

Object Lessons in Victorian Education: Text, Object, Image

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Abstract: Lessons on common objects, known as ‘object lessons,’ were a customary occurrence in Victorian schoolrooms. This article looks at Victorian object lessons around mid-century as a means of examining the variety of meanings that common objects, and particularly manufactured objects, might have held both inside and outside Victorian schoolrooms. While model scripts for object lessons circulated widely and clarified the meaning of common objects in print, the objects themselves had the potential to complicate and challenge these meanings. Drawing primarily on publications by Elizabeth Mayo and the Home and Colonial School Society (established in 1836), this article outlines the theological, industrial and imperialist ways of looking that informed the model object lesson. Yet close study of the objects employed in object lessons—feathers, an object lesson specimen box, and a series of illustrations of animals—demonstrates how full sensory engagement with material objects can disrupt these disciplined ways of looking and learning. The final section of the article describes the decline of object lesson pedagogies once they were established within the official curriculum for England and Wales over the course of the 1880s and 1890s. Increasingly, pictures and nature study came to replace common objects in Victorian schoolrooms, and had their own implications for the ways that schoolchildren were taught to look at and learn from the world around them.