Public Humanities (2026), 2, e54, 1–11
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10165

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

"Make Your Own Votive": From Ancient Healing to Modern Well-Being, a Case Study in Object-Based Learning

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(Received 07 October 2025; revised 06 February 2026; accepted 24 February 2026)

Abstract

Handling and making objects can make an important contribution to learning, bringing sensory dimensions to understanding technology, style, and functions of objects; thus I use object-based learning as building blocks in my teaching of university students. In the context of the recent pandemic, I had dual concerns about the absence of physical engagement with objects and their materiality (during the long period classes pivoted online) and about the individual and collective well-being of our students, so I designed a new activity to address this in the context of an archaeology module on Minoan Crete. I asked each student to make their own votive offering, photograph/catalogue it, and place it in an experiential/experimental space by writing a prayer or other piece of creative writing about it. In this paper, I describe and reflect on the activity, using three years of collected data, together with student reflections made at the time of making the votive, plus additional interviews conducted later.

Keywords: experiential learning; minoan archaeology; object-based learning; votive offerings

Touching the past through picking up and handling archaeological objects, and then using them as a starting point for conversations, can be a powerful, sensorily rich, and memorable experience. Imagine, for example, that you are a child attending a handling session with Egyptian amulets in your local museum for the first time, a university student tasked to work with a box of pottery fragments from an excavation, or that a family member in a specific medical or therapeutic setting (such as a hospital or care home) is offered an activity with a handling box of Roman objects—tucked inside are a small pot, a child's clay toy, an oil lamp, and some coins. The quality, benefits, and impact of such experiences will depend on the care with which such object-based activities are designed and implemented and will, of course, relate to the individual's life experiences: the child with a pet cat at home may return full of chat and excitement about the shimmering blue amulet representing Bastet, a cat-headed Egyptian goddess; the College student finds pleasure (or boredom!) in the quiet routine of handling and measuring pottery; and for a dementia patient an object may evoke deep emotions, storied spaces, and memories, perhaps now fragmented yet much treasured.[1] For these and many other individuals and communities, object-based learning (OBL)

[1] For studies of artefacts in medical and therapeutic contexts, see, for example, D'Andrea, Dening, and Tischler 2022; Lanceley et al. 2011.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

—whether with archaeological and heritage items, artworks, or modern objects—has been shown to have clear educational and health benefits.[2]

This study presents an archaeological activity designed around material objects and first developed in the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic: a time of intensified worry about health, a time of isolation and loss of socialisation, and a time of increased levels of stress. In terms of the present themed issue, the activity provided an innovative way for the relevant "community" (in this case my students) to develop a creative and potentially therapeutic space through object creation (making) combined with an element of creative storytelling.

The object-based learning activity entailed making and recording their own votive object, and the participants (or stakeholders) were Trinity College Dublin undergraduate students taking my second-year module on Minoan archaeology.[3] The activity has now been repeated by four groups of students since 2020–2021, offering a longer-term view of its usefulness beyond the challenging contexts of the pandemic. My motivation was twofold and simple: first and foremost, concerns around student well-being and ways to improve it; and second, how to compensate for the absence of the standard "hands on" or object-based learning which forms part of most archaeological curricula, while also bearing in mind that these are the activities which are, for most students, fun, sociable, and excellent for building confidence and collaboration. These were the circumstances then that led me to develop a new seminar topic for an undergraduate archaeology module: creating an assessment activity which incorporated *making objects.*

1. Contextualising the Minoans, framing the making activity

Seminars in this module usually combine discussion with object handling, bringing important sensory dimensions into engaging with fundamental topics such as technology, style, and function. This aligns with the more general incorporation of object-based learning into the "Ancient History and Archaeology" (AHA) programme at Trinity College Dublin, using, for example, classical coins and pottery from our College collections to explore topics such as materiality and typology, or as a jumping off point for wider discussions of socio-economic issues or taking a closer look at iconography. The sharp pivot to online teaching—communicating via on-screen Zoom boxes, while isolated in our homes and rooms—made all of this impossible. Rather than falling back on additional disembodied discussion or on traditional written work, I designed a new seminar that engaged with and *directly confronted well-being* in two parallel and complementary ways. First, I hoped it would enhance understanding of the relevant ancient material, and second, that it could have a positive impact on the well-being and creativity of the students.

