Thinking Beyond Field Trips: 
An Analysis of Museums and Social Studies Learners

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This study describes and explains the ways in which three urban cultural institutions/museums provide opportunities to students for learning in the social studies. Through interviews, observations, and a content analysis of museum-produced materials, I examine the opportunities for various audiences (elementary, middle, and high school students) to engage with, and utilize, museum resources to facilitate meaningful social studies learning. This article includes a discussion of state standards, field trips, and use of technology to engage social studies learners. This study has implications for both classroom and museum-based educators.

Keywords: Kindergarten-12 education, social studies, social studies curriculum, museum education, informal learning, community learning

Introduction

A group of ten-year olds excitedly descends the stairs to the “Streets of Detroit” exhibit at the Detroit Historical Museum. As they turn the corner, the students find themselves on the brick streets of Detroit circa 1930, resulting in a collective gasp before they scatter to the various storefronts and artifacts. Several girls peer into the historic Kresge Department Store, wondering aloud, “What’s that?” as they point at bolts of fabric. Meanwhile, two boys attempt to climb into a horse’s water trough, before they wander toward a bicycle parked along the building to investigate, out of sight from chaperones and their teacher.

As this example illustrates, museums are places where students can learn through play as they explore its specifically designed and interactive environment, both independently and with supervision. Museums tend to reflect the diverse communities where they are located (Boyer, 1996). In a complex world, museums provide a place where children can learn through exploration independently and with the supervision of adults. Museum professionals create interactive environments in which learning experiences take place and so, they provide children with opportunities to explore beyond their everyday classroom experiences, expanding and enriching both teaching and learning. Similarly, taking students to museums, or bringing museum materials and programs into the classroom, changes the teaching and learning experiences by giving teachers opportunities to engage students with lesson content and their communities in new and different ways. In an era of decreasing resources and increased expectations for literacy and mathematics achievement, providing opportunities for students to learn outside of their classroom may be the primary means by which students have access to the social studies. The relationship between museums and Kindergarten-12 educators can be mutually beneficial: these relationships are valuable to both students’ education and to the sustainability of cultural institutions (commonly defined as a public or nonprofit institution).
which engages in the cultural, intellectual, scientific, environmental, educational or artistic enrichment of the people). Informal educational experiences through community-based institutions promote and engage students in ways that support the broader purposes of social studies: to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 1994). 

Museums, however often are an under-utilized resource for teaching valuable social studies content and critical thinking skills (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008), which is unfortunate since many museums are making efforts to demonstrate how their content aligns with state content standards. The Detroit Institute of Arts' Education Department, for example, has designed school-based and museum-based lessons which identify specific Michigan state standards across several content areas. Educators can use museums to teach content that is squarely situated within the curriculum, and they can do so in more interesting, authentic ways than in the traditional classroom.

In light of this context, this study describes and analyzes the opportunities available to students through museums for engagement and learning in the subject area of social studies. I examine museums and museum resources in Detroit’s Cultural Center (American Institute of Architects, 2003) (See Appendix A) and how people (students and teachers) use these museums.

Theoretical Framework

I utilize two theoretical perspectives to explore my research questions and to analyze the data. First, I draw upon theories of informal education: this study is situated in museums, which are considered informal educational spaces. Second, I use activity theory (Engestrom, 1999), which enables me to identify the multiple and distinct aspects of using museums as sites of learning: this study focuses specifically on social studies learning opportunities through museums.

Informal education is a general term referring to education outside a traditional classroom setting, such as in community-based organizations, libraries, at home, or in museums (McGivney, 1999). According to Veronica McGivney, learning takes place outside schools and arises from the activities and interests of individuals and/or groups. Informal learning can be planned learning, such as a presentation or workshop organized in response to identified interests and needs, delivered in flexible and informal ways and in informal community settings.

Michael Eraut (2000) draws a distinction between "learning" and “education.” “Learning,” he suggests, occurs all the time, whereas "education" is intentional and requires commitment. Informal education merges these two ideas. Four areas in which people are engaged in informal education and should focus their attention are described: (1) exploring tacit knowledge through reflection, (2) supporting self-education by approaching people as both learners and educators, (3) strengthening associational life by building stronger groups and relationships, and (4) developing informal education alongside formal education relationship.

