

What is so special about a plastic kettle?

The use of artefacts in the primary classroom

“Using artefacts in the classroom can be a powerful means of bringing cultures alive, of stimulating learners' curiosity, discussion, creativity and powers of observation and detection.” Oxfam



Artefact or artifact?

Artefact is the British spelling of the noun meaning an object shaped by human workmanship. Artifact is the American spelling. Both spellings are etymologically justifiable, and both are hundreds of years old in English

<http://grammarist.com/>

Two typical West African plastic kettles



Metal finishers in Serrekunda market, The Gambia. The kettle is used for handwashing, drinking, and for ritual ablutions.



Teachers enjoying mid-morning tea in school's banana grove

Background

These plastic kettles are found widely in West Africa, most households, restaurants, workplaces and mosques have at least one. In The Gambia they are sometimes called 'Senegal' kettles, in Senegal they are called 'Satale' and in French they are called 'bouilloire.' They are a clean convenient way of carrying water in areas where taps are few and far between. They are used as water containers, their shape makes them easy to fill and pour and keeps flies and dirt from contaminating what's inside. They cannot, of course, be used for boiling water, but nonetheless they are produced in their tens of thousands if not millions. They are reported to be used in Mauritania, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The factories that process them (in Dakar, Senegal and Lagos, Nigeria) are large modern factories producing a range of plastic goods. The kettles are made in multicolours from recycled plastics. and in different sizes. But what are they used for and why are they so widespread?

They are used to carry water for a variety of reasons but two uses seem to be paramount. In the picture one of the kettles has the words Al Woudou embossed on it. This does exactly what it says on the kettle. Other kettles might have the Star and Crescent embossed on them. However others are plain or have secular patterns on them.

Al Woudou (a variant on the Arabic wudu, also wuhdu, woodoo) is the Islamic ritual of cleansing the body and mind in preparation for formal prayers (salat). Some will do wudu before holding and reading the Koran. Wudu is a partial ablution. It says in the holy book:

“O ye who believe! when ye prepare for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands (and arms) to the elbows; Rub your heads (with water); and (wash) your feet to the ankles”

So the humdrum plastic kettle has a great spiritual significance for many of the poorest people in West Africa who do not have access to running water in their own homes, or who cannot wash at a public tap or well (part of the ablution ritual is the “intention”, the clearing of the mind ready for prayers, this might be difficult to attain at a busy public tap). The kettle is a convenient way of carrying sufficient water to complete the ritual. Of itself it has no religious significance, it is not like a chalice, but the Al Woudou is a very important ceremony completed five times per day.

The other main purpose which these kettles are used for is far more mundane but nonetheless also very necessary. They are used in local toilets for cleaning where toilet paper is not available. If a local toilet has a full kettle of water outside the door it means that the toilet facility is available for use, if there is no kettle it means the toilet is in use. Of course the plastic kettle has a host of other uses as a water container from carrying water, watering plants to washing babies.

International organisations recognise the importance of these plastic kettles, Oxfam have distributed hygiene kits in response to West African emergencies and these kits include soap, towels, plastic kettles for washing and buckets with lids. UNICEF

emergency supplies to some 497 evacuated families in Burkina Faso in August 2015, included 360 plastic kettles.



The ubiquitous plastic kettle



Plastic kettles on sale at a stall in Bakau market



A view of the SIMPA(Société industrielle moderne des plastiques africains) plastics factory in Dakar, Senegal

The wise use of such artefacts in the primary classroom can engage all learners especially those who have strengths in kinaesthetic learning (touch, shape, feel) and can gain the attention of reluctant learners. Artefacts can provide insightful, stimulating and engaging learning about other places (Catling 2012). The choice of artefacts needs to be considered carefully to avoid stereotyping, as they may only provide a partial representation of a place, but used appropriately they can be a key source material for developing children's awareness of other places. Barlow (2013) explains how by exploring the hidden stories of everyday items children can become geographical detectives. It provides them with opportunities to gain

locational knowledge, to deepen their understanding of different places and to appreciate the interdependent and interconnected nature of the world. However this does depend on the expert subject knowledge to teach geographically (Iwaskov 2013), so to use particular artefacts teachers do need to be well prepared, perhaps by considering

1. Why am I using artefacts?
2. How will a particular artefact extend my class's understanding of a particular place?
3. What is the geographical context where this artefact is used?

Artefacts do provide the opportunity to involve your children in geographical enquiry, considering the what? where? why? how? when?, questions do with the kettle. However a structured approach may help the children develop their enquiry skills.

Observation: handle the kettle, touch, look, feel

Discussion: describe the features of the kettle (colour, patterns, shape, composition) - what is the kettle like?

Analysis: model open questions - what do think is the story of the kettle?

Hypothesis: what could it be used for?

