New York: Crown.

Schiff, S. O. (1979). *Buttons: Art in miniature*. Berkeley, CA: Lancaster-Miller Pub.

Button collecting is the third largest organized hobby in the U.S. There is a national society for button collectors: The National Button Society, Ms. Lois K. Pool, Secretary, 2733 Juno Place, Akron, OH 44313. Contact the National Button Society and ask for the name of the button collector's group nearest you.

*book for elementary social studies* (Introductory Edition). Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.

Thornton, S., & Vukelich, R. (1988). Effects of children's understanding of time concepts on historical understanding. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 16(1), 69-82.

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Lawson, A., Abraham, M., & Renner, J. (1989). *A theory of instruction: Using the learning cycle to teach concepts and thinking skills*. Atlanta: National Association for Research in Science Teaching Monograph #1.

Sunal, C. S., & Haas, M. (1993). *Social studies and the elementary/middle school student*. Ft. Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 120-121.

Taba, H. (1967). *Teacher's hand-*

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**Figure 3. Examples of Events That Have Affected Button Design**

Event	Effect on Button Design
1870s. John Wesley Hyatt develops celluloid as a substitute for ivory billiard balls.	Celluloid becomes a popular medium for buttons: transparent celluloid replaces glass, "ivoroid" replaces ivory.
1861. Prince Albert dies. Queen Victoria wears black mourning clothing with jet buttons.	Black is the fashion, even wedding gowns are often black. An inexpensive substitute for jet, black glass, becomes popular for buttons.
Post Civil War to early 1900s. Industrial growth and labor organizations.	Brass uniform buttons are numerous and fashionable.
"Gay" 1890s period of rising prosperity. Many millionaires are made in the banking, mining, manufacturing, trade, and transportation businesses.	Large buttons with a gaudy central jewel are popular.
1902. Teddy Roosevelt refuses to shoot a bear cub encountered on a hunting expedition. Toy bears are used as party favors for the President's daughter Alice's birthday. They become known as "Teddy Bears."	Sew-on political buttons featuring Teddy bears become popular.