The second theoretical approach I use for this study is activity theory (Engestrom, 1999). Using this descriptive theory enables me to consider the wide range of factors that work
together to impact social studies learning opportunities and museum outreach. Thus, I am able to take into account the museum environment, rules, supplemental materials, and community, in addition to the students, teachers, and museum collections. Yrjo Engestrom suggests that, in order to reach an intended outcome, it is necessary to produce certain objects, such as field trip experiences and knowledge. He explains that human activity is mediated by artifacts and by organizations or communities, which may have rules that affect the activity. In essence, the subject (in this case, the student) works as part of the community to achieve the object (e.g. an understanding of social studies content).

The educational outreach of each museum can be identified as an activity system (Engestrom, 1999). The subjects, in this case social studies students, participate in museum-based activities including field trips and lesson plans. These activities have artifacts, rules, a community and a division of effort, all of which impact how the students experience the museum, and the outcomes. The various factors involved in this activity system impact the outcomes: in this case, museum outreach and social studies opportunities. For this study, I have identified the roles and data in Table 1.

### Table 1

**Activity Theory and Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of Activity Theory</th>
<th>Data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Field trip experiences (live &amp; virtual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>Lesson plans (pre, onsite &amp; post)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum collection (live &amp; virtual)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lesson plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Museum educators</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social studies teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Division of Labor</td>
<td>Students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Museum educators and classroom teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Virtual and live experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Michigan GLCEs/HSCEs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Field trip rules</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social studies learning opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Outreach</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social studies experiences/opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Social Studies learning opportunities</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In this study, activity theory and informal education overlap. Activity theory is the action by which I will analyze the data, and informal education is the context in which the study occurs. My research questions for this study are:

- How do museums provide social studies learning opportunities for students?
In what ways do museums reach out and appeal to various audiences (elementary, middle school, and high school students and teachers)? Because each of these questions examines the role of museums as sites for learning, it is important to examine these specific sites as locations of informal education.

**Selected Review of the Literature**

Students are more likely to learn about history from television, movies, fictional texts (all of which take latitude in storytelling over fact), museums, and images than from reading informational text (Rosenzweig & Thelan, 1998). The historians Roy Rosenzweig and Dave Thelen (1998) explored the “popular uses of history in American life.” They conducted a national survey, which revealed that 80% of respondents ranked museums as the most-trustworthy source of historical information, followed by personal accounts from grandparents or other relatives (69%). College history professors were ranked at 54%, followed by high school teachers (35%), nonfiction books (32%), and movies and television programs (11%). Since the American public places so much trust in history museums and personal relatives as the conservators of America’s past, further examination of museum resources and their connections and/or efforts to connect with students is necessary.

**Museums**

People visit museums for a variety of reasons and with varied frequencies. Lake, Snell and Perry (1999) reported, “American museums average approximately 865 million visits per year or 2.3 million visits per day.” In addition, The American Association of Museums (AAM) (2006) gathered data and found the median annual attendance for various types of museums and cultural institutions (Table 1). For this study, I have focused on three different types of institutions: an art museum (the Detroit Institute of Art), a specialized museum (Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History), and a history museum (Detroit Historical Museum). As illustrated in Table 2, these three types of institutions are in the bottom half of cultural institutions visited each year. On average, an art museum has about 13% of the number of visitors a zoo has. This may be based on the availability of zoos versus art museums as well as the perceived accessibility of the collection.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>Median Annual Attendance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zoo</td>
<td>440,502</td>
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<tr>
<td>Science/Technology Museum</td>
<td>244,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arboretum/Botanic Garden</td>
<td>106,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's/Youth Museum</td>
<td>78,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural History/Anthropology</td>
<td>62,803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art Museum</td>
<td>59,822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature Center</td>
<td>52,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Museum</td>
<td>43,500</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The questions: what roles can museums serve in a learning community, why do people go to museums, and what do they learn there? Are posed and responded to by Falk and Dierking (2000). They utilize theories of constructivist learning to inform their thinking about how museums can better create environments that are conducive to learning experiences. An interesting dilemma is presented: one advantage of museum experiences is the freedom of choice visitors have in exploring them. This freedom can also serve as a deterrent; however, visitors may misinterpret exhibits or miss artifacts/displays essential to understanding the exhibit. As a result, museums must not simply design experiences for visitors but “successful” experiences, as defined by each visitor (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

Teachers think museums offer valuable learning experiences not available in school classrooms and are interested in providing these experiences for their students (Sheppard, 1993). Although teachers desire to engage their students in museum experiences, there are several limitations. Research has found that K-12 classroom teachers have a limited understanding of the pedagogical value of museum visits; show a lack of interest in working with museum staff; and seem uncertain about the value of hands-on experiences in museums, and the museum's role in developing students' analytical skills and increasing their own knowledge (Boyer 1996).

