Research libraries acquire materials in a broad range of subject areas with the aim of developing a diverse collection addressing the varied needs and interests of a wide range of users. Large libraries can house millions of volumes, most of which are not highly visible to library patrons; instead, they are used by a small number of patrons conducting research on a specific topic. This is where library exhibits make a big difference, publicizing resources that can get lost in a large collection. Libraries often display materials to promote special collections, rare and other valuable items, and to show the relevance of print materials from the past in today’s technology-driven, electronic world. Library exhibits give meaning to collections, particularly noncirculating collections, and inform those who may not be involved in research that there is something for everyone. Exhibits help present what libraries value and embody.

Physical and online exhibits meet such objectives as stimulating social awareness of historical events, diversity, politics, and protests. These kinds of exhibits showcase the most prized, obscure, unique, and impressive items of a collection. Since collections house materials on varying subjects and formats, exhibits on a wide range of topics and themes continue to be offered. Library exhibits are generally in-depth reflections of the library collections they represent.

Exhibits also serve as an extension of the classroom, especially at academic institutions, by assisting with the education of community members. Libraries have long been the place where individuals go for information and to expand their learning. A fundamental mission of libraries (and a core value of librarians) is to provide free access to information to all communities. Because of this, libraries are more often willing to address controversial issues and furnish information on difficult subject matters. An exhibit is one of the means employed by libraries to implicitly educate visitors. Today exhibits serve the dual purpose of advertising and teaching for libraries.

2. ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, available online at www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom.
Before an exhibit can advertise resources and materials from the library’s collection or provide new insight and alternate viewpoints, it must first draw in reluctant or unfamiliar audiences. To do this, a library exhibit must do two things: evoke wonder and resonate with viewers. To accomplish this, exhibits should present imagery (ephemera, artifacts, and props if appropriate) that speaks to individuals who may not have a great interest in reading, as a form of visual enticement.

Stephen Greenblatt, literary critic and Cogan University Professor at Harvard, makes the connection between the two concepts by defining resonance as the “power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world…” and wonder as “the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness…” Before a viewer can be informed, stimulated, or intrigued, he or she must first be persuaded to stop long enough to be engaged by the exhibit. When used properly, the concepts of resonance and wonder provide an almost transparent platform for exhibited materials to present information on taboo subjects that people are apprehensive about discussing. Greenblatt goes on to contend that a resonant exhibit allows the viewer to form questions and relate the exhibited materials to one another. Library exhibits present information through what seems to be a passive format, but using concepts like this help exhibits resonate with the communities they serve.

To offer a detailed account of how a library exhibit on a potentially controversial subject led to beneficial collaborations that resulted in an enhanced exhibit, this paper will focus on an exhibit curated and installed by the author at Michigan State University for Black History Month in 2007.

Planning
Any exhibit requires research and planning. It is helpful to begin by visualizing how the exhibit will appear in the physical space where the exhibit will be displayed to determine needed resources. The “Acquiring Literacy: Triumph Over Slavery” exhibit was part of a number of campus activities related to a symposium titled “Timely Reflection—Plessy vs. Ferguson 110 Years Later: Implications in the Americas,” which was convened and sponsored by the University Provost’s Office along with other groups on campus. As a part of the symposium activities, an exhibit titled “Lest We Forget: Triumph over Slavery,” a traveling exhibit organized by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), was displayed at the museum on campus, in close proximity to the

library. The library exhibit served as a companion piece to the museum exhibit and other campus events.

Planning an exhibit in conjunction with campus and local events is a very effective marketing strategy for libraries, since multiple events can draw in new users as well as support outreach efforts to the community. Since events like this take ample time to plan, it is necessary to seek out partners well in advance. Related community events are another great way to find potential collaborators and build partnerships. If there are no local events coinciding with the exhibition, brainstorming with colleagues, groups, and other (campus) organizations can assist with discovering new partnerships.

Having a clear understanding of the amount of work an exhibit entails is important to ensure that the task can be completed in the time allotted. It may be useful to take an inventory of all available resources (colleagues, time, materials) and needed resources (artifacts, manpower, and such). Coupled with the amount of research and graphics required for the display, an exhibit can be a large enterprise. Preparing labels, wall text, and graphics for the exhibit can be unexpectedly time consuming; but, in most cases, that will help with determining the exhibit’s scope and convey a full story.

