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**Items tell stories**

Thousands of items surround people and the items play big roles in our everyday life. But the item is so much more than just a functional instrument of aid. The items might be the result of our achievements and the aim of our desires, the materialised form of our ideas. The items help us to believe and love, commemorate and remember. To understand the essence of items is to help understand ourselves, but also the culture that has created and used that item.

The ancient items that have remained into nowadays were a part of the material culture of once lived people. They carry within themselves meanings and stories and getting to know these one might create interpretations and narrations about the past. Items like these are a part of our cultural memory. We consider old and rare items valuable both in historical and material sense. In the same time, people also appreciate items that have limited material values but that contain emotional and personal meanings. Thus in the appreciation of items, our personal memories and stories of them are important. So how we use the item as well as how we think and talk of it gives meanings to the item.

Items are telling stories, fulfilled with information and offer abundant ways to interpret them, so ways how they can be used in the course of studying are numerous. The possibilities of the material approach are not limited with certain subjects, it is suitable equally well in teaching both nature sciences and humanities. In selecting examples to the article, we have followed from the history subject syllabus, the main reason being that the authors of the article are educated in that field.

In the first chapter of the article we bring out, how the topic that we deal with helps to support the national curriculum and the activities recommended there. We exemplify the usage of the topic cultural identity with the help of material approach and stop with the item analysis as a research method. We also briefly introduce the possibilities of how to diversify studying with museum classes. In the second chapter of the article we share some methodical pointers and offer ideas of how students could be involved with active studying. We take under observation the stages of working with an item used in museum pedagogy and the principles of narrative pedagogy. In the final part of the article we present three example tasks carried out in practice alongside with the reaction from the pupils and the description of the feedback.

1. **Material approach in the context of national curriculum**

 Following we have selected some topics from the national curriculum of basic schools and upper secondary schools to exemplify the possibilities of usage of the material approach in study work.

Cultural identity

Cultural identity is one of the obligatory successive topics of the curriculum. With that, the aim is that the students would understand the role of culture as a shaper of thought and behaviour manners of the people and the changing of cultures during history. Pupils should acknowledge the cultural diversity of the past and present societies and through that learn to value their own culture and try to treat others with an unprejudiced way.

Material culture is a part of cultural identity. When one is in an unfamiliar environment the cultural differences are usually revealed most strikingly through material culture: the clothing that people wear, food, buildings, furnishing etc. Even in their own culture the people show inclusion to a group using material objects. Many young people see important to demonstrate their subcultural affiliation in a material form, through clothing and symbols. By selecting items that are significant and intriguing for the youngsters and in the same time with an interesting cultural background, it is possible to open more deeply the historical processes or cultural phenomenon in a memorable way that engages the attention of the pupils.

By taking, for the starting point, let say, the black and white scarf that has become the fashion accessory for the youngsters, it is possible to open the backgrounds of the complicated history and conflicts in the Middle-East. In the scarf's case we are dealing with a traditional headwear of Arabic men from Kufa region, called *kufiia*, and of which in the Middle-Eastern region has become nowadays the carrier of a political message. In the conflict during the 1930s between the Arabs who lived in Palestine and the immigrated Jews, the *kufiia* became the symbol of Palestine nationalism. After the founding of Israel on the Palestinian areas this headgear became the mark of the freedom movement of the Palestinians and a trademark of the politician Yasser Arafat. Wearing *kufiia* became at first popular with those western activists, who were the supporters of Palestinians in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, that was before the scarf became a commodity within the masses. The example could be used in the upper secondary schools during the course "Recent History III" in the framework of the topic that handles the Middle-Eastern crisis.

The topic of Christian church, that is taught in basic schools within the framework of courses of middle ages and early modern period, can be made more interesting if to introduce for instance to the students the well known and intriguing symbol *the pentagram*. By researching the historic background of the pentagram the pupils learn how ambiguous is the meaning of the symbol in different cultures and how the meaning of it has changed over time. In case of the pentagram i.e. the regular five-pointed star we are dealing with an ancient mystical-magical symbol, that was not related to evil before the inquisitions carried out by the Catholic Church. In different societies this sign was interpreted as the life circle of a human, the symbol of divinity and truth, in the middle ages it also symbolised the five virtues of a knight. During the inquisition people started to see the pentagram as the symbol of a goat's head and the shape of the devil. Former sign of protection was formed into a signifier of evil and it was soon called as the witches’ foot. In the 20th century, the pentagram has become a symbol of Satanists and some neopaganist groups. During the Soviet time, pentagram badges were worn by Little Octobrists.

