Object Medleys
Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research

How do we get at the meanings of everyday (and not so everyday) objects, and how might these meanings enrich educational research? The study of objects is well established in fields such as archaeology, art history, communications, fine arts, museum studies, and sociology—but is still developing in education. Object Medleys: Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research brings together 37 educational researchers from wide-ranging contexts and multiple knowledge fields to a dialogic space in which subjects and objects, living and nonliving, entangle as medleys to open up understandings of connections made with, between, and through objects. Object Medleys offers diverse, innovative modes and lenses for representing, interpreting, and theorising object studies. The book is distinctive within scholarship on object inquiry in that much of the research has been conducted within Southern African educational contexts. This is complemented by contributions from scholars based in Canada and the United Kingdom. The original research represented in each peer-reviewed chapter expands academic conversations about what counts as data and analysis in educational research. Overall, Object Medleys illuminates the applied and theoretical usefulness of objects in response to pressing educational and societal questions.

"Object Medleys is a rich and fascinating exploration of new possibilities, with potential for research, teaching, and learning that seems almost unlimited. This book is a rich assembly of affordances for exploring and widening the role of objects in educational research. It relocates attention from language and text towards embodied and material storytelling practices where new and marginalised ways of expression can find their ways into classrooms, thereby opening completely new avenues of teaching and learning."

— Kenneth Malbjer Jorgensen, Professor, Aalborg University, Denmark

"In a time when materiality is being brought at the centre of critical inquiry in the social sciences and humanities, this edited collection offers unique insights into the relationship between objects, subjectivities, and learning. Beautifully written and cogently argued, the book breaks new ground by casting a critical spotlight on artefacts that might appear mundane at first sight but, on closer inspection, reveal complex patterns of educational potential."

— Tommaso M. Milani, Associate Professor, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Object Medleys
NEW RESEARCH – NEW VOICES

Volume 8

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The series provides students and scholars with state-of-the-art scholarship on methodology, methods and techniques focusing on a range of research topics. It comprises innovative and intellectually rigorous monographs and edited collections which bridge schools of thought and cross the boundaries of conventional approaches. The series covers a broad range of issues focusing on not only empirical-analytical and interpretive approaches, but moreover on micro and macro studies, and quantitative and qualitative methods.

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Object Medleys

Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research

Edited by

Daisy Pillay, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan and Inbanathan Naicker
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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*Izimbadada* are synonymous with the dances of the Zulu migrant workers who brought the sturdy sandals, made from recycled motor car tyres, to the city during Apartheid. Maskanda and Mbaqanga musicians popularised *izimbadada*, the name being onomatopoetic for the sound the rubber soles make when walking and performing vigorous, athletic, traditional Zulu dances.

For us, this image evokes the plurality and possibilities of working with objects in educational research.

NOTE

\(^1\) Any opinion, finding and conclusion, or recommendation expressed in this material is that of the authors and the National Research Foundation does not accept any liability in this regard.
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1. COMPOSING OBJECT MEDLEYS

OBJECT MEDLEYS: THE PRELUDE

*Object Medleys: Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research* follows on from a 3-day international research symposium held in Durban, South Africa in February 2016, organised by Daisy Pillay, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, and Inbanathan Naicker. The symposium, “*Not Just an Object*: Making Meaning of and from Everyday Objects in Educational Research,” was inspired by Claudia Mitchell’s tantalising question: “But how do we get at the meanings of these everyday (and not so everyday) objects, and how might their meanings enrich our research?” (2011, p. 36). The focus of the symposium was on working with objects (both tangible and symbolic) to produce personally, professionally, and socially useful understandings to enrich educational research. The symposium included a poster exhibition where participants presented visual images associated with objects that were connected to their own research. The symposium and exhibition brought together 34 local and international researchers (including many early career academics and postgraduate students) from multiple knowledge domains.

Keynote speakers at the event were two distinguished researchers with considerable expertise in working with objects in educational inquiry: Claudia Mitchell (McGill University, Canada) and Kate Pahl (University of Sheffield, United Kingdom). Each guest speaker gave a public seminar as a vital part of the symposium. Claudia Mitchell’s seminar spoke to the topic of “Object as Subject: Productive Entanglements in the Study of the Everyday in Educational Research.” Building on work across a variety of disciplines that looks at objects, things, and even “stuff,” and drawing on case studies where objects have been the subject of social inquiry, her talk sought to contribute to deepening an understanding of their significance to several approaches to participatory research, including autoethnographic studies in higher education. Kate Pahl’s seminar looked at “Dialogic Objects: Material Knowledge as a Challenge to Educational Practice,” where she considered the potential objects have for unsettling academic boundaries and ways of knowing by exploring the qualities of objects as they travel across diasporic contexts—to come alive, speaking in multiple languages and materialising new practices.

Each guest speaker also conducted and facilitated an interactive research workshop to offer symposium participants hands-on experience of working with objects for meaning making in educational research. Claudia Mitchell’s workshop centred on
“Things That Talk: Meaning Making through Autoethnographic Engagement with Objects and Things.” Kate Pahl’s workshop focused on “Object Pedagogies as Practice: Hearing Voices, Listening to Stories.”

Overall, the “Not Just an Object” symposium strengthened and extended local and international collaboration and networking in the emerging area of object inquiry in educational research. As Claudia Mitchell highlights in her chapter in this book, the study of objects is well established in fields such as archaeology, art history, communications, fine arts, museum studies, and sociology—but is still developing in education.

