

Art Education as a Significant Supporting Element of Object-Based Teaching

Silvie Novotná, Monika Dokoupilová

Faculty of Education, Palacky University Olomouc, Czech Republic

Abstract

The Object-Based Teaching is a constructivist method based on the assumption that every object has great information potential. In the first section of the paper the authors introduce the method as a suitable supportive educational medium and summarize the philosophical background of it. Further, the text reviews the results of two thematically-related research surveys that have been conducted among schools providing compulsory education in the Czech Republic, in the North Moravian region of Olomouc, confirming that the method is not sufficiently used by teachers. Additionally the paper focuses on ceramic work as one of the techniques convenient to reach the goals of Object-Based Teaching and presents the results of the survey showing the degree of inclusion of ceramics into art lessons. It is hoped that this study will inform the active educators about the significant potential of this method and contribute to the creation of a methodological platform supporting the use of this method in teaching.

Keywords

Object-Based Teaching Method, Ceramics teaching, Czech Art Education

Annotation

The Object-Based Teaching method is based on the assumption of the great information potential of items, art objects and other objects for pedagogical practice. This paper analyses the results of two thematically-related research surveys that have been conducted among schools providing compulsory education in the Czech Republic, in the North Moravian region of Olomouc. The text focuses on the topic of educational content and on the methodology of teaching Art – and specifically, with ceramic work – in connection with the method of Object-Based Teaching. It aims to distinguish the didactic method of Object-Based Teaching and to determine the level of knowledge of primary school teachers in our region about this way of working with objects in teaching.

Introduction

All of us certainly perceive that the quality of life of individuals as well as communities largely depends upon education. We also realise that this “great pedagogical result” relies upon the quality of a large number of segments within education, consisting of a huge mosaic where each part has its justification, its significant meaning. This includes the pupils themselves and their roles, as well as the teachers themselves and their roles; further, the chosen didactic methods, form(s) of education, educational processes, the educational environment, plus the environment of the society as a whole. The Education Act of the Czech Republic (Czech Law Coll., 561/2004, par. 44, 1.9.2017) formulates the goals of basic education as follows:

During primary education, pupils shall acquire necessary learning strategies on the basis of which they should be motivated for life-long learning, to learn how to

think creatively and solve problems, to effectively communicate and cooperate, protect their physical and mental health, creative values and the environment, learn how to be considerate and tolerant towards other people, different cultures and spiritual values, to recognise their abilities and real possibilities and to apply these together with the knowledge and skills acquired in deciding on their life path and professional career.

According to the 20th century Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, the final “willingness” of an educated individual should be the realisation of the “third lived movement”: namely “the movement of breakthrough”, which means “wanting to live the shattering experience of unsecured behaviour and from this experience to derive one’s humanity. This is the principle of a healthy “polis” (Blecha, 2017). Patočka (2009, p. 329) himself explains that this means coming to terms with our own nature(s). Man should see himself in his own certain contexts, dependencies and in his role in the world. This is a difficult assignment for a young person in today’s society, where the mental space is largely filled with digital media, which mainly offer virtual experience. The philosopher Anna Hogen (2015) assumes that our current society is utilitarian, focusing on achievements. The immediacy of life is missing, “everything is pre-lived”. She explains that education in its current form is understood as a transfer of knowledge, skills, habits, attitudes and competencies in order to make Europe competitive. The market, however, should not be the highest goal, dictating the nature of our lives. Consequently, existential questioning has been disappearing from our lives. Whereas through questioning, the deficiency that a person feels spiritually is cultivated. Therefore, as she adds, man must keep asking. As professional educators, we search for the ways that lead to achieving these goals. On this path we can be helped by didactic methods, including the method of Object-Based Teaching.

The Method of Object-Based Teaching

The method of Object-Based Teaching¹ is a constructivist method. It is based on the assumption that every object (historical, artistic, or a common thing or item people use on a daily basis) has great information potential. The object is a “reservoir” of information. It originated at some time in the past, under certain circumstances, for some purpose. It was part of a “story”, of a historical event. Furthermore, each object also has its physical properties, its design; it carries a certain function and value. It is concentration of reality in space and time – both at the time of its creation and at the present time. In the case of an artefact, it may be a process; for example, accompanying emotions, a storyline, etc. It may go beyond itself into areas to which it might not be related at first glance. From a pedagogical point of view, within educational activities, we can deal with all of the above-listed categories. The educator takes an approach to this sum of information, which is at the same time the connotations the object offers. The teacher can look at the objects from different perspectives: materially, practically, but also cognitively, spiritually or emotionally. Thus, working with objects offers an overlap into various areas, urging us toward critical thinking, to creating contexts. These are the great advantages of the Object-Based Teaching method, which in turn guides pupils to understand situations in context. G. Durbin, S. Morris and S. Wilkinson (2001, p. 4–5) add:

