Playfully Learning About History Through Objects?

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Abstract

The text presents the results regarding the play- or game-based historical learning processes of primary school children in the binational Italian-German research project "Education and Objects. Historical learning processes of primary school children in museum collections." In the project, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), groups of Italian and German school children between the ages of eight to eleven years had performative and playful experiences with selected collection objects or their respective replicas in "contact zones" (Clifford, 1997; Wagner, 2010). These interactions with collection objects can be considered anthropologically as "play" – as an individual form of playing – or as a "game" – a social form of playing (see Schiller, 1795/1946; Mead, 1967; Huizinga, 1938/2006; Gebauer & Wulf, 1998).

On the basis of ethnographic participant observation (Breidenstein et al., 2013) and ethnographic videography (Friebertshäuser, 2012) children's approaches to and interactions with collection objects are reconstructed from a didactic as well as cultural studies perspective on performativity and material culture. The extensive video footage from Italy and Germany was coded and interpreted according to Corbin and Strauss' Grounded Theory Methodology (1996). The video data shows that children establish various connections from the present to the past, but also to the future through playful interactions. These can be seen as a preconditions for learning about history and indicate didactic potentials for child-centred, playful historical learning processes in primary schools.

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1. Introduction

Based on the Italian-German DFG-funded project "Education and Objects", the present text discusses results on playfully learning about history by primary school children in school-related collections. In the project, Italian and German primary school children aged eight to eleven had playful experiences in performative engagement with selected collection objects. The text empirically shows that children can experience the concept of time in school-related collections. Children "jump" from the present to the past and future, using performative game and play situations in which collection objects in "contact zones" (Clifford, 1997; Wagner, 2010) are sometimes used as props. The findings are relevant for child-centred approaches in primary didactics and show the outlines of a didactics of material culture.

Contact zones were created in in two participating collections: the School Museum – Workshop for School History in Leipzig and the Fondo Pizzigoni in Rome. In both places, collection objects were set up for children to have individual and social experiences that were not subject to the "curricular order of learning" which is often imposed in school contexts and even outside school (Budde & Hummrich, 2016, p. 35). These experiences can be considered anthropologically as "play" as an individual form – or as a "game" – a social form of interacting with objects (see Schiller, 1795/1946; Mead, 1967; Huizinga, 1938/2006; Gebauer & Wulf, 1998).

On the basis of participant observation (Breidenstein et al., 2013) and ethnographic videography (Friebertshäuser, 2012), the project reconstructs children's approaches to collection objects and children's processes of learning about history, using Corbin and Strauss' grounded theory methodology (1996). This methodology is particularly useful in explorative studies for research fields without a solid data basis. Usually, such children's play or game activities spontaneously connect to the "affordances" (Norman, 1999) of objects, i. e. to material object properties that connect to physiological properties and which suggest a certain approach to the object or its use. Socially, games develop performatively from object interactions, which on the one hand lead to individual stagings with objects, and on the other, to joint explorations and mimetic appropriations and learning.

The first part of this text will introduce the project and its theoretical and methodological background and then will analyse the specific playful nature of object interactions using ethnographic scenes from the Italian and German empirical material. The text will conclude with considerations on how such performative play and game situations can be used didactically in multiperspectival teaching about history and the social sciences, and will address further questions.

2. Introducing the Project

The project "Education and Objects" is a cooperation between the Università degli Studi Roma Tre (Prof. Sandra Chistolini) and Leipzig University (Prof. Bernd Wagner), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The project is theoretically grounded in a cultural studies perspective on performativity and material culture. It follows an approach of qualitative educational research on the object-centred learning processes of children (Scholz & Rauterberg, 2004; Wagner & König, 2023). Such learning processes are linked to children's own activities in collecting objects themselves as well as their use and interpretation of objects. Because of this, the use and interpretation of historical collection objects by children has to be brought into focus by the research project with the research design.

1.1 Research Design: Selection of Research Locations

Because primary school children usually make experiences with objects in direct, physical interactions and because they interpret the objects on the basis of their previous life-world experiences, the project focused on historical pedagogical and didactical traditions which used objects for children's learning processes. This is for two reasons: firstly, because primary school children have experiences with school and should therefore be able to recognize such didactic objects on the basis of their own school experiences. Secondly, because such pedagogical traditions would provide a selection of potentially interesting objects as the basis of the project's research. These considerations led to reform-pedagogical traditions at the beginning of the 20th centu-

ry, in particular in the work of the Leipzig Teachers' Association (1846–1933) (see also Taubert-Striese, 1996) and to that of Giuseppina Pizzigoni (see also Chistolini, 2015), a Milanese reform pedagogue who lived from 1870 to 1947. Objects from both traditions are kept in collections, for the Leipzig Teachers' Association, in the School Museum – Workshop for School History in Leipzig and in the Fondo Pizzigoni at the Università Roma Tre for Giuseppina Pizzigoni.

