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CRITICALLY ENGAGING VOLUNTEER GUIDES: A STUDY OF ADULT LEARNING IN AN ART MUSEUM[1]

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Abstract

The role of art museum educator has shifted from presenter of information to facilitator of dialogue. But as art museums pledge to be more accountable to—and representative of—a plurality of publics and narratives, what is spoken about with visitors? Given revolving temporary exhibitions and expanded readings of permanent collections, guides play a dual role of adult learner and educator. This article asks what learning opportunities equip art museum guides to critically engage with challenging subject matter. A qualitative research project grounded in the author's reflective practice, it draws on interviews with newly trained volunteer guides. Responses suggest that guides' relationships to challenging subject matter are multilayered and deserving of both personal and institutional attention. Findings point to a need for support that includes, but is not limited to, ongoing training. This article will contribute to the growing but limited scholarship on art museum educators' learning, speaking to efforts by trainers and adult educators to foster reflexivity and critically embrace the potentially challenging and necessary dialogues inspired by art museum collections.

Résumé

Le rôle du personnel éducatif de musée s'est transformé : autrefois axé sur la transmission d'informations, aujourd'hui, ce rôle privilégie l'animation du dialogue. Mais maintenant que les musées d'art s'engagent à devenir redevables à une pluralité de publics et de discours ainsi que de les représenter, de quoi parlent-ils au public? Étant donné les expositions temporaires itinérantes et les lectures élargies des collections permanentes, les guides assument le double mandat d'apprendre à l'âge adulte et d'éduquer les adultes. Le présent article se penche sur les possibilités d'apprentissage permettant aux guides de musée d'art de s'engager de manière critique avec les sujets difficiles. Ce projet de recherche qualitatif fondé sur la pratique réflexive de l'auteure est basé sur des entretiens tenus avec des guides bénévoles ayant récemment terminé leur formation. Les réponses suggèrent que les relations des guides aux sujets difficiles sont multidimensionnelles et méritent une attention à la fois personnelle et institutionnelle. Les résultats révèlent un besoin de soutien

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qui comprend la formation continue. Cet article contribuera au nombre limité, mais croissant, de recherches sur l'apprentissage du personnel éducatif de musée d'art et aborde les efforts de ce groupe et du personnel d'enseignement adulte pour favoriser la réflexivité et pour s'engager de manière critique avec les dialogues potentiellement difficiles et nécessaires inspirés par les collections des musées d'art.

Based on interviews with recently trained volunteer art museum guides, this article examines their dual role as adult learners and educators. With a particular focus on guides' critical engagement with challenging subject matter, I discuss factors that support or hinder their efforts. Research participants' responses reveal varying degrees of readiness, suggesting that the task of situating artworks in the politics of their content, production, circulation, acquisition, or display is not always an easy one. My analyses of participants' responses, suggestions for institutional support, and implications for teaching and research are intended to support the work of current and future guides. This study will contribute to a relatively small but growing pool of recent studies on the training and learning of volunteer and professional educators (Castle, 2006; Dewhurst & Hendrick, 2016; Ebitz, 2005; El-Amin & Cohen, 2018; Ferrara, 2017; Meyer, Veneziano-Korzec, Larrivee, & Stacy, 2016).

The starting point for the article is participants' testimonies, and I have categorized their responses into four sections. "Navigating Discomfort in Learning and Teaching" looks at how participants perceive their role and highlights the tensions that guides face throughout their learning in both the research phase and the galleries. "Recognizing the Challenges" examines participants' hopes for future training and their current responses to contentious narratives and institutional practices. "Training Is Not Enough: Building a Reflexive Guide Culture" addresses both the limits of training and the relevance of reflective practice in addressing both uncertainty and resistance. "Sold on Dialogue" considers participants' comments on the skills, predispositions, and strategies they draw upon to open up learning spaces and underscores a particular set of tensions stemming from their application of a dialogical approach. The discussion that follows comprises two short sections. "Future Learning and Support" proposes areas for the development of skills, knowledge, and critical understanding among guides in their dual role. "Implications for Teaching and Research" returns to my own reflective practice, detailing possible adjustments to training curriculum and areas for future research relevant to both scholarship and practice in adult and art museum education.

