

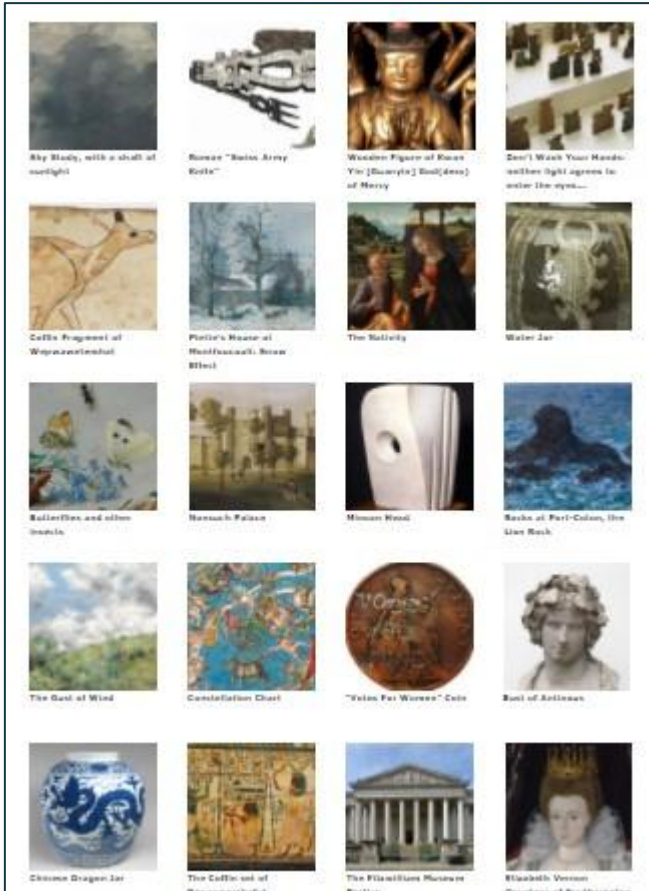
# Talking Objects Resource Pack

**For school and museum-based educators to support object-based dialogue**

Developed by Alison Twiner, Zixuan Tang, Benjamin Rudd (Camtree and CEDiR), Kate Noble, Rosanna Evans, Jacqui Strawbridge, Holly Morrison, Nicola Wallis (The Fitzwilliam Museum), Alison Giles (The Whipple Museum), Nic Skipper (Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences), Roz Wade (The Museum of Zoology), Scott Horsley, Jackie Deal (Kennett Primary School) and Duncan Powser (Weatheralls Primary School)



Handling Collection from The Sedgwick Museum



# About Talking Objects

The Talking Objects research project brought together primary school educators and museum practitioners to explore how museum objects can spark meaningful conversations, thinking and understanding in young learners.

We held 7 in-person, online and hybrid action learning sessions to explore what dialogue meant to us, aligned to the [D200 online course from Camtree](#) about educator inquiry into dialogue. We carried out inquiries in 3 different settings where we audio recorded students aged 6-9 years talking about museum objects.

