

Expanding the boundaries of museum studies: Popular education through engagement with hidden histories of organising and activism

**Emese R Toth, Sandy Guttman, Andie Kimura and
Therese Quinn**

Museum and Exhibition Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

Abstract

This article shares a descriptive case study of a popular education project entitled Alternative Tours UIC (ALTourUIC) that took place during a graduate course in the Museum and Exhibition Studies Programme at University of Illinois at Chicago. The educational activities created by the students included a map locating historically rich areas of campus, guided and self-guided tours, and social media spaces inviting participants to contribute stories of campus-based activism. The aims were to make visible marginalised and suppressed histories of activism and organising by members of the campus community at University of Illinois at Chicago. Importantly, this article offers a model of popular education that we recommend be taken up by museums to create greater awareness of frequently unknown and ignored histories and actively engage students in critical learning and investigation.

Keywords

Adult education, popular education, museums, archives, social movements, social justice, informal learning

Corresponding author:

Emese R Toth, Museum and Exhibition Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, 106 Jefferson Hall, 929 W. Harrison, MC 201, Chicago, Illinois 60607, USA.

Email: emese.r.toth@gmail.com

Introduction

In 2015, the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), an urban public institution with a social justice mission, celebrated the 50th anniversary of the founding of its campus. This article shares a case study of public engagement strategies – a map locating historically rich areas of campus and social media spaces to contribute stories of campus-based activism – as forms of popular education created as a final project within a graduate course in the Museum and Exhibition Studies Program at UIC. Grounded in research and documentation, and developed collaboratively by all students in the course, the project, Alternative Tours UIC (ALTourUIC), made visible marginalised and suppressed histories of activism and organising by members of the campus community at UIC.

The project had multiple goals. One was to make visible the history of justice-focussed organising by students, staff and faculty at UIC and to highlight the heterogeneity of our campus. Another was to foster the engagement of students and other participants with social issues from the past, and equally, their connections to the present. By encouraging all participants to share their histories of activism and organising, ALTourUIC works to challenge, as noted above what counts as knowledge and encourage social justice-based actions for change. Another aim of the project was to subvert problematic, traditional forms of education in museums – didactic, top-down, educator-driven, singular, dominant narratives (e.g. Hein, 2008; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994b). Characteristic of these normative museum practices is the prioritisation of the transmission of knowledge from experts to everyone else. To push against these, we crafted co-equal or co-shared, rather than simply ‘docent-led’ (a term for museum-based educators in the United States), tours of campus, including students, staff, faculty and other community members who were engaged to voice and make visible their histories of activism. By focussing on ‘invisible’ histories and urgent contemporary concerns, we propose that museums and universities can offer their communities’ opportunities to identify and foster challenges to inequities and remind participants of the ever-present possibility to work for social change and justice.

Completed in May 2015, ALTourUIC lives on as a self-guided tour with map and information accessible online, and through rolling submissions of stories via social media. This article shares our conceptual framework, grounding it within museology, and a detailed presentation of the context for, and process, evaluation and analysis of the project as popular exhibitionary education beyond the museum, with potential application within museum walls. Finally, we close by noting the urgent need for museum reform, and offer additional examples of projects using popular education strategies to initiate change in these cultural institutions. Popular education brings to museums ‘intentionality’ to render visible what has been hidden by problematic relations of power that limit historical knowledge and thereby, what we can know today.