It is wise to circumscribe the theme, wholly develop a mental picture of the exhibit, and select thought-provoking, visually stimulating materials. Establishing the size and scope of the exhibit early on will be crucial in providing working deadlines as well as direction to others assisting with graphic content, digitizing, printing, installing, and the rest. Outlining or scripting the storyline will also be helpful in deciding how exhibited materials fit together and in what order.4

One other thing to think about during the planning stage is assessment, to ensure that this important element is properly executed from the beginning through the end of the exhibit. Knowing that the exhibit would be a large undertaking, the author was prepared to give the project top priority in her work schedule. As a new librarian, she found this to be possible as there were no other obligations aside from her reference duties. In fact, this exhibit was the first project the author took on as a newly hired librarian, and close to four months of dedicated time was given to complete this work.

As a Reference and Instruction Librarian, the author’s foremost concern was how effective the exhibit was as a teaching/learning resource for students. Once the

exhibit was installed, it was decided that a physical exhibit would not be the most efficient means of assessing how much students learned from this (analogue) type of encounter with information. The “Acquiring Literacy: Triumph over Slavery” exhibit did not have a digital component. Shortly after this experience, she worked with a colleague to produce an online exhibit of primary source material that includes a quiz component, which the library still uses for instruction purposes.5

The storyline of “Acquiring Literacy: Triumph over Slavery” (hereafter “Acquiring Literacy”) underscored the explicit intentionality of slave communities to become literate during the pre-Civil War and post-Civil War eras. The exhibit covered a period of 120 years, from 1830 to 1950, beginning with the proscriptions placed on teaching slaves to read and finishing with the desegregation of higher education institutions. The exhibit also sought to highlight special collections in libraries to promote and increase use of these rare and valuable items. Once the exhibit theme and title were established, the author moved on to exhibit design and curating.

Curation
Conveying the meaning of library collections, inviting library visitors to take a closer look and ask questions, is another purpose of library exhibits. Library exhibits are designed with the intent to display materials, most commonly print materials (including manuscripts) and photographs that demonstrate the impressive and enthralling items that reside on shelves, in vaults and reading rooms, and in unique collections throughout the library.

For viewers to get a basic understanding of the importance of the materials displayed, an exhibit must illustrate a story with a clear beginning and end. A curator will need more than books and text panels to engage large, diverse audiences. People expect libraries to have books. For an exhibit to evolve through a complete story, non-print materials such as ephemera, photographs, graphically designed posters and banners, memorabilia, and artifacts should be used to captivate viewers.6 In some cases, nonlibrary materials may be needed to round out the storyline of the exhibition. For the “Acquiring Literacy” exhibit, the author put out a call for materials to colleagues within the library. The items used from this call were wooden children’s letter blocks, a small writing slate, an early nineteenth-century children’s book, photographs and book illustrations, along with a Brazilian floppy hat and Cuban sand. Other images were obtained and printed in large scale from the Prints & Photographs Division of The Library of Congress, with appropriate permissions for copyrighted material.

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5. “Primary Sources” Online Exhibit, Michigan State University, available online at www.lib.msu.edu/exhibits/primesource/index.jsp [accessed 12 August 2013].
Scouring special collections for unique and interesting items related to the exhibit theme is an excellent means of showing off what sets the library’s collection apart from others. Intrinsically, library exhibits help advertise resources and tools that would otherwise only be known and used by a handful of informed scholars and researchers. Exhibits dramatically increase the visibility and use of featured collections made available for research. Connecting materials by subject, feeling free to include lesser known titles, and pulling items that cannot be easily discovered through browsing increases the chance of such materials being used.

**Development**

In addition to educating, publicizing, and inspiring ideas, library exhibits also effectively present materials on polarizing and highly contested topics and materials such as war, social movements, and even political cartoons. However, taking on more challenging themes may require ancillary planning and subject expertise. For the “Acquiring Literacy” exhibit, the author decided to meet with the organizers of the “Timely Reflections” symposium to discuss possible themes that would tie the exhibit to other events on campus. This was to ensure that the exhibit had a particular focus that acquainted viewers with stories of actual people who were enslaved, not simply the broader institution of slavery.

Library exhibits are usually the result of a group of materials on a related subject (that have been collected over time) being displayed together, but they can also draw from many collections within a library. In this particular instance, there was no distinct collection of materials from one library collection to be displayed. The only precondition for the exhibit, set by the Library Exhibits Coordinator, was that it focus on slavery and correlate with other campus events. Having only a few fledgling ideas and a couple of images, it was clear that much more brainstorming was needed to plan and design a complete exhibit.