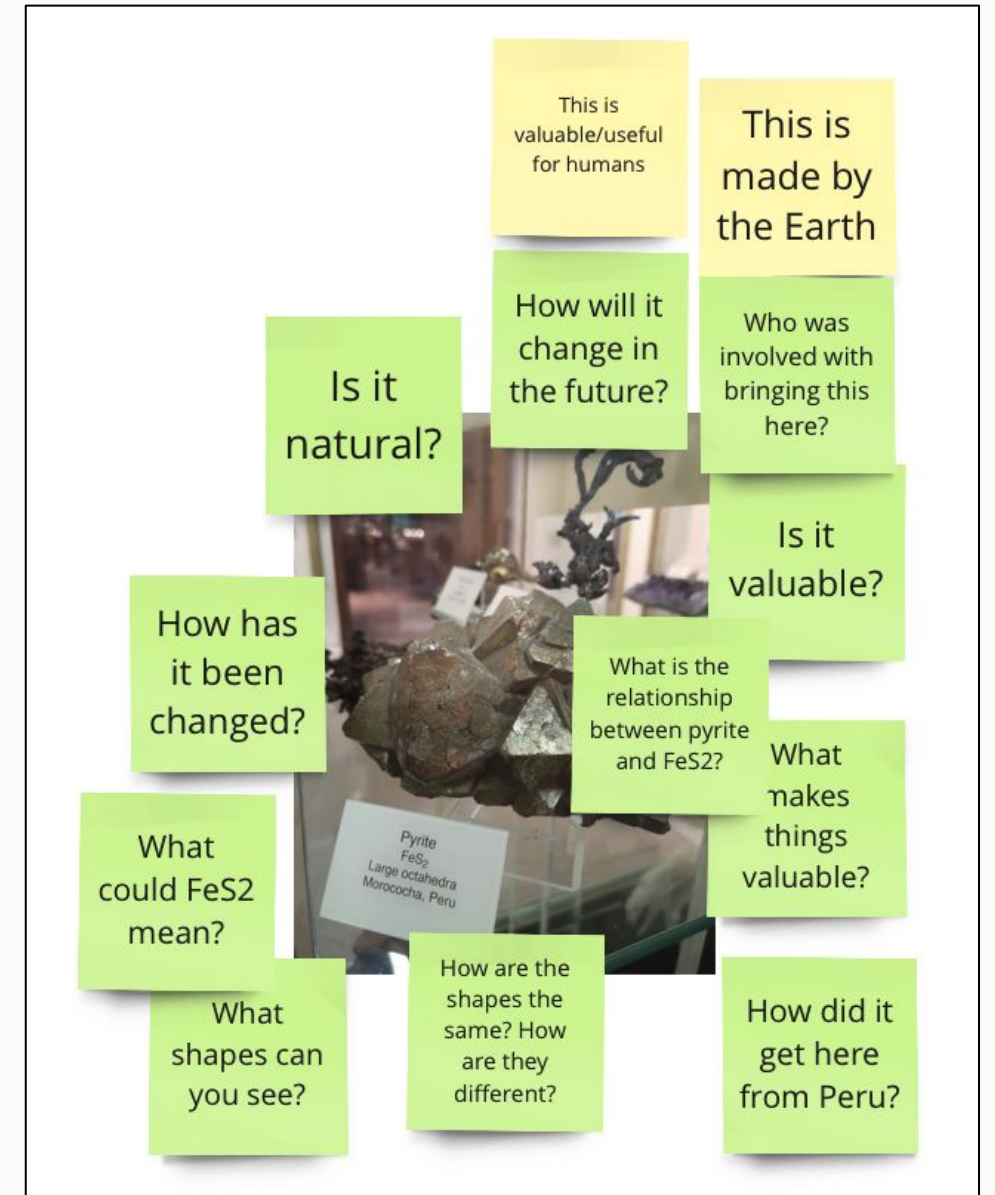
We then used the [Toolkit for Systematic Educational Dialogue Analysis \(T-SEDA\)](#) to analyse the dialogues and wrote a report on each of the inquiries.

Look, Think, Do online resources  
The Fitzwilliam Museum





# 1. What is dialogue?



Miro Board from Talking Objects professional learning session



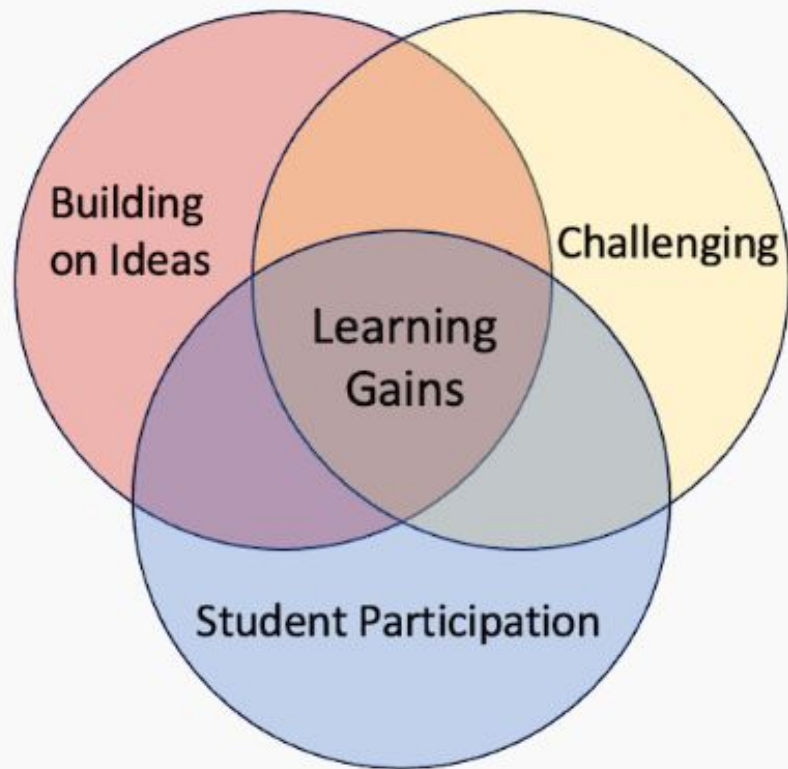
## Miro Board from Talking Objects action learning session

