Object Stories: Poetic Storytelling

By Teaching Artist
Cindy Williams Gutiérrez
Middle School Curriculum

I. Outcomes: Students create and tell stories about their own objects with description and personal meaning. Students recognize that all objects have multiple stories and begin to find personal meaning in museum objects.

a. Indicators: Prompts for creating meaning through expressing love for own object.
   Prompts: Why do you have what Neruda calls “a crazy, crazy love” for this thing? How it is “alive”? How is it “a part of [your] being”? How does it connect you to someone else?
   Poem: Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to things”

b. Indicators: Prompts for describing own object with sensory detail and simile.
   Prompts: (with eyes closed and the mind’s eye wide open) What does your object look, feel, smell, and sound like? Neruda uses a simile to compare his socks to rabbits: “soft as rabbits”; using similes for each of your senses, what 5 ways can you compare your object: _____ as ____? (For example, my stapler is red as brick, hard as muscles, bitter as steel, click-clack as a train.) Which simile does your partner like best? Why?
   Poem: Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to My Socks”

c. Indicators: Prompts for developing meaning by describing own object through metaphor.
   Prompts: If Neruda’s socks are “two fish made of wool,” “two long sharks sea blue,” “two immense blackbirds,” “two cannons,” and “two decrepit firemen,” (using metaphor) what 3 things could your object be?
   Poem: Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to My Socks” (cont’d.)

d. Indicators: Prompts for story-shaping and storytelling about own object.
   Prompts: Who are the characters in your story? What is the setting? Where does the story begin and end and what happens in between? How are the characters changed by the end?
   Tool: Narrative arc (inciting incident, obstacles, climax, resolution)

e. Indicators: Prompts for “quick” storytelling about a museum object.
   Prompts: How can you retell the story about the museum object? Where does your story begin and end? What happens in between? What one thing can you say about the object, the artist, and the viewer (i.e., you)?
   Poem: Pablo Neruda’s “I know/ that tiny carpenters/ went in/ through your delicate/ throat,/ flew in/ on bees.”
II. **Big Idea**: Objects hold stories because they store energy, memory, and culture. Poet Pablo Neruda collected used things because he could feel the stories passed on in these things when he touched them. Museum objects hold stories stored by the hands of the artist who made them and by the viewers who admire them.

III. **Motifs**: Circles and hands to reinforce the physical and cyclical connection of passing on story through things and through time.

IV. **Materials**: Pablo Neruda’s book Absence and Presence (which include photos of things he collected and loved, along with excerpts of his poems), Neruda’s poems cited above (i.e., “Ode to things” and “Ode to My Socks” and “I know/ that tiny carpenters/ went in/ through your delicate/ throat,/ flew in/ on bees.”), butcher paper, pens/pencils.

V. **Lesson #1: Seeing Things through the Heart and the Mind’s Eye** – 90 min

   a. **Opener – Exploring a Crazy, Crazy Love for Things**

      i. **Prep**: Students bring 2 of their favorite things to class. They are encouraged to bring things that have been given or handed down to the student, borrowed by the student, or lent by the student to someone else.

      ii. **Book**: Neruda’s Absence and Presence, featuring photographs of the used things he collected and loved.

      iii. **Poem**: (15 min.) Neruda’s “Ode to things” — Students learn that Pablo Neruda collected used things because they carried the energy and memories—and therefore, the stories!—of the people who had previously owned them. Things are imbued with story.

      iv. **Circle Game**: (35 min.) “Jump In – Jump Out, Introduce Yourself and Your Crazy, Crazy Love for Things” (modified version of Adele White’s Jump In – Jump Out) — Students stand in a circle. Each student takes a turn jumping into the center of the circle to say: “My name is ____. I have a crazy, crazy love for ____ and _____.“ Student jumps out as other students respond: “_____ (name) has a crazy, crazy love for ____ and _____.“ [Note: Teaching Artist, docent, and teacher participate.]

      v. **Writing Exercise**: (10 min.) Students choose one of their favorite objects. Students write 3-5 sentences about why they have “a crazy, crazy love” for this thing, i.e., what connects them to their object. [Note: See prompts in IIa.] Students share in pairs the most important reason they feel connected to their object.
b. **Procedure** – Bringing Things Alive through the Senses, Similes & Metaphor

i. **Prep:** Students review the concepts of simile and metaphor and make lists of similes and metaphors associated with their object.

