



Collections Exercise – Collections as a Collection

This exercise asks students to consider the interrelation of items in the aggregate, and to create a narrative that describes the ways in which items interact with people, the environment, and each other. The purpose of using collections to create a “just-so” narrative of everyday life is to help students expand their perceptions of cultural items as a part of someone’s lived reality, and as existing within an extensive network of relationships. Simultaneously, the narrative form should help to bring into focus those areas where their knowledge of that reality remains blurry.

This exercise does not require students to have deep knowledge of each item present, nor to provide narratives they can prove to be accurate – although they should avoid narratives they know to be false! Instead, it requires students think creatively and expansively.

Activity

Your instructor should have a group of collections prepared for you, from which each student should select one.

If there are more items present than students, this will mean creating a “subset” group. If there are more students than items, more than one student may select the same item. Not every item must be selected.

As a class, discuss the physical properties and known information of each individual item, as individually observed and as provided by your instructor.

Silently examine and reflect on the items you and your classmates have grouped together. Consider in particular the item that you personally selected, and how it may relate to each of the other items present.

Attempt to create a narrative out of all the items present, with the one you selected at the center of your story.

Suggested discussion questions

Ask your students to consider:

- *What relationships can they perceive, or imagine, between these items and different people? (e.g. the people who made them; who used them; who exchanged them; who excavated them; who studied them?) Between these different people and one another?(remind students to include themselves among these “different people.”)*

- *What relationships might exist between these items spatially? Across time?*
- *What relationships might exist between these items and the environment?*
- *What relationships might exist between these items and animals? Other non-human, biological actors?*
- *What relationships might exist between these items and items not present in this aggregate?*
- *From what, or whose, perspective are students creating their narratives?*
- *What personal experiences or associations are they drawing on, in their encounter with this aggregate collection?*
- *What may be missing from the students' narratives, in terms of context? Voice? Emotion?*

If necessary, encourage your students to consider assemblages from their own lives. Do the items in their environments all come from the same time period? The same socio-economic status? Can items with contradictory meanings exist in one context? Do we bring an assumption of greater homogeneity to our conceptions of the past, than we assume for our own lives?