# What do we mean by dialogue, and why does it matter?

- Educational dialogue refers to shared thinking and building cumulatively on others' ideas, to construct knowledge (*Vygotskiĭ & Cole, 1978*)
- It also includes critically and respectfully challenging and evaluating different perspectives and reasoning (*e.g. Alexander, 2020; Wegerif 2011*)

**Dialogue is not just about talking, or agreeing:  
it is about building deeper understandings together**

# Research into the value of dialogue for learning *(Howe, Hennessy, Mercer, Vrikki, Wheatley, 2019)*



A large-scale study of talk in upper-primary schools, found classroom dialogue boosted test performance (in maths, spelling, punctuation and grammar on standardised tests) when there was evidence of:

1. high levels of **building on/elaborating on the ideas of others,**
2. and respectfully **challenging** ideas
3. as long as **multiple students participate actively and engage with each other's ideas**

**All three elements needed to be present, for the learning gains noticed.**



# Dialogue moves linked to learning, and what they sound like

(from the Toolkit for Systematic Educational Dialogue Analysis: T-SEDA Collective, 2023)

There are ten dialogue moves or 'codes' in the full T-SEDA - five are illustrated here and in the next slide

Dialogue categories	Contributions and Strategies	What do we hear? (Key Words)	Museum and object-based examples
IB – Invite to build on ideas	<i>Invite others to elaborate, build on, clarify, comment on or improve own or others' ideas / contributions</i>	'Can you add', 'What?' 'Tell me', 'Can you rephrase this?' 'Do you think?' 'Do you agree?'	Otis said they thought things should be left – what do you think they meant by that?  So you said you think it's valuable: What makes it look valuable to you?
B – Build on ideas	<i>Build on, elaborate, clarify or comment on own or others' ideas expressed in previous turns or other contributions</i>	'it's also', 'that makes me think', 'I mean', 'she meant', 'following on...', 'building on...'	Oh yeah of course, and only rich people would have had horses  So thinking about what you said, that would make sense if you think about the materials they would have made things from

To see the full ten codes and more detail about T-SEDA:

T-SEDA Collective (2023). [Toolkit for Systematic Educational Dialogue Analysis \(T-SEDA\): A resource for inquiry into practice. v.9](#). University of Cambridge.



# Dialogue moves linked to learning, and what they sound like

(from the Toolkit for Systematic Educational Dialogue Analysis: T-SEDA Collective, 2023)

Dialogue categories	Contributions and Strategies	What do we hear? (Key Words)	Museum and object-based examples
CH - Challenge	<i>Call into question, doubt, disagree with or challenge an idea</i>	'I disagree', 'But', 'Are you sure...?', '...different idea'	OK, but if you look at it from below it's hollow, so I don't think it's very strong  I don't think that's fair at all - they should give it back
IR – Invite reasoning	<i>Invite others to explain, justify, and/or use possibility thinking relating to their own or another's ideas</i>	'Why?', 'How?', 'Do you think?', ...'explain further'	How would they have made it so smooth do you think?  Why do you think they didn't just leave it where they found it in the first place?
R – Make reasoning explicit	<i>Explain, justify and/or use possibility thinking relating to own or another's ideas</i>	'I think', 'because', 'so', 'therefore', 'in order to', 'if...then', 'it's like...', 'imagine if...', 'could'	They just look really yellow, because I guess cows don't clean their teeth do they! I bet they smell too  I reckon they thought they were doing the right thing, because they wanted to look after things that might just fall apart where they were

So genuine dialogue, that supports learning, relates to how we:

- offer our own views (e.g. give reasons),
- link to others' views (e.g. build on ideas),
- and also how we invite others to share their thoughts (e.g. inviting reasons or invite others to build)