Three national studies were utilized by Eileen Hooper-Greenhiss (2007) to examine culture and learning museum settings. Analysis of the data revealed the impact of museum pedagogy. As a result, she questioned traditional museum pedagogy and the future challenges museums face. Additionally, Victoria Kravchyna, and Sam Hastings (2002) investigated the informational value of museum websites. In their study, visitors are categorized as scholars, teachers, students, museums staff, and museum visitors. These various museum audiences were asked questions about their use of museums’ virtual material specifically databases, virtual visits, and websites. The majority of virtual visitors (68%) look for information about recent exhibits. The researchers found that virtual visitors had several informational needs when visiting a museum’s website. First, they needed to be able to browse collection databases and to locate supplementary descriptive information. Also, it is essential for visitors to find directions to the museum. Teachers and scholars used museum sites for research of information needs and needs for images. Buying tickets and gifts online rank last in information needs.

Museum websites, however, provide much more than visitor information as many museums are developing virtual experiences for visitors. These virtual experiences are valuable in a time which field trips are being cut from many schools’ curriculum. Jeremy Stoddard (2009) describes research on field trips, hybrid distance learning models, and virtual field trips in the social studies that simulate experiences and engage students.
Field Trips and Social Studies

While virtual experiences may meet the informational needs of visitors, field trips provide additional informal educational experiences in which students can independently or collectively engage with social studies information. In a review of the literature on field trips, Jennifer DeWitt and Martin Storksdieck (2008) found cognitive and affective learning occur as a result of class visits to out-of-school settings. The “success” (achievement of learning goals and outcomes) of a field trip is fundamentally influenced by: the structure of the field trip, the novelty of the setting, prior knowledge and interest of the students, the social context of the visit, teacher agendas, student experiences during the field trip, and the presence or absence and quality of preparation and follow-up. However, DeWitt and Storksdieck also found that field trips/informal educational experiences are not ideal for teaching complex concepts or even isolated facts. Rather, they found that field trips best serve students who are investigating an independent inquiry.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) advocates that students explore real-world issues and utilize the tools and resources of social scientists (NCSS, 1994). These tools and resources include primary source documents, photographs, and artifacts; often, these items are housed in museum collections. Thus, museum visits (field trips) are opportunities for students to interact with and use these resources as well as practice various social studies skills, such as asking questions, gathering data, and drawing conclusions. According to Brenda Trofanenko (2010), history museums play a critical role in validating one's history. The artifacts displayed define a particular perspective.

Method

Sample

For this study, I selected three institutions located in Detroit, Michigan, based on the content of their collections and its connection to social studies teaching and learning: The Detroit Institute of Arts Museum, The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, and The Detroit Historical Museum.

Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (Wright Museum) is a history museum specializing in African American history. Dr. Charles H. Wright was a Detroit-area obstetrician and gynecologist with an interest in African American history; the origins of this museum are based on his personal interest and collection. In 1965, Wright and other Detroiters established Detroit's first International Afro-American Museum (IAM), which has since grown into the Wright Museum. In 1998, the museum was renamed the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in honor of its founder. “The museum continues to serve its community as a place of exploration and celebration” (“About Us,” Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, 2007). The museum has attempted to serve the community through the creation and distribution of educational materials and programs designed to address state standards.

Detroit Historical Museum. Similar to the Wright Museum, the Detroit Historical Museum (DHM) also began as a grassroots effort. Clarence M. Burton, a lawyer and historian donated his collection of historical papers to the Detroit Public Library in 1914. In December 1921, Burton, with the help of other local historians, founded the Detroit Historical Society, an
organization dedicated to the preservation of the city’s history. In 1927, an initiative was started to establish a museum, which was built and overseen by the City of Detroit until 2006. “Before 2006, the museum was run in part by the City but after 2006 we took back total control of the museum” (Poulos Interview, 4/1/10). In March 2006, the Detroit Historical Society once again assumed operational responsibility for the Museum, after signing a formal agreement with the City of Detroit.

