

Learning about History and Culture in a Mobile Museum

Julie Taylor
University of Michigan-Dearborn

Truman Hudson
University of Michigan-Dearborn

Glovetta Williams
Douglass Academy for Young Men

Christopher Kotcher
St. Mary's Preparatory Academy

Introduction

By making objects of historical, cultural, and scientific interest accessible to the public, museums have contributed to the democratization of learning (Roppola, 2012). When mobile museums present in school settings, informal and formal learning environments merge. Mobile museums offer unique experiences as students leave their classrooms to learn in libraries or media centers. In addition to generating interest, museum experiences have the potential to develop historical and critical thinking. This article explores the impact of the Black History 101 Mobile Museum on secondary school students in a major Midwestern city in the United States.

From antique shops, estate sales, flea markets, and auctions, Khalid el-Hakim, the founder and curator of Black History 101, has amassed a collection of over 7,000 artifacts. Building a museum collection is a selective and deliberate process (Pearce, 1995). Collections reflect values as well as ideas (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). El-Hakim identifies hip hop as the primary influence on his work as a collector and educator. Since its inception in the Bronx, a borough of New York, in the late 1960s and 1970s, hip hop has become a global movement and culture (Fernandes, 2015; Price, 2006; Terkourafi & Milani, 2010). Artistry, empowerment, community improvement, protest, and expression are core hip hop values (Travis, 2016). Hip hop encourages social and political commentary through critical dialogues (Deis, 2015; Gosa & Fields, 2012; Seidel, 2011; Travis, 2016).

Through their selection and framing of artifacts, museum curators, like el-Hakim, create visual narratives and construct meaning (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Roppola, 2012; Vallance,

2004). Exhibitions are interpretive acts and forms of pedagogy (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Roppola, 2012). “Through object placement and display...museums hope to influence the thoughts, feelings, and, ultimately, the learning of the casual visiting public,” wrote John Falk and Lynn Dierking (1992, p. 135).

The theoretical underpinnings of this study lie in Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995; 2009) work on culturally relevant teaching. Culturally relevant instructional practices foster students’ academic growth, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness. Additionally, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s (2000) writings on constructivist learning in museum settings influenced this article. Hooper-Greenhill has examined the interpretive frameworks through which museums communicate and create meaning (2000). Applying critical pedagogy to museum education, she has written about the potential that museums have to engage people in explorations of identities and human possibilities across cultures (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994).

The School and Students

This study was conducted in an alternative, public school in a large city in the Midwestern United States. During the 2017-2018 academic year, the school was attended by 166 middle and high school students. The majority of the students qualified for the National School Lunch Program. All students were male, and over 98% were African American. On the day of the visit by the mobile museum, 133 students viewed the exhibition in rotations with their history and other social studies classes. By opting to complete anonymous surveys, 104 students participated in this IRB-approved study.

The Curator and Museum

As a social studies teacher in Detroit, Michigan, Khalid el-Hakim recognized the value of teaching with primary sources. Observing deficiencies in instructional resources on African Americans and inspired by the work of David Pilgrim, who founded the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids, Michigan, el-Hakim began collecting artifacts pertaining to African American history and culture in 1991. His first exhibit was in a display case at his school. When interviewed for this article, el-Hakim (2018, March 15) explained:

...the principal gave me a display case in the hallway, which I used to change very month. So, I got started doing small exhibits at the school. One month it would be women’s

history. Another month it would be hip-hop related. Another month it would be Martin Luther King artifacts. So, I changed it every month...I also used artifacts in the classroom, to teach my students at the time, too, just to introduce different eras of history with them. So, if we were talking about politics, I would bring in political campaign material. If we were talking about slavery, I'd bring in slave chains. If we were talking about Martin Luther King, I would bring in original photographs of Martin Luther King. Magazines, newspapers - that type of thing. It made history real to them. (n.p.)

El-Hakim's passion for collecting and teaching with artifacts ultimately led to the establishment of the Black History 101 Mobile Museum. He left the classroom in 2011 to devote himself to museum education full time. His collection has been displayed at universities as well as in libraries, cultural centers, and houses of worship in the United States and Canada. Although most visitors have been college students, over 10,000 U.S. school children have viewed the mobile museum at their schools.