Justifying: provide evidence for speculation

Research: follow up activities to find some of the answer using references and search engines

Table 1 Developing enquiry

Enquiry Questions	Initial Answers	Suggested Activities	Deeper questions
What?	A kettle made from re-cycled plastic	Write a short description of the plastic kettle	Where do you think the plastics come from?
Where?	Used in many countries in West Africa	Complete an outline map of West Africa naming and locating cities and countries mentioned in this article	Why aren't they used in Europe? Why not in other developing countries?
Why?	For carrying water, but particularly for ritual ablution and for hygiene in local toilets.	Find out about domestic water supply in one of the countries named in the article	Why don't people use taps and sinks in their own homes? Why don't people use toilet paper in the local toilets? Is this fair that there are these differences?
How?	How are these made?		They are made by injection moulding, how is this done?
Who?	They are made in large modern factories, there is one in Lagos, Nigeria and one in Dakar, Senegal but there are many more.		What would happen if these factories did not produce the plastic kettles?
When?	They are currently in production and use		They are based on the traditional design of a metal kettle, why?

Applying Eight Way Thinking and the West African Kettle

Eight way thinking is a development of Howard Gardner's (1983) ideas of Multiple Intelligence expressed in child friendly language. Multiple intelligences suggest that there are eight different potential pathways to learning. If the more traditional linguistic or logical ways of teaching are proving difficult, the theory of multiple intelligences suggests several alternative strategies to enable effective learning. Ian Gilbert has used the MI to produce a thinking scaffold to help children generate ideas, think and understand. (see Steve Rawlinson and Cath White from GA's conference 2016, www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_Conf08Rawlinson.ppt)

People: *which people use these kettles? why?*

Numbers: *are they common or rare? Why?*

Sights: *what does it look like? draw it?*

Words: *describe it in words*

Sounds: *does it make any sound?*

Nature: *what is it made of? what effect do they have on the environment?*

Feelings: *what feelings do it give you? what feelings do you think it gives when people use it?*

Table 2 Using artefacts to develop thinking skills



Becoming geographical detectives at KS2



Purposeful play for early years

Some classroom activities for artefacts

A list of questions which may help children think and find out about global artefacts.

Descriptive questions

1. What does it look like?
2. What does it feel like?
3. What is it made from?
4. What does it smell like?
5. What colour is it?

Deductive/detective questions

6. Does it look like anything we have seen before?
7. What do you think it is?
8. Where do you think it comes from?
9. Who do you think might have used it?
10. What other sources might help our enquiry?

Oxfam some advice on using artefacts www.oxfam.org.uk/education

- Ensure like is compared to like if asking children to make comparisons. For instance, a clay pot from rural Malawi, designed to keep water cool, cannot fairly be compared with an expensively produced Royal Doulton vase made for decoration. In looking for similarities and differences between places, peoples and lifestyles, first look for the commonalities, such as basic human needs.
- Consider context in trying to understand an artefact: its cultural background, the place and time it is from and the purpose behind its creation.
- Recognise appropriate technology as good technology - the use of readily available materials and tools is sensible, sustainable and practical

Conclusions

So by using artefacts like the plastic kettle children can engage directly with other people and other lives and will be encouraged to consider think, puzzle and explore (Whittle 2012) and the use of artefacts may stimulate productive and purposeful talk in the classroom..

The artefacts in primary geography can provide a direct link with a place and people that can really engage children, they are perfect for encouraging group and class discussions. They help children use all their senses (VAK) and they can develop detective skills by drawing conclusions based on evidence.

The choice of artefact(s) obviously depends on the places to be studied and the learning outcomes, but can be critical. A tourist souvenir may not necessarily be

able to help the children gain insights, but a commonly used artefact may provide illumination and explanation for lives and activities in other places.

Artefacts can be collected by teachers or indeed brought by children but others are available commercially. However the artefact is obtained it requires careful planning and organisation, to generate enquiry skills (Whitehouse 2016) to encourage children's learning. However the use of artefacts can provide exciting classroom experiences, memorable learning and an empathy for the lives of people in other places.



Kettles for sale in Bakau Market, The Gambia

Barlow, A. (2013) *Tools of the Trade* Primary Geographer 2013 pp 22-23
Catlin, S. (2012) *Varieties of Geographical Artefacts* Primary Geographer Summer 2012
Gardner, H. (1983) *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Basic Books, New York
Iwaskov, L (2013) *Inspiring Curiosity and Fascination*. Primary Geographer Autumn 2013 pp 24-25
Whitehouse, S and Vickers-Hulse, K (2016) *Generating Enquiry Skills* Primary Geographer Summer 2016 pp 2-3
Robinson (2016) www.geography.org.uk/download/GA_Conf08Rawlinson.pp
Whittle () *Using Artefacts with Thinking Routines and Skills* Primary Geographer Summer 2012

Dr Des Bowden was head of Geography at Newman University Birmingham, and is now co-director (with Pam Copeland) of B&C Educational Ltd.. (www.primary-school-resources.com)

Many thanks to Stephen Scoffham for his comments on an earlier draft.