ii. **Circle Game:** (15 min.) “Observing Objects with the Mind’s Eye” (based on Adele White’s Circle Sharing and Viola Spolin’s Identifying Objects and Observation Games) — Students create two circles, one inside the other. Students partner with their counterparts in the opposite circle. One student in each pair hands his/her object to his/her partner and closes his/her eyes. The student describes the object using a simile for what the object looks like. [Note: See prompts in IIb.] The partner returns the object to the student who feels (and optionally smells, tastes, and/or listens to) the object with eyes closed. The student then uses a simile for each sense. The listening student provides feedback on which images s/he liked best and why. Students switch roles and the process is repeated. [Note: Teaching Artist, docent and/or teacher model.]

iii. **Writing Exercise:** (10 min.) Students write down their sensory similes and metaphors. [Note: See prompts in IIc.] Students are asked to share their similes and metaphors with the class in “popcorn” style.

c. **Closer** – Reflection on Seeing What’s Stored in Objects (5 min.)

i. Stories are stored in objects. You just have to discover “a crazy, crazy love” for objects to discover their stories.

ii. Writers and storytellers see more than the object as it is; they use their imaginations to bring them alive by comparing them to other things through simile and metaphor.
VI. Lesson #2: Shaping and Telling the Stories Stored in Objects – 60 mins

a. Opener – Story-shaping about Your Own Object

i. Prep: Students bring their chosen object and story to class.

ii. Writing Exercise: (20 min.) Students draw a narrative arc. Under the arc, they write the names of the characters and the setting in their story. At the bottom of the arc, they write where the story begins — i.e., the inciting incident, the initial situation associated with the object. Along the middle of the arc, they write 2 things that happen (or 2 obstacles that are encountered) along the way. At the top of the arc, they write the most dramatic part of the story, i.e., the climax. On the descending side of the arc, they write how the story ends or resolves. Students are encouraged to think about how the main character (i.e., the student) is changed by the end of the story. [See prompts in lld.] Students revise their stories based on their arcs.

iii. Circle Game: (10 min.) “Passing on the Stories in Objects” (modified version of Adele White’s Circle Sharing) — Students create two circles, one inside the other. Students partner with their counterparts in the opposite circle. One student in each pair hands his/her object to his/her partner and says: “Here’s the story that goes along with this object.” The student then tells a story while holding his/her narrative arc, using two sentences for each step on the arc. Students tell their stories until they hear the sound of the Teaching Artist clapping. Students tell their stories again — this time in 60 seconds, using one sentence for each part of the narrative arc. When the Teaching Artist claps again, the partner provides feedback on the best parts of the story and how it could be better. Students switch roles and the process is repeated. [Note1: This game is modeled by the Teaching Artist, docent, and/or teacher at the beginning of class prior to the writing exercise. Note2: A shortened version of this exercise will be used by the Teaching Artist. The longer version is described for use by the teacher in a subsequent class prior to the museum visit when students’ stories will be recorded. The longer version described above may take 20 minutes. To shorten the exercise to 10 minutes, a few students will be asked to step into the center of the circle and share their story (based on their narrative arcs) with the class. Another option is for the students to work in pairs at their desks and have them tell the story once rather than twice.]
b. **Procedure** – Storytelling about a Museum Object

i. **Poem:** (5 min.) Neruda’s poem about a ship in a bottle

ii. **Circle Game:** (20 min.) “Jump In – Jump Out, Introduce a Museum Object with a Crazy, Crazy Love” — Students divide into 3 circles, one with the Teaching Artist, docent, and teacher, respectively. Students are shown a museum object and told a story about it by the Teaching Artist, docent, or teacher. Students are asked to retell a “quick” story with a beginning, middle, and end. [Note: See prompts in Ile.] The beginning focuses on something captivating about the object, the middle on the artist, and the end on the viewer’s response. Students stand in a circle. Each student takes a turn jumping into the center of the circle and tells a “quick” story about the museum object. S/he begins by saying: “This _____ (object) has ____.” (Include descriptive language about an object detail). “The artist ______.” (Include a detail you learned about the artist.) “You might feel a crazy, crazy love for this object because ______.” or “You might be reminded of ______.” (Include the personal connection to the viewer.) Student jumps out. As the game proceeds, each student is encouraged to focus on a different detail from the original story. [Note: This game is modeled by the Teaching Artist, docent, and teacher.]