Through artifacts, el-Hakim relates the history of African Americans from the transatlantic slave trade to the present day. He presents, in chronological order, diverse sources on slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement. He also includes hip hop cultural artifacts. Building on these topics, el-Hakim often curates in light of historical anniversaries and achievements by African Americans. Themes within his collection include Motown, Nobel Peace Prize winners, Black inventions, and sports icons. He typically selects between 150 and 200 items for an exhibition. In the spring of 2018, at the school in this study, el-Hakim presented a number of historical artifacts from 1968 in '68: *How Far Have We Come?*

During the exhibition, el-Hakim structured the students' learning with a writing assignment: D.I.C.E. The D.I.C.E. questions were: a) *What artifacts disturb you? Why?;* b) *What artifacts interest you?;* c) *What connection can you make between an artifact and your personal experience?;* and e) *What artifacts empower you?* While the students viewed the artifacts independently, el-Hakim and his assistant fielded questions. They also engaged students by employing the Visual Thinking Strategies: a) *What's going on in this picture;* b) *What do you see that makes you say that?;* and c) *What more can you find?* (Yenawine, 2013) After viewing the exhibition, the classes participated in lectures and discussions led by el-Hakim.

Research Methods

Mixed, complementary research methods were used in this study. In addition to administering an optional, blind survey with an embedded design, the authors conducted a semi-structured interview with el-Hakim. Mixed methods deepen understandings of complex social phenomena by integrating diverse perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Greene, 2007). The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data strengthens inferences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). When using mixed methods, authors can contextualize findings (Greene, 2007).

With an embedded design, the four-item survey was comprised of three Likert-scale items and one open-ended question. After each fixed-choice item, the students were invited to add comments. On Likert scales, the students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with three statements: 1.) *Seeing authentic artifacts and other primary sources in the Black History 101 Mobile Museum increased my interest in history;* 2.) *Learning African American history is important to me,* and 3.) *I would recommend Black History 101 to students in other schools.* A fourth, open-ended question asked, *What did you learn from Black History 101?*

For students with special needs, a separate, two-item survey was designed in consultation with the special education teacher, who recommended the use of emojis. In response to the question, *Would you recommend Black History 101 to students in other schools?*, students had two options: a smiling emoji making a thumbs-up gesture or a frowning, thumbs-down emoji. Under the former was written, *Yes, I would recommend.* Under the latter was the statement, *No, I would not recommend.* The second question, *How would you describe the exhibition?*, also offered two possible responses: a thinking-face emoji with the word *interesting* or a yawning, bored-faced emoji with the label *boring*.

The exhibition was open for four-and-one-half hours in the school's media center. As classes left the center in 50-minute rotations, the students were asked whether or not they would like to complete surveys. The surveys were available in hard copy on tables in the hallway. Seventy-eight percent of the students opted to take the surveys. An incentive was offered: Participants names were entered in a raffle to win a basketball or a football. Survey data was later entered manually into SurveyMonkey, a cloud-based analytical tool. The students' comments were read multiple times in order to categorize the data, identify themes, and select representative and illustrative concepts (Saldaña, 2013).

The semi-structured interview with el-Hakim took place two weeks after the visit by Black History 101. The interview questions were written to gain understanding of el-Hakim's background, professional motivation, and collection. He was queried about educational needs, objectives, and outcomes. In addition, el-Hakim was asked to discuss the scope of his work and his methods. The interview was recorded, transcribed, and read multiple times. This scholarly, noncommercial study was conducted autonomously by the researchers; Black History 101 did not sponsor it.

Results

The findings of the standard survey suggest that the students' experience with the Black History 101 Mobile Museum increased their interest in history. The students reported that learning African American history was important to their understanding their own identities. Overwhelmingly, on both the standard and alternative surveys, the students indicated that they would recommend the museum experience to others. Ninety-eight students completed the standard, four-item survey. Six students, who had special needs, took the alternate survey.

With the statement on the standard survey, *Seeing authentic artifacts and other primary sources in the Black History 101 Mobile Museum increased my interest in history*, 82.65% strongly agreed (47.96%) or agreed (34.69%). Over 14% were neutral. Only two students (2.04%) disagreed, and one student (1.02%) strongly disagreed. In the embedded comments' section, 42 students explained their responses. Two main themes became apparent: a) The students found the experience of studying authentic historical objects, images, and documents to be powerful, and b) Learning about African American history increased the students' determination and motivation to learn. The following comments reflect the themes:

The chains were a powerful message to show how tough those times were.

It really opened my eyes to see the things in person and up-close.

Seeing this makes me want to push through and make it in life.

Seeing these things makes me angry and want to learn.

On Likert scales, the vast majority of students (84.53%) strongly agreed (59.79%) or agreed (24.74%) with the statement, *Learning African American history is important to me*. Over 13% were neutral. About one percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Thirty-seven participants offered comments to explain their responses. A key theme emerged: Learning history in the mobile

museum had deepened the students' understandings of themselves as African Americans. The participants wrote these comments:

It's important because I am learning about my culture.