Conceptual framework

Since their inception, museums have been educating young and old alike (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a, 1994b). Initially, this education through exposure to their stories, artworks and exhibits served the purposes of catering to the cultural and social furtherance of the elite on one side, and on the other, regulating the behaviour and bodies of the masses, moulding them into 'ideal' citizens, and instilling notions of nationalism that can be seen as problematic (e.g. Bennett, 1995; Hein, 2008). In many ways, this liberal practice of adult education parallels others that aim to produce people who conform to the neoliberal marketplace ideal (Peters, 1991). Indeed, museums are 'exceedingly effective educators' (Chapin & Klein, 1992, p. 6) in nurturing dominant ideologies and supporting a frequently oppressive status quo. As if to solidify this role, in the 1980s, many museums began to establish education and learning departments with even more specialised programmes and foci (Hein, 2008). Despite this, Dudzinska-Prezesmitzki and Greiner (2008) conducted a literature review of the pedagogical work of museums in the United States in particular and found an acute absence of any form of critical adult education and learning theory guiding their activities. The result is a frequently depoliticised cultural practice that absents particular histories and stories. This is a challenge we took up through the use of popular education.

Popular education

The pedagogical framework and practice we employed for our project was popular education. Popular education is a process of collective study and action that engages people who have been marginalised, politically, culturally and/or socially, with taking charge of their own learning, and in the case we offer here, histories, as a means to movement for social justice and change (Hale, 2002; Schnapp, 2002). For scholars such as Hale (2002) and Flowers (2004), popular education makes little or no distinction between teacher and student; instead, everybody teaches and everybody learns. Components of the framework include an accessible and inclusive learning process, identification and analysis of issues participants face in their lives and communities, and a collaborative action-based process. Popular education emphasises the background knowledge people bring to their learning; participants need to define their own struggles and look to their lived experiences for insights (Schnapp, 2002). At the heart of popular education theory and practice is a vision of creating opportunities for people to 'come to know, understand and tell their stories and those of others' (Flowers, 2004, p. 12). Through telling and sharing stories, a key practice of museums as they are first and foremost storytellers, participants become aware of their own and others' everyday roles in making history and shaping the present, rather than simply as observers and consumers of changes facilitated by the 'leaders' so often portrayed in museums. In other words, as Flowers (2004) argues, all can become the 'shakers and movers and the makers

and performers of history and culture’ (p. 12). Another key characteristic of popular education is to stress the role of the educator as a ‘facilitator’ of dialogue. As participants critically examine and reflect on their own and each other’s problems, it is through dialogue that they become aware of ‘social pressures and internalised ideas that hold them passive in conditions of oppression’ and learn that they are ‘capable of changing their reality, their lives, and the society they live in’ (Ferreira & Ferreira, 1996, p. 19). Finally, popular education insists that these facilitators follow the lead of participants as they analyze society and their lives, and identify ways they can take action (Zerkel, 2001). In other words, for popular educators,

ordinary people—not those celebrated in the media or the arcane journals of academic thought [and, we’ll add, museums] but those who struggle within and against their own subjugation—are the ones best able to understand the real conditions of society and to bring forth fundamental change” (Ayers, Heller & Hurtig, 2016, p. 3).

In the United States, an early proponent of popular education strategies was Myles Horton who, along with Don West, founded the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. This folk school played key roles in two major social movements in the United States – the labour movement in the 1930s and 1940s and civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s – through its education programmes, which were organised around the goal of teaching the skills needed to challenge structural inequities and oppression, such as learning to read to be able to vote (Horton, 1990, 2003). Specifically, Horton proposed that learning took on powerful meaning and urgency when linked to compelling personal and social concerns. For example beginning in 1954, Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson at Highlander prepared teachers to serve in what were called ‘Citizenship Schools’, places where people were taught skills as part of a struggle for African American freedom (e.g. Brookfield & Holst, 2011).

Importantly, popular education is about more than simply making education broadly accessible; it is about ‘designing education so that the knowledge, values, and perspectives of grassroots people [are] privileged and shape . . . the curriculum’ and the world (Flowers, 2004, p. 13). Through sharing stories about their experiences, as noted above, participants come to their own conclusions about social and political structures and how to change them. Schugurensky (2002) argues that the most important aspect of popular education is its advocacy of social justice, through its central practice of assisting people in ‘reclaim[ing] their collective history so that they can bring about the structural changes [they need]’ (Cadena, 1984, p. 34).