## 2. Dialogue in museums and galleries

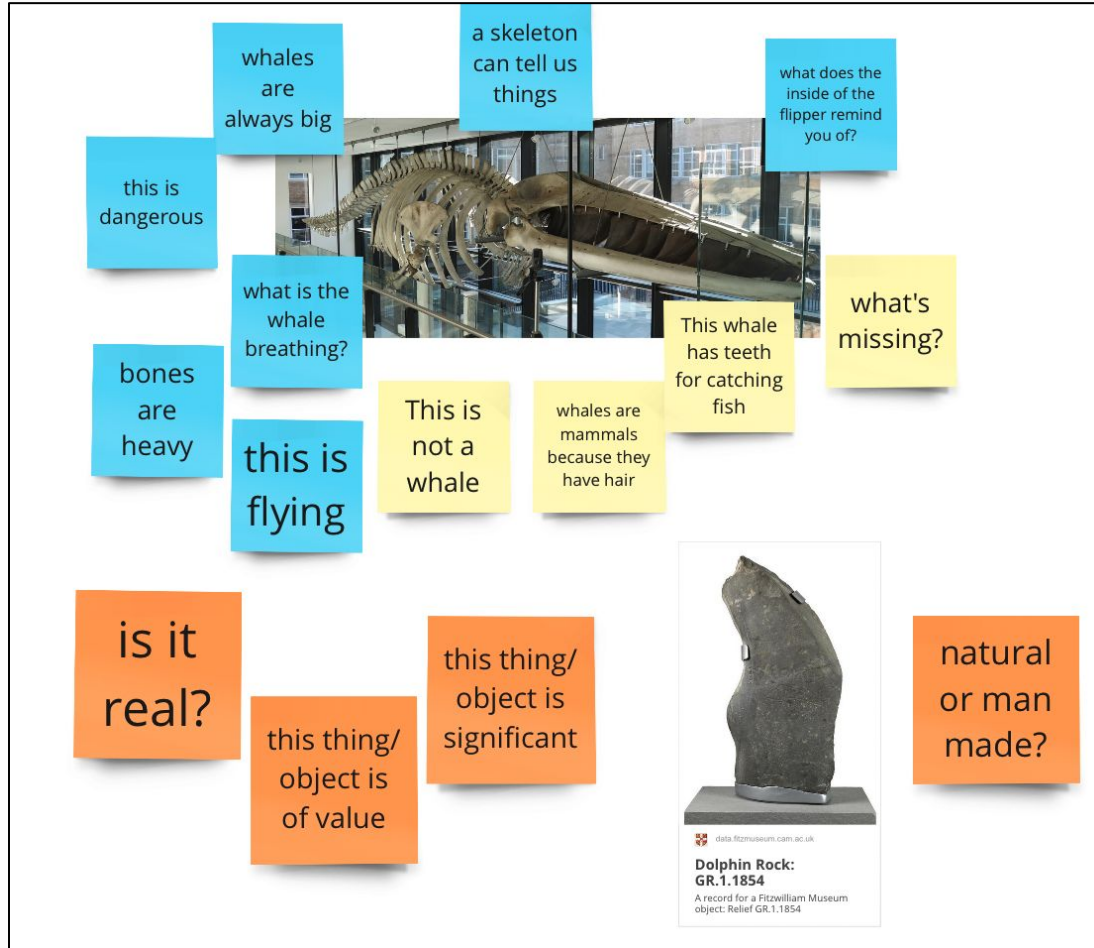


Children talking about a display at The Fitzwilliam Museum

# Museums and galleries are rich sites for thinking, and for dialogue

- Museums and galleries have a unique capacity to provoke curiosity, invite creative thinking, encourage dialogue, and promote learning (*Noble, 2019; Falk & Dierking, 2018; Burnham & Kai Kee, 2011, Hooper-Greenhill, 2007*)
- Situated outside of formal education, they are less tied to curricula, and so are open to wider discussions and considerations than prescribed knowledge-based schemes of work
- Engagement with questioning previously accepted ideas and interpretations encourages a broader range of encounters with collections, and opens up the possibilities for more inclusive and equitable futures (*Habib, 2021; Soares & Witcom, 2023*)
- Multimodal encounters with objects can make learning more accessible, meaningful, memorable and enjoyable (*Burritt, 2018; Jewitt, 2009; Twiner et al., 2014, 2021, 2022, Wallis & Noble, 2022*)





Talk is really important, but in museums we have so much in addition to words that we use to communicate with, and around

*'We think with and through artefacts'*

*(Säljö, 1995)*

*'We think "with" and "through" things, not simply "about" things'*

*(Malafouris, 2020)*

The three case studies on the following pages give some examples of what this thinking and learning ‘with and through things’ can look like in museum contexts, and how it could be supported.