We need to learn our history.

This made history more important to my life.

I am African American, so this means a lot to me.

In the strongest finding, 91.83% of respondents indicated, on the standard survey, that they would recommend Black History 101 to students in other schools. Six percent were neutral, and only one percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. Thirty-four students offered explanations of their willingness to recommend the museum to others. Two themes arose: a) The museum teaches historical information about African Americans that is important for students to know, and b) The museum makes history engaging and accessible. Representative comments were:

This history could help other schools, including white schools, to understand the meaning of Blacks.

I think other kids need the knowledge.

I think this is something that shows the history of Blacks in an interesting way.

Very informational and easier to access.

On the alternative survey for students with special needs, the same question, *Would you recommend Black History 101 to students in other schools?*, was included. All six students circled the smiling, thumbs-up emoji with the statement, *Yes, I would*. When asked, *How would you describe the exhibition?*, the participants, without exception, circled the thinking-face emoji with the word *interesting*.

The last item on the standard survey was open-ended. Students were asked, *What did you learn from Black History 101?* Ninety-four students responded. Some students named historic persons and cultural icons such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Emmett Till, Muhammad Ali, Mahalia Jackson, Colin Kaepernick, and Michael Jackson. Four students mentioned the Klu Klux Klan. Two students wrote about the commercial exploitation of African Americans. Overall, three themes were evident. From the museum, the students learned about a) racism and the maltreatment of African Americans in the past and present, b) African American history and culture, and b) the importance of being proud to be African American. These comments were representative:

I learned that Black people were treated badly. Also that we as a community need to

stand up for each other.

That there is a lot more about history that people my age don't know.

I learned that my roots are rich and filled with natural-born leaders.

That our African American race is of beautiful importance.

Discussion

If we are going to build a multiracial society, which is our only hope, then one has got to accept that I have learned a lot from you, and a lot of it is bitter, but you have a lot to learn from me, and a lot of that will be bitter. That bitterness is our only hope. That is the only way we get past it...It is our common history. My history is also yours. (Baldwin, 1968/2011, p. 113)

Speaking in support of a bill to form a Commission on Negro History and Culture in 1968, James Baldwin (1968/2011) asserted that common historical understanding is fundamental to a multiracial society. The bill did not pass, but thirty-five years later, President George W. Bush signed legislation to establish the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the Mall, near the Washington Monument (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2017) When President Barack Obama (2016, September 24) opened the national museum in 2016, he spoke about historical understanding, healing, and progress:

(The museum) reminds us that routine discrimination and Jim Crow aren't ancient history, it's just a blink in the eye of history, it was just yesterday. And so we should not be surprised that not all the healing is done. We shouldn't despair that it's not all solved. And knowing the largest stories should instead remind us just how remarkable the changes that have taken place truly are – just in my lifetime. And thereby inspire us to further progress. (n.p.)

The national museum is the newest and largest of multiple museums devoted to African American history and culture. Other institutions include the African American Museum and Library at Oakland, the DuSable Museum in Chicago, and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit. To reach students in different parts of the United States as well as in other countries, some museums have digitized holdings. The DuSable has a mobile museum that exhibits in the Chicago area. The Black History 101 Mobile Museum is currently

one of only two mobile museums that travel to communities throughout the United States. The other mobile museum is the True Black History Museum.

Mobile museums do not benefit from the physical context that traditional museums have. The architecture, collections, displays, interactive media, and soundscapes of brick-and-mortar museums enhance the visitor's experience (Bedford, 2014). Nevertheless, with only 10 draped tables at his disposal for Black History 101, el-Hakim captures the attention of visitors. No objects are displayed under glass. Viewers can approach the artifacts within inches. With an assistant, el-Hakim is present to explain the history of objects and to field questions. Both intellectual and visceral, the learning experience is effective. "The pictures and all the signed documents helped me understand better," wrote one student on the survey. "It was an awesome museum. I saw things that I had never seen before that are real," stated another. A third student wrote, "I really wasn't interested in black history until now."



Figure 1. El-Hakim posed and fielded questions on artifacts with students.

In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire (2001, p. 49) asserted, "...to know how to teach is to create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged

simply in a game of transferring knowledge.” In the Black History 101 Mobile Museum, the students engaged in free-choice learning as they focused on objects that were of interest to them (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Crowley, Pierroux & Knutson, 2014). Free-choice learning allowed for spontaneous interactions (Crowley, Pierroux & Knutson, 2014). The D.I.C.E. assignment offered structure by requiring students to evaluate artifacts. On the survey, a participant in this study wrote, “I (learned) that hands-on is better.”