The time span of approx. 100 years between the aforementioned reform-pedagogical traditions and today should necessarily exceed everyday experiences and topical knowledge of today's children. If children thus have experiences with historical objects, i. e. experiences with objects which were not previously part of their life worlds, this can be considered a learning process in its most basic form – i. e. a change from a previous state to a different, new state (Bateson, 1964, p. 283). This leads to further questions of research design: how to capture such learning processes and which objects to choose from the holdings of the collections involved for these processes?

1.2 Research Design: Selection of Objects

As already indicated, both the reform-pedagogical traditions in Italy and Germany have a certain degree of similarity regarding the use of objects in educational settings. Both traditions produced and used of a wide range of objects by teachers and learners; many of which have been collected by the participating museum institutions. In addition, both traditions have an affinity to sports or physical education as well as outdoor education. Objects from these areas were therefore selected to focus on shared aspects despite the differences between the traditions. In cases where historical objects could not be used directly for conservation reasons (e. g. being very small or fragile, such as the original miniature building blocks in Figure 1), the designer Mady Piesold, who was involved in the project, created replicas of the originals. Sometimes, the number and size of the objects was changed in order to facilitate more interactions (see Figure 2). The selected originals or their replicas then became the centrepieces of "contact zones" (Clifford, 1997; Wagner, 2010).

Figure 1 – “Der kleine Schwede” (ca. 1910) historical miniature set of building blocks. Inv. Nr. U8-174-54556 (Photo Schulmuseum –Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig). With kind permission of Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig.

Figure 2 – Contact zone with objects at Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig with enlarged replicas of the historical collection object “Der kleine Schwede”. Photo by Klaus-Christian Zehbe.

Two test groups of children were invited – one in Italy and one in Germany – to test the respectively chosen objects. This ensured that the selected objects aroused the children’s interest. After these successful tests, the planned contact zones in both participating collections were set up. The Leipzig School

Museum provided a room specifically for this purpose; the Fondo Pizzigoni, a university teaching and research collection, was opened to school children for the first time especially for the project intervention.

1.3 Research Design: Creation of Contact Zones

The term "contact zone" was originally coined by Marie Louise Pratt in 1991 in a decolonial discourse. James Clifford (1997) and Bernd Wagner (2010) adapted the term fruitfully for museums, so that "contact zones" describe a space where fundamentally asymmetrical positions come into contact with each other and relationships can be negotiated, for example between children and adults, but also between the past and present or between children and objects. New relationships and perspectives can emerge from such negotiations. For this reason, contact zones are particularly interesting for learning settings.

In the contact zones that were set up in Leipzig and Rome, children had the opportunity to explore specially designed objects or replicas of historical originals directly. For this to be possible at all, the contact zones had to provide sufficient space for children's activities, which meant that sufficient work and experimentation areas had to be created in sometimes very constrained collection spaces. Figure 3 shows some of the working areas with selected objects in the School Museum in Leipzig.

Figure 3 – Contact zone "Changing Cities", Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig. Photo by Klaus-Christian Zehbe.

1.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Once the objects had been selected and the respective contact zones set up, data collection began. In the project this meant video ethnographic field research with participant observation. Already during planning and setting up the contact zones, two different camera positions were considered: one for close-up shots of individuals and one for wide-angle shots of groups.

Data collection typically meant taking groups of primary school children on a set course along different stations and objects. These visits of children were videographed while taking field notes on the children's activities and behaviour. This has generated a rich corpus of video material with more than 350 primary school children participating in Germany and Italy. Data was analysed following the Grounded Theory Methodology of Corbin and Strauss (1996), which is particularly suitable for exploratory studies. The following section presents some project results regarding performative play and game situations.

3. Spontaneous Plays and Games with Objects

It is assumed since ancient times that children, when not under supervision of adults or teachers, will spend most of their time "playing". At the beginning of the 20th century this was attributed to an anthropological or physiological "play drive" (especially Buytendijk, 1933). Despite the difficulty of grasping the multifaceted nature of "play" (especially Huizinga, 1938/2006, p. 10; Wittgenstein, 1953, §66), spontaneous actions by individual children or groups of children can be often found in the project's extensive videographed material which exhibit many of the characteristics which Huizinga identifies as features of play:

> Play is a voluntary action or activity, carried out within certain fixed limits of time and space according to voluntarily accepted but unconditionally binding rules, which has its goal in itself and is accompanied by a feeling of excitement and joy and an awareness of "being different" from "ordinary life". (Huizinga, 1938/2006, p. 37)

Figure 4 shows a scene from the project's videographed Italian material of such games which is inspired by historical games with hoops.