Detroit Institute of Arts. The Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) was founded in 1885 and has been at its current location since 1927. The DIA’s collection is among the top six in the United States (History of the DIA, Detroit Institute of Arts). Artifacts represent various cultures from prehistory through the 21st century. Through online and onsite programming, the DIA provides educational opportunities for a variety of students from elementary through college.

Data Sources and Analysis

For this study, I analyze three sources of data: interviews, observations, and web materials created by each institution. I conducted interviews (See Appendix B for interview protocol) and did observations at the three cultural institutions. Utilizing these three sites for gathering data enables me to make assertions about teachers and their use or lack thereof, of cultural institutions (museums) in a specific area of Detroit. I chose to do interviews and observe at each of these sites because of the focused nature of their programs/collections. Each institution appeals to a somewhat specialized audience with possibilities for a broader audience. By perusing each institution’s web materials, I am able to analyze and evaluate both on-site and off-site opportunities to engage students in social studies learning.

First, I interviewed the Senior Director of Communications & Sales for the Detroit Historical Museum (DHM) on the phone and observed a class of fourth graders participating in a class tour of the museum with a docent who has worked at the museum for two years and oversees visitor services.

My second interview was with the Educational Program Coordinator at the Wright Museum. She has worked at the museum for three years in various positions. She put me in contact with the Manager of Sales and Retail Operations who helped to answer some follow-up questions. This interview was followed by two more observations. I observed two different groups—a group of multi-aged visitors and a class of seventh grade boys—tour the exhibit “And Still We Rise,” each with tour guides.

Finally, at the DIA, I observed a mixed-age group of elementary students touring the Detroit Industry exhibit by Diego Rivera, which is one of the “gems” of the museum’s collections. This series of murals was completed in the 1930s and depicts industry/technology as the culture of Detroit. I also perused the DIA website for information on educational programming, which includes class field trips, student programming (both in association with schools and independent of school experiences), teacher workshops, and online lesson plans.

In interpreting and analyzing the interview and observational data, I followed a three-step interpretivist approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, I read through all the data (observation, interview notes and web content) in order to determine patterns and themes that would eventually become codes (Merriam, 1998). I revisited the data sources and marked the codes. Then, I organized the coded text into categories. Finally, I revised the original
frameworks to encompass the newly created categories, thus allowing me to make contrasts and comparisons, and note patterns, quotes and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings

Research Question 1: How do museums provide social studies learning opportunities for students?

Each of the museums in this study offer students various and multiple opportunities for social studies learning. Social studies students have the opportunity to be exposed to, explore, and learn social studies content using artifacts, and activities to increase their understanding of the community. This research question can be answered in two overlapping ways: (1) by aligning museum artifacts and exhibits with particular state content expectations, and making that alignment visible to the visitor; and (2) by organizing structured group tours or self-guided tours for students within the museum that highlight social studies-related knowledge and skills.

Use of content expectations. When asked to identify the different reasons people have for visiting this museum, Thomas of the Wright Museum responded, “Ideally, to teach all of American history. But, teachers come here to help them teach the GLCEs about African history” (Interview, April 9, 2010). The state of Michigan organizes student learning around the Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCEs) and High School Content Expectations (HSCEs). Each of the three institutions in this study identifies GLCEs and HSCEs in conjunction with the site and/or specific exhibits. After identifying each of the expectations, I examined each disciplinary standard category for the State of Michigan (civics, economics, geography, history, United States history, world history, and knowledge and processes) to look for patterns or overlap. There are forty-three standard categories (see Appendix C) and only one identified by all three institutions: G4, Human Systems. Two institutions identify six of the 43 standard expectations (approximately 14%). Only one institution identified ten of the 43 standard categories (approximately 23%) and 25 of the 43 standard categories (approximately 58%) are not addressed by any of the three of the institutions.