Multidisciplinary, interactive, and playful engagement with objects during the 3-day symposium offered participants diverse languages of, with, and about objects and visual representations of those objects. Together, the symposium and exhibition became “an ensemble which [portrayed] messages, of possibility and plurality” (Nordstrom, 2013, p. 252) and pushed the boundaries of what counts as evidence for generating new and different knowledges and ways of knowing in educational research.

Following on from the symposium, Daisy, Kathleen, and Inbanathan invited participants to contribute written object pieces to a collective book proposal. This invitation was also extended to other researchers who had not attended the symposium but had become interested in object inquiry through their involvement as colleagues and postgraduate students of the guest speakers, Claudia Mitchell and Kate Pahl. The invitation contained the following guidelines (adapted from Samaras, 2011, pp. 105–106):

Choose one object that captures an aspect of your educational research. Consider the suggested prompts for writing about your object:

- Explain why you chose this object.
- Share what the object represents or symbolises about your educational research.
- What is the time period of this object?
- How does culture play a role in relation to this object?
- Are there others involved with this object? What role do they play? What is their influence on your thinking? Do they see things the way you do?
- What metaphor would you choose to represent, symbolise, and reinforce the significance of this object to you?
- Express an emotion that this object brings forth for you. Describe where that emotion generates from, and might extend to, in your educational research. Be descriptive.

Kate Pahl and Claudia Mitchell were each asked to contribute a book chapter based on the public seminars they gave at the symposium. Devarakshanam Govinden, a renowned South African researcher with expertise in literature and literary theory, postcolonial studies, and feminism, was also invited to submit a chapter based on her work with objects.
AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

A medley can be understood as “a musical combination consisting of diverse parts” (Medley, n.d.). By combining wide-ranging object pieces and perspectives from 37 authors, Object Medleys continues and extends the creative process of dialogue and exchange that was set in motion at the “Not Just an Object” symposium. The book is organised into two parts. “Part One: Object Memoirs,” offers retrospective insights from established scholars, Claudia Mitchell, Kate Pahl, and Devarakshanam Govinden, bringing together their distinct yet complementary theoretical and empirical vantage points and practices of working with objects.

The “Object Memoirs” section begins with a chapter by Claudia Mitchell, whose pioneering body of work on objects in social research (Mitchell, 2011; Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Mitchell & Weber, 1999) was the catalyst for the “Not Just an Object” symposium. In her chapter, “Object as Subject: Productive Entanglements with Everyday Objects in Educational Research,” Mitchell explores how engaging with commonplace objects can enhance educational research. In particular, Mitchell makes a strong argument for the social responsibility of educational researchers to take seriously the use of objects and object inquiry in seeking to make a qualitative difference to schools, children, and teachers. Kate Pahl’s chapter, “Dialogic Objects: Material Knowledge as a Challenge to Educational Practice,” focuses on the potential of objects to make education a socially just space where people enter on their own terms, with their stories and thoughts kept alive within the material potentialities of the object. In the chapter, she engages with an approach to object pedagogies that offers a challenge to hierarchical educational practices that can deny young people voice and agency. Through an emergent approach to objects and the literacies within, she advocates for a resituating of what matters so that people’s own entanglements come to the fore in the making of knowledge together. To close the “Object Memoirs” section, Devarakshanam Govinden’s chapter, “Not Just an Object: Exploring Epistemological Vantages in Postcolonial Thinking,” focuses on the different ways everyday objects become entangled in the performance of diasporic identity. The chapter engages with object inquiry by drawing on a postcolonial, diasporic lens. Govinden shows how domestic objects can have important implications for critical questioning of what constitutes history and culture, self and selfhood.

“Part Two: Object Beginnings,” communicates new voices, new insights, and new possibilities for working with objects in educational research. Each chapter includes several pieces written by new scholars in the field of object inquiry in South Africa, Canada, and the United Kingdom. These researchers, many of whom are early career academics or postgraduate students, have engaged in object inquiry from a variety of perspectives and using diverse approaches. Their individual object pieces were woven together through dialogue with the book editors, Daisy Pillay, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan, and Inbanathan Naicker, who coauthored with the new
scholars in the spirit of peer mentoring and reciprocal learning. Each chapter offers a distinctive, multifaceted, and polyvocal (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015) exploration of interrelationships between objects, lived educational experiences, and wider social and cultural concerns.

The first chapter in this section, “The Vanda, the Rose, and the Baobab: Inspirational Display Objects as Fertile Sites for Opening up Narratives of Teacher Researcher Professional Identities,” is authored by 11 Southern African teacher researchers in higher education: Theresa Chisanga, Gladys Ashu, Pamela Mavume, Mandisa N. Dhlula-Moruri, Mukund Khatry-Chhetry, Sookdhev Rajkaran, Lazarus Mulenga, Nkosinathi Sotshangane, Nareen Gonsalves, Peter du Toit, and Daisy Pillay. The chapter focuses on objects as spaces for developing new perspectives and priorities about what teacher researchers in higher education can be, and can do differently. The chapter reveals how objects can provide important clues about how teacher researchers in higher education negotiate their daily lives and choices as moments of possibility and hope for self-transformation.

