

# Holding Memories: Objects and Spaces as Resources for Conversation

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## Introduction

Museums have increasingly engaged in work with older people, with the intention of having a positive impact on participants' wellbeing. Workshops often involve objects and a mix of reminiscence and creative activities. Our hypothesis is that these workshops could be fruitfully analysed as a form of conversation where the space and the objects are resources which the participants draw on.

A pilot project explored two questions: Does changing the nature of the space and objects make a noticeable difference to the conversations of a group of people? Can the video recording of the conversations allow us to capture the changing role of verbal and non-verbal interactions in these settings?

Video recordings of object handling sessions at 2 different venues enabled the researchers to establish how the participants used the material and sensory qualities of the objects and spaces as 'resources' for making sense of the objects, self-reflection and interaction with fellow participants. The differences in the space and the objects used in the two sessions provoked marked differences, indicating that the nature of participants' engagement with objects can be explored more carefully in this way.

## What did we do?

We invited a long-standing group of active, older women to attend 2 object handling workshops. One at Beamish Museum, an open-air museum in County Durham, and one at the Shipley Art Gallery, in Gateshead. These two venues were chosen because the contrast between them, in terms of setting and collections, was as great as we could readily achieve in the north east of England.

The object handling session at Beamish took place in one of their Pit Cottages, set in an early 1900s mining village (*below left*). The session was led by the museum's Active Ageing Officer, Michelle Kindleysides, along with two volunteers. The objects were drawn from a 1950s-themed handling collection.

The Shipley Art Gallery (*below right*) holds a contemporary craft collection. The handling session took place in the gallery's education space and used Learning Team's contemporary craft handling collection. The session was led by the gallery's (then) Learning Officer, Virginia Wilkinson, along with the project RA.

Both sessions were observed by members of the project team and recorded using digital video and audio recorders. The focus of our attention was on the way that the group responded to the space and the objects, and the role of these in the ensuing conversations.



## Settings as Stimulus

The setting of the Pit Cottage pre-dates the participants' life-times. However, rather than talking about their childhood home, they rapidly made reference to older relatives, "My Granny had a fire like that. And I used to have a little shelf when I was a child" (*see right*).



The Shipley Education Room did not evoke any verbal responses. The participants were looking around at the room and its contents but no comments were forthcoming. Only when one of the facilitators brought out 2 tea-pots did the participants began to speak.

## Handling Difference

The group handled differences in their backgrounds through the conversation. Some differences were accounted for by appealing to differences in place of birth. One member was repeatedly referred to as "Posh" to explain why, for instance, her family home was different. Differences in aesthetic judgements regarding the craft objects did not form a major theme in the conversations.

The participants also needed to manage the difference between social values in the present day and those embodied in the 1950s women's magazines (Bendien, Brown & Reavey, 2010).

## Objects & Conversation

At Beamish, the objects provoked conversations but they were rarely the focus of attention: the participants moved through association to largely autobiographical topics. The objects took centre stage when they were unfamiliar (e.g. an early design of toaster, *see right*) or remarkable (e.g. nylon stockings).



The contemporary craft handling objects at the Shipley ranged from the recognisable & functional to abstract & sculptural. Participants talked around the functional objects in a similar, autobiographical fashion.

The majority of the objects at the Shipley were unfamiliar and they remained the centre of attention. Conversation involved analysis, "So, how is this made"; aesthetic judgments, "Oh.. That's lovely, that's gorgeous." and comments about the qualities of the objects, "It's not as heavy as I thought" (*see right*).



Some unfamiliar objects managed to become starting points for conversation if participants were able to move associatively into more familiar terrain. One participant used a ceramic piece (designed to evoke textiles), "It's like when you were learning to sew and your Mum said that the back-side should be as good as the front".

## Gesture & Learnt Processes

Gesture played an important role in both conversations. The learnt actions for processes associated with objects were acted out as people discussed different topics.

One participant mimicked typing whilst talking about learning to type to music (*see upper right*). Another participant talked about sewing lessons and made stitching-like gestures with her hands (*see middle right*).

The participants were familiar with sitting with the 1950s magazines, flicking through them and discussing items that caught their eye (*see right*). This should also be seen as a form of learnt process.



## Hands-on Exploration

Hands-on exploration occurred more frequently with the unfamiliar objects at the Shipley. One participant repeatedly assessed metal objects by tapping them (*see right*). Another carefully stroked the unevenly glazed surface of a ceramic piece.



## Conclusions

The use of digital video recording of the sessions enabled us to capture the verbal, and non-verbal, interactions between the group members. Non-verbal interaction and physical/tactile exploration of the objects were significant features of the conversations.

The spaces and objects used in the 2 settings resulted in noticeably different interactions:

- This group responded to the period setting and social-historical objects at the Beamish with conversation that was largely autobiographical. Here, the objects played a minor role in the conversation and physical exploration of the objects was limited.
- The group's conversation at the Shipley was focused more squarely on the objects and there was much more careful exploration of the material qualities of the objects. Nonetheless, in some cases participants were able to make an associative move from the objects to a personal story, leading to a more autobiographical conversation.

Social identity was managed through autobiographical conversation, this has been positively linked to wellbeing (Haslam et al., 2010). The sharing of memories contributed to a positive emotional state.

## Potential Future Work

The findings of the pilot study also provoked some questions: Would the contemporary craft objects have been discussed differently if presented in a different setting or framed differently by the facilitators? The results indicate that there is a fuzzy boundary between familiar and unfamiliar objects—is it possible to experimentally explore how people make use of objects that sit in this boundary region?

Finally, the interpretation of conversations is an area of continuing debate which means that the interpretation of the video data regarding the relationship (if any) between the observed conversation and the underlying cognitive processes (Bietti, 2014) remains theoretically fraught. Whilst the participants' cognitive and perceptual processes are important, they remain elusive. At the same time, an adequate account of such sessions needs to address the way that participants make use of the setting, the objects and each others' presence—this pilot study indicated that these processes are more tractable.

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