# Case study 1: Finders Keepers at The Fitzwilliam Museum



**Ancient Egyptian Galleries at The Fitzwilliam Museum**

# Exploring Reasoning and Respectful Challenge in Ancient Greek and Egyptian sessions with Year 3 and 4 students (aged 7-9)

## Aims:

1. To encourage students to examine complex ethical considerations concerning provenance and the ownership of cultural artefacts.
2. To encourage discussion and shared reasons and thinking beyond facts

Read the [full Inquiry report on Camtree](#)

*“In our antiquities sessions, we talk about ... how things got here and what's fair about them being here, what's not so good. And so that's a perfect moment in which there's not really only one right answer ... It's an opportunity to develop that ... conversation with, between each other”*

*(Jane, Arts Museum Educator)*



# Facilitating multimodal dialogue about ownership

- The educators thought about small changes they could make to their existing schools sessions
- They changed a discussion about the value of objects from a whole class to small group discussions to encourage dialogue
- Learners were given the question:

***‘Finders keepers: if you find something, do you keep it?’***



The Pashley Sarcophagus at The Fitzwilliam Museum

# Findings

- The Finders Keepers prompt question did lead to students reasoning with each other, comparing and contrasting ideas and feeling confident to disagree
- Giving the students cards to read the prompts from provided unnecessary distraction
- It is important to allow students to work independently as adult interventions were observed to shift the dialogue to a call and answer pattern and away from a more open ended dialogue
- The location of the inquiry in the physical space of the gallery impacted how students engaged with the task

Boy B	Look at that. If you were to find that, would you keep it?
Boy C	No.
Boy A	I would think that I found it (I) keep it.
Boy C	I wouldn't keep that because surely there is interesting to look at, but I want other people to look at it as well (inaudible). I think the ancient Greek artefacts should be displayed or for other people to see, because if you just keep it to yourself, how's the world going to see all these people?
Boy D	If someone else went to a museum, when they are (inaudible)...
Boy C	It could be on display in museums. You don't have to keep it because if you find it, how you keep it? how about everybody else meant to see the beauty of the statue or objects that you found?
Girl E	And you find things and you want them. It doesn't mean you keep them. (inaudible) You can have a look at them, and when other people come, they can look at it as well.
Boy C	If you put it in the museum, I'm pretty sure you can get free entry.

Extract drawn from the paper:

Morrison, H., Evans, R. & Strawbridge, J. (2025). Finders Keepers? Exploring reasoning and respectful challenge in museum-based dialogue with primary students, Practitioner Inquiry Report, Camtree Digital Library, <https://doi.org/10.71779/585>

# Exploring the parameters of an open question: From historical and disconnected, to hypothetical, ethical and personal

(discussion in action learning session)

Keep it

Put it in a museum

Leave it

*"I thought that was interesting actually ... how the children, trying to be specific, have understood the question ... in that you keep something for yourself... or you put it in a museum ... They often are going for the middle way:... we should take half the things or one thing ... So you don't take the things and keep them for yourself. But you don't leave them there either. You put them in a museum as the sort of middle ground, because then ... you're sharing it. They seem to kind of justify ... if you're going to take it and share it, that's OK because it's worse keeping something for yourself. I think ... that was quite interesting ... how they understand who it is who's doing the keeping." (Natalie, Arts Museum Educator)*

*"Me too. ... it really felt like they were being very personal. So they were personally thinking: what would I do if I had it, what will I do? What should I do?" (Jane, Arts Museum Educator)*

# What's not being talked about?

(discussion in action learning session)

**How can we widen dialogues, by introducing important ideas and questions that learners may not think about?**

*"I think it's interesting that when, I guess it might be to do with how the question is raised, but **none of them ever consider paying for anything**. It's like either you keep it or you don't keep it. There's no kind of, maybe we should buy it, or maybe we should kind of compensate people... Greek vases are valuable, and that maybe if you find something - because also the Finders Keepers rule, I think changes depending on how valuable the thing is that you found." (Amelia, Science Museum Educator)*



# Key Takeaways

- Dialogue prompts around specific objects can provide opportunities to discuss complex topics such as ownership or coloniality, that may be more difficult to comprehend as abstract ideas
- Dialogue can be supported by provocative but open questions, inviting consideration and ideas beyond ‘facts’, to consider alternative possibilities and reframe historical narratives
- Providing opportunities for small group discussions in response to a prompt did lead to students reasoning with each other, comparing and contrasting ideas and feeling confident to disagree
- Considering what’s *not* talked about can be as important as what is, to consider how we can widen or deepen the debate, as space to extend understanding
- Acknowledging we don’t always have to have all the answers to visitors’ questions provides a meaningful real-life experience to think about objects and histories beyond what we factually know and can explain