The next chapter, “A Stove, a Flask, and a Photograph: Learning Together through Object Inquiry in Self-Study Research,” builds on and adds to a rich history of object inquiry in self-study research by teacher educators. The chapter brings together the voices of three Southern African teacher educators, Mandisa N. Dhlula-Moruri, Makie Kortjass, Thokozani Ndaleni, and their doctoral research supervisor, Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan. Through object monologues and dialogues, this chapter presents individual and shared learning about how everyday objects can become more meaningful for educational researchers and educators. The chapter further illustrates how collective object inquiry can connect educators and educational researchers who often work alone.

To follow, is the chapter by Southern African educational leadership researchers, Sagie Naicker, Sibonelo Blose, Freedom Chiororo, Rashida Khan, and Inbanathan Naicker: “From a Crutch to a Bus: Learning about Educational Leadership Research and Practice through Referencing and Mapping of Objects.” In this chapter, the authors engage with Riggins’ (1994) concepts of referencing and mapping of objects in educational leadership research and practice. The chapter shows how knowing in educational leadership research and practice can be enhanced through object inquiry.

“A Tin Bath, a Cooking Pot, and a Pencil Holder: Object–Self Dialogue in Educational Research” by Lisa J. Starr, Zanib Rasool, Haleh Raissadat, and Daisy Pillay, combines perspectives and reflections from four researchers working in universities in Canada, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. The chapter demonstrates how dialogue with different domestic objects can open up spaces for advancing fresh insights into social constructions of the researcher self, and for openness to alternate ways of thinking and knowing as instruments of social change.
The subsequent chapter, “Spontaneous Shrines and the Studio Desk: Learning from Working with Objects through an Arts-Informed, Practice-Led Lens,” is the result of a transcontinental exchange of ideas between Shauna Rak in Canada, Adelheid Camilla von Maltitz in South Africa, and Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan. Both Shauna and Adelheid are artists, researchers, and art teachers (artist–researcher–teachers). The chapter gives a storied, visually illustrated account of Shauna and Adelheid’s theoretical and practical experimentation in relation to objects, while also showing the meaningful purpose that working with objects can bring to art, teaching, and research practice. This chapter offers insights for both artist and nonartist researchers and teachers into working with objects with arts-informed, innovative, and pedagogical consideration.

“A Microscope, a Stone, a Cap, and a Lampshade: Objects as Conduits for Recognising Teaching Practices as Teacher Leadership in Higher Education,” is authored by five Southern African higher education teachers, Tamirirofa Chirikure, Angela James, Nomkhosi Nzimande, Asheena Singh-Pillay, and Inbanathan Naicker. The chapter focuses on how objects can serve as tools for thinking and reflection about teaching practices as teacher leadership. Drawing on the concept of object practice, the chapter shows how, through object inquiry, teaching practices can be understood as teacher leadership in higher education.

Fauzanah Fauzan El Mohammady, Wendy Rawlinson, and Daisy Pillay, in their chapter, “Mount Merapi and the Trencadís Bench: Negotiating Personal–Professional Identities through Working with Photographs as Treasured Objects,” engage in an exchange of ideas about photographs as treasured objects. The chapter reveals potential openings for new ways of imaging and negotiating nonlinear and multiple personal–professional identities. Introspective thinking prompted by working with photographs as treasured objects unfurls possibilities for making visible the muted voices and the multiple stories of self that can enable a deeper understanding of the struggle between “who am I” and “how I want to be known by others” as a creative, dynamic, and relational tension.

“Shoes, Suitcases, Stones: Creative Engagement with Ourselves as Artist–Researcher–Teachers through Object Inquiry” brings together self-reflexive research by four South African artists who are also university educators: Tamar Meskin, Tanya van der Walt, Lee Scott, and Chris de Beer. The chapter is presented as a performative, collaborative object inquiry, in which the authors perform distinct roles. The four artists act as the lead players, while Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan offers poetic commentary at key moments. Using dramaturgy as an analytic tool, the chapter shows how objects can become points of departure and vessels for creative engagement with self in educational research within the domain of arts and design.

The final chapter, “A Religious Object Medley: Objects as Signifiers of the Values, Beliefs and Practices of Servant Leaders” by Theresa Chisanga and Inbanathan Naicker, draws on servant leadership as a theoretical lens to explore
objects as signifiers of the values, beliefs, and practices of servant leaders. Theresa’s medley of five object pieces, juxtaposed against the attributes of servant leaders, reveals the evocative nature of objects in teasing out values, beliefs, and practices of servant leaders.

THE BOOK PEER REVIEW PROCESS

Essential to the development of this book was ensuring that quality standards for scholarly publication were observed. Every chapter of the book presents original research, and was peer reviewed prior to publication. The chapters were individually reviewed by independent peer reviewers who contributed prepublication advice and expertise. Drawing on the peer response guidelines that were used in Pithouse, Mitchell, and Moletsane (2009), the prompts for the peer review feedback were as follows:

• What do you find most interesting or significant about this draft? Why?
• Do you have any questions about this draft? For example, are there any points that are unclear to you or that you think could be explained more fully? Why?
• Do you have any particular suggestions for how the authors could enhance their discussion of some of the following issues, as relevant to the particular focus and purpose of the chapter:
  ○ the positioning of the chapter in terms of professional, disciplinary, sociocultural, national, and so forth, contexts;
  ○ the positioning of the chapter in relation to theoretical vantage points;
  ○ ethical concerns in engaging in object inquiry;
  ○ methodological challenges and complexities in engaging in object inquiry;
  ○ diverse approaches to object inquiry, for example, memory work, arts-based methods, poetic inquiry, narrative, dialogue as method, and so forth;
  ○ what counts as data and analysis in object inquiry;
  ○ the potential of objects in generating interpretative portrayals of lived educational experience;
  ○ what difference the object inquiry might make—the so-what? question.