c. **Closer** – Reflection on Story-shaping and Storytelling (5 min.)

i. Stories have a shape. They have a beginning, middle, and end. Telling a story is like taking someone with you up a beautiful mountain. You have to climb up to the best part of the story. And you’re never the same once you’ve made the trek.

ii. To tell a good story in two minutes, capture the reader’s attention right away and make sure each sentence moves the story forward.

VII. **Common Core Standards: 6.W.3** - Write Narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

a. Engage and orient the reader by establishing a context and introducing a narrator and/or characters; organize an event sequence that unfolds naturally and logically.

b. Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences and events.
Poems: Pablo Neruda

Ode to things
by Pablo Neruda

I have a crazy, crazy love of things.
I like pliers, and scissors.
I love cups, rings, and bowls – not to speak, of course, of hats.
I love all things, not just the grandest, also the infinitely small – thimbles, spurs, plates, and flower vases.

Oh yes, the planet is sublime!
It’s full of pipes weaving hand-held through tobacco smoke, and keys and salt shakers – everything, I mean, that is made by the hand of man, every little thing: shapely shoes, and fabric, and each new bloodless birth of gold, eyeglasses, carpenter’s nails, brushes, clocks, compasses,
coins, and the so-soft softness of chairs.

Mankind has built oh so many perfect things! Built them of wool and of wood, of glass and of rope: remarkable tables, ships, and stairways.

I love all things, not because they are passionate or sweet-smelling but because, I don’t know, because this ocean is yours, and mine: these buttons and wheels and little forgotten treasures, fans upon whose feathers love has scattered its blossoms, glasses, knives and scissors – all bear the trace of someone’s fingers on their handle or surface, the trace of a distant hand lost in the depths of forgetfulness.

I pause in houses, streets and elevators,
touching things,
identifying objects
that I secretly covet:
this one because it rings,
that one because
it’s as soft
as the softness of a woman’s hip,
that one there for its deep-sea color,
and that one for its velvet feel.

O irrevocable
river
of things:
no one can say
that I loved
only
fish,
or the plants of the jungle and the field,
that I loved
only
those things that leap and climb, desire, and survive.
It’s not true:
many things conspired
to tell me the whole story.
Not only did they touch me,
or my hand touched them:
they were
so close
that they were a part
of my being,
they were so alive with me
that they lived half my life
and will die half my death.
Ode to My Socks

by Pablo Neruda (and translated by Robert Bly)

Mara Mori brought me
a pair of socks
which she knitted herself
with her sheepherder’s hands,
two socks as soft as rabbits.
I slipped my feet into them
as if they were two cases
knitted with threads of twilight and goatskin,
Violent socks,
my feet were two fish made of wool,
two long sharks
sea blue, shot through
by one golden thread,
two immense blackbirds,
two cannons,
my feet were honored in this way
by these heavenly socks.
They were so handsome for the first time
my feet seemed to me unacceptable
like two decrepit firemen,
firemen unworthy of that woven fire,
of those glowing socks.

Nevertheless, I resisted the sharp temptation
to save them somewhere as schoolboys
keep fireflies,
as learned men collect
sacred texts,
I resisted the mad impulse to put them
in a golden cage and each day give them
birdseed and pieces of pink melon.
Like explorers in the jungle
who hand over the very rare green deer
to the spit and eat it with remorse,
I stretched out my feet and pulled on
the magnificent socks and then my shoes.

The moral of my ode is this:
beauty is twice beauty
and what is good is doubly good
when it is a matter of two socks
made of wool in winter.
I know
that tiny carpenters
went in
through your delicate
throat,
flew in
on bees.
I know that flies
brought on their backs
tools,
nails, planks,
tiny ropes,
and so
inside the bottle
a perfect ship
took shape:
it's hull the nub of its beauty,
raising its pin-sized masts...