## Case study 2: Handling Session at The Museum of Zoology



*Specimen 1: Dog tooth*



*Specimen 2: Cow tooth*



*Specimen 2: Cow tooth underside*

**Handling specimens from The Museum of Zoology**

# Encouraging Broader Ways of Talking About Animals and Nature: An Inquiry into Open-Ended Dialogue through Museum Collections with Year 2 students (aged 6-7 years)

## Aims

1. To use open-ended questioning and reduced teacher direction to foster curiosity, imagination, and shared reasoning among learners
2. To bring more learner voices into the discussion, including those who might normally be less confident

*"I purposely didn't want to ask questions like 'What do they eat?' because that's what they do in school. I wanted them to think about how they might describe something, to look without worrying about whether they were right or wrong."*

*(Rebecca, Science Museum Educator)*

Read the [full Inquiry report on Camtree](#)

# Opening prompt questions for small-group discussion

The educator used three prompt questions, with handheld objects (a dog tooth and a cow tooth) that learners could hold, to encourage discussion:

- What does it look like?
- What does it feel like?
- What do you think is important?



Handling specimens from The Museum of Zoology



# Findings

- In the group where the teacher was present, conversation followed a more instructional pattern, with the teacher guiding the students towards more instructional points
- Student-led groups showed more exploratory or imaginative exchanges, describing specimens in sensory or metaphorical terms
- In the absence of teachers' mediation, students engaged in more speculative forms of reasoning involving speculative hypothesis building

Extracts drawn from the paper:

Wade, R., Giles, A., Skipper, N. & Tang, Z. (2026). Encouraging broader ways of talking about animals and nature: An inquiry into open-ended dialogue through museum collection with Year 2 students, Practitioner Inquiry Report, Camtree Digital Library,

<https://doi.org/10.71779/784>

Teacher	What does a cow eat?
Girl B	Grass
Teacher	So, if it eats grass, it looks like this. And what tooth is it?
Boy D	A dog tooth, they eat dog food.
Teacher	Okay, what is dog food like?
Girl B	Meat.
Teacher	So, a cow is an herbivore, and a dog is a carnivore. Why do you think the carnivore has to have teeth like this?

Boy A	This actually looks like—if you put that like that—it looks like a mountain?
Boy A	Because—does that look like a mountain?
Girl C	Oh yeah, it kind of looks like a mountain!
Boy B	Oh yeah!

# Learners exploring the objects ‘in every way they could’

(discussion in professional learning session)

*“So with the **dog tooth**, it's **quite pointy**. So there was a lot of **flicking** on the end of it. **They really enjoyed holding that one**, whereas the **cow molar**, there's a lot more rolling around of it because it's, it's more, **it's a bit more handheld**. **It's not a small object**. There are **some bumps on the back which one boy said reminded him of, of little sausages or something**. ... There were a lot of those kinds of **conversations around the texture**” (Benjamin, Researcher)*

*“It was really interesting, you know, **the two teeth, one of which was definitely much more exciting than the other teeth**, and three children. ... **Both teeth were quite comprehensively destroyed in my group**... But it was really fascinating to be able to watch because sometimes ... someone will come and hand me something they've broken. I'm like, well, ‘How on Earth did you do that?’ And it's just watching them and going, oh, OK, I can see now how. And **they were absolutely on task. They were totally exploring it in every way they could**.” (Amelia, Science Museum Educator)*

# Key Takeaways

- Open questions and inviting personal interpretation of objects can validate the experiences learners bring - where there are no right or wrong answers, just reasoned perspectives on open questions
- Creating space for speculation, imagination and sensory observation supports students to construct meaning collaboratively and express their ideas with confidence
- Creating space for student-led dialogue provided freedom from curriculum expectation to foster curiosity and shared reasoning amongst pupils
- Handheld objects centred attention, intrigue and sustained focus on the task
- However, excessive handling can mean the objects are not usable after - with a suggestion to 'handle with care' this practice