The peer review comments were sent to the book editors, each of whom also reviewed the chapters and added editorial remarks for the purposes of additional guidance or clarification. The chapters were then sent back to the authors for them to revise and rework as per the peer review recommendations. To provide support and assistance, the editors were involved in ongoing communication with the authors as they revised their contributions.

OBJECT MEDLEYS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THIS MAKE?

How do we get at the meanings of everyday (and not so everyday) objects and how might their meanings add new significance to our research if, as Shanks (1998)
explained, “the [object] is itself a multiplicity, its identity is multiple” (p. 24)? This unique edited book brings together 37 researchers from diverse contexts and multiple knowledge fields to a shared space in which subjects and objects, living and non-living, entangle as medleys to open up understandings of connections made with, between, and through objects.

The book is distinctive within scholarship on object inquiry in that a large part of the research presented has been done in relation to Southern African educational contexts. This research is complemented by contributions from scholars based in Canada and the United Kingdom who have brought their object memoirs and pieces into dialogue with Southern African voices for the purposes of mutual exchange, learning, and growth.

Object Medleys illuminates the promise of objects in generating sociocultural and autobiographical interpretative portrayals of lived educational experience. Moreover, the original research depicted in each chapter expands scholarly conversations about what counts as data and analysis in educational research to highlight the interpretive possibilities of objects, situated within pressing societal questions (Mitchell, 2011). Educational researchers who mediate meanings of and from objects “are not apart from the trajectories of objects, subjects, culture, society, and discourse” (Nordstrom, 2013, p. 253). The exemplars in this book illustrate how working consciously with objects locates researchers within and in response to those trajectories as they try to make sense of them. The object memoirs and pieces interwoven in Object Medleys offer diverse, innovative modes and lenses for representing, interpreting, and theorising object studies. Taken as a whole, Object Medleys shows how researching education through studying the meanings we attribute to, or make from, objects defies binaries and linearities—to reveal how lived educational experience is open to new and different reworkings and re-visionings, with critical implications for social agency and social change.

REFERENCES


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PART ONE

OBJECT MEMOIRS
We live in the middle of things.

(Turkle, 2007, p. 6)

Entanglement: a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with.

(Nuttall, 2009, p. 1)

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I explore how entanglements with objects of the everyday can serve a productive function in educational research. The writings of Sherry Turkle and Sarah Nuttall serve as useful anchors for this exploration. Objects have interested me across a number of research studies, ranging from work with teachers and the artefacts of school as memory prompts (Mitchell & Weber, 1999), to work on children’s popular culture and the place of very young children’s expert status in studying material culture as can be seen in girls’ knowledge of Barbie or GI Joe (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). Indeed, it was this work with children that spurred me to go further with the idea of objects and things and to consider the idea of not just an object (Mitchell, 2011), particularly when I also considered the profound linkages between memory and objects. But I also began to see this formulation of not just an object as key to accessing in a very economical way what is so often the urgency of social research. I recall the words of a 15-year-old girl in a township school in rural South Africa who made the assertion during a workshop on HIV and AIDS and gender-based violence: “Ma’am, you can get AIDS from lipstick” (Mitchell & Smith, 2001). Her assertion was a stark reminder of the entanglements of the everyday that carry an urgency to them. Clearly, the girl who made this statement was not talking about the transmission of HIV through lipstick at a literal level but she was signalling the idea of entanglements. How do we study transactional sex without an understanding of the meanings of objects (in this case, the four Cs: cash, cars, cell phones, and clothing) as currency?

Daniel Miller (2010, p. 116) made a similar observation about “matter of life and death” in his book, Stuff. Citing the work of Layne, who studied the significance of things and objects in relation to late abortions and stillbirths, Miller wrote:
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Layne showed how parents in the US dealing with late foetal loss and stillbirth insist that at Christmas time a gift is given to the person who should have been, or from the person who would have been. She tells of the trouble parents take to dispose of the layette, the things bought for the envisaged child, as part of the mourning for the death of the child. The central fear of these parents is that other people will think that what they have lost was not a human being, a child, but a mere thing. The paradox is that it is primarily through material things that they find the most effective means for insisting upon the humanity of their child, that they were not just not just a thing. (p. 136)

To draw attention to these intricate and profound entanglements may seem obvious, but the idea of trying to study the significance of these entanglements in the lives of the groups with whom we work offers a promising approach to deepening an understanding of everyday realities.

