

## Thinking Outside of the Exhibit: Museums as a Space for Empathetic Conversations

**Objective:** Through guided group conversations, participants will learn how artifacts can be used to discuss human tragedy, build empathy, and share experiences with peers.

**Time:** 15-30 minutes

**Materials:**

- **Artifacts with emotional baggage**
- **A circular set of chairs for group conversation, with a table in the center to hold the artifact**

**Anticipatory Set:** How can artifacts be used to have conversations about the more troublesome aspects of human existence? Ultimately, Museums exist to tell the stories of the human past. That past includes triumph and progress, but it also includes tragedy, death, and loss. These are aspects of human life that doctors, sociologists, and other professionals must deal with every day, and those aspects can be draining on the individual. Sharing together what has, and might be, experienced in the course of work can unburden the individual, provide emotional support, and aid the individual during difficult conversations.

*Before the activity begins, consider the following artifact example. The item that you use in your collection may carry similar emotional weight, or focus on another aspect of human existence, such as war, abuse, or neglect.*

For today's activity, I'm going to tell you the backstory of the artifact before we begin. William Wallace Lincoln, also known as "Willie," was born in 1850 after the Lincolns' second son, "Eddie," died at age three that same year. By all accounts, Willie was the child who was most like his father, Abraham. He had a sharp mind, wrote poetry, and showed great promise. However, in the winter of 1862 while his father was in the White House and the Civil War raged, eleven year-old Willie and his younger brother, Tad, took ill with typhoid fever. While Tad Lincoln improved, Willie Lincoln died in February. For months after his death, his father locked himself away in his son's room for an hour each Thursday – the same day that Willie died. His mother became so distraught that she could not attend her son's funeral, and her husband threatened to send her to a mental institution.

**Activity:**

- 1.) Request silence before you begin.
- 2.) Let participants take their time silently viewing the artifact.
- 3.) Invite them to sit within the circle.
- 4.) Ask the discussion questions.

# LESSON PLAN



## Discussion:

- 1.) What do you believe this artifact is?
- 2.) What led you to your conclusion?
- 3.) Why do you think that this artifact exists?
- 4.) What led you to your conclusion?
- 5.) How does interacting with this artifact make you feel?
- 6.) How can you apply those feelings to the work that you do?