# **Case study 3: See-Think-Wonder: Exploring digital reproductions in the classroom**

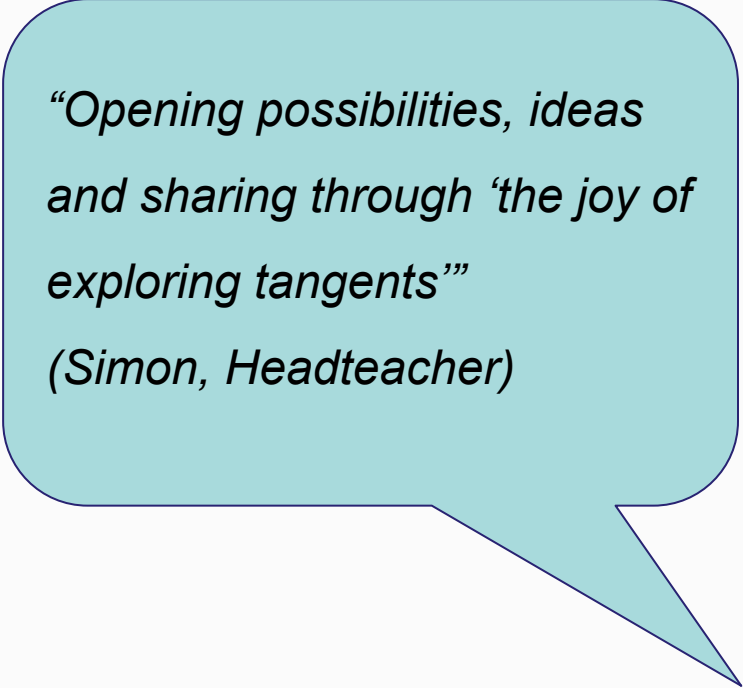


**Iceni coins from The Fitzwilliam Museum**

# An investigation into Open-Ended Student Dialogue in and Object-Oriented Year 3/4 (aged 7-9 years) See-Think-Wonder Assembly

## Aim

1. To use See-Think-Wonder prompt to support open-ended dialogue and reasoning around digital reproductions of iceni coins in the school classroom



*“Opening possibilities, ideas and sharing through ‘the joy of exploring tangents’”  
(Simon, Headteacher)*

Read the [full Inquiry report on Camtree](#)



# See-think-wonder prompt questions

**Class teacher facilitated open discussion about the represented coin, shown on a large screen, through the prompt questions:**

- What do you see?
- What do you think?
- What do you wonder?

Find out more about [See Think Wonder](#) Thinking Routine



*An Icenic Iron Age coin. Part of the Lakenheath coin hoard. Available at:*

<https://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/111496>

# Findings

- Students integrated learning, maintaining a space for speculative shared thinking rather than closing down to a specific subject
- Students connected to their knowledge across different disciplines, discussing topics beyond history.
- Having the same class teacher supported opportunities to make cross-curricular links through shared experiences, memories and understandings

R – Make  
reasoning  
explicit

1:23, Student 2: It's probably an ancient cockroach fish that looks like one of those centipedes from the past.

2:47, Student 5: Or a scooter (one of those electric ones).

R – Make  
reasoning  
explicit

C –  
Connect

4:28, Student 10: Well, it looks like that's sort of coming out. So this is the flat side and it's all coming out like this, so I feel like it could have sunk into the sea, and then it could have pressed on the sand at the bottom – and then, and then – if you come back up again... the sand could have dried, and – and it would have made this like, big print.

Extracts drawn from the paper:

Deal, J., Tang, Z. & Rudd, B. (2026). An investigation into open-ended student dialogue in an object-oriented Year 3/4 see-think-wonder assembly, Camtree Practitioner Inquiry Report, Camtree Digital Library, <https://doi.org/10.71779/772>

## See-think-wonder prompts support inclusive dialogue

- Those more confident in history referred to which historical era the coin could have been from, listing the civilisations through which a 2000-year-old object would have existed.
- Those with less confidence in history asked questions for the rest of the group or made observations about the coin's design.