Figure 4 – Children playing with hoops based on historical games with hoops at Fondo Pizzigoni, Photo by Klaus-Christian Zehbe

In the scene, children explore ways of using a number of hoops in a span of time which is at their own free disposal. These time spans can be very short, f. e. between different tasks. It is interesting to note that children immediately begin different activities with the hoops in such time spans: some swing the hoops around their arms, others around their hips or neck. Some children explore how hoops return to them with back-spin. Some children appear to have already experience with such hoops, so that in some cases virtuoso actions are performed individually and in front of each other.

Interestingly, such activities in the material usually develop from spontaneous individual play situations with objects (see Wagner, 2017), something that George Herbert Mead describes as "play" or a "play for oneself": "A child plays at being a mother, at being a teacher, at being a policeman; that is, it is taking different rôles, as we say" (Mead, 1967, p. 150). These play situations sometimes develop into social situations, which Mead describes as "games" – as social or community activities – and which are distinct from "play" as described above:

> If a child is *playing* in the first sense he just goes on playing, there is no basic organisation gained. [...] But in a *game* where several individuals are involved, then the child taking one rôle must be ready to take the rôle of everyone else. (Mead, 1967, p. 151)

Mead presupposes certain rules for games, which Huizinga describes as a characteristic of the game, with the players taking on different roles amongst themselves. In the project's material, such rules often emerge spontaneously from interactions with objects. More precisely: the objects provide impulses according to which children performatively develop the framework conditions or rules of the play or game situation. These situations and their rules are partly but not completely determined by the objects or their properties, or their "affordances" (Norman, 1999). According to Norman, affordances are material object properties – such as shapes, colours, textures or degrees of freedom of movable objects that suggest a certain handling – and matching human physiological properties or skills. This can also lead to a reinterpretation of objects, as the following example from the German material shows:

Figure 5 – Child looks at the hole of a cardboard pinhole camera; Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig. Video still by Keidel, Wagner and Zehbe, 2023.

Figure 6 – Child performs the launch auf a rocket from a portable rocket launcher with a cardboard pinhole camera; Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig. Video still by Keidel, Wagner and Zehbe, 2023.

As part of a station with a historical pinhole camera, a child looks at the two openings of a replica pinhole camera made of cardboard. The child apparently establishes a connection between the two holes. The connecting axis through the body of the cardboard camera is obviously extended and brought into connection with the elongated shape of the object. By putting the box on the shoulder, the cardboard box takes on the symbolic meaning of a portable rocket launcher – a bazooka. This leads to a short, individual play situation: by pulling the box up from a horizontal position on the shoulder, the recoil of a rocket launch is performed and supported with the sound of an explosion. Later, this play situation is performed again in front of another child and thus "offered" as a game, but this does not lead to a social game between the two children.

Due to this spontaneous, individual, object- and context-dependent handling of the objects on the basis of previous experiences and the spontaneous emergence of play or game situations, such situations are considered here methodologically and operationally mainly under the aspect of performativity in connection with the respective object and its properties or affordances.

The theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte defines performativity based on performative speech acts according to Austin (1962) and a praxeological defi-

nition of performativity according to Butler (1990), which is conducive for such object interactions:

> The term [performativity] designates specific symbolic actions, which do not express or represent something already given, but bring into being that reality to which they refer. It [the reality] is created in performing that action. A performative act must be thought of exclusively as an embodied act.
> (Fischer-Lichte 2013, p. 44)

It becomes clear from the data material that performative actions with objects do not necessarily have to be symbolic actions, as we have shown in the example of the hoops, but can be symbolic in certain contexts and situations, as the case of the rocket launcher shows. This also brings playful, direct object interactions into view, which can be further expanded in school settings from the perspective of performativity. The following example from the German material shows the interweaving of individual playing situations with social games based on object properties.

For the area of sports or physical exercises described above, movement figures were created for the Leipzig School Museum, which are modelled on gymnastics poses from historical photos. The movement figures were offered to children (see Figure 7). Children usually tried them out immediately and freely explored the movement possibilities of the figures. Large movements in particular – such as the splits – are tried out with the figures; it seems that the maximum and, so to speak, superhuman mobility of the figures is of interest. At the same time, possibilities are opened up by exploring the limits and potentials of one's own body as well as that of the figures. This often leads to individual gymnastics exercises: cartwheels, handstands or splits are frequently performed. The pupils are extremely co-operative and engaged, exchanging ideas with each other, proudly showing off their flexibility or imitating each other as well as the movement figures (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 – Group of children experimenting with movement possibilities, Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig (Video still by Keidel, Wagner and Zehbe, 2023).

