

Experiencing Difference

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Last semester the department launched a new Year 1 UG module called “Archaeological Thought.” Lucy and I taught the introduction to social/cultural anthropology section and we wanted to somehow give the students an opportunity to experience in a direct, immediate way just how fundamentally strange and different other people’s worlds and practices can be.

Surprisingly, it is very difficult to coax students into looking and thinking objects closely. When asked they tend to look quite superficially at an unknown object with the explicit aim of ‘naming’ that object. Being able to say, “It’s a/an xxxx” is understood to be all that is required to ‘know’ and make an account of an object. Even when we specifically direct students to consider instead the various properties of an object, materials, colours, smells, hardness, manufacture processes, wear etc., they commonly move first to define the object by naming it and treat the closer inspection as additional description, rather than intrinsic to the process of coming to know that object.



Figure 1. Photo: Andrew Crosby

The observation and description of the Shaman's Bag in this paper was a response to this refusal. The task specially aimed to do two things:

1. To see what emerged when we denied students that initial shortcut to naming by presenting them with an object which was unnameable and unknowable in simple terms, and thereby forcing them into looking closely and engaging with the object on any terms which arose for them personally – intellectual, emotional, distasteful, fearful...whatever.
2. To illustrate to the students how been given pre-information about an object such as name or history immediately narrows the way we approach and think that object.

The bag is leather, about 28cm long and has a shoulder strap. It contains 32 objects of plant, animal and mineral origin. All are worked; none have an obvious purpose.

The bag and its contents were laid out for the students to experience – to see and touch (wearing gloves). They were given no information. Each student was given a post-it and could use up to ten words to say something/anything about their experience.

The post-its were collected and Lucy took on the task of collating the words into a poem. The rules of composition were: everyone's words must included; no extra words could be added.

1. First Poem

Sticks, stones, animal bones
Collector, collection, connection.
Scavenger, witch-doctor, made me smile,
Well preserved, weird and wood.

Snake, symbol, spiritual,
Broken belonging bag.
African variety, different to ours,
Daily business, exchange mechanism.

Earthy, ethnic, archaic,
Medicine, materials, mixing.
Simplistic or valuable,
Possessed echo of the past.

Purposeful, personal possessions,
Fauna, skin and seed.
Well made, random, stitched and restitched,
Objects, items, charms.

The poem was given back to the students in class but not discussed. Three weeks later the bag and its contents were again laid out and the students invited to experience it a second time. They were again given a post-it and 10 words.

This time the students were also told the few bits of information which came with the bag. It is from South Africa and belonged to a Zulu 'witchdoctor' or shaman. It was made around 1920. At some point it passed into the possession of Prof R. Turner of Cape Town, and was later brought to London by a subsequent owner. Lucy compiled the students' words into a second poem - the same rules applied.

2. Second poem

Spiritual, ritual, ancestral.
A person of respect.
A journey of spirituality.
Grounded medicine,
Different power to the everyday.

Symbolic, representative, organic.
Someone out of place.
A healing function.
Rites of passage.
In a state of decay.

Old, magic, preserved.
Objects of importance.
Lonely, deliberate things.
Tool kit? Animal spirits? Shaman?
Wood, stone and stuff?
Epicness (apparently).

What strikes me about the first poem is that the language simple, direct and immediate. In contrast, the language of the second poem is complex and the ideas more intellectualised. As Lucy puts it, the second responses are so much more compact and echo each other far more.

How little it takes to colour our experience and begin to confine it within expectations.