Benefits of Using Objects/Images as Starter or Transitional Activities

- Participants are given a focal point or “conversation starter” to help build rapport and comfort during what can sometimes be a socially awkward situation, encouraging them to establish positive social connections with each other.
- Group members feel engaged, involved, and welcomed into the space from the very start.
- Participants have an opportunity to make a choice for themselves, giving them a message that choice, control, ownership, and their input in the learning experience are important.
- Social, emotional, and physical engagement are involved.
- Participants are invited to focus on the here and now.
- Interest and buy-in are increased with inherent novelty and a sense of fun and creativity in these activities.
- Context and relevancy can be created for an upcoming lesson.
- People often find it easier to share when they can attach their thoughts to an object or image.
- Conversation and reflection can become more metaphorically rich than with conversation alone.
- Learners engage in reflection early on in their educational experiences, helping them practice the art of reflection in an engaging and meaningful way. This leads to better reflection and transference of learning later in the learning experience.
- Participants’ comfort with reflective practice and dialogue increases.
- Reflection becomes an enjoyable, interesting part of a learning experience rather than a chore that takes place after a novel learning experience.

Find a Hook!

Engage learners from the moment they walk in the door by using objects, images, or quotes. This creates an opportunity for participants to make positive connections with their peers, set up context around the upcoming experience or lesson, begin the process of reflection, and shift their focus to the here and now. The following are a few of my favorite approaches for engaging groups from the moment they walk in the door.

Pick-A-Postcard™ Introductions

Materials: A collection of postcards or images

Facilitation Suggestions
- Spread out postcards so they are accessible to all group members.
- As participants enter the space, ask them to choose a card centered on a reflective, goal setting, or conversation-starting topic. The cards could represent questions or themes:
  - Choose a card that you would send to a friend to describe your experiences at this program/course/workshop/event.
  - Choose a card that represents a strength you bring to the group or a skill on which you want to work.
  - Is there a card that represents a unique perspective you bring to the group or program?
• Pose a question related to the group’s purpose for coming together. For example, when leading a vision-setting program for a group of committee members you might use one of the following:
  › Choose an image that represents why you were drawn to being part of this group.
  › Choose an image that represents a strength of this program.
  › What card represents a hope you have for the future of this program?
• In Language Arts classes, you might use this method to introduce or explore the use of metaphor, theme, and figurative language.
• Having the cards available during pre-group gathering time or as an entry activity during the first 5 minutes of class can inspire conversations, help group members get to know each other, and set the tone for the lesson or experience. Choosing a card gives people something to focus on as they transition into the workshop or classroom space.
• My favorite way to use the postcards is on the last day of a conference or workshop when I ask participants to send the card they picked to their future self.

I now have a collection of old toolboxes and vintage lunch boxes filled with found objects—antique keys, an old lock, an old camera, joke glasses, white out, a ruler, and other items. These objects can be used in a similar way as the postcards for both introductory activities and reflection. People respond a bit differently to objects than they do imagery. Try using tangible objects when reflecting on roles/responsibilities in a group or with younger participants.

Object/Toolbox/Miniature Metaphors™

Material: A collection of objects

Facilitation Suggestions
• As participants enter the room, ask them to choose an object that represents their role in the group, or a strength or unique perspective they bring to the group.
• With the toolbox variation, you might ask participants to choose a tool that represents the most important “tool” to have in one’s toolkit based on the group’s reason for being together. For a group of facilitators, you might ask: “What is the most important tool to have in one’s toolkit when working with groups. This could be a favorite engagement technique, a philosophy or mind-set, theory, or approach.”
• For a leadership course or language arts class, the tangible objects can inspire a reflective writing assignment or discussion around personal strengths, character traits, or goals.
• For a work group in a team-building program: “Choose an object that represents your view of your role in this group/organization.”

Reference/Resource: Make your own image or postcard kits with found items. Pick-A-Postcard™ kits are available through Experiential Tools at www.experientialtools.com. Other books that explore the use of images include A Teachable Moment by Cain, Cummings and Stanchfield, Inspired Educator Inspired Learner by Stanchfield; and the Chiji Guidebook by Cavert and Simpson. Make your own object kits with found items like old toys, tools, or objects from nature. Miniature Metaphor™ kits are available at www.experientialtools.com. Other ideas for entry activities to create a hook to engage can be found in chapter five of Inspired Educator Inspired Learner by Stanchfield.