The only standard category used across three institutions is Human Systems (G4). Human Systems are described by the Michigan Department of Education (2007) as “understand[ing] how human activities help shape the Earth’s surface” (p. 20). One can examine these human activities in four different ways: (1) cultural mosaics, (2) patterns of human settlement, (3) forces of cooperation and conflict, and (4) economic interdependence (Michigan Department of Education, 2007, p. 6). This standard category is evident in the physical organization of each site. At the Wright Museum, educators have focused on presenting the cultural mosaic and patterns of human settlement through identification and discussion of the African Diaspora. As visitors enter the museum’s Ford Freedom Rotunda, they need only to look up to see the flags of the countries identified as being part of the African Diaspora. In one of the central exhibits at the DHM, Frontiers to Factories, the visitor moves through the history of human settlement along the Detroit River, as well as the economic relationships between the Native Americans and French around the fur trade (beaver pelts). This connection to the content standard, however, is not overt to visitors.
The standard categories identified by one or two institutions span the social studies, including at least one category in civics, economics, geography, history, social studies processes and skills. The DIA is the only organization that cites a civics content standard: C4, Relationship of the U.S. to Other Nations and World Affairs. Both the DHM and the DIA recognize E1, the Market Economy, as part of their educational programming. As a result, teachers are able to make academic choices with this information readily identified. For the DHM, this is exemplified through the development of the auto industry. It is important to understand the market economy as part of a special exhibit on artist forgeries (Fakes, Forgeries, and Mysteries at the DIA) because of the impact on the economy in Detroit. Geographically, the Wright Museum and the DIA introduce the world in spatial terms through the design of their facilities. The DIA and the DHM explain places and regions through artifacts in their collection. Most notably, The Streets of Detroit use their collection as well as exhibit design to re-create Detroit in the 1840s, 1870s, and 1930s. Using the content standards associated with history, the only recognizable pattern is the connection to history (both U.S. and world).

As mentioned above, a majority of the content standards are not explicitly identified as part of the educational literature from each museum. In particular, content standards in civics are not mentioned except in one case (DIA - C4, Relationship of the U.S. to Other Nations and World Affairs). However, C5 (Citizenship in the United States) and C6 (Citizenship in Action) are represented in the genesis of each of these institutions.

Structured group tours and self-guided tours. The second way in which these museums create social studies learning opportunities is through field trip experiences. Field trips are designed for a variety of school-aged students and their teachers. Although the majority of field trip opportunities appear to be focused on an elementary audience, the institutions in this study attempt to create learning experiences for all students. Through these field trip experiences, students are encouraged to explore and examine the collections with varying degrees of structure.

Elementary students. Each of these three institutions designed field trip experiences for elementary students. “A is for Africa” introduces elementary students to people, places, events, ideas, foods, and other objects associated with and helpful understanding the continent of Africa. Twenty-six (26) stations make up the interactive exhibit, each associated with a letter of the alphabet, and students are encouraged to read and touch items throughout the exhibit. Visitors may explore alphabetically or move from station to station based on interest and/or availability.

Similarly at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), elementary students are able to explore in a semi-structured way as they participate in the “Eye Spy” program. Placards appear throughout the museum galleries, each one presenting a short riddle and a visual clue which visitors can see if they lift a small cover. These riddles and clues point children to particular works of art.

At the Detroit Historical Museum (DHM), the Streets of Detroit exhibit is designed so that visitors do not simply focus on particular artifacts; instead there is an attempt to transport visitors back in time through the recreation of the sights and sounds of Detroit at different points in time. There is a great degree of freedom as visitors walk around the galleries.
discovering various artifacts that represent Detroit’s past. One can visit the Streets of Detroit before or after Frontiers to Factories. Unlike the DIA, however, the galleries are designed with a chronological narrative in mind. Visitors are encouraged, through limited entrances, to begin with a display on Detroit before French settlement, then move to French settlement and the fur trade before viewing items about British occupation of Detroit.

**Middle school and high school students.** The three institutions have a more structured approach for middle and high school student field trips. The Wright Museum has the most structured visitor plan. Again, visitors are welcome to move through the exhibits independently and at their own pace. The central exhibit, And Still We Rise (a 22 gallery exhibit), however, has one entrance and exit which visitors are directed to use. This is important because it establishes a clear and common presentation of the museum collection. And Still We Rise is a chronological narrative of life in various parts of Africa prior to the Atlantic Slave Trade to Slavery in America, Freedom and Emancipation, Civil Rights and African Americans in the 21st century. At several points in the exhibit, historical re-enactors describe life and events of a particular era, thus visitors tend to move together a bit more to take advantage of these short, somewhat infrequent monologues. As a result, independently walking through the museum does not always seem very independent: the power of the exhibit is shared by the group. Almost all of the museum opportunities at the Wright Museum are group experiences. Most notable are the group tours through And Still We Rise in which historical re-enactors who specialize in particular eras of history walk with groups (5-20 people) explaining the artifacts and ideas of the time period. Visitors are then “handed off” to another re-enactor who specializes in the next time period.