There is no writing in the adult education literature, or museum literature for that matter, to date that makes a strong link between popular education and museums. We did uncover two examples of museum-related projects we feel use popular education modes of dialogue, visibility, problem identification, and collaboration to address justice concerns. However, they do not in fact use the term. The first is Museum Workers Speak (#MuseumWorkersSpeak), which was

founded in 2015 by a group of museum activists to provide a regular platform for discussion about labour practices in museums and other cultural institutions. The group hosts monthly ‘tweetchats’ on related topics including income inequality, workplace exploitation (including unpaid internships), and gender bias. It has also hosted both ‘rogue’ – random interjections – and traditional sessions at American Alliance of Museums conferences. This group has successfully used social media and in-person gatherings to facilitate self and group education, and has crafted a mission that identifies action for social change as its central aim (<http://museum-workersspeak.weebly.com/>).

The second example is a 2016 exhibit, *our duty to fight*, organised by Black Lives Matter Chicago in collaboration with various supportive movement organisations. It was exhibited at Gallery 400, a contemporary art gallery on the UIC campus. This exhibit was framed in a press release as ‘a call to join the rebellion being waged’ (Gallery 400, 2016, para. 1) and featured works by artists active in Black Lives Matter, as well as organising ephemera, including posters, protest banners, and t-shirts made to wear at rallies. To ‘enable multiple platforms for coming together’ the exhibit included a space to allow ‘performances, workshops and knowledge-sharing’ and a series of programmes (Gallery 400, 2016, para. 3). The exhibit organisers wrote that they hope their work in the gallery ‘spurs dialogue and action toward realizing liberation, abolishing oppressive systems, and maximizing opportunities to practice justice’ and note that ‘*our duty to fight* [italics added] invites exhibition visitors to join the struggle against state repression and terror while working to build collective power’ (Gallery 400, 2016, para. 4). The exhibit invited dialogue and action, and was an open invitation to join others in movement for justice, identifying this exhibition project as popular education.

Our project, as we outline below, took up the language and practices of popular education, joining museum forms with popular education’s intent to bring about social and cultural change.

Context of the project

Our belief when we embarked on this project was that goals of empowerment behind popular education were very much aligned with the historical mission of the University of Illinois, a public land grant institution founded to provide the working classes of the United States with an entry in to higher education. UIC is an urban branch of the system and, like all land grant schools, has a mandate to be open, accessible and of service to residents. UIC has responded to this mandate by adopting a social justice mission and supporting related programmes and scholarship, including an interdisciplinary, justice-centred Museum and Exhibition Studies Programme. Our programme translates the mission into the values that: (a) museum studies can learn something from social movements; (b) exhibits are forms of popular education when they centre on posing questions and sparking dialogue; (c) everyone can and should learn to make exhibits and programmes; and (d) exhibit and museum work should inspire public engagement and participation.

Influenced by the practices and literature of new museology, which, according to Lindauer, ‘analyzes moral and political aspects of [museum] practice’ (quoted in Quinn, 2006, p. 96), and the scholarship of curriculum theorists on the social and education work of museums (Ellsworth, 2002; Vallance, 1995, 2004), Quinn (2006) has proposed that popular education, as a model of curriculum grounded in social justice aims and thus foundationally linked to moral and political concerns, could be used to help create more powerful and relevant museums, or, ‘museums that “push” toward equity, democracy, representation and other aspects of a just society (p. 95). Following these leads, a popular education framework was a good choice for ALTourUIC, which engaged social justice goals by highlighting marginalised populations and their histories of campus resistance, inviting and valuing the contributions of all participants, and opening up opportunities for ongoing discussion and collective action (Kane, 2000).

