Creating a Museum of Family Artifacts

Judith Y. Singer and Alan J. Singer

We have used the Family Artifact Museum Project at a number of age and grade levels to promote student interest in social studies and to create a cultural context for learning. These have included presentations of family artifacts as part of a summer-long thematic project on the people of New York City in a preK-fourth grade community-based program; an artifact displays in a public school kindergarten, second grade and fourth grade classrooms; a class “Museum of Immigration” at an ethnically diverse Queens, New York, middle school; a “Museum of Russian Immigration” created as a cooperative-learning team project by recent Russian immigrants attending a Brooklyn, New York, high school; and in university-level undergraduate and graduate teacher education classes.

Students at all levels need to have opportunities to represent themselves in their work in ways that are meaningful to them. The Family Artifact Museum Project provides an opportunity for students to accomplish this as they bring their family stories into the classroom and to see how the lives of ordinary people are part of history.

This project is a creative way to address our state’s (New York) social studies and literacy learning standards and national social studies thematic strands. Teachers can help children understand the concept of an “artifact” by introducing appropriate children’s literature (see sidebar, p. 9). An artifact display potentially represents a broad cross-section of contemporary U.S. history, including waves of immigration to the U.S., the Civil Rights Movement in the segregated south, the Cold War, and technological change—all historical developments that take on meaning for students in the process of sharing relevant artifacts. In addition, sharing family artifacts supports the development of a sense of community in the classroom.

Overview

The teacher (a woman in this example) can introduce the idea of a Family Artifact Museum by having students read and discuss one or more relevant pieces of children’s literature, including The Keeping Quilt by Patricia Polacco or The Hundred Penny Box by Sharon Bell Mathis. She then shares one of her family artifacts: a kitchen implement that belonged to her grandmother, or an engraved locket her grandfather gave to her grandmother before they were married. These objects precipitate a discussion of immigration (Strand TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE), courtship practices (Strand CULTURE), and changes in technology (Strand SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY).

Students create a Family Artifact Museum by arranging their artifacts and accompanying museum cards (descriptions of the artifact) on a table. Each class member takes a turn presenting his or her family artifact, explaining where it comes from, how old
They sat and listened to their classmates and showed interest in seeing the artifacts... They ended up wanting to walk around the room and exchange with everyone.

In another elementary education class, a teacher described the responses of her second graders to the family artifact project in their classroom: "All the children were really into it. They really loved sharing their artifacts. They have the feeling of being more connected to each other, of getting to know each other's family backgrounds, of why that artifact is so important to them, or who gave it to them. I really thought it was a great project. And it was appropriate for second grade. I thought it was age appropriate. They understood it; they got into it. And the principal loved it, too. She thought it was a great idea.” Citing the principal's support in this time of standardized teaching and learning is a powerful affirmation of a project that focuses on individual children and how they represent themselves.

**A Project for Preschoolers**

We helped to create “Family Artifact Museums” in early childhood and elementary school classes. One museum was part of a theme unit on the people of New York City at a pre-K through 4th grade educational program in an innercity community. The other sites included a second grade classroom in a suburban area and a fourth grade classroom in an urban community.

At the preschool/afterschool, classes read about local history and visited a number of community landmarks and museums in preparation for creating their own Family Artifact Museum. Teachers, children and some family members participated in the culminating activity by sharing and describing family artifacts that were exhibited in the school’s community room, where children gave tours of the exhibit to other classes and to their parents at scheduled times. These artifacts included written documents, jewelry, clothing, photographs, foods and music. Expressed goals of the project were to involve students in thinking about and understanding history and the contemporary world while bringing the cultural and historical experiences of students and their families directly into the classroom and learning process.

One teacher introduced the family artifact project by reading from a work of children's literature and by showing students an artifact from her own family. In general, teachers offered a simple definition of a family artifact as "something that is old and is important to your family.” When possible, children handled the artifact, and they discussed what it was used for and why it was important to families. During this process, teachers modeled a Family Artifact presentation.

The children were encouraged to bring their artifacts to school before the day of the museum display so they could practice it is, what it is used for, and who it has belonged to. During this presentation, a photograph is taken of each presenter. Afterwards, the photographs are arranged on a bulletin board with the museum cards, and the display becomes their Family Artifact Museum. Family artifacts have included religious objects, jewelry, kitchen utensils, and an infant’s christening clothes, as well as the more common photograph and favorite toy.

