



# A GUIDE TO TEACHING FROM COLLECTIONS

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Department of Academic Partnerships

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## » INTRODUCTION

The Peabody Museum cares for nearly 1.25 million items from around the world, including archaeological, ethnological, osteological, and paleoanthropological collections, as well as substantial photographic and archival records. As a place of inquiry, the Museum provides unique opportunities for teaching and learning: Collections provide insights into the lived realities of ancient and contemporary peoples; of colonial pasts and presents; and of ongoing resistance and cultural survival. They represent the documentary histories of Indigenous nations and individuals, of peoples and cultures across the globe and in relation with one another, written by rather than about them. When we allow them, collections expand the narratives of our shared histories, as told from different cultural perspectives and approached from multiple intellectual traditions, providing increased avenues for reflection on our present and dialogues for our future.

**It is the mission of the Peabody Museum to support the responsible and thoughtful use of collections in university courses, to make this experience meaningful for students and instructors alike, and to remain accountable to its numerous stakeholders.**

The Peabody Museum Academic Partnerships (AP) department is dedicated to these efforts, and is here to join with faculty and students in developing our practice while lending our expertise to those looking to learn with us. AP and other Museum staff host frequent class visits to collections, engaging directly with students and instructors while developing and delivering course content, facilitating collections-based exercises and discussion, and monitoring the safe movement of both people and collections in their shared environment.

Additionally, the Peabody Museum enables class visits that occur in the absence of any Museum staff. Most often, these occur in the context of large lecture classes, where professors ask their Teaching Fellows (TFs) to hold their section meetings in one of the Peabody Museum's collections-viewing spaces, so that student discussion can occur in the direct presence of select material items.

While we hope that anyone reading this guide may find something of value, **the advice offered here speaks specifically to this context, in recognition of the numerous challenging skills these moments demand of TFs**, as they are made simultaneously responsible for the safety of their students, the safety of the collections present, the effective delivery of that week's course content, and the engagement of students in productive discussion.

**We encourage all instructors, regardless of course topic or academic discipline, to remain mindful of concerns of care and stewardship, acknowledging our respective responsibilities to collections and their human relations.**

## » HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The advice offered here is the cumulative product of the lessons learned by Academic Partnerships staff in our own experiences teaching with collections, reflecting on our failures and successes, and the challenges we continue to encounter.

This guide is further inspired by our relationships with Harvard Teaching Fellows, understanding their roles as instructors and identifying areas where we can provide our support.

This guide does not ask TFs to treat each class the same, but to consider their individual environments and needs. *It is not a step-by-step instruction manual.* Rather, each section points to factors and parameters to consider, or offers strategies to employ. The suggestions here are meant to inspire personal and purposeful approaches to using collections in teaching, with the shared intention of engaging students with collections both effectively and safely.

AP staff are always available to assist in the development of your teaching plan, including: selecting individual collections; advising on collections-based exercises; reviewing physical spaces and planning how to navigate them; discussing potential cultural concerns; or anything else you may like to discuss.

We further encourage all our partners to reach out with your own strategies or suggestions for teaching with collections, and to offer us feedback on our own practice.

For associated resources, including example collections exercises, student discussion guides, and a teaching template, or to contact Academic Partnerships at the Peabody Museum, please visit [peabody.harvard.edu/teachingandlearning](https://peabody.harvard.edu/teachingandlearning).

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## »TEACHING FROM COLLECTIONS: GETTING STARTED

Think about what the presence of collections can contribute to your class and prioritize what you would like to accomplish.