Objects have a remarkable capacity to motivate. They develop the ‘need to know’ which will first spark children’s interest, then their curiosity or creativity, and then stimulate their research. Handling objects is a form of active learning that engages children in a way that other methods often fail to do. Objects provide a concrete experience that aids or illuminates abstract thought. Interest in them, and their power to motivate, is cumulative, so that as pupils learn they put themselves in

¹Other terms used in English are: “object-based learning”, “learning from objects”, “using objects in learning“, “teaching with objects”, “object analysis” and “working with objects”.

a position of wanting to learn more. (...) Objects are real rather than abstract, and thus they aid the memory: physical sensations, experiences and emotions may remain much longer in the mind than word-gained facts or ideas.



Figure 1 & 2: The bowler hat belonging to the groom depicted in the wedding picture (Fig. 2, 1936). In lessons, while working with objects, we can deal with many questions, for example: Is the bowler hat for ladies or men? Is it modern, contemporary, or was it worn only in the past? On what occasion was/is it worn and why? What is its „life story“? What material is the hat made of? Where was it made? How was it made? Who are the people in the picture? What were the wedding customs at that time? What was the fashion like at that time? What was the fate of this couple? etc.; private archive (photo by Monika Dokoupilová, 2018)

The method of Object-Based Teaching is a suitable supportive educational method usable also for education programmes in museums and galleries, for in these places the objects simply “are”. One of the museum’s main tasks includes collecting objects. Thus eventual pedagogical activities are carried out “around” objects and “with” them. Museum education often puts

museum exhibits at the centre of educational events which is very supportive for Object-Based Teaching. Using different forms of education, museum educators provide pupils the opportunity to meet and enjoy objects with experience. As confirmed by constructivist-based research, it is the experience that is the foundation – without it, educational content cannot be constructed in the minds of pupils. The educator Jan Slavík (2001. p. 64) explains:

Human life and its situations are something one must experience: to see, to hear, to touch, to taste or to feel, to realise. In other words, a person must experience them – otherwise they are not accessible. What has been experienced, is an experience. Thus, the word ‘experience’ refers to a personal approach to a certain life situation that we have grasped through the experience and [it denotes something] we can return to in our memories.

However, the didactic method of Object-Based Teaching is easily achieved and can be carried out not only at museums and galleries, but also at schools. Working with objects during the educational process is mainly conditioned by a positive attitude towards the interdisciplinary form of teaching. The fact that the curriculum valid for pedagogical activities in the Czech Republic enables teachers to have a relatively free choice of methods and forms of education as well as activities applicable in the pedagogical process logically implies that the quality of education partly depends on teachers’ pedagogical talent, attitudes and education.

Involvement of Ceramics within the Method

If we, art teachers, think about the method of Object-Based Teaching, we may come to the conclusion that one of the art techniques convenient to reach the goals of Object-Based Teaching is *ceramic* work.

Its relation to the method of Object-Based Teaching can be seen on two levels:

1. Ceramic objects can function as a huge source of information, with great information potential. They keep intrinsically the evidence of the time of their creation. They tell of the human race, they document historical developments including changes from cultural values through artistic and social expressions to international trade and exchange of ideas. Ceramic shards from archaeological sites and clay objects let us glance into past societies, with a physical connection. Therefore ceramic products can support contextual understanding. The immediate view of the pupil on the theoretical information communicated by the teacher becomes more understandable.
2. Ceramics, however, offer a certain upgrade of working with objects – hence Object-Based Teaching. The pupils' experience with an object can be upgraded by the experience gained from *the process of making a ceramic object* – which includes the extraction of clay, its preparation for usage (making slip, kneading, suitable storing to preventing its drying), the proper technical process of making the object itself so as not to be destroyed during drying or firing in the kiln, retouching and eventual glazing. Under the good guidance of an experienced teacher, pupils can view ceramic objects from many perspectives and obtain many findings on the basis of them. However, if pupils gain their own experience of the production of ceramic objects, they come to an understanding of an object to its very nature. The experience of production leads to a proper evaluation of an object. Pupils do not only gain respect for the object, but they can also realise a number of contexts related to the production process – both now as well as in the past. Additionally, memory is supported. At the same time wider interdisciplinary relations can be formed.

With regards to the topic of Object-Based Teaching and with the intention to acquire reliable data on the topic of ceramics inclusion in pedagogical practice at schools providing compulsory education in the Czech Republic in the Olomouc region, we carried out a questionnaire survey.