One teacher described the responses of the children to this project: “Sara brought a heart shell box and Carey brought in his card talking about his baby blanket. I had each child sit in front of the class and present their family artifact. It was really good to see how the children reacted to each other and each other’s work.
explaining them in their classes. In one classroom, an eight-year-old presented a hat woven by her grandmother from palm fronds in the Dominican Republic. She explained that it was passed “from my grandmother to my other grandmother, to my mother and then to me” and that for thirty years “no one has ever worn the hat.” As the other children tried to understand more about this artifact, each repeated, “from your grandmother to your other grandmother, to your mother and then to you.” Another child brought a photo album given to her mother ten years earlier. She walked around the circle, showing a few photographs to each child. Even though they were growing restless, each child became attentive at his or her turn to see the picture.

From our perspective as educational researchers, one of the most memorable presentations was by a three-year-old in a preschool classroom who presented a picture and proudly proclaimed, “My great-grandma is my artifact. She is almost 100 years old.” When we examined photographs and the museum cards that parents and teachers helped students prepare for the final museum display, another young child had also identified an older relative as his “artifact.” We do not consider these statements to be mistakes, but examples of how young children learn by making what is being taught meaningful to themselves.

The Family Artifact Museum display, and the presentations that we observed and photographed, allowed teachers to introduce preschool children to the underlying concepts behind five of the ten NCSS thematic strands. Figure 1 describes the artifact presentations from two classes of three-year-olds (with 19 and 16 children) and the thematic strands that apply to each presentation. For example, an Ecuadorian bead and string bag was used to introduce a sense of family (INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS), ethnic culture (CULTURE) and of geographic space (PEOPLES, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS). Baby pictures were used to discuss individual development (INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY). It is evident from these charts that children repeatedly named their family artifacts in ways that were meaningful to them.

The children were helped in preparing their presentations by their parents and teachers. They were photographed with their artifacts by their teachers who mounted the photographs on colorful display paper along with the child’s name and a brief written description of the artifact based on their presentation.

Suburban School, Second and Third Grades

One of the teachers who participated in this project teaches in a suburban elementary school where he works with students in the second and third grades. He uses the project to engage students as historians as they examine the material culture (artifacts) of their own families. He had children read a series of artifact-related books and he read some more difficult chapter books to the class. The ability of literature to promote social studies understanding was evident when students defined and explained the meaning of the term “artifact” in their reports and in full class discussion. Definitions included: “Something passed down to you”; “Special family treasure”; “It could be something special to your family that they really care about”; “Something that is important to your family that you pass along”; “It could be hand-made.”

What was also significant in these reports was a growing sense of “historical time” and of “geographical place.” For example, a family Bible was understood not only as a religious item or an example of beliefs, but also as a record of family genealogy, as marked on the inside covers. A sense of “historical time” extended to student discussion of the technological changes represented by the artifacts. There were numerous exclamations from the class when an artifact was over one hundred years old. Many students were also able to locate the place of origin of the artifact on a world map.

Each of the nineteen students in the class came to the display table in front of the class, presented a Family Artifact, and read from a museum card that he or she had written. Many children had artifacts from World War II that had been passed down by family members. Interestingly, by second grade, the children apparently understood that an artifact is a thing, not a person. Five photographs

Figure 2. Artifacts Collected in a Suburban Classroom, Second and Third Grade (and Thematic Strand)

1. A family Bible, Hebrew Scriptures, where family events are recorded
2. An embroidered Christmas decoration
3. A “family tree” faxed by a grandparent in Florida
4. A thirty-one year old birthday book that her grandmother gave to her aunt and that reminds her of her grandmother
5. A key chain from 1950 from the grandfather I was named after
6. Binoculars taken from a German prisoner of war during World War II and a picture of a grandfather in uniform
7. 1950s era photograph showing a grandmother wearing a rhinestone necklace and the necklace
8. Lizard pendant given from grandmother to mother to child
9. Photograph of an antique silver teapot from Turkey that was a wedding gift for great-grandparents
10. Great-grandfather’s ice pick from 1915
11. Photograph of an Irish family before migrating to the United States circa 1920
12. Trophy won by a family member in a boat race
13. Brooklyn Dodger baseball cap from Zaida (Jewish for grandfather) who lives in Florida and I miss
14. Grandfather’s World War II era Civil defense bag from Long Beach. Boy was named after this grandfather
15. Photograph of Brazilian native ceremonial mask sent by family member who was a journalist
16. A photograph album showing grandmother with British Royal family in Canada
17. 100-year-old pocket watch given to great-grandfather at birth
18. Quilt crocheted by great-great grandmother for my Mom when she was a baby
19. Grandfather’s war medal
were presented, and in each case the child designated the photograph itself, not the person depicted, as the “artifact.” In addition, to the classroom teacher, the school’s principal, an inclusion teacher, and a class aide presented artifacts. The involvement of the classroom adults (teacher and assistant) and parents clearly contributed to the excitement experienced by students during the presentations and their excitement about history.

