

Object-based learning

A new way of teaching in Arts West

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Object-based learning (OBL) is an educational method that involves actively using authentic or replica material objects. An 'object' might be, for instance, a natural history specimen (such as a dried plant or taxidermied animal), work of art, archaeological relic, manuscript, rare book, archival document or historical artefact.

OBL helps students acquire both subject-specific and cross-disciplinary knowledge, as well as observational, practical and other skills that can be applied in different fields. There is now a significant body of research into OBL, which demonstrates that objects can inspire, inform, fascinate and motivate learners at all stages of their education.

The University of Melbourne's use of OBL also helps overcome problems of student disengagement. Close examination of authentic artefacts that originated in an ancient culture, for example, brings that world to life in a way that texts, two-dimensional materials or digital surrogates cannot. OBL helps to ignite students' imagination and adds depth to their learning. One student enrolled in the subject Egypt Under the Pharaohs reflected:

I just cannot go past the immense aid the objects and practical exercises were toward learning.

As a uni student, I found all other subjects at Melbourne to be so 'abstract' and 'intellectual' as to be more about trying to keep awake and 'translate' the ideas from lectures and readings to something that actually meant something to me than it was about the actual subject matter. It is almost as if there is some school of teaching which says that if something isn't boring or 'literary' it can't be educational. This subject proves this is just not true.

The Arts West building on the Parkville campus, which opened in 2016, has dedicated OBL laboratories, as well as object displays in corridors, foyers and other spaces, in order to create a learning environment where skills are imparted through practical experience and exploration. This type of work complements more formal learning based on lectures or memorisation; the resulting combination of methods leads to better results for students.

The redevelopment has been celebrated both locally and internationally. Earlier this year Arts West was the overall winner of the 2017 Learning Environments Australasia Awards for Excellence in Educational Facilities. The committee was particularly impressed by the

ways in which object-based learning was mapped onto the building's design, fostering a productive learning environment that drew on the university's various collections.

The objects in Arts West prompt visual analysis, which goes well beyond mere contemplation of the objects' aesthetic appeal. Rather, it is a close examination and analysis of the physical characteristics of an object. By observing and then researching and interpreting elements such as form, colour, decoration, materials, and marks made during the fabrication process, a student can learn how to determine an object's date and location of origin, method of manufacture, artistic style, and original purpose and function. Objects are imbued with meaning, and can be read much like a text, but each object or type of object might have its own syntax or vocabulary through which messages are communicated. Through OBL, students can learn how to read these different forms of language.

The OBL lab experience becomes more than just an exciting trip away from the traditional classroom; it is also a lesson in analytical skills, an opportunity for students to develop their own interpretations of material, learning by praxis rather than just memorising by rote. These kinds of active encounters are often far more

Arts West: corridor display on Level 4, with image from the university's Rare and Historic Maps Collection, sextant from Surveying and Geomatic Engineering Collection, and Chinese ceramics from the University of Melbourne Art Collection. Photograph by Lee McRae.





Left: The object-based learning lab brings objects from the university's extensive cultural collections to life, such as for this group of secondary school students from rural Victoria. Photograph by Sarah Fisher, University of Melbourne.

Below: Arts West: an object-based learning lab, with archaeological artefacts in vitrines behind the students. Photograph by John Gollings.

memorable and informative in the learning process than the more passive experiences of reading from a book or listening to a lecture.

OBL also leads to collaboration. The very process of organising and curating displays in Arts West provides opportunities for historians, archaeologists, curators, conservators, designers and other skilled professionals to work together. In the OBL labs, students are required to take on aspects of these various roles, and through this they come to appreciate the range of skills and knowledge required to fully appreciate and understand an object. By following the divergent motifs present in the objects and integrating them with historical knowledge, students gain a broader understanding of the object and its context. The Classics and Archaeology Collection, one of 30 cultural collections at the University of Melbourne, was originally established as a teaching collection. Objects from ancient cultures including Egypt, Mesopotamia, Cyprus, Greece and Rome were selected for display in the Arts West OBL labs and exhibition spaces to support teaching of particular subjects on offer in 2016.

The Arts West building also allows the broader community greater access to many of the university's cultural

collections. Secondary school students studying ancient history visit Arts West as part of a project that offers rural students an OBL opportunity. The aim is to improve their academic work and also broaden their potential career paths and choices. The facilities are also used for public lectures, masterclasses, forums and symposia.

As students are encouraged to use all their senses through their direct experience with authentic objects, they learn how to draw conclusions based on an examination of material evidence, and are motivated to discuss their findings with others. This multi-

sensory approach also strengthens the link between learning, experience and memory, creating enduring connections.

Arts West's OBL laboratories and integrated displays allow students to work with the university's cultural collections in new and exciting ways, enriching their learning experiences.

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