

Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Volume 8 No. 1, April 2019

pp. vii-xii

ersc.nmmu.ac.za

ISSN: 2221-4070

Editorial

“Not Just an Object”: Making Meaning of and From Everyday Objects in Educational Research for Social Change

Guest Editors from University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Daisy Pillay, 

pillarygv@ukzn.ac.za

Kathleen Pithouse-Morgan,  and

pithousemorgan@ukzn.ac.za

Inbanathan Naicker 

naickeri1@ukzn.ac.za

Objects Repurposed

Encountering objects

Family objects

Cultural objects

Memory objects

Objects transcend black and white

Objects work in transversals

Objects open becomings

Disruptions refocused us

To speak back, provoke, dispel . . .

Produce questions, entry points

Pause, change direction!

Re-launch ourselves

Make new connections

In diverse contexts

Walking with students

Mapping with students

Know our students

Inspired to read and write

Improve educational practices

Social change and equity

As Claudia Mitchell (2017) has pointed out, the study of objects is well-known in fields such as archaeology, art history, communications, fine arts, museum studies, philosophy and sociology—but is still developing in educational research. Owing to the post-social turn in the social sciences, emphasis on objects in social science research has gained momentum with researchers being called upon “to de-centre the human actor from the heart of analysis and to recognize the constitutive influence of non-human actors [such as] material objects” in social science research (Humphries & Smith, 2014, p. 478). According to Candlin and Guins (2009), the developing body of research in relation to objects can be best described as eclectic, and not neatly grouped under “object studies” or “object culture” (Candlin & Guins, 2009, p. 3). Rather, they advocate adopting a more supple, looser categorisation such as “object study” and the “study of objects” (Candlin & Guins, 2009, p. 3), where the study of objects, conceptual and material, is opened up for study in varied ways and with potential for interdisciplinary work.

This “Not Just an Object” themed issue was inspired by Claudia Mitchell’s (2017, p. 15) deceptively simple question, “What can an educational researcher do with objects and object study?” Mitchell’s interest in objects spans different research settings in Canada and South Africa where she has engaged with teachers and artefacts of school as memory prompts (Mitchell & Weber, 1999). In South Africa, much of the work in educational research is essentially focused “on access to material resources such as text books, schools, desks, electricity, water and toilets” (Mitchell, 2017, p. 15). Significantly, Mitchell noted that the “materiality of such material resources, grounds object inquiry research in the everyday world.” She highlighted the point that human entanglements with objects and things of the everyday can serve a transformative function in educational research. The study of objects is, thus, particularly focused on the idea of appreciating the local and the everyday as sites for creating different knowledges (St. Pierre, 1997). Everyday knowledge becomes a site for creative meaning-making that can “challenge hierarchical educational practices” (Pahl, 2017, p. 29) and enhance outward movement and connectedness between and across education spaces.

According to Mitchell (2017, p. 16), valuing the local knowledge of participants within an “[object study] participatory framework” highlights the agency of the participant who chooses to voice or symbolise a particular object. One of the central features of objects in research is their potential to evoke “new stories” (Pahl, 2017, p. 33). When individuals talk about their chosen objects, the objects and the stories they construct and narrate are linked, and also combine as part of an overall new “way of knowing” (Pahl, 2017, p. 33).

Pahl (2017) has drawn attention to the marginalisation of the different experiences and knowledges that educational researchers and participants embody alongside particular dominant kinds of knowledge practices. She has shown how object study can foreground particular concerns and questions about “what it is to be human, about whose lens counts, about the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge in an encounter with the everyday” (Pahl, 2017, p. 36). The study of objects in educational research, thus, makes available “the potential of objects to make education an equitable space where people enter on their own terms, with their stories and thoughts kept alive within the material potentialities of the object” (Pahl, p. 29).

Object study does bring to the fore a range of ethical issues that researchers need to consider. Mitchell (2011, p. 15) has highlighted the need for ethical issues to be “front and centre” in this work. She has cautioned that there is potential for harm in that using and displaying objects such as photographs, cultural artefacts, images, symbolic subjects, and others might reinforce negative stereotypes about individuals, groups, places, and so on. There are also important issues of privacy to be considered. For example, in using photographs that include people as objects of study, Mitchell (2011) cautioned researchers to carefully consider what it would mean to make public these photographs and to

consider possible alternatives. In addition, Edwards (2002, 2009), in her work on the materiality of photographs, highlighted the issue of ownership when using photographs or printed images. She has pointed out that regardless of whether one is talking about old family photographs in family albums, or photographs that are more recent, the issue of ownership is critical. Hence, the study of objects in educational research is ethically complex and complicated. Here, it is helpful to be mindful that “doing least harm and doing most good . . . are the cornerstones of our work [and] these clearly are interpretative areas in and of themselves” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 15).