Two of the students presented material of a religious nature, but neither of the children mentioned religion in their presentation. The student who presented a Bible described it as a record of family history, and the student who presented a Christmas ornament emphasized that it was embroidered (hand stitched) by a family member. There were five photographs, two of which were accompanied by physical artifacts. One photograph showed a grandmother wearing a necklace, and the child also brought in the necklace. Another showed a grandfather in World War II uniform. The child also brought in binoculars that had been taken from a German prisoner. Two artifacts were either too expensive or rare to bring to school so students brought photographs of the artifact. A number of the artifacts were special because they reminded the child of a loved one who was either dead or lived far away.

We made a video of the student presentations and the museum. Later viewing of the video revealed that the project allowed teachers to introduce elementary school students to the underlying concepts behind six of the ten NCSS thematic strands (see Figure 2). For example, an ice pick from 1915 led to a discussion of historical change (TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE), what families value and keep (INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS) and how changes in technology have changed the way that we live (SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY). A report on a Brooklyn Dodger baseball cap from a Zaida (Jewish for grandfather) “who lives in Florida and I miss” included an explanation of the Yiddish language (CULTURE), who the Brooklyn Dodgers were (TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE), where Florida is (PEOPLES, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS), and a boy’s relationship with his grandfather.

Figure 3. Artifacts Collected in an Inner-city Classroom, Fourth Grade (and Thematic Strand)

2. Autographed baseball. Gift from father who “taught me how to play baseball.”
3. My Dad (no physical artifact). Father recently died in Canada during heart valve surgery and left no pictures or memorabilia.
5. Socks. Belonged to great-great grandmother who brought them from Jamaica to keep her feet warm.
6. Picture of Africa from a magazine. His mother cut it out of a magazine when she was a child and has saved it since then.
7. Necklace. A present from aunt Tina who “loved me”. Necklace has a small glass cross but student does not identify it as such or offer religious significance. Student’s name is lettered on a piece of rice inside the glass cross. Aunt purchased necklace on a trip to Tampa, Florida.
8. Music Box Bible and praying hands. This was my grandmother’s favorite. Important because my grandmother died.
9. Brooch. Seventy-years-old. Her grandmother gave it to her mother when her mother was seventeen years old to wear to church.
10. Wooden African statues. Gift to remind us of where we are from.
11. Pearl Earrings. My great grandmother Ruby brought them from Jamaica.
12. Sports cap with that uncle gave as a gift. Monogrammed with Uncle’s name. Uncle has since died.
14. Ceramic statue of a bear holding a baseball. Gift from father who got it from his father. Purchased in Jamaica.
15. Pen with school name. Presenter found the pen. Reminds him that his grandfather went to the same school.
(INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS). The project also supported the ability of students to examine cultural similarities and differences, an important social studies and multicultural goal, as they discussed what families valued and decided to pass on to future generations. In Figure 2 we can see the emerging importance of history alongside culture and geography in student presentations.

Urban School, Fourth and Fifth Grades

Another of the teachers who participated in this project worked with ten-year-old students at an academically underperforming innercity school. Seventeen of the twenty-eight students in the class presented an artifact as part of the Family Artifact Museum (a significant level of participation in this school) and addressed six questions in their report:

▶ What is it?
▶ Who gave it to you?
▶ Why is this an artifact?
▶ When did you get it and how did it become an artifact?
▶ Where did it come from?
▶ Explain how the artifact is important to you?