Methods of research

It is brought out in the general competence section of the curriculum, that the pupil should know the simpler social sciences research methods and to use them in studying by associating the learned material with everyday life. One such research method is the **source-analysis**. Understanding the principles of object-based source-analysis is especially important for understanding the topics of prehistory in the framework of "Estonian History I (until the turn of the 16th and 17th century)", as all of the known information is based on the material remnants and the interpretation of them. But the method is suitable for using to teach other periods as well.

**The biography of things approach** focuses on the investigation and analysing of the things biography (Kopytoff, 1986). It is a topic that is beyond a single subject, suitable for teachers of different specialties and pupils with different interests. In the method, one could originate from the whole life-cycle of the item: starting from the need to produce the item until the item ends up in the museum, but one could also be engaged more thoroughly with only one stage of the items life-cycle as well. So one could for example take under the observation an items story in the museum or instead, how the raw materials become the item and which technologies were used for it. The first example will be more thoroughly introduced in the last part of this article, in the "Favourite Item" task example and the other in the description of the museum class about traditional work techniques.

**Using analogies.** The understanding of cultures and societies that existed in the past can be simplified by using analogies with contemporary phenomenon’s that are familiar to the pupils. This device has been used in the Estonian National Museum workbook "Children of the House barn", where the meaning of the ancient items is explained using the items of today that have similar function (Tuubel, Värv, 1997). For instance, the granary peg seems at first glance as an item with incomprehensible function. But when the granary peg is described as an old credit card, the function of the granary becomes more understandable for today's people (photograph 1).

Using analogies is in general suitable for two types of phenomenon:

* the function or the technology of the item has had surprisingly few changes during the time. For example, in spite of the achievements in high technology today, we still use a knife for cutting things, an item which basic form and function has stayed untouched in time more than five thousand years.
* a person’s need has stayed unchanged, although the means to satisfy it have altered. The means of communication for instance have changed during the course of the time, from a signal fires and carrier pigeons to mobile phones and social networks, but the need that they satisfy remains the same – the wish to communicate to another human being.

In contrast with the two previous, a third type of phenomenon can be added:

• things, that have lost their original function, as the society, the needs of the people and the technologies have changed. For instance, the milk trestles built during the soviet times on the sides of the village roads have lost their meaning, as the agricultural production and marketing is different in capitalist society.

Museum as a study environment

The national curriculum foresees the expansion of the study environment to the museum, archives, library, computer class and into historical-cultural environments (relics, buildings) etc. To combine the teaching with everyday life, the school should enable field trips outside the class room, to the aforementioned places at least twice per a academic year. Museum is an appropriate environment for better explaining of the material culture. There are many items from different eras and cultures, which gives the children the possibility to compare and contrast the items. In addition, museum teachers are able to communicate to the pupils in an understandable way even the most complex phenomenon related to the past work there.

Basics of research work

Museum can be a collaboration partner to the school, in order to widen the topics handled by the pupils in the elective subject "Basics of Research Work". For example the pupils can use the topics of the Estonian National Museum questionnaires for their research and they can ask help from the specialists in the museum, who can give practical advice of how to use the museum collections and to help them in applying the scientific research methods, whether the materials used are in the form of objects, audiovisual media or texts.

**2. Methodical possibilities in studying through items**

Active learning

In the national curriculum the studying is seen as an intentional activity if the teacher and the pupil, which is guided to construing and interpreting the perceived information. Methods introduced by us are based on the principles of active learning.

According to the active learning strategy (Buehl, 2001) the study process id efficient if it is based on a trichotomy:

* preset, where one prepares for studying and the learner finds a pointer to the topic;
* processing and conceptualisation of new information and
* the consolidation of new material through interpretation and reflection.

When learning through objects it is important to know how they are experienced. The following stages will describe how an understanding of an item might develop and consolidate. Although the model for the methodology in working with items comes from the experiences of German museologists (Kolb, 1998), the same techniques are used by the Estonian museum teachers in their everyday work.

**The preset: First contact with the item and discovering its meaning.** During the first contact with the museum piece[[1]](#footnote-1) it occurs whether the learner has any previous experiences with a similar item.

**Understanding the meaning:**

• The first new layers are experienced; those are verified as correct and are being systematised. Aspects that have been previously hidden, unknown or nave not been apprehended come forth. In that phase the learner needs some outside assistance, whether it is in the form of written texts (i.e. the name and the introduction of the items function) or in the form of explanations from the museum teacher and the teacher.