OBJECTS ALL AROUND

The topic of object as subject is one that can be difficult to write about. At the very moment that I sit down to write about objects, I become ever more aware of the objects around me—on the kitchen table and even the table itself: the half full glass, the slight clutter of objects in my reach (a few CDs, a stray clothes peg, several books about objects and then of course the very thing that makes it possible for me to write, my Lenovo laptop). Thoughts of objects and things can be dizzying. It is impossible to avoid the material world. Even if we participate in some sort of cloud (operating system) much of the time (online, LinkedIn, or connected), our lives are still full things and objects that make the virtual possible—cell phones, chargers, adaptors, laptops, iPads, docking stations, desktops, flash drives—all objects and things in and of themselves. There is now an emerging body of object work that is about technology as objects. Some of it is linked very powerfully to memory work, as Lukas Labacher (2016) wrote in an account of his first cell phone. Along the same lines, David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett (2009) examined the various devices that young people have used over the years to produce videos: Super 8 cameras, camcorders, and different versions of cell phones. Sadie Bening, an artist and filmmaker in the United States, wrote of the Fisher Price PXL camera she was given as teenager, and of her outrage at being given a toy, and of her resistance, which turned that camera into a medium unto itself (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002).

I am also reminded of the pervasiveness of these objects of the virtual world even in contexts where electricity and the Internet are limited. When I conducted a photovoice workshop with a group of women in Korogocho, an informal settlement in Nairobi, on the topic of women’s economic empowerment and access to childcare (Mitchell, DeMartini, & Muthuri, 2016), several of the participants produced photographs of dumps and waste sites that contained, along with all the needles and
sharp objects that are so dangerous to their children who might wander in if there is not adequate supervision, images of cast-off hard drives and computer screens (Figure 2.1).

The presence of these material objects representing the virtual world is a reminder of the notion of travelling objects and global mobility, but also misplaced objects and the impact of Global North trash on the environment. More than anything, however, these objects are a reminder of Sherry Turkle’s notion of things presented at the beginning of this chapter, and that they can have different meanings depending on the situation of the beholder and the context of the object. Ironically, perhaps, trash is a focus of study in the artistic world. As Julian Stallabrass (2009) observed of images of trash:

Context is everything in the construction of critical meanings. Irving Penn made refined black and white platinum prints of pieces of trash which he had picked up and then shot in the studio against pristine white backgrounds. Torn from the company of the environment and their fellow objects, they lost the largest part of their significance. These isolated fragments were treated like new commodities by this successful commercial photographer, becoming renewed as abstractions, and most of all revealed themselves as discrete objects and as prints for purchase. (p. 422)
The images of trash produced by the Korogocho women offer a different angle on trash. However, in both the work Stallabrass wrote about and in their work it is clear that our relationships to things and objects are typically not simple and straightforward. For the group of women who produced the image of the computer hard drives that had ended up so close to where their children play, the objects are dangerous ones, but also entangled with access to child care, having few economic resources, and perhaps being victimised by global commodification. For another person an image of computer hard drive may evoke a nostalgic memory of entanglement, as we see in Lindsay’s (2003) analysis of the TRS-80 computer from Radio Shack from the 1980s.

OBJECT STUDIES

To date the study of objects has been primarily outside educational research with the vast body of work that looks at objects, things, artefacts, material culture, and “stuff” as Daniel Miller (2010) wrote, cutting across such disciplines as art history, museum studies, fine arts, sociology, archaeology, and communications. As scholars from such diverse backgrounds as media and technology (Turkle, 2007), science (Daston, 2004), archaeology (Hodder, 2012), museum studies (Wood & Latham, 2014), and anthropology (Brown, 1998, 2004; Miller, 1998), and the interdisciplinary area of object studies (Candlin & Guins, 2009) have highlighted, the analysis of material objects offers the possibility of theorising abstract concepts in a grounded manner and, in so doing, expands the possibilities of what counts as evidence in research. In addition, objects are meant to be seen—and photographed—as Marina Warner (2004) argued in her introduction to *Things: A Spectrum of Photography, 1850–2001*. “Photographers”, she wrote,

> have a special relation to the mystery of thingness, for a photograph so often reaches out to possess and stay the moment when the thing was there, in the here-and-now that was happening when I was there or you were with a camera or another means of making an image. (p. 10)

The study of objects, as I explored in *Doing Visual Research* (Mitchell, 2011), lands nicely into the area of participatory visual research in that the objects and things as material culture in the lives of participants conveniently carry meaning. The work of Stephen Riggins (1994) on the sociosemiotics of things seems particularly helpful in combining the idea of the visual (seeing the object through photography), something that is complementary to work in the area of photovoice and participatory video, with analyses that highlight the connotative along with the denotative. While the work of object study remains open-ended within Riggins’ tools and approaches, there is nonetheless a framework that suggests a type of entanglement. One set of questions focuses on the denotative: What is the object? Where is it typically found? Who uses it? A second set of questions about the connotative allows for more personal interpretation. Interestingly, the idea of brief personal essays about a particular object or thing has evolved into a genre of its own as can be seen in a range of writings such

OBJECT AS METHOD

But how can the idea of entanglements with objects be captured in educational research? What tools and approaches are appropriate? In this section, I highlight several approaches to object as method, building on the idea of object lessons and highlighting the ways in which the personal and social meanings of everyday objects can be central to addressing urgent issues.

Object Lesson 1: What Does This Object Have to Do with Issues of Social Justice?

Consider the objects in Figure 2.2: a boarding pass, a knife, a credit card, a condom, a paper clip, a charger, a camera, a potato, a clothespin, a set of keys, a 10-rand note and a USB key. What do these objects have in common? And how might the answer to this question form the basis for the idea of object lessons, particularly if the question was varied to become, “What do these objects all have to do with … [insert a particular issue of social justice: education, HIV and AIDS, gender, waste management, human rights, or democracy]?” In the example here, I use the prompt, “What do these objects...
[Figure 2.2] have to do with HIV and AIDS and gender?” To carry out this activity as a participatory workshop, there is only one basic rule: there are no wrong answers.