The artifacts included a *columba* (thumb organ) that was originally from a great-grandfather who purchased it in an antique store in Africa; an autographed baseball, “a gift from my father who taught me how to play”; and socks that “belonged to my great-great-grandmother who brought them from Jamaica to keep her feet warm.” Parents who were immigrants from the Caribbean provided many artifacts. One student had no physical artifact, but told the class about his father, who recently died during heart valve surgery and had left behind no pictures or memorabilia. As students presented their reports, other students asked them follow-up questions. As the lesson progressed, more and more students had such up questions, which we considered to be a measure of the class’s engagement in the project. Perhaps of greatest significance in this class was the depth of student involvement in both presenting and listening. Student presentations in this class showed a strong

Children’s Literature

A family artifact is part of the story in each of these books.


Mathis, Sharon. *The Hundred Penny Box* (Illustr. Leo and Diane Dillon). New York: Puffin, 1975. A boy named Michael, from an African American family, understands how much his great-great-Aunt Dew needs to hold on to her artifact: a wooden box containing one hundred pennies, one for every year of her life. Michael’s mother wants to give Aunt Dew a new box that is smaller and prettier than the big clumsy one she has.

Mills, Lauren. *The Rag Coat.* Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1991. Minna is a little girl from Appalachia who wants desperately to go to school, but her father has died from miner’s cough, and her mother has no money to buy her a coat. Quilting helps her get to go to school, and revives happy memories.

Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt.* New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1998. This quilt story spans several generations of a Jewish family, beginning with Anna, the author’s great grandmother, whose family travels from Russia to the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Pomerantz, Charlotte. *The Chalk Doll* (Illustr. Fran Lessac). New York: HarperCollins, 1989. Rose begs her mother for stories of what her life was like as a young girl, growing up in Jamaica. Rose learns that her mother had a rag doll, which she made herself, but her mother always wanted a “chalk” doll, a store-bought, white china doll.

connection to the social studies standards.

In the student presentations in this urban school (grades 4 and 5), more time was spent describing family culture and place of origin (geography) than was spent in the suburban (grade 2) classroom. On the other hand, these upper level students paid less attention to historical connections. This might be attributable to the nature of the artifacts themselves, but more likely to family circumstances and degree of parental involvement in the project, which was low. Many of the items presented by the students had a religious connotation, but in their reports students emphasized the secular meaning of the objects to them and their families. A large number of the artifacts were symbolic reminders of departed or distant loved ones, but there were no family photographs in this set. For many of these children, their connection to African and Caribbean culture was an important theme.

**High Expectations**

We are strong supporters of a spiral social studies curriculum that increasingly engages students in more and more sophisticated discussion and questioning of social studies concepts and material. We also adhere to a situated, multicultural approach to teaching that respects the cultures of the learners. Projects like the Family Artifact Museum meld these two pedagogies in a way that addresses the learning standards presented by the NCSS and other national organizations, while enhancing student literacy and promoting overall student academic performance. This school-as-museum approach—also used by science educators—has been described as a “learning surround” and as a “Science Circus.” In a similar vein, Howard Gardner, author of the theory of “multiple intelligences,” proposed creating educational environments for young children where schools are modeled on museums and children as young as seven or eight have the opportunity to work in mixed age groups and to apprentice with adults who are engaged in exploring particular academic discipline.

The New York State Social Studies Standards include a requirement that elementary school children learn about themselves and their place in history. Based on our work with Family Artifact Museums, we believe they are a highly effective approach to achieving this goal as well as for introducing students from different age groups to what it means to be a historian. Students at different ages were able to participate in a developmentally appropriate way.

Teachers used the project to introduce social studies themes (an important practice in culturally relevant pedagogy). Increasingly sophisticated notions of time and place were voiced in the upper elementary classrooms.

One of the most powerful aspects of this project is the way it builds a sense of community in the classroom. As they listen to one another and examine each artifact, students express pride in learning new stories about their own families and in sharing their new knowledge with classmates.

From our study, we conclude that the “Family Artifact Museum” can support multicultural and culturally relevant pedagogy; transform social studies classrooms into “laboratories of culture” that are “inherently multicultural,” to promote family literacy, and introduce children and their parents to what it means to be an historian.

**Notes**

9. We would like to thank Theodora Ridley and Yvette Sanchez, MLE Learning Center; Dana Reeves and Eric Sutz, Hofstra University; and Kwanza Adams and Holly Berg, Long Island University, Brooklyn Campus.

**Judith Singer** is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Long Island University-Brooklyn Campus. **Alan Singer** is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hofstra University, in Hempstead, New York.