• Activity connected with the item, with which it is important, that the study process would enable us to harness other senses as well – i.e. to pick up items, try them on, use them in their original functions. When to take into consideration the value of the museum items, copies of the items or illustrative auxiliary materials are used in the study work.

**Reflection of the meaning:**

* Creation of feedback. That is the reflex reflection phase, where one apprehends the item in a topical context already (for example: the item that has been tried on is one of the former items of clothing of the human being). During that phase the strongest connection with the topic at hand is formed and the museum teacher's or the teacher's help is vital. Consolidation of the new knowledge and the interpretations of the item – observation of the item according to the age group, that might follow a work with written sources, a conversation etc.
* Summarising the topic and continuing, the latter might take place in different study situations. For example, the topic of the ancient clothing that was covered in the museum can be further developed in school by creating a more general discussion over the influence factors and about what influences the day to day fashion within the pupils. It is important to create a connection between the museum and everyday life concerning the item. Through that the identification or likeness – the skill to recognise the item in other environments and cultures.

Narrative pedagogy

People use different senses for receiving and remembering information. When reading and listening our receptivity is average. Our skill to remember information is slightly better if we see and hear it simultaneously. Our receptivity is far greater towards the information gained during dialogue. By discovering something ourselves we are able to remember as much as 80% of the knowledge.

One important method in teaching history is the narrative or storytelling pedagogy (Lippus, 2010) which is suitable for applying in material approach in school. With narrative pedagogy people do not mean merely telling stories to the pupils, but also that the pupils would analyse, tell and create stories themselves, speak of their own experience (Valk, 2006). During the storytelling a meaning would be given to the items and phenomenon, they analysed and interpreted. In the course of that the standpoints get clearer and knowledge consolidates.

Thus the aim of the storytelling is the creation of meaning. Narrations are stories in which the plot develops logically, stating how thing were at the beginning of the story and showing afterwards how the situation chanced and found a conclusion. A narration that explains how one situation leads to another in addition presents to the succession of events in time the causal relationships between them. While capturing causality and interconnecting event people search and create meanings in the narrative – which is the most important aspect in telling stories about items.

Via the narration we understand the past and attribute meaning to it. Thus the narration also gives form and content to our practical lives, fixes our experiences and helps us gain new knowledge. Working with narrations and during the discussions, complemented by explanations from the teacher, one learns to acknowledge its experiences, to observe and analyse one's own behaviour.

Storytelling is one of historians’ tools – after the data is analysed an interpretation is crated in narrative form. The interpretations of children also come from analysing data. If the traditional scientific approach tries to search and explain the reasons behind the occurrences, then the aim of the narrative approach is to create meanings through analysis and by weighing different interpretations. Every version given by a historian or by a narrator is only one possible explanation. Children should learn to understand that there might be more than one version to one story. So, for instance, a general's story of a battle differs from soldiers who fought there and the description given by the winners differs from the description of losers. A historian who sees events in long term perspectives and in a wider historical context interprets the battle in a wholly different way. In analysing different viewpoints the skill of empathy develops in the child (Anderson, 2009: 127–129).

Narrative pedagogy as a method encourages active learning and teaching, as it offers possibilities for active communication between the teacher and the pupil, between the pupils themselves and between the learners and the topic incl. the items as well. To initiate the process one could for example use items with an interesting history, the story of which can be complemented by the students via offering their versions or by submitting a story connected with the item seen from different perspectives.

**3. Example tasks**

Following we are describing three example tasks that have been carried out in practice and that illustrate the material approach within the study process. We describe the aim, content and the reactions and feedback gained from the participants in every example. The first task was held in history class on the guidance of the subject teacher, the others were carried through by museum teachers. The last example task was carried through in the museum, but the ideas presented there is possible to apply in school with some modifications.

Task 1. The dilemma of war industry

War characterises every era, but the attitude towards it has been different, for instance, in Europe during the early modern period, warfare was seen as a natural phenomenon. The wars in the 20th century have exceeded all the previous with their extent, leaving the history with all the innovations and changes and the numbers of killed – a hard burden to carry. How to handle a topic that from one side brings innovations but from the other sufferings? War should not be promoted, in the same time different aspects accompanied with the wars must be observed and analysed in the history class. An opportunity of how the wars held on the 20th century can be taught in the upper secondary school in the light of the new curricula follows. The topic is carried through with the Põlva Co-Educational Gymnasium 12th graders during their history class within the framework of the topic First and Second World War.