After reaching out to the symposium organizers (primarily composed of a research team that included anthropology, archaeology, and sociology graduate students and a few faculty advisors), it was clear that the group was more than happy to help refine the focus of the exhibit. During the course of several discussions, the author expressed an interest in producing an exhibit related to literacy, but she explained that she was required (by the Exhibits Coordinator) to design an exhibit on the subject of slavery. This is when the director of the research team suggested that the exhibit focus on how slave communities worked to acquire literacy skills.

After some preliminary research, it was evident that there would be no problem procuring enough library material to produce a substantial exhibit. The director even suggested that one of the graduate students assist with the installation of the
Acquiring Literacy: A Library Exhibit

exhibit. This stood out as another great example of the various functions exhibits have as a teaching tool and as a learning laboratory for scholars.7

Numerous meetings and discussions transpired with the research team, which assisted with the selection of provocative materials and language for the exhibit. During the course of developing the visual display of the exhibit, it was suggested that a copy of David Walker’s Appeal (1829)8 be displayed with the text panel of the State Slavery Statute (1830)9 at the start of the exhibit to illustrate the state’s response to the idea that slaves should work to overcome their condition of bondage.

It was a rewarding experience to work with a research group with such interdisciplinary expertise (one of the faculty advisors is a plant biologist). Working in this manner compelled the author to seriously consider the kinds of questions, experiences, memories, and feelings she wanted to evoke in viewers of the exhibit. The entire research team was extremely generous with their collective energy. Their invaluable assistance with the development of a contextual, less pedestrian theme, which represented the lives of actual people, was much welcomed.

Prior to discussions with the research team, the author believed that the exhibit’s tone should primarily convey a sense of triumph and victory; but, after considerable discussion, these plans were altered. It became more evident that, for those who endured slavery, the struggle not only to gain freedom but also to become literate prior to and after emancipation had to be emphasized. Ira Berlin, Distinguished University of Maryland professor and Fellow at the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University, discussed why this is so very important in his essay, “Coming to Terms with Slavery in Twenty-First Century America,” explaining that the written record of the individuals who lived during these times are practically nonexistent or “thin to the point of invisibility.”10

These examples of the team’s support highlight the importance of collaboration. This kind of collaboration made it possible to devise a thought-provoking script and visual display that explored multiple themes across the time period covered by the exhibit. This was no small achievement, but it was absolutely crucial for an exhibit of this size. Being receptive to divergent viewpoints and perspectives really helped develop a more interpretive exhibit that endeavored to present what lives held in bondage had endured and the way these lives established change.

Substance of Meaning

While the previous stages of planning, curating, and developing may be best realized through collaborative work, the ultimate meaning and substance of an exhibit should come from the curator. An exhibit that takes on a complex theme from history, such as slavery, has to illustrate some fundamental concepts to provide viewers with a basic understanding of what transpired. According to Ira Berlin, no one can make sense of slavery without an understanding of these major themes: violence, power, and exclusion.

Berlin goes on to explain the challenging endeavor of presenting public audiences with information on the history of slavery, because the long history of slavery encompasses conflicting ideas of death and life. He declares that, “if slavery was violence and imposition, if it was death, it was also life.” To show the contrast of death with life, an effort was made to accentuate stories of clandestine schools before emancipation as well as the establishment of schools and universities by African Americans after slavery met its end. For instance, the story of Susie King Taylor was presented, describing how she received her entire education in makeshift schools, with improvised teachers. “Carrying schoolbooks camouflaged with paper, Taylor and her younger siblings stole, one at a time, into the home of a free black woman each morning…”

Examples of higher education institutions were also provided with Fisk University (Nashville, TN), Hampton Institute (Hampton, VA), and Wilberforce University (Wilberforce, OH) serving as focal points because of the intriguing histories of how these institutions were established. Examples such as Wilberforce stand out from other Historically Black Colleges and Universities not only in its location, but primarily because it was the first university purchased and operated by African Americans (established in 1856). Instances like this helped the story transition from tragic to inspirational.