Objects carry meanings that are constructed in sociocultural environments (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). In examining artifacts, students consider form, function, and signification (Dudley, 2012a). As students place objects in historical context, they reflect on the impact of the past on the present. They grasp historical concepts such as causation, change over time, and progress (VanSledright, 2014). “...every object is caught up in the tension between biography and history, belonging to its own web of meaning that a human life constitutes, from whose context it has now fallen out...Museums are filled with objects by historical ruptures,” wrote Loewy (2017, p. 83).

With artifacts, el-Hakim unmask histories and ways of thinking that are not fully examined in United States history textbooks. Through Black History 101, the students in this study were exposed to once-commonplace objects that are not often seen today. As manifestations of the baseness of racist thinking, many artifacts in the collection were disturbing. In their materiality and authenticity, the objects elicited both cognitive and emotional reactions (Cf. Dudley, 2012b). In his interview, el-Hakim explained, “The point is to get us out of our comfort zones and force that uncomfortable conversation about race, about identity, to happen.”



Figure 2. The museum presented artifacts on the oppression of African Americans.

In *Teaching History with Museums*, Marcus, Stoddard, and Woodward (2012) wrote about the value of museum learning for K-12 social studies students, noting that museum experiences foster inquiry. During the exhibition, el-Hakim encouraged students to investigate history and to interrogate historical narratives. The statements by some students on the survey suggest that they had gained appreciation of history and its relevance. A student wrote, “I learned that you should learn as much history as possible.” Another young man stated, “I learned that history still impacts us, centuries later.”



Figure 3. El-Hakim talked with a student about the history of segregation.

Students' backgrounds, cultures, and familiarity with museum settings influence their experiences (Vallance, 2004). In *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (2009) wrote about the importance of multifaceted learning and the development of foundational knowledge of African American history and culture. Transformational teachers honor cultural heritages and ecological factors (Gay, 2010). African American as well as other cultural perspectives must be represented in instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Museums are arenas or contact zones in which negotiations of representation occur (Sternfeld, 2017; Sandell, 2007). They can be vehicles for cultural empowerment (Ames, 1990). When interviewed, el-Hakim (2018, March 15) stated:

My intention, initially, was to make sure that (the students) saw themselves in history, that they saw that they are part of a legacy of people who contributed great things not only to American history, but to the world...One of the big issues and challenges with museums, for people who have been marginalized in society, is to walk into museum spaces and not be able to relate to anything in the museums that speak to their experience. (n.p.)

Hosting and Teaching with Black History 101

The Black History 101 Mobile Museum travels to rural and urban communities in the United States as well as to other countries. To share the cost of bringing the mobile museum, schools sometimes partner with universities and libraries. Because of his belief in the educational value of direct experiences with primary sources, el-Hakim does not offer videoconferences, but through the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration (CILC), educators can view alternative, online museum programs on African American history and culture, such as the Smithsonian American Art Museum's program on African American artists and the Cleveland Museum of Art's offering on the Harlem Renaissance. On website of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, educators will find virtual exhibitions.

To build upon learning with the Black History 101 Mobile Museum, the authors recommend that secondary students engage in intertextual readings using primary sources from other collections, such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress. Rich materials have been digitized, and they are discoverable on the websites of these institutions. Students could be asked to evaluate and present evidence on African American history and culture in digital displays using Museum Box or Google Sites. Alternatively, they could fashion their own museum-style displays with posters in their schools (Passe & Whitley, 1998).

By examining how museums represent history and culture, students cultivate historical thinking skills (Marcus, Stoddard, and Woodward, 2012). When exploring Black History 101, students could be asked to identify the curator's perspective and choices. Students could also be assigned to find additional sources that they would, hypothetically, add to the exhibition. "The demystification of museums does not make them less accurate or less useful to visit, but instead bestows a wonderful opportunity for students to explore...how history is 'made'" (Marcus, Stoddard, and Woodward, 2012, p. 9).

Conclusion

As African Americans, the students in this study felt that the museum's focus on African American history and culture had bearing on their lives. They reported that the Black History 101 experience was powerful and motivational. The museum's inclusion of racist memorabilia led to critical discussions about bigotry and stereotyping. By affording students the opportunity to

experience authentic artifacts directly, Black History 101 enhanced history education. The students explored historical thinking concepts such as evidence, historical significance, perspective, and continuity and change (Seixas & Morton, 2013). In light of the findings, collaboration between mobile museum educators and secondary schools merits consideration.

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