Background

The research site was a large, private encyclopedic fine arts museum housing over 41,000 objects spanning six collections. In addition to a team of professional educators, roughly 150 volunteer guides conduct group visits with members, the general public, secondary and post-secondary schools, and community organizations. In 2017, these visits reached 45,000 people. Such a significant number points to the potential impact of these encounters; hence, the content of gallery dialogue should be not only accurate, but representative of, and accountable to, the vast publics the museum aims to serve.

Prospective guides complete a 12-week course offered in partnership with a local university's continuing education department. My mandate as the curriculum developer and

instructor was to equip trainees to facilitate gallery dialogue. The museum is positioned as a meeting place and hub for group meaning making and exchange, and in this spirit, dialogue offers an alternative to a transmission model (talking *at* rather than *with*). A dialogical approach is supported by decades of adult education literature stressing the importance and potential of interaction across informal, non-formal, and formal adult learning contexts (Connolly, 2008; Cranton, 1989, 2016; Freire, 1972; Vella, 2002). Prominent scholarship on dialogical museum learning emerged quite recently (Burnham & Kai-Kee, 2011, Dysthe, Bernhardt, & Esbjorn, 2013; Hubard, 2015), speaking to a disconnect between museums and adult education that has been documented by both academics (Clover & Bell, 2013; Dudzinska-Przesmitzki & Grenier, 2008; McCray, 2016) and trainers in the field. For example, DePrizio (2016) argued that most adult tours are still lecture-based, and Katzenstein and Koster (2014) suggested that many guides may still revert to lecturing and rely on knowledge-based questions instead of trying to connect with visitors' viewpoints. A combination of past didactic museum visits, teacher-centred educational experiences, and the misperception of guides as expert knowledge keepers means that visitors may come to art museums expecting a guided visit of this type. In such a context, many prospective guides' assumptions about their future role and responsibilities are also challenged by the museum's increasing emphasis on dialogical learning and the co-creation of knowledge. Thus, I deliberately designed training to foster an understanding of both the *how* and the *why* of gallery dialogue. Trainees develop their capacity for critical research, an ability to adapt content, and the reflex to actively listen to their groups and welcome silent looking. Workshops model flexible facilitation and openness to myriad perspectives, histories, interpretations, and group dynamics. A combination of readings, classroom and gallery activities, guest speakers, and regular writing exercises encourage exchange, reflection, and ongoing learning from day one. Together, we also critically unpack the increasing emphasis that museums have placed on messages of inclusivity, accessibility, and wellness. This article builds on my experience both delivering the course and continually adapting its content and approaches.

The Study

This qualitative study comprised nine semi-structured interviews in which participants discussed their role, experience, and learning as new art museum guides. It was also the first step in a doctoral project grounded in my reflective practice as a mid-career adult/art museum educator. Given that my research took place from within two institutions (the museum and the university) that have employed me as a trainer, I should state that I pursued this project with both institutions' knowledge but at neither's behest. The study drew on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), a methodology rooted in both inductive and abductive inquiry whereby analytical categories are developed through coding, memo writing, and theoretical sampling. In turn, these systematic and iterative processes ground new conceptual frameworks and theories in the data itself. Because of the limited scope of this small-scale study, I did not engage in theoretical sampling through the collection of new data, but rather worked with an abbreviated version of grounded theory. While key principles of coding and constant comparative analysis guided me, the implementation of negative case analysis and theoretical sensitivity and saturation was limited to my initial data (Barbour, 2008).