An exhibit with a focused theme, which covered how slave communities and the newly free acquired literacy skills during pre– and post–Civil War eras, still supplies more information and materials than can be displayed. There was far more information to recount than there was time or space. Detailed information of individual slaves and free African Americans was provided that included the names of individuals and locations where they lived; where and how they received schooling was also very essential to delineate the rich, full story of the actual lives that were

lived. Providing brief biographical sketches was key in animating the unique stories for these individuals.

As Ira Berlin expressed,

“…slavery was not one thing but many. Like every human being who ever lived, the slave was a product of his or her circumstances, only one part of which—to be sure, a significant part—was that he or she was owned. Knowing that a person was a slave does not tell us everything about him or her.”

Here, Berlin makes it clear that offering any representation of slavery is virtually impossible without speaking of the actual individuals who experienced the atrocities of slavery and therefore difficult to give any substance to the meaning of those individuals by offering hardly any other depiction of them other than slaves.

Objects and quotes were used to illustrate the intentional and covert means that slaves used to become literate. Belle Caruthers, who spoke of her duties that included fanning her mistress and caring for an infant, stated that, “the baby had alphabet blocks to play with and I learned my letters while she learned hers.”

The exhibit displayed children’s wooden spelling blocks as visual aids juxtaposed with Caruthers’ statement. Another example given was that of Moses Slaughter’s mother, who communicated that she would frequently offer to keep the place of her owner’s daughter while she read, “and while little Emily read ‘Mamma Emalina’ followed each line until she too was a fluent reader and could teach her own children.”

Determining what is needed to visually convey the complete story of an exhibit is just one challenging hurdle to be cleared before installation occurs. This is one of the more difficult aspects of devising an exhibit and why establishing the scope, storyline, script, and all other aspects of an exhibit is so crucial early on in the developmental stages. Editing can be a challenge without this kind of structure. Neglecting to operate within the parameters of the exhibit’s design makes it much more difficult to manage visual and print materials as well as make decisions on what is integral to an exhibit’s storyline. As important as the physical display of materials may be, it is the text that expounds upon and provides interpretations of exhibited items.

The Language Landmine

When exhibiting materials on a complex theme, language is another common issue that must be given deliberative thought. Discussions with the research team assisted with the selection of language used in text panels and the display of materials, even an adjustment in the exhibit’s tone. Kathleen Hulser, Humanities Professor at the Eugene Lang College of the New School, speaks about the problem of language in exhibition and explains why it cannot be maintained with the “prevailing flat informational aura of the museum label…” when paired with materials that represent the atrocities of slavery.17 Displaying historical imagery and quoting facts are no longer enough to arouse the viewer’s interest. In today’s digital society, this kind of information is only one click away. It is more necessary than ever to provide unique stories, taken from history, that use new unconventional approaches to pique curiosity, as well as to inspire ideas and new ways of thinking.

Another difficulty with language is that individuals living in contemporary times cannot always identify with individuals from the past or the events and circumstances that these “characters” from books actually faced. It is up to the curator to make a clear and obvious connection for the audience. Current literature recommends providing historic context for viewers with less explicative narratives as well as designing text in a fashion that “gives visitors varying interpretive readings…rather than simply an informal caption,”18 or captions that compel viewers to ask difficult questions of themselves and what they believe. This method of using labels that can be interpreted by viewers provides the opportunity for individuals to make meaning out of the information given in exhibits to mitigate the perception of bias.

Where Library Exhibits Really Make a Difference

Allowing viewers to contemplate, question, and interpret information from artfully exhibited materials is of the utmost importance when dealing with a complicated theme. Presenting information that gives viewers the opportunity to appraise differing perspectives increases the chance of precipitating interest and the likelihood that the exhibit will register with viewers.

What made “Acquiring Literacy” relevant to a diverse audience was the emphasis that it placed on education as a tool of progress as well as the central theme of perseverance. The message the exhibit intended to deliver was that African Americans prevailed under the most unreasonable of circumstances, to give inspiration to all.

who face any sort of obstacle today. Presenting historical information from library collections, which seems so distant to contemporary society, connects the present to the past and gives the collections that library professionals have spent many decades building relevance in the digital information age.

Developing an exhibit on such a complex subject required much research, planning, and collaboration. Seeking subject expertise beyond the library was a process that enriched the exhibit and forged new relationships. In the end, all the work was more than worth the effort due to the fact that this project expanded the author’s perception of library exhibits as a teaching and learning tool for scholars as well as library patrons. After her work on the exhibit, she was invited to join the research team as a faculty advisor, further demonstrating the power of collaboration.