Context and project design

ALTourUIC centres on fostering dialogue and understanding around the hidden histories of the University’s past. As part of our research plan, we divided ourselves by areas of interest in specific sites, including the Gender and Sexuality Center, the Department of Disability and Human Development, the African American Cultural Center and the Latino Cultural Center. The students in our class approached these spaces directly, combing through archival materials within these institutional locations, visiting the University’s Special Collections and Archives, and conducting in-depth interviews with current and former campus activists. The materials we uncovered through our research included photographs and video recordings from former protests, ephemeral materials related to organising such as posters and fliers, chants that were shouted during demonstrations, and some personal retellings of the history through informal interviews. Digging through and engaging with materials from the University’s 50-year history, we began to uncover narratives across generations and departments which pointed to an on-going struggle between a bureaucratic hierarchy inherent to all university systems, including UIC regardless of its founding mandate, and the needs and concerns of students, faculty and community members in the surrounding neighbourhood. Some of the celebratory histories that the University highlighted during the 50-year anniversary included the story of the former mayor Richard J. Daley founding the University of Illinois at Circle Campus in 1965. This new campus was created as an alternative and affordable public education option and as a solution to the overcrowding at the former University location at Chicago’s Navy Pier, which occurred due to the influx of returning men and women from Second World War looking to attain an education through the 1944 Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (otherwise known as the GI Bill). Absent from the story of this founding was any mention of the mass displacement of the people living in the culturally diverse neighbourhood along Halsted Street, and the demolition of 11 of the 13 buildings in the historic Hull-House Settlement, one of the first major

social service organisations in the city, founded by the social reformer Jane Addams. Upon hearing Mayor Daley's intent to relocate the University to their neighbourhood in the early 1960s, members of the community, including former Hull-House resident Florence Scala, organised demonstrations, a march on City Hall, and sit-ins at the Mayor's office. Though the efforts of these organisers were great, their cries for preservation went unheard – more than 800 homes and 200 businesses were lost to make room for the campus (Fitzsimmons, 2007). Thus, the great losses – the displacement of people from the neighbourhood, the movement of social services away from the community, and the loss of historic architectural structures – resulting from the founding of the new campus, these stories are missing from the retelling of how the University came to be where it is today. Considering histories like these in conjunction with the traditionally celebrated tales advertised and often retold, it became clear that in burying activist histories of our campus, we are passively supporting damaging systems.

The primary aim of our popular education practice/research was to bring to light these tensions that existed, and continue to exist, between those within our community of higher education – administrators and students – unions and the University, around diversity in our historically segregated city, around notions of gender identity, and even of architecture causing barriers to access within UIC's sprawling campus.

In approaching the research and project framework for ALTourUIC, we designed an inclusive method of extensive collaboration. As a class, we created a document of skills we each possessed and were willing to share with the group and with each other, as well as skills we were eager to learn through engaging in the project process. By beginning from a more egalitarian process that allowed people to share their strengths and what they personally wanted (and for the group), the core of our project centred not only on the 'do-it-yourself methods' of collective organising, but also on fostering forms of collaborative work that can be rare for students within a system of higher education often dedicated to competition and ranking. The diverse backgrounds, skills, histories and interests of those in our core group bolstered the work we were able to compose as a team. We reported to no one but ourselves, divvying up labour based on interest and skill sets both newly acquired and pre-existing. Inadvertently modelling aspects of our project on Barnett's (2002, p. 16) notion of lifelong learning, the pursuit of multiple skill sets and the importance of educating oneself 'to widen the very frameworks through which we interpret the world', ALTourUIC took on a form that was moulded by the individual talents and worldviews of each member of our team, and every active participant on our tours (Trotman & Kop, 2009).

Over the course of formulating our project process, our team used a variety of research methods to interpret the theme of campus activist history. Having spent the first few weeks of the semester studying various forms of public engagement project-based work, we took inspiration from projects like Aisha Cousins' 'Mapping Soulville' (Cousins, 2013), Jay Shells' 'Rap Quotes' (Shelowitz, 2014) and Gunter Demnig's 'Solpersteine' (Kolbert, 2015). These projects utilised

collective memory, invisible history and the claiming of space through commemorative plaques, bricks and mapping to recall memories and histories once forgotten.