**Remember: Your classroom should not feel the same when collections are present as it does when they aren't.**

**Employed strategically, collections-based teaching can:**

- Encourage discussion
- Inspire interest and creativity
- Provoke self-reflection
- Engage emotion
- Enhance multisensory imagination
- Instigate active learning

**Collections-based teaching can also enable students to:**

- Draw out different contexts, knowledges, and experiences
- Consider multiple perspectives
- Identify their own biases or assumptions
- Identify gaps in common narratives
- Ask more questions
- Notice processes of interpretation
- Apply interdisciplinary approaches
- Build observational skills
- Build critical-analysis skills

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As you peruse the advice below, keep in mind your chosen goals. Be intentional in matching your methods to your desired outcomes, and **be intentional in your selection of museum collections**. Decide which themes and concepts you want students to discuss and leave with, and select the items you think will be most effective at this. **More is not better in this context.**

## » TEACHING FROM COLLECTIONS: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Don't worry about trying to master your own knowledge of the collections. Your ability to teach effectively is often more important than your content knowledge.

Go slowly and spend time with collections, even if it means viewing fewer of them.

Collections should be the stars of your lesson and should be driving student discussion. Ask questions of the collections and encourage your students to do the same. Redirect conversation back to the collections as necessary.

Allow for student discomfort. Students often dislike not knowing and want information about collections at the beginning of discussion. It can be more productive to help students work together and discuss first what they can discern for themselves.

**Use this process to help students think about how they build knowledge; to discern and reflect on what they "know" and how they know it.**

Allow for silence. Build time for silent student reflection.

Allow for noise. Collections should inspire, and frequently even require, conversation.

**Verbal responses of laughter, gentle teasing, surprise, etc., can all have their place in a culturally respectful classroom.**

Your students will likely be experiencing collections only visually. Help them to engage their imaginations toward a multisensory, multi-contextual consideration of the item.

**E.g. What sounds might items produce? How might they interact with a person's body? How might they look in sunlight? By firelight? What other ambient sensations would be present?**

Spend time reflecting on the context of collections. Remember to be as expansive as possible in the relationships implicated.

**E.g. How were/are collections related to one another across time? Across space?**

**How did/do they relate to their environments (plants, animals, people, landscapes)?**

**How did/do they interact with different individuals? With different communities? With different notions of value?**

Remember to include yourself, your classroom, and your students among these many contexts and the relationships you consider.

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## » TEACHING FROM COLLECTIONS: ENGAGING YOUR CLASSROOM

Provide opportunities for cumulative knowledge. Consider an iterative exercise for repetition each week, to build knowledge and skills.

Think about how you might mix the familiar with the unfamiliar to provide students with the traction to begin their discussions, but also the means to discern the limitations of their own logics and experiences, and so to think more expansively.

Consider taking collections out of the context of course content, so that students can encounter them first on their own terms, before drawing the collections into conversation with the week's lecture.

Avoid binaries. Encourage students away from "either/or" and to think in terms of "and."

"Exhibit the problem, not the solution." You don't need to know all the answers; you need to get your students to understand the questions.

Don't simply identify features of the item you are discussing. Equally explain what you *are* and what you *aren't* seeing that leads you toward a particular identification. When asking students to identify features, have them do the same.

Don't only tell students what an item *is*, but where, how, or from whom that information was derived.

Build time to discuss not only student questions—generated by their encounters with collections—but also how they might subsequently pursue the avenues of inquiry they've raised.

## » TEACHING FROM COLLECTIONS: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LESSON PLANNING

Your lesson plan is too long. No, seriously—it is too long. Pare down activities and the number of collections with which you are engaging.

**An open-ended conversation reflecting on a single item can easily occupy an entire hour. Illustrating key features of collections may require multiple examples, as well as time for students to examine, compare, and discern. Think about what you are trying to accomplish; what, from among this, you can accomplish well; how much time you can dedicate to this; and discard everything else.**

Set expectations for student behavior around collections before the class starts. Everyone in the room equally shares the responsibility of caring for collections, and the responsibility to create and maintain a thoughtful and careful environment.

**You are ultimately responsible for the safety of students and collections. The more adept your students can become at maintaining this safe environment, the less focus you will have to devote to monitoring them and the more you will be able to give to fostering discussion.**

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What are the physical realities of the space you're in and the collections from which you are teaching? Can you move collections during class? Can students move around the table?

**Consider the visibility of collections from students' perspectives and plan their use and placement accordingly.**

How and when do you want to bring collections into the discussion? Should students view all collections together from the start? Do you want to add collections at intervals, to address new themes and/or build discussion?

