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THE SCHOOL AS MUSEUM: USING CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGY TO UNDERSTAND PAST SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Lena Almqvist Nielsen

In accordance with Ian Hodder's thoughts of entanglement, I want to approach school environment research from the angle of contemporary archaeology. Can an interdisciplinary approach like this advance the ongoing research about educational spaces? What stories are hidden behind the objects in school and can these stories be made visible if we look more closely at the entanglement of people and objects?

Since the modern world and the material things around us are familiar, we tend to take them for granted, accepting them unquestioned.¹⁶⁴ But by asking different questions and using an interdisciplinary approach we might uncover the secrets and hidden stories of the artefacts that surround us. By using contemporary archaeology, the aim of this article is to make a contribution to the understanding of objects "left behind" in the school environment.

An Interdisciplinary Study

The study of material things is a central element of archaeology. Traditionally, archaeology has been used to understand past ages and cultures, rarely our own time or the future. Contemporary archaeology is perceived as slightly controversial at times due to the objects investigated.¹⁶⁵ Yet there are several

¹⁶⁴ Paul M. Graves-Brown, *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture* (New York 2000), 1.

¹⁶⁵ Adrian T. Myers, "Contemporary Archaeology in Transit: The Artifacts of a 1991 Van," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 15, 2011, 139.

interesting research areas of material culture where contemporary archaeology can contribute to a fuller understanding of the objects and their context. Applying archaeological methods and theoretical perspectives, the study of modern materials can uncover new themes and raise new questions.¹⁶⁶ The combination of archaeology and the history of education can visualise previously unseen aspects of school history and by asking the right questions, the layers of sedimentation in the school environment can be removed and the hidden stories of the objects and their life cycles be told.¹⁶⁷ “The archaeology of us” was a concept first broached in the 1970s and William Rathje’s “garbology” is one of the earliest archaeological projects to visualise how recently abandoned contemporary materials can be a valuable source for understanding social trends and values.¹⁶⁸ The aim of contemporary archaeology is to contribute to a better comprehension of the present day¹⁶⁹ and offer possible understanding of future society.¹⁷⁰ Archaeology brings three specific perspectives to the study of material culture: *archaeological investigation*, which focuses on material culture and the things people leave behind; recognition of and interest in *long-term processes*; and an interest in *change*.¹⁷¹

By using an archaeological approach in line with Hodder’s previously mentioned thoughts of entanglement, I want to visualise the importance of the forgotten things tucked away in the school environment as clues to understanding very recent and present-day material culture.

Understanding Objects as Entangled Things

As humans, we are connected to things and objects in many different ways. They are important to us every day, at home,

166 Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas, *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (New York 2001), 8.

167 Martin Lawn, “A Pedagogy for the Public: The Place of Objects, Observation, Mechanical Production and Cupboards,” in Grosvenor and Lawn (2005), 145.

168 Myers (2011), 140; Rathje and Murphy (2001).

169 Myers (2011), 140.

170 John Schofield, “Archaeology and Contemporary Society”, *World Archaeology* 42 (3), 2010, 325.

171 Rodney Harrison and John Schofield, *After Modernity: Archaeological Approaches to the Past* (Oxford 2010), 6.

in our free time and at work. They are closely linked to human identity, even though these connections are often hidden. Hodder points out that things often bring people and other things together and that the objects subsequently become entangled with humans and other things.¹⁷² The artefact is activated by organisational, social or cultural relationships, without which it has very little use value.¹⁷³ In *Entangled*, Hodder explores what things can do for humans. In my study, I intend to explore what things can do for teachers, students and other individuals working in a school environment. The objects constitute society, what it means to be human or in this specific case, what it means to be a teacher or a student.¹⁷⁴

Our interest in objects is often directly connected to the beneficial effect they have for us. We actually rarely look at the objects themselves. Hodder states that in order to really understand them, we need to look deeper and more fully.¹⁷⁵ Not only do things entangle with other things and humans, things and humans are also co-dependent on each other in the sense of mind, body and the world.¹⁷⁶

I took photos at the school where I have worked for the past ten years with children aged 13 to 15. The school was built in the 1960s and is located in the northern part of a medium-sized town on the west coast of Sweden. The school is now undergoing what can be called a “technical transformation,” as older technology is replaced by new, so for the moment, there is a mix of all different kinds of equipment, some of which, though never used during the duration of my employment, is still there. I use three of these photos as documentation, in order to visualise my points and in an attempt to place them on the map of contemporary archaeology and the history of education.

172 Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Malden 2012), 8–12.

173 Grosvenor and Lawn (2005), 7–17.

174 Hodder (2012), 1, 64.

175 *Ibid.*, 2.

176 Carl Knappett, “Photographs, Skeuomorphs and Marionettes: Some Thoughts on Mind, Agency and Object,” *Journal of Material Culture* 7 (2002), 100.

School Props and Their Hidden Stories

The objects around us function as a backdrop; they are props for a way of life, which means that the objects in the classroom are props for a way of teaching and working in school. They make a particular method of teaching possible.¹⁷⁷ Artefacts, rules, teachers and students integrate with one another, and all these things together function as *a network constituting the classroom*. Martin Lawn speaks of social technology as a way of distinguishing between the tools and the context in which they operate. This way of thinking can enable technology to be seen and studied in a wider sense and the activities going on in the classroom to be comprehended in a new light.¹⁷⁸



Figure 1. *Technological change visualised by the mix of objects in the classroom.*
Photo: Lena Almqvist Nielsen (2012).