Mapping

What the Jay Shells, Aisha Cousins and Gunter Demnig projects noted above all had in common was their use of mapping and site-specific installations as a basis for making visible invisible histories tied to people and places. All three of these projects took distinct historical moments, lyrics, streets and figures, and placed them within geographic frameworks that made them tangible and visible to insiders as well as outsiders from the communities they represent. In looking at projects like these alongside the alternative historical narrative we were developing about our University, the idea of creating a map and walking tour was an organic direction for our work. We had the campus as a resource and buildings and spaces pregnant with history, with remnants of our institutional and communal past layered across the campus. Working within the space of a map, we honed in on the idea of using contemporary cartography and historical narrative to place the real stories within architectural spaces on our campus. We aimed to unearth moments and figures not traditionally archived, stories left untold, and images that have long since fallen by the wayside. We chose some sites that we knew had activist histories, such as the Gender and Sexuality Center, the African American Cultural Center and the Architecture and Design building, and chose others we hypothesised might have histories linked to social movements and campus activism, such as the Department of Disability and Human Development, through which the first PhD in Disability Studies in the United States was offered. In order to locate moments of protest and collective action, we combed the Special Collections and University Archives, interviewed former and current professor and student activists, and tracked down former campus organisers. Our research led us in many directions, with some resulting in concrete stories that offered a narrative of the social justice-based work that has taken place on our campus since its founding. Other research avenues turned up little information, leading us to wonder why certain histories were archived while others remained forgotten. The result was an array of confirmed events, which we aggregated into a shared workspace on Google Drive. We then used this information to populate a Google Map, which we opened to the public upon completion of the mapping project. Our intentions for opening the Google Map up to the public came from a place of wanting to extend our research beyond the space of the campus, while also allowing for the opportunity for those outside of our class to add their own locations of activist history should they be willing to share. To create the physical map, we organised a group of writers and editors and coordinated with our in-house graphic designer. Settling on 12 campus tour locations, we wrote collaboratively, in an accessible language, for a broad audience. Each location was allotted a concise description highlighting important details relevant to telling the narrative history. After multiple edits and an overall

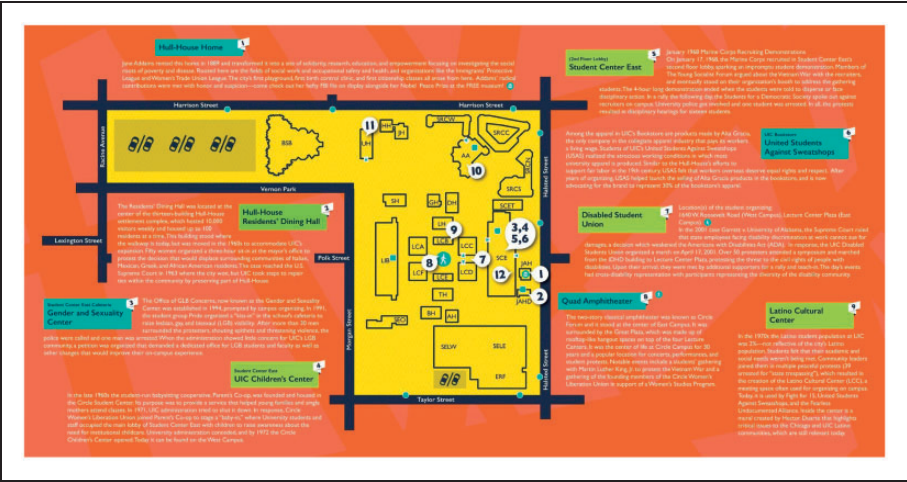


Figure 1. Map distributed during guided tours and online for self-guided participation. It includes 12 stops and short narratives for each location.

agreement by the class, the final map was released in both print media and in a shareable PDF format to maximise access (Figure 1).