The module is a survey of the archaeology of Minoan Crete, taught through lectures and seminar discussions. It offers an introduction to the archaeology of the island of Crete in the Bronze Age (c. 2100–1050 BCE), with the period conventionally known as "Minoan" via the lens of later mythology (the legendary King Minos, famed for his labyrinth with its monstrous bull-man Minotaur at Knossos), though what the Bronze Age Cretans called themselves remains unknown. In modern times, this Minoan past was famously revealed by

[2] Chatterjee and Hannard 2015; Kador 2025; Kador, Chatterjee, and Thomson 2021; Morgan 2024; Thomas 2024.

[3] A votive object, sometimes referred to as an *ex-voto*, is an object offered in perpetuity to a divinity, saint, or other non-human entity.

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the British excavations at Knossos directed by Arthur Evans, begun in 1900 CE, but it is important to acknowledge that he was not the first to dig there; rather that honour belongs to a local Cretan scholar Minos Kalokairinos whose work at Knossos in 1878 brought to light some huge pithoi (storage jars) which he donated to museums in Greece, Paris, and London to raise public awareness of the site. In summary, the Minoan Bronze Age was a complex palatial society. They used writing for administrative and ritual purposes and interacted with the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean, with whom they traded finished objects, raw materials, and shared ideas. Minoan arts and technology are also notable: colourful frescoes adorned the walls of palaces and elite villas; tiny stone seals illustrate miniaturist skills in carving; tools, vessels, and weapons are skilfully made from bronze; imported ivory was used to work figures and make furniture inlays; and the Minoan love of colour is reflected in the vibrant polychrome decoration of Kamares pottery of the Middle Bronze Age.

The new seminar looked the mountain sanctuaries of the Cretan Bronze Age, usually termed peak sanctuaries and a key element of Minoan ritual practices. In brief, these ritual sites are characterised by their elevated locations which are (importantly) intervisible with the inhabited human landscape. An additional benefit of drawing this topic (usually presented via a lecture and some additional pre-recorded material) into the more student-led, seminar space was the research-led dimension of the topic: I have worked collaboratively for decades myself on Minoan peak sanctuary material and can thus speak about landscapes, sites, and objects from a strongly experiential and personal perspective.[4]

The Minoan peak sanctuaries are also characterised by the presence of large quantities of finds—notably, handmade terracotta figurines of small size (easily held in the hand and portable), especially of humans, animals, and anatomical body parts. These votives were deposited as part of ritual practice, with some of the offerings relating to healing and well-being, and like votives in many cultures they may reference specific health needs (especially through anatomical body parts) or address wider human concerns.[5]

In the seminar itself (completely online during the pandemic), we first of all built a familiarity with Minoan peak sanctuaries through readings and discussion. We considered how far we can reconstruct the ritual practices from the archaeological evidence. Then, more specifically, we thought about votives: why make and offer them, and how are they felt to be effective. Both topics, of course, have methodological implications far beyond this particular cultural case study. Since I knew that we would be unable to handle objects: replicas, 3D prints, and comparative modern votive material (such as *tamata* from the Greek Orthodox tradition, which always provoke useful discussion), all of which are my usual go to toolkit for such a topic, I designed a new activity as part of the seminar assessment which would (I hoped) remedy this. In short, I asked the students to *make their own votive.*

As a side note and to put this into a wider context, making figurines was for me an already familiar activity: although for different (research-led) reasons, in rather different settings, and for and with other groups or stakeholders. In brief, I have undertaken some collaborative, experimental work on figurine making.[6] Over the years, I have also co-organised a number of figurine making workshops with school children as an element in Classics activity days in Trinity College Dublin; alongside the figurine making (where the participants were invited to make copies of ancient examples from Minoan Crete and from Cyprus), these

[4] For example, Morris 2009; Morris, O'Neill, and Peatfield 2018, 2019; Peatfield and Morris 2012, 2020.
[5] Morris and Peatfield 2014.
[6] Morris, O'Neill, and Peatfield 2018, 2019.

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sessions had a strong focus on creative and hands-on activities such as handling Roman coins, writing on papyrus and making theatrical masks. The more rigorous, academic experimental work was designed to replicate both the figurine forms and working methods (the practice environment) by which they were hand-modelled, while the educational workshops for schoolchildren imitate the forms of the human and animal figurines using air-drying modelling clay. These activities took place in *sociable groups*, which in the context of the pandemic was not possible. Instead I designed a task to better meet the specific and challenging circumstances of the pandemic.