In summary, the three institutions in this study provide social studies learning opportunities for a variety of learners by aligning museum artifacts and exhibits with particular state content expectations, and more importantly, making that alignment visible to teacher and student visitors. Among the three museums, social studies content is addressed from civics to economics to geography to history, as it is represented through the distinct collections at each location. Structured tours, either in a group or self-guided, have been designed at each museum to highlight social studies-related knowledge and inquiry-based skills.

**Research Question 2: In what ways do museums reach out to various audiences?**

The staff I spoke with at each institution identifies their audience a bit differently. According to Poulos of the Detroit Historical Museum, “there is no typical visitor. They come from all over.” He goes on to say, “We get school groups from all three countries (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb)” (Interview, April 1, 2010). Thomas (April 9, 2010) describes visitors to the Wright Museum as “most[ly] school-aged kids; elementary and middle school, few high schools and students from local colleges doing assignments for classes...In the summers, we get a lot of families holding family reunions. Many families rent our space for their reunions and they do a tour, too” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010). The DIA’s community was identified most inclusively as young and old, representing the metro-area—that means they represent the world. We try to appeal to everyone. Although the audience of each institution is interpreted differently, for the purpose of this study, I am examining the outreach focused on social studies
teachers and students which I have categorized in three ways: (1) programs targeted at teachers and students, (2) partnerships with members of the community, and (3) use of media.

**Programs targeted at teachers and students.** At all three institutions, the educational staff designed programs for teachers and students. Generally, these programs are organized so that teachers and students are invited to visit the museums, given tours of the exhibits, and presented with ways in which they may integrate museum artifacts and materials into their respective classrooms and understanding of the world around them. All three institutions approach teachers in similar ways: teacher workshops and mass mailings.

Programming for teachers at the DIA is the most universal of the three museums. On the DIA website, there is a section devoted to professional development in which teachers can explore websites to promote art and culture in their classrooms. There also are opportunities and workshops identified for teachers to earn continuing education credits. These workshops are multi-hour experiences where teachers learn about artistic styles and forms as well as creating pieces of art. Last, there is a “Free Educators Pass” (DIA, 2007) that teachers register for by simply identifying themselves and the school at which they work. With this pass, teachers are admitted free to the museum’s general collection and special exhibits for a year. The pass provides a distinct incentive for teachers to explore the collections in order to integrate materials into their classroom and preview materials for class tours.

In order to preview the museum collections, the Wright Museum educational staff organizes teacher workshops or teacher’s night for new or special exhibits. “We did a teachers’ night for TUT. Teachers came and preview[ed] the exhibit, [and] talked about content and how to teach it. And, it was free” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010).

On occasion, the DHM will hold teacher’s workshops, but they depend more on an established teacher’s knowledge of their site and teachers returning with students year after year. In order to keep the DHM at the forefront of teacher’s planning, Polous and his staff use direct mailings. “We sent out about 3,000 guides. We follow up with past visitors and try to get them to book earlier for their next visit. We send things out to the schools versus the teachers. There are workshops and the 90 minute tour” (Polous, Interview, 4/1/10).

Teachers are encouraged through the various outlets (workshops, websites, and mailings) to bring their students to each museum to see the exhibits and experience the locations. Beyond that, the Wright Museum and the DIA have programming for children beyond school or family experiences: the DIA organizes workshops for Girl Scout troops and Sunday art exploration.

The Wright Museum works on a larger scale with a summer program called Camp Africa. “It is a two-week (we wanted to do a three-week camp but we didn’t have the funds) camp looking at Africa regionally. So, this summer, if we do three weeks, it will be East Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010). The children who are participating are charged a nominal fee and range in age from seven to 12. “The whole idea is to expose students to new things. Before we had a ‘taste test’ of different African foods and a drumming workshop. It was a good experience for kids” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010).