Walking tours and participation

In configuring our research in a mapping format, the evolution of the project led us in the direction of devising a walking tour. Our walking tour project was situated within a lineage of walking tours typical of Chicago – including tours about local food, architects and architecture, and Chicago’s violent past, featuring mobsters, shootouts and Prohibition-era speakeasies. ALTourUIC falls into a subset of tours that situate participants squarely within historical narratives hidden from plain view, including contemporary social issues present on campus, in the city, and more broadly, on a national and international scale. Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s experimental walking tours as artistic practice served as a context for this project, in which the design offers an experience that is just as much about the history learned and felt through related activities as it is about the participant (Cardiff & Miller, 2012). In order to better understand how a tour could be an effective method for engagement, we explored tour best practices, pulling from multiple team members’ experiences leading tours at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago. Additionally, we arranged a meeting with Paul Durica, founder of *Pocket Guide to Hell*, an experimental touring programme focussed on ‘True Crime, Social Justice and Labor History’ in Chicago (n.d.). Paul Durica’s programmes run the gamut from staging full-scale reenactments of historic events such as the violent 1886 protest in Haymarket Square and demonstrations for labour rights of industrial workers, to more

simple walking tours of Chicago's neighbourhoods. All the activities, however, bring history to life through the use of props, actors and immersion. Though we did not rely on audio or video in the way that Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller did or stage full-scale hyper specific reenactments like Paul Durica, we did have diverse activities for active engagement, opportunities to share concerns, questions and ideas, space for open dialogue among our class, and room to raise our voices collectively in protest in the name of equality and justice.

A group of four students from the class with experiences in tour script writing and leading volunteered their time and skills to create a tour that was participatory and engaging for both the leaders and participants alike. Indeed, participation was crucial to measuring the success of the programme in general. Following notions of active learning, the importance of participation and on-going dialogue, and making space for questions throughout the tour were what propelled the tour framework. Sprake (2012) speaks of 'productive participants' in opposition to more passive methods of 'receiving authoritative information' (p. 7), a methodology that we exemplified in the participatory and collaborative nature of the tour structure. While our tour leaders ran some of the tour in the more traditional lecture format, the tour also broke from the standard by pausing for questions posed by both the lecturers and the tour participants and allowing for interruption from both participants and external passers-by. The tour also incorporated a multitude of engagement activities along the way to stir up and elicit reactions in our participants through active engagement with the tour material in ways that connected past histories to present issues around social justice. In allowing for diverse methods of interpretation from our tour participants, we were able to learn from one another and uncover different ways of looking at social justice issues of the past and present. Interactive and inclusive interpretation also gave a certain sense of agency to our participants – making their voices and their backgrounds an important asset to the evolution of our tours and the collaborative learning that occurred over the course of this project.

Tour logistics

In particular, Paul Durica's (n.d.) programmes inspired some of the more engaging elements of our own tour, which included chanting the same protests for disability rights in the exact location where they had been heard over a decade prior, creating protest signs, and visiting actual sites of campus activism. Paul Durica also urged us to focus on tour logistics, such as making sure it was not too long, including stops for breaks, and mapping out a route that strengthened our narrative arc. To achieve a concise tour one hour in length and completely accessible to participants of varying mobility, we walked and timed the route, locating amenities such as elevators, ramps and benches, as well as calculating the time allotted per stop. At each location we incorporated an activity, a visual aid or an action that would underscore the importance of activism in shaping the University. For example at the site of the 2001 on-campus protest for disability rights, we reenacted the same

chants that were shouted in the exact spot 14 years prior; in the Quad, where numerous actions continue to take place, we paused to let participants make protest signs for contemporary issues they believe in fighting for, and encouraged them to hang their posters somewhere on campus (providing markers, posters and tape); and at the site of the infamous same-sex kiss-in we passed around archival materials that helped to tell the story of how the kiss-in for LGBTQI rights on the University campus came about (Figure 2).