**Step 1.** Ahead of time, as a workshop leader, assemble a bag full of small things or objects. These objects can be anything from a small potato, to a spoon, a 10-rand note, a flash drive, or an unused condom. Make sure that you have as many objects as there are people in your group. It is also fine to have some duplicates. Consider the objects in Figure 2.2. These are just examples and can be substituted by other objects that are on hand.

**Step 2.** While there are no doubt many different ways of carrying out an activity like this, my approach in working with a group (typically 15–25 people) is to ask participants to stand in a large circle. I think of it as the “object circle” (see Figure 2.3).

![Figure 2.3. The object circle](image)

**Step 3.** When everyone is in a circle, explain that you are going to ask each person to put a hand into the bag and choose one thing. Tell them that after everyone has chosen something you will tell them what will happen next.
Step 4. After everyone has an object in his or her hand, explain that you are going
to call on each person one by one to hold up his or her object so that everyone in the
circle can see it. They can say what the object is, for the benefit of the whole group:
“These are car keys” or “This is a potato.” Then they should proceed to focus on the
question, “What does a set of keys have to do with HIV and AIDS and gender?” or
“What does a potato have to do with HIV and AIDS and gender?”

Step 5. Give each person an opportunity to explain, one after the other, to the
whole group what his or her object has to do with HIV and AIDS and gender.
Answers will of course vary but I offer some of the responses to three objects used
with college instructors working in agriculture in Ethiopia:

*Potato*
This is a potato. It has a lot to do with HIV and AIDS. We know that good
nutrition is very important for people. We need to make sure that when we are
thinking about food security we are thinking about special populations such as
people who are HIV positive.

Potatoes are harvested by women. We also know that women are more likely to
be infected by AIDS than men, so we need to make sure that we see the health
needs of women farmers as attached to food security.

*Adaptor for a cell phone*
Here is an adaptor for a cell phone. Cell phones are very important in relation
to treating HIV and AIDS. Now you can receive text messages from a clinic
reminding you to take your ARVs.

Here is an adaptor for a cell phone. When women farmers have access to cell
phones they can deal directly with the markets in nearby towns and cities
for finding out what things are selling for. They don’t need a middle person
[intermediary] negotiating prices. This gives women much more autonomy
and more agency. If they are more powerful they may be less likely to be
victims of sexual violence and having to engage in unprotected sex.

*Keys*
Here is a set of keys. We might think of education as the key to addressing HIV
and AIDS. If people have more awareness about what causes HIV then we can
solve the problem.

Here is a set of keys. We know that the person who has the set of keys is
usually more powerful than the person who does not have the keys. If we had
more female farmers with the keys in their hands, we would have a greater
chance of gender equality. Women would have more control over their own
lives. This will help to address gender inequality as a driver of HIV and AIDS.
Step 6. If time permits you might ask people if they want to offer something different about someone else’s object. This can be very generative and productive because it emphasises the idea that there is not just one right answer. It also shows the power of group thinking and collaboration.

Step 7. Before you finish the activity, pose one question to the whole group: What do you learn from doing this activity? What meanings could it have? Where should we go with what we have learned? How does this help us think about HIV and AIDS and gender?

Discussion. The advantage of this approach is its simplicity and portability. It is easy to find 25 objects. A collection could include anything from things found in nature (a leaf, a stone), to a beer bottle cap, or a paper clip. This approach to working with objects has many permutations and variations. In working with 25 objects all on one theme, “What does this have to do with HIV and AIDS and gender?” the entanglements become obvious. Jean Stuart (2007) worked with the idea of using only one object, the AIDS ribbon, as the prompt for asking participants (in that case, university students) to talk about their personal and social associations. Thus, rather than working with a wide range of objects, she used the symbolism of the AIDS ribbon itself as the prompt. Serving as a reminder of the vast range of meaning that any one object can have in relation to social justice issues, the Rights Today gallery of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg features an exhibition of a small number of objects (including a cell phone, a container of cooking oil, and bag of coffee beans) and asks viewers to consider the meaning of the objects in relation to human rights. Each object includes two captions: one that highlights a positive feature of the object in relation to human rights, and another that draws attention to an association with something that threatens human rights. Visitors to the exhibition are encouraged to go beyond these ideas to consider their own associations, but they are also encouraged to see that human rights are interconnected. Ways of analysing the entanglements are also diverse though perhaps the most generative or productive in relation to this approach would be to document the dialogue, particularly focusing on the dialogue in Step 7, and make use of this in a participatory way with the group. Working across different stakeholder groups would also offer useful insights. At the same time, this approach serves as a useful diagnostic tool for where particular groups are in their awareness of an issue. For instance, in the example of the group of college lecturers and administrators offering their perspectives on HIV and AIDS and gender, it was clear that their knowledge of the entanglements was quite sophisticated, and as such provided valuable insights into what could be accomplished by way of applying this knowledge to teaching situations.