2. Making, recording, and imagining

Although the archaeological focus of the module was Bronze Age Crete, I did *not* ask the students to copy or imitate the figurines we had been studying. Rather, I offered them completely free rein to make their votive object in any form and in any material (mindful that they would have to improvise). I also let them know that I hoped that this would be enjoyable and not to worry too much about artistic skill (or lack of): this was not an art class!

Having made the object, the next steps were

1. to write a short catalogue description of it, treating it like archaeological artefact, and submitting this with a photo of the object.

2. to write a short creative piece and/or a prayer imagining the use of the votive. Again format was completely open.

I would stress that at this point I had no longer-term plan beyond trying to create an educationally useful and enjoyable assignment. I felt that combining the discussion of ancient votives offered for healing and well-being with the physical and sensorial task of making, together with some imaginative writing, might (at least for some) be helpful during the lockdown.

The resulting work was so wonderfully creative that I have continued to use the same task format in the following years even now that we are back in person in the social learning space. I continue to be intrigued—and not infrequently moved—by the insights that the students seemed to gain from "making and imagining" rather than simply reading about the topic (or as we can also revert to doing now, also handling some replica figurines in class). Being a part of the informal discussions around what they planned to make, seeing their personal investment in the work, and the pleasure in reading the completed assignments are also not inconsiderable benefits. I also now tell the current students how this task took shape during the pandemic and so the assignment format also has its own story. This helps to encourage ongoing, personal reflection around well-being and on the benefits of different ways of learning.

I turn now to sharing the results of the votive-making activity in the spring of 2021, followed by similarly structured discussion of the same activity in subsequent years. Data collection and reflection are based on three elements: (1) the output of the assignment itself; (2) short student reflections that were built into the activity; and (3) a later follow-up questionnaire.

Of the different materials selected by the 18 students who chose to do the activity (Figure 1), modelling clay, perhaps unsurprisingly, was most popular, while bread and cookie dough (also easily shaped) were similarly favourites. Several students spend time carving from wood, while others took to paper and card to shape or draw things. One student combined

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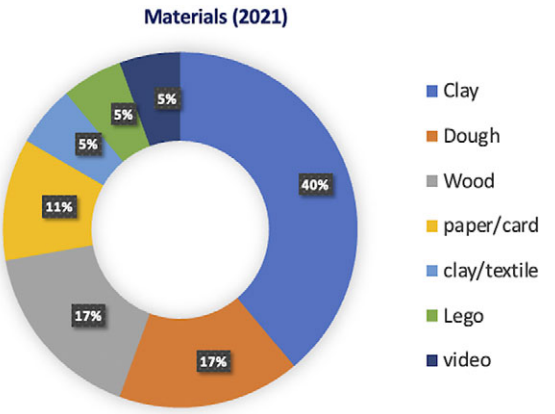


Figure 1. Range of materials used to make the votives by students in 2021.

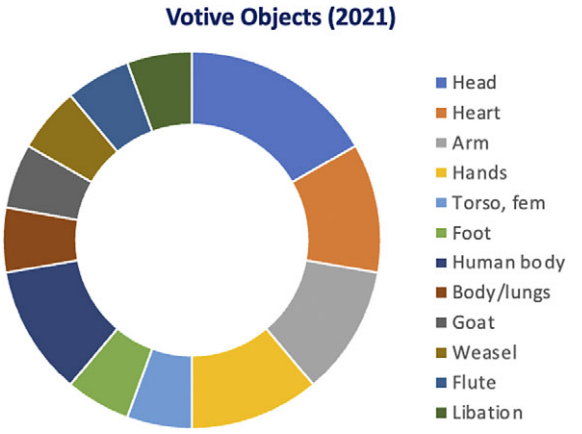


Figure 2. Kinds of votive objects made by students in 2021.

clay and textile, another created a Lego model, and finally one student diverged from the suggested format by instead making a video showing a libation being poured.