This themed issue comprises a collection of object study articles, a review by Logamurthie Athiemoolam of the edited book, *Object Medleys: Interpretive Possibilities for Educational Research* (Pillay, Pithouse-Morgan, & Naicker, 2017), and a report by Nosipho Mbatha on the 6th annual international conference of the South African Educational Research Association (SAERA). The articles bring together researchers from diverse contexts and multiple knowledge fields who share a commitment to repurposing the material potentialities of objects for educational research for social change. As the opening poem, “Objects Repurposed,” conveys, this collection of articles offers a shared space in which subjects and objects, living and nonliving, entangle to open up understandings of connections made between objects and the “relationships which flow constantly between-across persons and things” (Nordstrom, 2013, p. 238). The themed issue opens up ways to rethink objects and subjects as interconnecting entities that can make visible and tangible social meanings and connotations of daily lived experiences of education and the objects encountered and used in personal and professional lives (Pahl & Roswell, 2010; Turkle, 2007).

A common thread linking the heterogeneous articles in this collection is the authors’ ingenious engagements with objects to inspire transformative modes of researching that blur conventional boundaries within and beyond the field of educational research. Each article demonstrates a unique “methodological inventiveness” that “[enables] new, valid understandings to develop” (Dadds & Hart, 2011, p. 169). Through creative and unorthodox research practices such as collage, dialogue, found objects, photography, photovoice, painting, poetry, and walking, the articles present textured, dynamic portrayals of lived educational experience that are full of transformative possibilities. This work shows how imaginative encounters with objects to provoke unconventional methodological approaches can facilitate generative ways of coming to know, with wide-ranging implications for social change and action (Mitchell, 2011).

The following medley of poems offers a poetic introduction to each of the articles. In creating this medley, we chose words and phrases from the articles and repositioned them according to the traditional Japanese poetic format of a tanka poem (Furman & Dill, 2015). We were guided by the customary arrangement of the tanka, which reveals a shift from examining an image in the first two lines to examining a personal response in the final two lines, with the third line marking the start of that change in perspective (Poets.org, 2004). By using the concise tanka format, we aimed to “in a few words . . . convey with emotional impact ideas or patterns present” in the diverse collection of articles (Furman & Dill, 2015, p. 46).

A Man and Dog's Joint Exploration

-- Inspired by the voice of James Bernauer

Objects encountered,
 Joint wanderings, untapped!
 Re-launch ourselves?
 Learn the environment?
 Objects transcend black and white . . .

Ensembles of Life

-- Inspired by the voice of Susan Naomi Nordstrom

Genealogy?
 Pre-existing life concepts?
 Family objects affirm . . .
 Objects work in transversals,
 Objects open becomings . . .

Reading Memory

-- Inspired by the voices of Bridget Campbell and Bonakele Mhlongo

Memory objects,
 Reading as a privilege.
 Know our students.
 Choices! Texts! Interactions!
 Inspired to read and write.

Inside a Box

-- Inspired by the voice of Marguerite Müller

Object memories,
 Autobiographical experiences
 Make new connections.
 Collaborative narratives,
 Social change in education.

Teaching Through Artefacts

-- Inspired by the voice of Makie Kortjass

Cultural objects . . .
 Integrated learning approach?
 Self-study project.
 Appreciate mathematics,
 Improve educational practices,

Material Entanglements

-- Inspired by the voice of Adrian D. Martin

In diverse contexts,
A new materialist lens.
Objects repurposed.
Agentic capacities . . .
Social change and equity.

Assessment in Education, a Mysterious Thing

-- Inspired by the voices of Vonzell Agosto, Jennifer R. Wolgemuth, Stephanie Green, Aimee Frier, Sujay Sabnis, Michael W. Riley, Jeanine Romano, and Jessica Korbey

What thing would *you* bring
To talk about assessment?
A painting, a cube?
Clustering things and stories
To speak back, provoke, dispel . . .