**Partnerships with members of the community.** In order to effectively create, present, and promote these types of teacher and student programs and outreach opportunities, the DIA,
DHM, and Wright Museum have partnerships with public services, non-profit organizations, and businesses. These relationships are created in part to make museum resources more accessible (affordable) but it is essential for the institutions to make the public aware. There are several specific partnerships used by museums to promote their facility and collections. The DHM, for example, has developed specific partnerships with Detroit Public Schools (DPS). “We have a relationship with DPS. All DPS students pay $2.50 and non-DPS kids pay $5. We publish promotional coupons, too. We have an Adopt-a-Classroom fund for donors to earmark funds for class visits” (Poulos, Interview, April 1, 2010). This type of partnership fosters good will within the community and makes social studies learning opportunities more accessible to students outside of traditional school hours. Similarly, the Wright Museum partnered with Detroit Public Schools on “Faces of America.” “Teachers came and saw it [the exhibit] and started to talk about using it in classes” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010). This event was less formal than the teacher workshops described earlier. In addition, “we usually connect with schools with our other partners” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010).

For the last four years, Detroit-area cultural institutions have teamed up in creating the Museum Adventure Pass. Institutions make admission free of charge if visitors pick up passes from their local public libraries. “Here we accept the Museum Pass so people come for free, except in February and the summer because those are our busy times. . . people can use the Museum pass we talked about- the Adventure Pass! That they get from the library” (Thomas, Interview April 9, 2010). Currently, the DHM also participates in the Museum Adventure Pass program. The DIA has participated in this program in the past. Two of the museums also have partnerships with local or national businesses that subsidize admission to exhibits. “Last year we did Target Free Sundays and this year it is Chase Wednesdays for free” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010). The DIA also has a relationship with Target and a local pizza restaurant, Buddy’s for field trip grants. These grants are available for field trips involving any K-12 classrooms. Each of these institutions uses various media outlets to reach out to various audiences.

**Media outreach.** “It couldn’t be further from the truth to think about or define the museum by the walls. The museum goes well beyond the bricks and mortar” (Poulos, Interview, April 1, 2010). These three institutions transcend the brick and mortar of their buildings by utilizing technology and media outlets. Each institution has a website and a Facebook page enabling visitors to preview and investigate aspects of their collections without physically going to the institution. Wright Museum utilizes “Facebook, our e-blasts, local stuff – Metro Times, Black Life, Arts, and Culture, word of mouth. Also, if we have connections through artists who come here, events might get on Fox 2 or WDET. ” (Thomas, Interview, April 9, 2010). “There was a thing in the paper this past weekend; in the sports section. And, t.v., Fox 2, WWJ or WJR” (Poulos, Interview, April 1, 2010).

**Discussion**

Implications of this study are two-fold. First, there are the possibilities for museum educators to (1) better reach potential audiences and (2) better present social studies content aligned with state standards. Second, educators can more effectively draw upon local resources to enhance social studies teaching and learning via the cultural institutions of their metropolitan area.
Using activity theory in informal educational settings for this study, social studies students participate in museum-based activities, specifically, field trips and lesson plans. These activities have artifacts (e.g. museum collection, lesson objectives), rules, a community and a division of effort which impact how subjects, in this case students, experience the museum and the outcomes or social studies learning opportunities. The museums, the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Detroit Historical Museum, and the Detroit Institute of Arts, have artifacts and collections representative of the content of the social studies in the State of Michigan. As a result, there are many possibilities for social studies learning opportunities among these three sites. The many possibilities, however, are not fully realized, in part due to the financial commitments toward the educational departments in each institution. In recent years, all three have had their budgets cut and, in turn, each has lost staff members.

The remaining museum staff reaches out to potential visitors through a variety of ways to the Detroit-metropolitan community. At these three institutions, staff reaches out using a myriad of media but not specifically to social studies teaching and learning, even in direct mailings. More connections are needed if one hopes to increase K-12 classroom teachers understanding of the pedagogical value of museum visits and interest in working with museum staff to make them more certain of the museum's role in developing students' analytical skills and increasing their own knowledge (Boyer, 1996). Although each of these institutions has a web presence, none has virtual field trip opportunities, which could possibly expand their market/student outreach beyond the metro-Detroit area.