While the range of materials was fairly limited (reflecting lockdown circumstances), the choices of object were much more varied (Figures 2 and 3). The majority (nearly 80 percent) opted to focus on the human body: either complete or body parts (including organs such as the lungs and heart). Despite the importance and strong representation of animals in the archaeological corpus of Minoan material we had been exploring, only two participants modelled animals: a goat and a weasel. The latter merits a special comment: clay weasels are found on some Minoan peak sanctuaries, notably Petsophas in eastern Crete. They have been much discussed since they have seemed harder to explain than the larger numbers of bovines, sheep, goats, and pigs which reflect the human–animal entanglements of animal domestication and management.[7] Students thus are often intrigued by these little clay

[7] See Zimmermann 2021 for recent work that makes a strong case for understanding the weasels as part of a *materia medica* connected to midwives and birthing.

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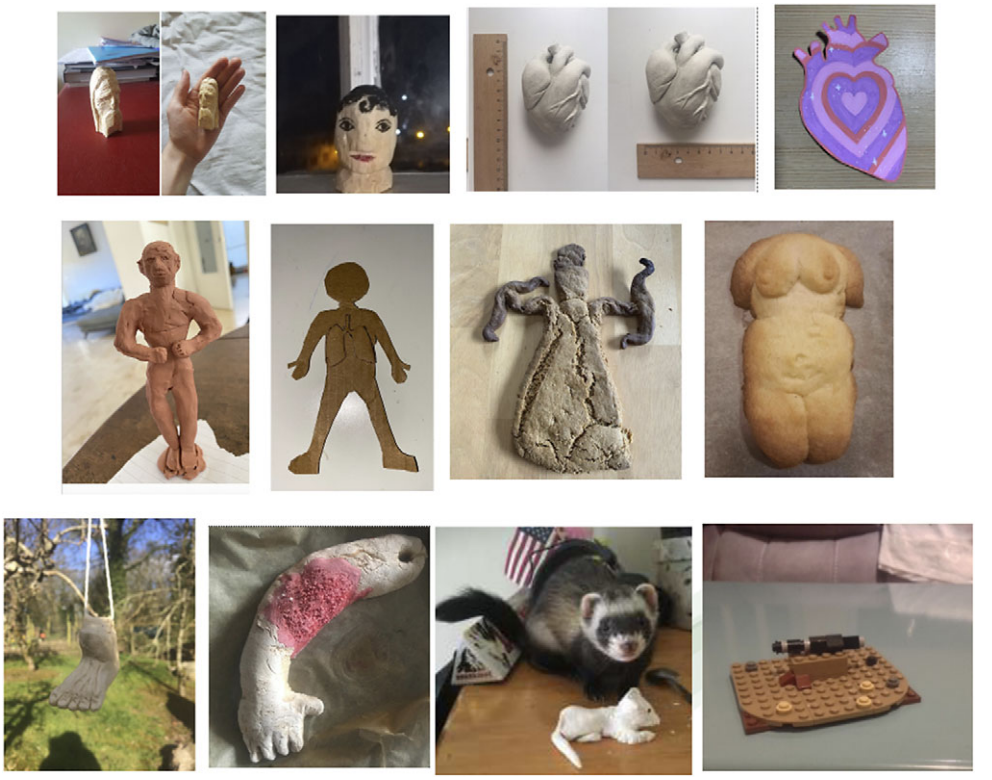


Figure 3. Illustrations of some of the objects made in 2021.

creatures with their characteristic arching backs. In the class, one of the students was caring for a range of rescue animals during the pandemic, including a ferret (a modern domesticated relative of the wild weasel, both of them mustelids) which is shown alongside the votive one made in Figure 3. More generally, their animals, including the ferret, often popped up on Zoom to say "hello" in class—contributing greatly to our collective well-being!. The Lego flute (explained as referencing the healing power of music) and the video, already mentioned, make up the full set.

Accompanying the objects came a rich range of creative pieces of writing accompanied by short prayers and invocations. They demonstrated experiential and sensory (and in some cases spiritual) awareness of, and empathy with, votive and ritual processes (whether past or present), and they gave students a space (*only if they wished to do so*) to frame the offering in terms of personal, family, or even societal well-being. While this is harder to share or quantify in a short paper, I here pick out a few recurrent or striking themes.

This element of the task helped to foreground many sensory details: most imagined travelling with family or in a group, stressing a sense of community. One memorable phrase described the journey as "a line of hurt and hope"; some provided vivid details of a physical setting and picked up on the deep impression that repeated ritual actions such as journeying and offering create. Illness and need were poignantly expressed—several referenced the pandemic explicitly, asking for it to end, for an end to loneliness and missing family, an alleviation of specific lung problems ("where the illness is most aggressive"), and a "healing

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of our weary minds." Unsurprisingly, reference to "illness of the mind" and mental health came through strongly. The final fate (or biography) of some of the votives is worth noting too: the baked goods were consumed; one foot (filled with pain and sickness) was hung from a tree; and the coloured paper heart was taken and offered in a nearby church. Thus in these two cases the objects performed a function as real votives.