In Figure 1, technological change is visualised by the mix of different objects in the same classroom. The smartboard alone can replace the television and the overhead. Using people's stories as a complement to visualisation can provide an even fuller picture. In this instance, I will use my own voice and my own experience as a teacher along with the knowledge gained from the experiences of other teachers and staff at the school. Looking at the props in this classroom, we can see that they make

¹⁷⁷ Hodder (2012), 2, 6.

¹⁷⁸ Lawn (1999), 77–78.

two different ways of teaching possible. The overhead squeezed into the corner of the room and the television turned away from the students, staring at the wall, belong to an older way of teaching. Still, they are kept as a possible solution for teachers less comfortable with the new technology offered by the smartboard. The grey speaker next to the smartboard is disconnected and has not been used for several years. It is still attached to the wall and since it is still in good condition it might be used again. No particular discussion about these objects has taken place, but a couple of teachers with a broken television in their rooms have had it removed. Some teachers use older teaching materials that can only be viewed on the overhead or the television. Lack of time can also be an issue, explaining why broken and unused objects remain gathering dust in the classrooms. If no uniform decision is made, it is up to the individual teacher to decide whether to have superannuated technology removed from their classrooms.



Figure 2. *The telephone: A connection to hidden and forgotten stories from the past.*

Photo: Lena Almqvist Nielsen (2012).

In Figure 2, you can see part of the whiteboard, a telephone, a list of telephone numbers and, again, a disconnected speaker. There is a whole story of entanglement associated with the telephone. Even though it appears to be connected, it does not work. Every classroom has one of these telephones. For years, they were tested each August, after the summer break. Beside the telephone, there is a list of the short numbers to the other classrooms, the teachers' room and the school nurse. The phones were used to convey brief messages, call a student to the office or the nurse, or when a teacher needed some kind of help.

The telephones were important work tools that all of a sudden lost their importance. As stated, this particular telephone is out of order and no one has referred to the list for years – but they are still there, attached to the wall, props from an older way of working. No discussion about their removal has occur-

red and in theory they may be used again. Teachers used to use them when conflict arose and they quickly needed assistance, but the school climate is now much more peaceful. Non-use has also changed the routine of the school nurse and the guidance counselor, who used to call the classroom, asking to see students. They now write notes to the teacher, asking them to pass them on to the student in question. It happens that the teacher forgets or that the student is not in school that day, which wastes the time of the nurse or counselor. Students also used the phones to call other classrooms, playing pranks on other teachers if their own had to leave the classroom for a few minutes.

When we use an artefact, it comes alive and entangles with humans and other objects in various networks. The electric light is not a teaching tool but can be used to illustrate how technology in the classroom, through entanglement with other objects, can *become* one in a movie projector or an overhead projector.¹⁷⁹ Any given artefact can move in and out of different networks, depending on the stage in its life cycle an artefact is in. To fully understand an object, we need to consider its complex web of entwining users.¹⁸⁰ A technological artefact may function as an extension of the mind; an idea of the mind is rarely fully understood without some form of tangible expression. Lawn defines technology as a *tool*, the *thinking* the tool represents, and the *social processes* that come with it.¹⁸¹ I believe that the telephones in this school can function as an example of how idea, behaviour and artefact co-depend.¹⁸²



Figure 3. *The overhead is in the end of its life cycle but the telephone might be used again.*

Photo: Lena Almqvist Nielsen (2012).

179 Lawn (1999), 63–82.

180 Knappett (2002), 100–101.

181 Lawn (1999), 68.

182 Knappett (2002), 98–99.

Snapshots of a Way of Teaching

In archaeology, documentation and interpretation are two major tasks. When excavating an ancient monument, it is essential to document every little step of the procedure. Doing so makes it possible to go back and revalue the conclusions. While excavating, you destroy important layers of clues and when the layers are gone the only thing left is documentation. The value of the visual is clear when studying objects in any environment. When looking at and visualising the objects left in school, we see snapshots of a way of working and teaching. One day soon these objects might be put away or replaced by newer ones and if the image is not captured, it will be hard to explain its content and context with words alone. An image also makes memories come alive and discussion taking an image as its starting point can provide much information. The old equipment in school, the television (as well as the VCR and DVD) and the overhead projector are at the end of their respective life cycles, while the telephones are more difficult to comment on since we do not know their possible future relevance. They might be used again if the school considers it necessary.

In this text, I have emphasised archaeology by focusing on material culture — the things teachers have left behind — and the recognition of and interest in long-term processes, change, and notions of entanglement and co-dependency. I believe that contemporary archaeology in school environments can offer many possibilities worth exploring. In his article, “A Pedagogy for the Public: The Place of Objects, Observation, Mechanical Production and Cupboards,” Lawn describes the need for object studies in the material context of school.¹⁸³ This area has hitherto been ignored but can answer questions about how objects give meaning to everyday life in school, how they are linked to active networks and connect people and routines.¹⁸⁴ Contemporary archaeology is innovative and controversial in itself, which makes it even more exiting since this means that it is possible to try new approaches.

In “Contemporary Archaeology in Transit: The Artifacts of

183 Lawn (2005).

184 Ibid., 145.

a 1991 Van,” Adrian T. Myers suggests that the archaeology of contemporary material culture needs to be innovative, that the discovery and exploration of new materials and situations will increase, which in turn will lead to the development of new methodologies and theoretical perspectives.¹⁸⁵ I would like to think that this research project has been conducted in line with his thoughts and shows how closely connected school routines, objects, and people really are.¹⁸⁶ A deeper study could reveal how the choices were made prior to investment in these objects and what changes they brought to the classroom.

¹⁸⁵ Myers (2011).

¹⁸⁶ Lawn (2005), 145, 160.