Object Lesson 2: Mapping the Present and the Past through Drawing

Drawing, as with the activity of Object Lesson 1, stands as a low tech, low cost, and yet powerful way to engage participants, both children and adults in participatory research related to objects. While drawing does not have to solely be about objects
and things, experience across a variety of settings demonstrates that objects and things are often present as participants set out to represent a particular social issue. This is very compellingly explored in the Constitution Hill-commissioned publication, *Mapping Memory: Former Prisoners Tell Their Stories* (Segal, van den Berg, & Madikida, 2006). Former prisoners of the Number Four prison complex in Johannesburg participated in workshops in which they went back to map and remap what the authors referred to as the “psychic space” of the jails during apartheid. What is fascinating, as can be seen in Figures 2.4 and 2.5, are the representations of material artefacts present in the drawings. In Figure 2.4, we see the representation of food in the cup and plate as everyday objects. In Figure 2.5, we see both the coffin containing the prisoner’s father, and also the image of the father.

![Figure 2.4. Food](image)

I have worked with drawing as a visual methodology across a variety of settings, ranging from studying children’s and teachers’ drawings of teachers (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), to studying the images of schooling produced by South African school children shortly after the first democratic elections (Mitchell, 2004). In a more recent study, children between the ages of 8 and 13 years living in informal settlements in Kenya drew images of feeling safe and not so safe. While I have written about these drawings in several publications (for example, Mitchell, Chege,
Maina, & Rothman, 2016), focusing very much on the process and the use of the drawings with community leaders and policy makers, I have also come to reexamine these images for what they say about the positioning of everyday objects and things in the lives of children as they represent violence and safety. For example, a recurring image is the strap or stick that adults (often stepmothers or stepfathers) have used to punish children (Figure 2.6).
Children also drew images of objects to represent labour, as can be seen in Figure 2.7. The child who drew this image has represented clearly the weight of the object that he must carry. As viewers, we cannot fail to appreciate its weight.
Following representations of child labour and issues of safety and security, objects linked to fetching water were present in many of the drawings (Figure 2.8).

Discussion. As with Object Lesson 1, an advantage of this approach is its simplicity. As I have highlighted in an essay on personal connections to using drawing in research (Mitchell, 2011), some of the most provocative images I have found in participatory research have been in the form of children’s drawings. As I wrote then, the drawing produced by an adolescent girl of a baby dropped into a pit latrine toilet remains as one of the most haunting images I have seen in participatory visual research. A close reading of images of objects found in the drawings above highlight the perceptions that children have of their material conditions. More than anything, these representations allow us to contextualise these material conditions so that we become more attuned to their significance.

Object Lesson 3: Picturing Social Justice—Visualising Objects

The third approach, visualising objects, draws on the idea that so much of participatory visual research through drawings and photography relies on objects and things as central subjects in representing the particular social issue under investigation. Much of this happens in photography and in drawing simply because of the nature of representation and, as with the activity above, it is often the objects that carry the message. At the same time, in photovoice, the idea of photographing
a thing or object—possibilities within a “no faces” approach as opposed to close-ups of people—is also a way of addressing ethical issues. As I explored elsewhere (Mitchell, 2011), participants in rural South Africa photographing challenges and solutions to addressing HIV and AIDS have chosen dozens of objects and things to represent their concerns. These include images of T-shirts with AIDS activism messages, hair dryers in a beauty salon, a bus, and a potted plant. The captions offered by the participants were typically similar to the types of statements offered in Activity 1, as we see in the caption offered by a teacher to accompany his picture of a bus. “I took a picture of the bus because it represents for me what AIDS is doing to our community. The bus is taking a group to a funeral. Another AIDS-related funeral” (as recorded in Mitchell, 2011, p. 105).

In an example which I have written about elsewhere (Mitchell, 2015), students in four agricultural TVET colleges in Ethiopia produced photo images of what it means to be a student in a TVET. As part of the work in these colleges, my colleagues and I had been working with senior staff to contribute to improving delivery of courses, women’s leadership, attention to gender and HIV in the curriculum, and entrepreneurship. Prior to the photovoice work with students we had done many consultations with deans and staff members but we realised that we also needed to consult with the students, and so we drew on our longstanding interest in photovoice to get at how the students saw the issues. We wanted to honour as much as possible the idea of no faces—so of course this resulted in many pictures of scenes and deforestation (things they are learning), but then many objects: jerry cans and the challenges of water in the dormitories, pictures of tools (either the lack of access to, or appreciation for access to, tools), and so on. The students made it quite clear in our debriefing sessions that they hoped the images would be viewed by as many policy makers as possible. When our research team was in a position to choose approximately 30 images and captions for an exhibition (*Our Photos, Our Learning, and Our Well-Being*) that took place in Canada and Ethiopia and involved the deans and associate deans from Ethiopia, we consulted these administrators to make sure that they were fine with it because many of the images depicted the colleges in a negative light. What I want to draw attention to here is the ways in which the photograph of one object, a half-eaten plate of food on a chair in a cafeteria, evoked a great deal of discussion amongst the deans. When they first started looking at the images, they expressed a sense of being pleasantly surprised about the photography skills of the students and also about how much their students seemed to know about topics such as climate change and environmental issues. At the same time, one dean was concerned about the image of a chair with a half empty plate on it and the rest of the dining hall in the background. The students who took the pictures offered a caption about the lack of food available. I wrote then:

Three of the senior management (deans and vice deans) are clustered around the image. One is adamant that it should be taken down. For one thing, he says, the student who took the picture should not be showing a picture of a plate
on a chair. Why doesn’t she clean it up instead? A colleague assures him that actually this is how things are and we should all be open to looking at the truth. It is a back and forth dispute and as an outsider I stay out of it but in my heart I am hoping that they will agree to leave the image. It is only the next day at the time of the launch I learn the outcome. The person who is most adamant about removing the picture asks if he can say something to the assembled group of dignitaries and makes a comment that although many of the images of the colleges are very negative in that they show problems with sanitation, and it is too bad the students had to take them, but that perhaps at the end of the six years of the project they will be taking different pictures. (Mitchell, 2015, p. 72)

Discussion. Photovoice projects typically are full of images of objects and things, and so offer rich possibilities for studying urgent issues. The advantage of photographing the images is that of course they can be exhibited and so may have a long-term impact on various audiences. The exhibition referred to above has travelled to all of the colleges involved in the project. While as a research team we have not been able to capture all the discussions that have taken place at each college, the critical point has been the recognition of the ways that objects talk. In this case, an image of an unwashed and half empty plate of food made a strong statement and set off a great deal of debate and in so doing drew attention to the entanglements that included, for example, issues of gender (“why doesn’t she clean it up”) and poverty, but also students’ rights to speak about the issues.

REFLECTING ON OBJECT LESSONS: WHAT CAN AN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER DO WITH OBJECTS?

In this section I draw on a formulation that I have used across a number of publications, and borrowed from the photo theorist Jo Spence’s, *What Can a Woman Do with a Camera?* (Spence & Solomon, 1995): What can a researcher do with a video camera? What can a teacher do with a camera? Here I ask the question: What can an educational researcher do with objects and object study? It is worth noting that much of the work in educational research, especially in South Africa, remains, of necessity, focused on access to material resources such as textbooks, schools, desks, electricity, water, and toilets. Indeed, material resources—objects and things—are some of the most urgent issues. The 15-year-old girl who offered, “Ma’am, you can get AIDS from lipstick” draws attention to the entanglements: some of the most critical issues in education are not just about the absence of things, but more about the interconnectedness of things and objects. We need then to pay attention to these object lessons and to methods and tools that make these lessons visible. Some of the lessons about object lessons to be learned from the examples described in the previous section include the following:
Looking Back on Images of Objects and Things

Something I have tried to highlight in this chapter is the fact that we sometimes overlook the obvious in participatory visual research, and that by doing a “looking back” over our work with participants to see how objects and things are represented offers a fascinating “secondary data” approach. Object Lessons 2 and 3 did not start out as object focused but they became object focused as I started to ask questions about the materiality of representations.

Objects and Agency

While numerous authors working on the theory of objects have written about objects and agency, a particularly compelling argument for the use of objects in educational research relates to the agency of the participant who chooses to speak about or represent a particular object. On the one hand, as Sandra Weber and I noted in our study of drawings of teachers (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), children and adults may draw particular objects (blackboard, stick or cane, mathematics symbols or heart symbols) because they are easy to draw and they have symbolic value. On the other hand, the frequency of images of certain objects may attest to their power.

Valuing Local Knowledge

A cornerstone of participatory research is the idea of valuing the local. The materiality of objects and things as represented by participants in the types of object lesson activities noted above grounds our research in the everyday world. The rich body of work in such areas as museum studies and material culture highlights the personal links to objects and things. This is precisely what we often say we want to do in educational research.

To locate object study and object lessons within a participatory visual framework expands the possibilities for approaching and working with the everyday insider knowledge of participants. As with other research involving human subjects, object study of course needs to respect practices and protocols for doing least harm and most good in relation to using the words, drawings, and photos produced by participants. Issues of ownership and creative productions in arts-based research, as Akesson et al. (2014) highlighted, are particularly relevant in relation to ensuring that the objects or images of the objects remain the property of participants.

CONCLUSION: OBJECTS IN POLICY?

For an academic community that is used to thinking of objects and things as best seen or represented in museums and art galleries and outside the realm of educational policy, we might begin to think about the significance of objects and things in policy discourses. Consider, for example, the issue of provisioning as described in
the South African Department of Education (DoE)'s *National Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for School Infrastructure* document and its references to toilets, textbooks, desks, and other infrastructure support necessary for quality teaching and learning:

Historically, one of the most visible forms of inequalities in the provision of resource inputs has been the physical teaching and learning environment; the key elements of which include infrastructure, basic services, equipment, furniture, books and instructional materials. As with other areas of provision, substantial effort has been made to redress these inequalities. This effort notwithstanding, key elements of the physical teaching and learning environment remain insufficient and inequitable across schools. For instance, by 2006, 17 percent of schools were without electricity, 12 percent were without a reliable water source on site, 68 percent were without computers, 80 percent without libraries or library stocks, 61 percent without laboratories and 24 percent had overcrowded classrooms (45 learners or more). To date, there is still a significant backlog of schools that are run in unacceptable and even unsafe physical facilities. (DoE, 2009, p. 5)

Concomitantly, we might also consider SECTION27: Catalysts for Social Justice, the lobby group named after Section 27 of the South African constitution (http://section27.org.za/#), which works to hold accountable national and provincial bodies in the provisioning of objects and things. Learners and teachers indeed live and learn in Turkle’s (2007) middle of things. But the object lessons above compel asking: Which things, and what do they mean? At the heart of this object lesson work is an argument for educational researchers to take seriously the use of objects and objects study in our research. Related to this is the idea that some of the most urgent work that we do in schools and with children and teachers is linked to materiality and material resources.

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