Within the scope of the task, I asked for a short reflection on the seminar and/or activity. The responses were entirely positive (no one said they would have preferred to write a conventional paper which does sometimes happen when students are presented with an unexpected form of assessment). I offer just a flavour of them here:

> I greatly enjoyed using my imagination to make my own votive offering (a very nice activity to break up all the reading!).
>
> I had so much fun doing the votive portion of the seminar … putting myself in their shoes.
>
> it was time for a halt in my own life, to leave the familiar world to look around, tune in, reflect, and adapt.
>
> fun, and a messy disaster!

Comparable data were collated for 2022 and 2023—noting that only by 2023 did I fully re-introduce handling of votives back into the seminar class. Thus *handling* in class was followed by the *making and imagining* task. In both years, clay was the most popular material, followed by other modelling materials such as Play-Doh or homemade flour doughs, while a few were more experimental and indeed beautiful—working in glass and paint, crocheting, or painting on a found shell (Figure 4).

In terms of the choices and range of representations (Figure 5), the main focus among the 14 assignments in 2022 was again on the human body (73 percent) with the body part directly referencing specific conditions, sometimes directly personal or relating to a family member: these included a crocheted eye and a painted uterus. Animals also made a few appearances: two referenced sick pets, while the clay pig was placed as part of a larger home shrine (also arrayed with negative COVID-19 tests) and a prayer saying "thank you for

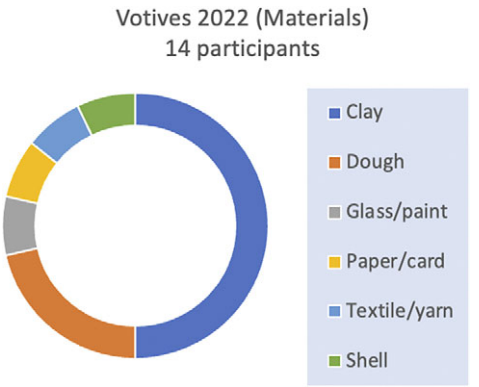


Figure 4. Range of materials used to make the votive objects by students in 2022.

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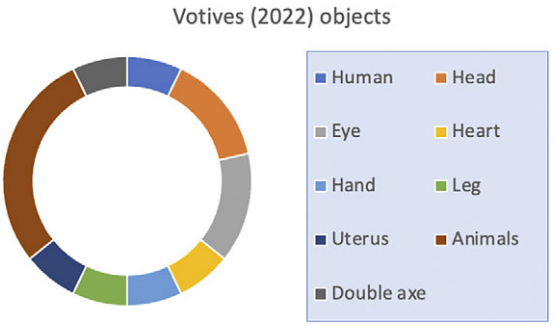


Figure 5. Kinds of votive objects made by the students in 2022.

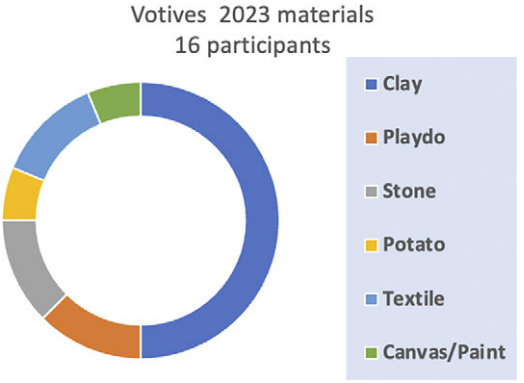


Figure 6. Range of materials used to make the votive objects by students in 2023.

protection against covid and for the negative tests." The creative writing, as before, showed engagement with the experiential and sensory aspects of making and taking the object to dedicate it. The sense of groups and communities came through again too, and one student made an *actual* journey with a family member.

A third iteration of the assignment took place in spring 2023 with 16 participants. As before, modelling materials (clay, Play-Doh) were favoured choices, again alongside a smaller number of other materials and techniques (Figure 6). The human body was the primary focus (68 percent of offerings): a modelled pill also referred back to the successful management of a health issue and was offered "in gratitude for health." Many offerings (as communicated through the object in tandem with creative writing) related to individual health (either personal or a close family member), while a new feature was that some were directed towards the broader community—one to avert drought, for example, while a beautiful embroidered piece sought care for the planet (Figure 7).