**Aim:** To show how diverse history is. The military innovations in the field of technology are firstly used in the interests of the war industry, but later are often adapted and adjusted according to the needs of the civilians. The following approach gives from one hand the pupils the possibility to analyse war and in the other hand enables the teacher to guide the understandings of the pupils of the development of a varied world.

**Description:** The topic is handled as follows: introductory brainstorm, group work, a short lecture by the teacher and the pupils’ homework. The topic can be divided between several school classes.

First a group work on the topic "Emotionally about the world wars" in the form of a brainstorm is done, where different aspects are brought out of how the war influenced the society, incl. animals, nature, cities, people etc. The results of the group works are written on the blackboard, big poster or any other visible place and after that a general discussion is held about the topics.

After that the teacher hands out to the groups a set of pictures of different inventions from the 20th century. The aim of the pupils is to divide the inventions into subgroups and to explain to the class, under what basis the division was done.

It is followed by a slide presentation by the teacher (Vijand, 2010) that contains the same pictures that were selected for the group work. The presentation focuses on the inventions of the 20th century that were crafted for military purposes or the development of which was influenced by the war and that were latter taken into regular use. For example nuclear energy: USA spent two billion dollars to fund a top secret research and development programme, the Manhattan Project, in the framework of which the nuclear bomb was developed. Two nuclear bombs were thrown on Japan in the end of the Second World War that forced Japan to surrender unconditionally. After the World War II the nuclear technology was developed in both military and civilian purposes, since the 1960s the aim of developing nuclear energy was to replace fossil fuels. In the same time the military importance of the nuclear energy remains. In the same way and also with military considerations the computer industry was developed, the initial aim of it was the defence of the USA air system. The computer network was created so that the researchers would be able to communicate with each-other in the lack of other secure communications in case the Soviet Union should attack USA and all the other communications would be out of order. When in the 1970s the nuclear threat lessened, the Internet opened up for civilians. Nowadays it is difficult to imagine life without computers and Internet.

After the slide presentation the pupils will be given an independent homework – a discussion on the topic "Cruel, but constructive war".

**Result:** The pupils enjoyed this interpretation as in the class room war is mainly interpreted from the political viewpoint and both social processes as well as the different aspect of the war were left out form the observation. The result was expressed through the pupils discussions on the topic "Cruel but constructive war". The attitudes towards war was much wider than merely battles and fighting counterparts, for instance it was brought out, that tank motors were later on used on cars and as a result of the war the societal role of women shifted.

Task 2. A favourite item.

A workshop based on the example of the "Items tell stories" favourite items was held in one school in Southern Estonia. The participants were the pupils from V-VI classes; the conductor was a museum teacher.

**Aim:** To introduce to the pupils the world of items that surrounds us and to show the possibilities of how the items can speak with us and tell stories. Methodology – the pupils narrate to each-others stories related to the

items (the techniques of narrative pedagogy are used). The pupils learn to analyse items, to see cultural

phenomena related with them. The pupils acknowledge the multitude of viewpoints in regard to the items and

learn to understand each-others differences.

**Description:** Previously the pupils were given an assignment to bring to school their favourite object. The workshop began with a short lecture which was followed by a group work and feedback.

Firstly the museum teacher gave to the pupils an overview of what kind of stories and how the items collected into the museum can tell. Each item has its own story that lets us know how the item came to life, people who have used the item, when and why it has found its way to the museum. The collected items are described so thoroughly in the museum that even by only reading the descriptions and without seeing the item people will know the whole story of the item. The items are preserved with care, the temperature and moisture level are closely observed in the storage room. Some of the items are occasionally displayed on exhibitions, telling us different stories. All interested people can now acquaint themselves with the items stored in the museum: until so far one had to come the museum for that, now all the electronically described items from every museum in Estonia are in a joint and continuously updated web environment[[2]](#footnote-2).

After that the pupils researched with guidance from the museum teacher two photographs from a museum item. The items function, age and material were figured out.

The short lecture was followed by a group work, where the pupils had to introduce to each-other the favourite item that they brought along, by telling its story. After which the groups put together an exhibition of their favourite items and chose an appropriate title to it, finally they introduced through the item narratives their exhibitions to each-other.

**Result:** In preparing the workshop a question arose before the teacher, whether a mobile phone is an appropriate favourite item in the context of this assignment. When discussing with the pupils, which items to bring it was thought as this is a workshop organised by a museum the items must be old and dignified. In the autumn of 2010 undoubtedly the favourite item among the pupils of a Southern Estonian basic school was a mobile phone. Several of them had owned such item for years and it turned out that it is important for 2/3 of the pupils. As a result of the workshop it was concluded, that every item has its story which in turn might carry meaning only to its owner, i.e. it is connected with someone important to the owner or brought along from abroad. In discussing over the museum items, they came to realise, that the material and shape can change often, but the function of the item remains. One girl had already had six mobile phones. If she was asked why so many, than it turned out, that it was important to own the most fashionable. The motivation of the pupils to work along was great, as the topic touched every single one of them.