In order to make clear that this was a group effort, we led the tour as a four-some, subbing in for one another, and offering multiple voices and points of view. This aspect of the tour broke down the notion of our tour having a single authoritarian voice that Sprake (2012) is rightfully critical of, and leaving room for multiple tour voices cleared the path for participants to also lead and share their own memories, histories and opinions. To further push the collaborative nature of the



Figure 2. Two tour participants showing their protest signs.

tour experience and tour formation, we were constantly revising the content based upon the anecdotes shared during our tours, through our social media platforms, and in response to current activist activities occurring on our campus including a gathering of the Tar Sands Action group, an activist group poised in opposition to the approval of the Keystone XL pipeline; the UIC Graduate Employees Organisation; the Fight for 15 movement organising and protesting on behalf of fast food workers for better wages, working conditions and the right to unionise; and the Black Lives Matter Movement, the growing grassroots activist organisation fighting for rights, equality and justice for members of Black and Brown communities in the United States.

Social media

Dependent on user-generated content, social media has the ability to circulate knowledge pursuant to the core of popular education. Anyone with internet access possesses the ability to start or contribute to a conversation, moving the storytelling essential to museums and popular education to a digital platform. As an educational tool, there is an increasing number of studies on the effectiveness of social media in adult education that agree social media has rapidly become a dominant mode for informal learning largely due to the fact that it is a free, non-hierarchical device with the potential for critical discourse to take place virtually (Careless, 2015; Hague & Logan, 2009; Klomsri, Grebäck, & Tedre 2013; Lee & Ang, 2013; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011). A nationwide survey by Futurelabs reported British adults spent an average of eight and a half hours a week informally learning through technology in their leisure time (Hague & Logan, 2009). Klomsri and colleagues (2013) conducted a study on informal characteristics of learning focussed on the usage of Facebook among South African young adults. The study most notably found these adults experienced personal development in both creating and receiving content that lead to new knowledge in addition to strengthened social interactions through more directed communication between individuals. Klomsri and colleagues (2013) noted respondents gained knowledge 'spontaneously, by scrolling through the newsfeed, or consciously by searching for certain information' (p. 140).

Capitalising on the potential for informal learning through social media, we were strategic in disseminating similar yet different information through Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram and Twitter. The ALTourUIC Facebook page took advantage of the 'scrolling' nature of social media by centring on tour logistics and sending reminders to stay visible on newsfeeds, while our Instagram account included extended captions on many posts with hopes of garnering attention from unfamiliar audiences. Almost half of our tour participants (8 out of 17 people) became aware of our program through digital media when responding to the post-tour survey.

More importantly, activating ALTourUIC accounts on multiple social media platforms aided in reaching a broader audience beyond the physical confines of

the University as well as generations apart from the current student population. Our social media created virtual space where informal dialogues could develop and encourage continued conversation. Careless (2015) noted social media possesses the power to ‘talk or “type” back to dominant ideology, and (give greater) voice [visibility] to counter discourses’ illustrating the applicability of social media to popular education (p. 1). All platforms chosen for ALTourUIC enable replies to posts, comments, ‘likes’ and ‘shares’, allowing individuals to express support and solidarity in various degrees. This was evident in the case of an Instagram post depicting a poster from the engagement activity during one of the tours, advocating for the Fearless Undocumented Alliance in favour of undocumented student (without legal permission or with an expired visa residing in the United States) representation on UIC’s Board of Trustees. An individual commented, ‘Thanks for the support!!’ integrating a sense of community and cause. According to Arroyo, Muldner, Burleson, Woolf, and Cooper (2009) ‘feedback plays a fundamental role in the educational process’ and the exchange of feedback can sometimes lead to more active users (p. 2). As a class we experienced informal, yet critical, learning first hand through a comment left by an activist who protested at UIC in the 1980s and 1990s on one of our Instagram posts offering help and ephemera from the former protests. An exchange of email information allowed the individual to share a longer anecdote of her past experience that we then posted to the Tumblr account.