3. Making and imagining as unconventional practice for thinking and feeling differently

Picking out some themes represented in the reflections integrated into the assignment, many students commented on things such as "the intense concentration and sensory aspect

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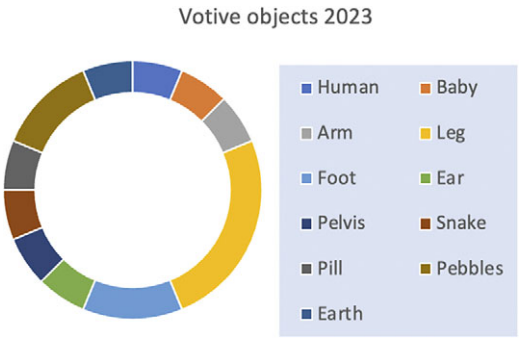


Figure 7. Kinds of votive objects made by students in 2023.

of working with clay" or felt they better understood a "tangible connection between votive and the person offering." Pebbles make an interesting appearance (recalling the finds of river pebbles on Minoan peak sanctuaries), and one group of pebbles was taken on a 6.5 km journey to be offered: a journey that was carefully documented and real rather than imagined. Reflections refer to the activities as meditative, thinking about life and relationships, fun, feeling attachment to the object made.

To further investigate the impact of the assignment, I contacted the 2021 and 2022 students (so all students who had spent a full-year online). Here, I was most interested in their subsequent *memories* of the assignment, so the email asked two core questions: (1) did the activity help them to engage differently or better with the idea of votive offerings? and (2) did it (as some students had informally suggested to me) have any impact on their well-being? Around 60 percent responded to the questions—all in considerable detail. Almost all of them expressed strongly positive memories such as enjoyment, welcome introspection, fun, and opportunity to chat about the activity with friends, partners, and family. One respondent said they did not recall much about it, feeling that most of College was a blur at that time, and another thought their learning was similar irrespective of the type of assignment. The 2021 year spoke in detail about it: "creating something tangible was a welcome escape from the outside uncertainties," of it having "a therapeutic quality," of "creativity and enjoyment" and "reducing negative doldrums" "at a time life was particularly grim in Ireland in February 2021." And it was good to hear that this prompted students to interact "we all had so much fun in the group chat bouncing ideas off one another," in other words creating a sense of community despite the physical isolation.

My own preliminary reflections—or why was this worth doing? The overall task (making and imagining) really helped the students to foreground the sensorial aspects of archaeology, for example, thinking about the affective nature of objects or the importance of ritual and offering as a shared and communal experience. This is clear from their creative writing and from their reflections and memories. More recently, I have found it interesting (and affirming in terms of beneficial practice) to read about similar participant responses in other imaginative teaching and learning activities which have involved "making" and "doing." Colleen Morgan, for example, asks her archaeology students to draw their own cell phone (an "intimate, everyday artefact") where close handling and drawing/doing changed both how they thought and felt about objects, and was reported as having a calming (so therapeutic) effect.[8]

[8] Morgan 2024.

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Choosing to focus on an ancient Minoan example connected to health and other societal needs offered an obvious mirror for thinking about health and well-being during a specific time of trauma—and student responses indicate that they retain clear memories of its positive value. What about now when we are back to handling objects and discussing them in the classroom? The stark changes in our lives during the pandemic prompted me—in partnership with our students—to pay more active attention to incorporating well-being into my archaeological teaching. Student engagement and feedback (and my own observations) indicate that the activity has opened up a significant space for thinking about the practical and emotional dimensions of votive offering. During the pandemic specifically it also had a positive impact on personal well-being and—less intensely—it continues to do so for some students, where themes of mental and family health recur in their assignments. And finally, the activity connects human experience past and present, and through the combined threads of making and imagining encourages a sensorial and affective engagement with votive practices and their central role in well-being.

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Author contribution. Conceptualization: C.E.M.

Conflicts of Interest. The author declares no competing interests.

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Cite this article: Morris, Christine Elizabeth. 2026. "'Make Your Own Votive': From Ancient Healing to Modern Well-Being, a Case Study in Object-Based Learning." *Public Humanities*, 2, e54, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10165

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