Task 3. Traditional work techniques

In the exhibition "From pig to soap. Traditional work techniques today" (Rattus, Jääts, 2008) opened at Estonian National Museum in 2008 an environment was created for trying out several simpler folk techniques. With the exhibition it was wished to offer to the teachers the possibility to associate different fields (i.e. history, natural science, chemistry, crafts) through actual examples. The following description is based on the museum classes made for the pupils of Tartu city basic schools. The pupils participated in the museum class with a teacher from their school; the class was carried out by a museum guide.

**Aim:** Learn to connect everyday necessity and its raw material and to understand the process behind the creation of it. Focus was set on the creation of the item

– what kind of material was used and as a result of what kind of process a sock or a mitten will be created for the child. Such approach enabled to understand the process of manufacturing the item using different senses, to try the tools necessary for doing the work and to understand different staged of the work process, their simplicity or complexity.

**Description:** The exhibition comprised of eight traditional work techniques (dipping candles, making soap, building stick fences and stone fences, wood chip works, tarring, rope twining and wool works) doing of which one did not need any special skills nor very specific work techniques. Both descriptions of the work process based on the archive materials as well as short films showing the process stage by stage were exhibited. First and foremost a possibility was created for the visitors to try out the work technique themselves. For safety reasons it was not possible to bring all the stages of the work into the exhibition hall – i.e. the tar burning or the boiling of the soap. But it was possible to tear wood chips from the stump, to hammer them on the roof and tar the, to build stick and stone fences, to use in water a homemade soap, to pluck, card and spin wool, to twine a rope from linen.

In the exhibition hall, the guide divided the class into groups and every group began to work independently in the theme centre. The activities were not rigidly directed; the kids were given the possibility to interact with the material freely (photograph 3).

**Result:** There were no feedback sheets in the exhibition that the teachers could have filled out, so the following analysis is based on the guide’s observations.

Some of the teachers had had previous experiences of the works shown, i.e. people remembered making soap at home and the stench connected with it. Teachers remembered and shared gladly their personal memories – the pupils seemed a bit surprised over it, that the teachers are telling them stories like that. In the same time it was a good opportunity for the teacher to pass on his/her own experiences. There were times when the teachers themselves were surprised how friendly and freely the class run its course.

The title of the exposition "From pig to soap." caused excitement in children. They were more interested in the topics that were more foreign and the parts of the exhibition, where they could take part more. The most popular turned out to be the building of the limestone fence, building the stick fence, tarring wood chips and hammering the wood chip roof. In the fence building, the pupils loved the fact that the fences could be put together, disassemble and again to put together. The scent of the exhibition was liked as well – it smelled of tar and wood in the exhibition hall. The children were more indifferent about those parts of the exhibition, where they could not try out the technology themselves (i.e. the candle dipping and soap making).

If some of the materials, i.e. the woollen yarn, were familiar to most, than i.e. the sheep's fat and tar were not. The children were surprised of how easily, by simply dipping rope into fat, the liquid fat of the sheep transforms into a solid candle. Many had thought that the candles were manufactured only by using moulds. It seemed odd for the children, that the sticky and smelly tar was gained heating the tree. It happened once that an adult visitor looked how the guide and kids were hammering the wood chips and then came and showed how he does it. The work together bound the members of the group together and furthered the interaction between different groups, as it is easier to get contact through activities. The guide was surprised by the interest of the children and how focused they were: they loved to research the topics in depth independently, i.e. to watch films headphones on.

**Summary**

Material approach guides pupils to observe the surrounding environment more closely, to wonder over that, what is the meaning of things, how it has developed and changed in time. The material approach alongside with the techniques of the narrative pedagogy offers the possibility of learning in a natural way to humans – by experiencing, interpreting and narrating of it.

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**Photographs**

Photograph 1 – Granary pegs: ERM 995/1-12. Bank card: Author: Anu Ansu, 2011.

Photograph 2 – Eesti Rahva Muuseum (Estonian National Museum),2004.

 Photograph 3 – Eesti Rahva Muuseum (Estonian National Museum),2008.

1. Museum piece - an item or document stored in a museum. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. www.muis.ee [↑](#footnote-ref-2)