**Keep in mind all the questions above and factor in space constraints and collection mobility as you devise your plan.**

Would it be beneficial to divide students into smaller groups focusing on discrete collections?

Would it be beneficial to have students all focus on the same items to emphasize individual perspectives and variation of responses?

What prior knowledge or skills are you expecting students to have? Does your lesson plan meet everyone's needs?

## »TEACHING FROM COLLECTIONS: CULTURAL REFLECTIONS

The Peabody Museum is conscious of the colonial histories and intercultural relationships that have shaped the institution since its founding, and that continue to influence and impact us today. We are mindful of the responsibilities we hold toward the communities related to the collections in our care. Within Academic Partnerships, we take seriously the obligations we carry to evoke reflection, rethinking, and rebalancing in meetings between students and collections.

We encourage you to reflect on your own responsibilities when teaching from collections, and to consider the impacts of these moments on descendant communities and on students (at times one and the same). Toward this, we offer some thoughts on how you might open up space, or its possibility, for the expression of multiple perspectives and voices in your classrooms:

### **For yourself:**

Self-reflection, self-location, and learning through conversation are crucial and should be part of any collections-based learning experience.

**Consider yourself and your own background, and how these influence your relationships with and perceptions of the collections joining your class. Share this with your students and encourage your students to share similarly.**

Avoid speaking *for*. Keep things personally directed: "I think," "I believe," "it is my understanding," etc.

Model the confidence to say "I don't know."

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### **For collections and communities:**

Collections can feel anchored in the past and can be made to seem relevant only to peoples of the past. Bear in view their living descendants as you engage with collections:

Use the past tense only when referring to an activity or event that occurred specifically and exclusively in the past.

Avoid the passive voice in reference to Indigenous histories. Center Indigenous agency and actions.

Never sensationalize collections or cultural practices. Pay attention to use of such words as “weird,” or laughter coupled with incredulity as potential warning signs. If applicable, make this an explicit discussion topic with your class.

Think about your specific language choices. Whatever words you choose, share your reasons with your students and acknowledge the place of different terminology (and spellings) in other Indigenous works.

**Examples of common terms to use with care and discussion: object, artifact, folklore/legend/myth**

**Examples of common words to avoid: primitive, pagan, discover**

**Say Tribal Nations *in* the U.S. (e.g.), not Tribal Nations *of* the U.S.**

**Say descendant/creator communities, communities of origin, not source communities**

Slow down. In the context of traditions that ascribe animation to material items, it may be rude to handle or consider them in a rushed manner.

### **For your students:**

Emphasize process. This includes helping students to consider not only *what* they are learning, but *how*.

Use the encounter with collections to reveal, disrupt, disturb, and complicate received wisdom, and the subjective assumptions, biases, or expectations people carry with them.

Ask students to discuss ethical research practice and knowledge production. Who is impacted? How? What difficult decisions are implicated?

Leave time for student reflection. Allow space for, and actively encourage, students to engage with emotion.

### **For your coursework:**

Consider your own syllabus. Assign students readings from Indigenous scholars/knowledge holders.

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Have students consider the politics of citation in their assignments. What sources do they use to help them interpret collections and why do they choose them? Whose authority are they asserting, affirming, circulating, or erasing?

Have your students think about whom they could, or should, consult for their research.

## »TEACHING FROM COLLECTIONS: FINAL THOUGHTS

Teaching and learning from collections is not, and should not be, limited to the classroom. Remind your students (and yourself!) to turn to collections in their course assignments and individual research. Guide them to look for comparative collections at the Peabody Museum and elsewhere, or to locate associated collections divided between institutions. Encourage them to search out connections between cultural items; natural history collections; photographs and drawings; maps and geographical or environmental records; biographical and personal papers of associated known and named individuals; or any of the other various repositories of knowledge and sources of expertise available to them within and beyond the university.

For all the hard work involved, engaging with collections and building relationships with them can truly be fun and inspiring. Enjoy it!