As described earlier in this paper, each museum was founded and organized around the interests of local citizens and their motivation to preserve and share their history. Thus, it is important to see and experience these collections. This can be done in the form of field trips or institutional tours. These connections to social studies teaching and learning are wonderful but it is essential that the various audiences who are interested as also aware. The sample is one overarching limitation of this study. The sample is small, just three museums, and thus it is not possible h to generalize. This is further complicated by all three museums location within in the same city and within blocks of one another. The resultant effect is an overarching limitation to generalization beyond this specific geographic area.

This small study brings together conversations from social studies instruction and materials, museum education, and informal education. It is a step in identifying resources that exist and in thinking about the possibilities and development of relationships between social studies students and cultural institutions in their immediate communities or urban centers where many cultural institutions/museums are located in order to create a depth of understanding about communities and social studies ideals. Based on my findings, one area for further research is to examine how museum educators see ways to better reach audiences and to better meet the needs of social studies teachers and students. Classroom educators may see ways in which they can more effectively identify and draw upon resources in their local communities and utilize the cultural gems of one’s metropolitan area.
References


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**Web-Based References**


**Author Bio**

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Appendix A
Detroit Map

Appendix B
Interview Protocol

Research Questions:

- How do museums provide social studies learning opportunities for students? What opportunities do students have to utilize museum resources?

- What do museums in the Detroit Cultural Center do to reach out and/or appeal to an audience? How do museums appeal to various audiences?

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview about the use of cultural institutions and community resources.

___________ = fill in specific museum
First, I am going to ask you a few things about yourself.
1. What is your current position at ____________?
2. Describe your job responsibilities.
3. How long have you worked/volunteered at ____________?
4. Have you worked at/for any other museums? If so, where? For how long?

Now, I am going to ask you questions about the museum and it’s resources.
- What are the different reasons people visit this museum?
- Describe the resources available at ____________.
- In your opinion, what is the greatest asset at ____________?
- Have you seen a change in the level of use of your resources?
  - What kind of change? PROBE: Decreased usage? Increased usage? Change in WHICH schools use the resources? Change in grade level that uses resources?
    - Do you ever hear reasons why teachers are not using your resources more frequently? (i.e. change in district/school policies about field trips, cost, lack of interest, not connected to curriculum, focus on testing, fear of visiting Detroit?)

Next, I am going to ask you generally about visitors to the museum.
- How do visitors hear about the museum/museum programs?
- Who visits this museum?
- Where are your visitors from?
  - Follow up with specifics about how often children visit the museum?
    - In what types of groups (e.g. schools, scouts, religious)
- How would you describe the racial/ethnic make up of your visitors?
- How would you describe the SES of your visitors?
- Would you say you have many local residents visiting the museums or are they mostly tourists? PROBE: Are the residents of Detroit visiting your museum frequently or are they mostly from the larger Detroit metro area?
  - Has your visitor population changed over the years? If yes, how so?

Now, I would like to ask about teachers, children, and families who visit the museum.
- Generally, you shared how people hear about museum programs. Now, I would like to know, more specifically, how do teachers hear about the museum/museum programs?
  - Have you ever tried to encourage teachers to visit the museum?
  - In what ways have you/might you encourage teachers to visit the museum?
    PROBES:
    - made phone calls to schools/teachers
    - sent specific education literature to schools/teachers,
    - organized/planned workshops
- teacher professional development activities to explain how to use the museum
  - at the museum
  - at schools

- Do you see many parents/families visiting the museum with kids?
- How do they hear about your programs?
- How would you describe the racial/ethnic and SES make up of the school children that visit the museum?
  - Has this changed in the past few years?
- Do you have special deals for families or schools? (i.e. cheaper rates, special program nights/days?)
- Do you run special programs for school aged-children? During the school year? Summer?
  How do children find out about this/these program(s)?
- What program do you think has been most successful at attracting students? Why?

Last, I would like to ask about the relationships you have with districts and/or schools.
- How do you decide which schools/districts to work with/recruit? How successful have these efforts been?
- Do you have relationships with specific schools or districts?
  - If so, how did those form?
  - How long have they been in place?
  - Why are these relationships beneficial to you? To the school/teachers?
  - Do you have any plans to pursue relationships such as these?

PROBE: If yes, please describe how developed and how schools/districts selected.
- What do you think is the best thing about your museum you wish more schools knew about?

Those are all the questions I have. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about museum, your programs, or visitors?
Thank you again for agreeing to participate. Is there anything you would like to add based on our conversation? Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Thank you!