While we initially intended these platforms to provide more robust dialogue, we were also conscious of the longevity of the profiles created. Our public social media accounts inherently create informal digital archives that can be accessed by anyone at any time with the possibility of expanding in the future. We were additionally keen to use multiple hashtags within our social media posts to embed our project and its rich, yet little-known, histories of everyday people working for justice in related content for future informal learners to discover.

Final thoughts

What we are arguing through the descriptive cases in this article is that museum educators and exhibitors need to consider how using popular education can inform their work in telling stories of history. It is a pedagogical process that has been used with success across countries around the world, and the United States, to engage people in creative and critical practices of education and learning that aims to improve their lives and society. And, in fact, the need for change in our cultural institutions is urgent. It is well documented in the United States that museum audiences are declining and museum staff do not reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the nation (Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010; Shonfeld & Westermann, 2015). The Center for the Future of Museums (2008) recently noted that while the United States’ populations of colour (minorities) are currently 34% and predicted to be 50% in 25 years, only 9% of museum visitors and 20% of museum workers are people of colour (pp. 5–7). There is also data documenting how visitors of colour experience museums as uncomfortable and

even alienating places (e.g. the *Visitors of Color* project organised by Nikhil Trivedi and Porchia Moore at: <http://visitorsofcolor.tumblr.com/>). In other words, museums are increasingly unpopular, unvisited and unreflective of our communities across the United States.

Yet these institutions have never had a fixed reality, and therefore, have always been in the process of change. But they need to change further by becoming more critical spaces of education and learning. Our project drew from popular education the ideas, and illustrated that justice is a compelling topic and that people want and need to learn about the events that shape their lives. Including new and frequently discounted histories, often connected to social movements and the potential they have had for change and possibility, can be both powerfully engaging and educative. The collaborative and lateral processes are creative and productive. Taking up these ideas in museums by focussing on the most urgent social events and offering all participants, including staff and visitors, ways to learn, contribute and take action, would mean that many people would be listened to, with the potential that many practices would be reviewed and reconsidered, and many goals shifted.

ALTourUIC, designed as a programme with the intent of bridging the gap between the official histories celebrated by the University and the untold histories of collective organising and activism, used tours, maps and social media platforms to enable participation is one model that we think holds merit for museums interested in popular education, and for all cultural institutions seeking to understand how to become important, both to broader demographics and to society. By taking up popular education practices, we believe museums will be able to have greater relevance in the lives of all citizens and the histories which have been subject to conscious or unconscious forgetting have a better chance of becoming visible and having an impact on greater numbers of people. By taking up popular education strategies like the ones shared in this article, museums can rise to the challenges of our times and contribute to justice-focussed social change.

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Author biographies

Emese R Toth is a graduate student in the Museum and Exhibition Studies Programme at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is an alumna at Loyola University Chicago with a BS in Secondary Education, BA in History, and a Minor in Anthropology. Her research interests include museum education, participatory community engagement programmes and visitor research and evaluation.

Sandy Guttman recently graduated from the Museum and Exhibition Studies Programme at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research centred around disability aesthetic, accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in arts and culture. She is currently a curatorial assistant at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC.

Andie Kimura is a graduate student in the Museum and Exhibition Studies Programme at the University of Illinois at Chicago. With an undergraduate degree in Architecture, Andie is interested in how people move through and experience space, particularly within cultural institutions. Her professional focus is in universal exhibition design.

Therese Quinn is the director of Museum and Exhibition Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the author and editor of several books, including *Teaching Toward Democracy* (2016), *Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons* (2012), and articles in *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, the *Journal of Museum Education*, and the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, among others.