*“Everyone can access a visual image or an artifact ... They can all do that at their own level”*

*“You don’t have to actually know. You can just ask questions, and that’s okay too.”  
(Jenny, class teacher)*

# Key Takeaways

- Digital representations can reflect both historical permanence (of the object) and uncertainty (around what it conveys) and provide a space to consider different ideas, ask questions and link to previous shared discussions
- The digitisation of small-scale, rare and valuable museum objects improves access and enables school-based practitioners to lead productive object-based discussions in the classroom
- Considering such conversations in a cross-topic, cross-curricular lens can be particularly valuable in primary-school contexts, where learners and teachers are largely constant and so unexpected cross-disciplinary connections can be developed as a group
- The 'see-think-wonder' format prompts curiosity and suggestion, drawing on learners' own experiences to enable all students to access and contribute to the conversation

## 4. Resources for Practice



**Assorted objects and creative prompts from a teacher training session**



## **Ground rules for dialogue** (drawing on Mercer, Wegerif & Dawes, 1999), are:

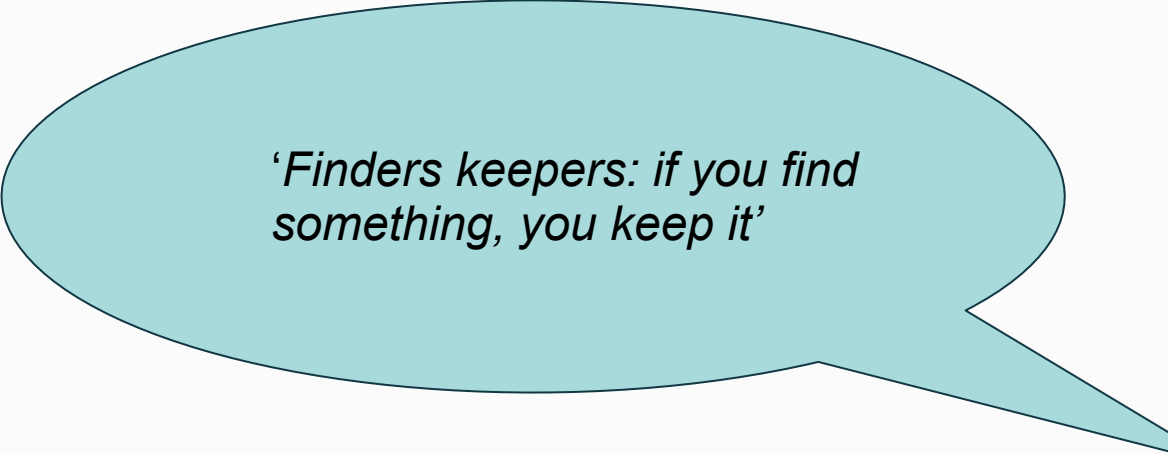
1. Set with learners/visitors at the start of a session or series of sessions together
2. In words suggested by the group, so they can be owned by group members
3. Used to set the scene for participation to ensure:
  - everyone can engage on comfortable terms;
  - learning is collaborative and supportive;
  - questions can be asked and considered respectfully
4. Reinforce the elements known to support learning gains:
  - participation by many,
  - building on each others' ideas,
  - and respectful challenge of ideas

## Some examples of ground rules (from Twiner, 2025)

- Give time for reflection; some responses are not immediate.
- We acknowledge everyone has a different starting point.
- Ask questions if you need to.
- Allow for opinions to change with developing dialogue.
- We respect others; they respect us.
- Allow yourself to listen properly.
- It is okay to seek clarification for an idea or question.

- Everyone's opinion will be listened to.
- You should give reasons for your answers.
- Challenge the idea, not the person.
- We should be open to changing our mind.

## Talking Points (e.g. Dawes, 2018)



*'Finders keepers: if you find something, you keep it'*

- Talking points are **provocative statements designed to encourage different points of view**
- Learners usually respond to them **in small groups**
- They can be **subject-specific, or more open**, depending on the focus of the discussion
- **When used with an object or image of an object**, you could make them more specific, or general
- When used together with ground rules, they can **prompt deep, nuanced thinking about complex issues**

# Prompt questions

Prompt questions can provide scaffolding around the implementation of ground rules, or talking points to encourage a more dialogic approach

## Some example prompt questions

- What do you see?
- What does it make you think about?
- What does it make you wonder?
- What does it feel like?
- What do you think is important and why?



**Museum educator-led dialogue at The Fitzwilliam Museum**

# Sentence stems and roles

**Sentence stems, based on T-SEDA dialogue moves and codes shown earlier, can be helpful to structure responses:**

- *“I think that because ...”* - to give reasons
- *“I’m not sure I agree with that - if...”* - to respectfully challenge
- *“Have you thought about...?”* - to invite consideration of different views
- *“I think that wouldn’t be right, because...”* - to counter an idea with another

**You can also assign learners different roles** in the discussion, for example:

- to ask for others’ opinions,
- to prompt for reasons,
- to summarise what others have said



# Find out more

[Talking Objects Practitioner Inquiry Reports](#) on Camtree

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