Hawks, robots, and chalkings

-- Inspired by the voice of Maureen A. Flint

Walking with students,
Encountering objects.
Pause, change direction!
Tangled moments of rupture
Produce questions, entry points.

The Map as Object

-- Inspired by the voices of Jayna McQueen Baker, Gabriel Huddleston, and Erin Atwood

Mapping with students . . .
What are we asking from them?
How and when to map?
Disruptions refocused us . . .
The map is only a tool.

Taken as a whole, this themed issue highlights the power of objects to inspire a repositioning of self as educational researcher, and a rethinking of taken-for-granted methods, approaches, and contexts in everyday research encounters. Overall, this collection of work contributes to strengthening and extending local and international scholarly conversations in the emerging area of object study in educational research. This assemblage of articles, thus, pushes the boundaries of what counts as evidence in educational research to consider the educational and social possibilities of objects (Mitchell, 2011).

The articles illustrate the potential for object study as research methodology to provoke different choices, develop new connections, and change directions. They show that objects comprise more than just their physical properties. When researchers and research participants interact in new ways with objects, objects can become enablers to see more and tell more. Researching education through studying the meanings we attribute to objects defies binaries and linearities—to suggest that educational experience is open to new and different re-workings and re-visionings. The object

becomes a catalyst for expansive thinking and creative retelling of educational experiences, made visible “through materialities that are co-constructed between object, people, artefacts, events and processes” (Humphries & Smith, 2014, p. 483). Object narratives can serve as material evidence of the researcher’s social and cultural meanings of self (McCracken, 1988), entangled in a complex network that can be opened up, revised, and reworked to reconfigure self in everyday, educational research encounters in socially responsive ways.

Making available the stories that are generated from thinking with objects can become drivers that make a difference to how we see ourselves and others in the world. Such introspection can inspire change in the self and change in others who read the object accounts—thereby contributing in a small way to a larger agenda of social change and transformation.

References

Candlin, F., & Guins, R. (2009). Introducing objects. In F. Candlin & R. Guins (Eds.), *The object reader* (pp. 1–18). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Dadds, M., & Hart, S. (2001). *Doing practitioner research differently*. London, UK: RoutledgeFalmer.

Edwards, E. (2002). Material beings: Objecthood and ethnographic photograph. *Visual Studies*, 17(1), 67–75.

Edwards, E. (2009). Photographs as objects of memory. In F. Candlin & R. Guins (Eds.), *The object reader* (pp. 331–342). London, UK: Routledge.

Furman, R., & Dill, L. (2015). Extreme data reduction: The case for the research tanka. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, 28(1), 43–52.

Humphries, C., & Smith, A. C. T. (2014). Talking objects. Towards a post-social research framework for exploring object narratives. *Organization*, 21(4), 477–494.

McCracken, G. D. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, USA: SAGE.

Mitchell, C. (2011). *Doing visual research*. London, UK: SAGE.

Mitchell, C. (2017). Object as subject: Productive entanglements with everyday objects in educational research. In D. Pillay, K. Pithouse-Morgan, & I. Naicker (Eds.), *Object medleys: Interpretive possibilities for educational research* (pp. 11–28). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Mitchell, C., & Weber, S. (1999). *Reinventing ourselves as teachers: Beyond nostalgia*. London, UK: Falmer Press.

Nordstrom, S. N. (2013). Object-interviews: Folding, unfolding, and refolding perceptions of objects. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 12, 237–257. Retrieved from <http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/article/view/16635>

Pahl, K. (2017). Dialogic objects: Material knowledge as a challenge to educational practice. In D. Pillay, K. Pithouse-Morgan, & I. Naicker (Eds.), *Object medleys: Interpretive possibilities for educational research* (pp. 29–44). Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Pahl, K., & Roswell, J. (2010). *Artifactual literacies: Every object tells a story*. New York, USA: Teachers College Press.

Poets.org. (2004). *Tanka: Poetic form*. Retrieved from <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/tanka-poetic-form>

St. Pierre, E. A. (1997). Methodology in the fold and the irruption of transgressive data. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10(2), 175–189.

Turkle, S. (Ed.). (2007). *Evocative objects: Things we think with*. Cambridge, USA: MIT Press.