However, these performative, physical play and game situations can also be seen in a performative, object-related use of language, as the following transcript sequences from the German material also shows.

Figure 8 – Group of children with historical photos, Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig (Video still by Keidel, Wagner and Zehbe, 2023).

We offered children copies of historical photos relating to reform-pedagogy (see Figure 8). The photos showed scenes of physical education and outdoor schooling. Through the photos and content-related impulses, children recognize similarities and differences to school today and refer to them, such as the school garden and gardening. A performative word play is created in reference to the photos between the German composite nouns of working in the garden (*Gartenarbeit*) and today's outlawing of child labour (*Kinderarbeit*), here in translation with reference to the composite of working in a recording from 16.06.2023 by K. Keidel, B. Wagner and K.-C. Zehbe (00:03:49–00:03:54):

Sf1: this ((photo)) is cool because they work with the shovels (here on it)
I: it's *working* in the *garden* [i. e. *Gartenarbeit*], isn't it
Sf1: exactly
Sf2: but *working* for *children* [i. e. *Kinderarbeit*] is illegal

Figure 9 – Open air classroom of the 34th elementary school Leipzig Eutritzsch (ca. 1920) / Inv. Nr. F5-027/19-6985 (Photo: unknown). With kind permission of Schulmuseum – Werkstatt für Schulgeschichte Leipzig.

Inspired by the photo of an outdoor school (see Figure 9), the children in the same group then develop a discussion on their own. They think about how the school desks in their own school could be taken outside. They come up with several ideas and become loud and enthusiastic, here in translation of a

recording from 16.06.2023 by K. Keidel, B. Wagner and K.-C. Zehbe (00:04:33–00:05:05).

I: And they have sometimes put such classrooms outside (.) would that be something for you, too?
Sf(several): Yeah:::::
Sf1: (unintellegible)
I: I also actually like this photo
Sf2: But then we would need to bring the tables outside
Sf3: Yeah simply throw them out of the window
Sf(several): Yeah:::
Sf: (unintellegible)
Sf4: Simply out of the window
Sf5: But no, there's this um (.) emergency exit upstairs (.)
Sf(several): Yeah:::
Sf: (unintellegible)
Sf5: No, we (flip the table) and then we all sit on it and then we slide with it down the stairs
Sf(several): Yeah::::::::::::::::::::::::::::::

The discussion between the children is at first about whether an outdoor classroom would still be possible today and what that might look like. Although the conversation is about a possible, near future, a group-related competition of ideas quickly ensues between the children. The discussion is about which ideas on the topic promise to be fun and are therefore interesting for the group. While this discussion quickly jumps from the past to the present, also differences between the past and present are noted.

On the basis of historical photos, differences between the present and the past are often spontaneously discussed. The colours of photos – black and white in the past versus color in the present – are often a first clue that is mentioned in both Germany and Italy. Children then also point to clothing or fashion where differences between the present and the past become visible. Such differences can be elaborated further for pedagogical and didactical purposes in primary didactics.

4. Outlook and Perspectives for Primary Didactics

The research results of the binational project "Education and Objects" indicate that the theoretical approaches of cultural studies regarding material culture and performativity can be developed further for pedagogy on the basis of empirical material. It can be shown through the interpretation of data, that children use performative approaches to collection objects, leading to body-related experiments and social contacts. Through these, a connection to life worlds in the past, present and future is established. These forms of engagement with objects are linked to properties of objects and do not develop freely from play and game situations, although such instances can also be reconstructed.

These findings hint at object interactions of children being not only linked to individual amazement at fascinating object properties. They rather show that there is a fundamentally anthropological dimension in object interactions which should be incorporated into didactic theories at elementary and primary level. A didactic theory of performative engagements with material culture views collection objects as possible occasions for communication and therefore extends the sociological theory of "boundary objects" by Star and Griesemer (1989) to include body-related engagements. The extent to which these can also be used to further develop play and game theories will have to be empirically tested. However, it is clear from the project's material that performativity includes not only language games and body-related forms of engagement, but also "assemblages" (Hahn, 2015) of material objects. The project's empirical material suggests that these forms of engagement can be both age-dependent and characterised by personal forms of playful expression. Further research is required to systematize these findings for didactical approaches.

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