Based on a number of clearly formulated questions, the aim was to find out whether at primary and lower secondary schools (pupils aged 6–15 years) ceramics is taught within compulsory art lessons, whether it is offered as a free time activity/afterschool club, and assuming it is, how old are the pupils it is offered to, whether the pupils are interested in a ceramics afterschool club, and finally whether the schools own pottery wheels and kilns. The questionnaire was divided into two sections corresponding to the two levels of compulsory education in the Czech Republic. It surveyed the situation separately at primary schools (pupils aged 6 to 11) and at lower secondary schools (pupils aged 12 to 15). The results of the questionnaire survey were unsatisfactory from the pedagogical perspective. Within the lower secondary level of education, ceramics is not included in the compulsory art lessons at 71% of the surveyed schools. Thus, only 29% of art teachers include ceramics work in their lessons. However, it is remarkable that almost 70% of schools own a kiln for the firing of objects. The technical equipment and facilities for the production of ceramic objects in schools therefore exist. Consequently the question arises: What is the reason for the absence of ceramic work in art lessons? At the same time, 43% of schools offer ceramics as a leisure time activity. With primary education, the situation is almost identical. 72% of schools do not include ceramics in lessons of art. Over 74% of the queried primary schools offer ceramics as a leisure time activity. A big difference appeared in the level of interest of pupils in ceramics as a leisure time activity. At lower secondary schools, pupils are only moderately interested in ceramics, whereas at primary schools the interest of pupils is enormous.

The time-consuming and technically demanding process of ceramics making places great demands on teachers. It is obvious that the degree of inclusion of ceramics into art lessons is markedly influenced by art teachers' personal interests, their motivation and skills, their knowledge from the field of Art Education theory, knowledge of the technology of ceramics production, and finally on their experience with ceramics making. If teachers do not perfectly master



Figure 3: Students at work, Department of Art Education, Palacky University in Olomouc (photo by Jana Bébarová, 2004)

the pottery production process, if they do not handle the craft adequately, if they do not have the necessary self-confidence in this field, and if they are not motivated enough, then they will not implement ceramics work in their pedagogical practice. Therefore, the field of ceramics is not extended and its positive contribution to pupils cannot be utilised. The logical deduction is summarised by one of the former teachers of ceramics at the Art Department of Palacky University in Olomouc, Jana Bébarová (2017), who claims that if teachers are insecure in the skills and techniques of ceramic making, then the very practises themselves are not applied in the pedagogical process. This takes us from pedagogical practice back to universities as places of education of future teachers. The weight of the responsibility for preparing students for their profession of art teachers falls on these institutions.

Awareness of the term “Object-Based Teaching”

With the aim of publishing a complex theoretical study about the method of Object-Based Teaching and creating methodological support it, there was a fundamental need to determine the awareness of the Object-Based Teaching method among primary school teachers and its application in teaching practice within the primary level of education in the Czech Republic, Olomouc Region. The goal was to find out if the method is commonly used and how it is applied in teaching practise, and perhaps to find out if this method is somewhere “hidden” in their lessons, i.e. if they use it intuitively in certain segments of their teaching practise without it being identified with the concept of Object-Based Teaching. In addition, the aim was to uncover what the understanding of the concept of Object-Based Teaching method among teachers is. At the same time it was expected that thanks to our research, primary school teachers in the Olomouc Region will become more aware of this teaching method.

The basic research questions were:

Is the method of Object-Based Teaching used in teaching practise within compulsory education in the Olomouc Region of the Czech Republic? If so, how is the Object-Based Teaching method used?

These questions were supplemented with individual sub-questions arising from the following areas:

- a) Knowledge of the term “Object-Based Teaching”
- b) Interdisciplinary teaching
- c) Art Education and its importance
- d) The environment of the educational institution

Qualitative research was chosen as the research strategy. As already mentioned, the quality of teaching is highly dependent on the teachers themselves. Qualitative research focuses on a deeper understanding of the atmosphere of the educational process at primary schools. For our research sample, 18 teachers working at schools in the Olomouc Region were chosen. Teachers at primary schools were represented by 10 teachers, teachers from lower secondary schools by 8 teachers. For the research, the form of unstructured interviews was chosen.

The questions of the interviews were:

Are you familiar with the term “Object-Based Teaching”?

What do you understand by this term?

In what way do you include this method in your teaching practise?

Is interdisciplinarity applied in your teaching practise? If so, how?

Where do you find the importance of Art Education on pupils’ development?

Does your employer support your own further education?

Conclusion

As can be seen from the results of both surveys the method of Object-Based Teaching is not sufficiently used by teachers. Although some authors who have a significant impact on pedagogy in the Czech Republic (Stanislav Štech, Dušan Foltýn) highlight the significant potential of this method, active educators are inadequately informed about this and are under-trained in the use of this teaching method. The method certainly deserves both theoretical and empirical attention. There is a need to clearly define the term Object-Based Teaching for our environment, to mark its possibilities and boundaries. The aim of further research is to contribute to the creation of a methodological platform that would provide teachers with active use of this method in teaching.

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