According to Charmaz (2014), a constructivist approach considers research as a construction and acknowledges the specific conditions under which it occurs. It also

> shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert. Not only does that mean that researchers must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis, but it also means that their values shape the very facts that they can identify. (p. 13)

Constructivist grounded theory's focus on reflexivity and its recognition of multiple realities, situated knowledge, and researcher/participant subjectivity (Charmaz, Thornberg, & Keane, 2017) resonate with my practice. These key elements also speak to the notion of power and intention that Rowe (2004) suggested is implicit in understanding a researcher's positionality along dimensions such as gender, culture, and class. Two recent studies examining teacher experiences of in-class race discourse spoke to how this concern is equally pertinent in adult educational contexts. Murray-Johnson and Ross-Gordon (2018) concurred that positionality "essentially acts as a lens, and influences what one says or how one thinks and operates" (p. 140), and Tilley and Taylor (2013) insisted that "instructors/teachers are part of the mix of difference in classrooms" (p. 417). Thus, I remained cognizant of my location as a White educator-researcher in relationship to the research participants, topic, and design. Taking into consideration the specificities of the museum's galleries as a learning site, I also considered participants' positionality as guides, noting relevant tensions within and between transcripts.

I chose interviewing as the research method out of an interest in participants' lived experience and the meaning they make of it (Seidman, 2013). All nine participants responded to an open call I emailed to 29 past trainees who had become guides. While convenience sampling within this chosen group meant that I did not select individual participants, the following demographics are largely representative of new guides: two were aged between 50 and 60 and seven between 60 and 70; all were White; two identified as men and seven as women; one was anglophone and eight were francophone. One held a college diploma, six held master's degrees, and two held PhDs. None had completed formal studies in art history. At the time of the study, three participants had been guides at the museum for less than one year; the other six had between one and two years of experience.

Prior to their interviews, participants completed a three-page questionnaire that covered their personal profiles and basic information about their guiding experience. Participants determined the language (English/French) and location of the interviews, which averaged 40 minutes in length. I sent interview transcripts to participants for their approval and invited them to elaborate or omit responses if they wished to do so. Once transcripts were approved, I identified and validated themes through a process of initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). I have protected participants' anonymity by translating French citations, opting for the pronouns *they* and *their* in place of *she*, *he*, *her*, and *his*, and using gender-neutral pseudonyms (Alex, Camille, Claude, Leslie, Maxime, Robin, Sasha, Sydney, and Yannick).

The interview and broader research questions echo conceptual frameworks in adult education and museum literature informed by critical theory. Critical engagement reflects how visitors and guides "read" visual artworks together. Lindauer (2006) suggested that critical museum visitors (I would add guides) observe the what, how, and why of exhibited objects and consider what is left unspoken or kept off display. Lindauer also asked, "Who

has the most to gain or the most to lose from having this information, collection, or interpretation publicly presented?" (p. 204) The intentionality of this line of questioning echoes well-established work in critical literacy and critical pedagogy. St. Clair (2004) made the distinction between critical thinking and critical pedagogy, positing that the latter is "less interested in examining the basis for argument than showing how that argument fits within a system of educational and social power" (p. 35). In the context of art museums, we can replace "argument" with "representation" in order to consider the unique learning context of an exhibition. Here, critical museum literacy offers a framework to read the realities found in museum displays as constructs (English & Mayo, 2012). This critical approach aligns with the constructivist assumption that neither data nor analyses are neutral. "Rather, they reflect the positions, conditions, and contingencies of their construction" (Charmaz et al., 2017, p. 417). In a similar vein, Charmaz (2014) also suggested that questioning structural factors such as hierarchies and ideologies offers researchers the opportunity to bring together critical inquiry and grounded theory research.

Exchanges with participants about challenging subject matter refer not to content that is necessarily difficult to comprehend, but rather to topics that may pose a personal challenge for visitors or guides to confront and/or talk about. This also refers to histories that have been previously erased or marginalized (for example, cultural genocide in Canada). Museum scholar Silvén (2010) outlined two types of difficult museum objects whose distinctions are helpful to consider how challenging subject matter in visual art takes many forms. The first type includes those "explicitly associated with matters like taboo, unpleasantness, sorrow, loss, and intolerance." The second are "seemingly innocent things" that require a narrative to understand them fully (pp. 135–136). Returning to the importance of situated knowledge and positionality, I acknowledge that "challenging" is deeply subjective, depending on multiple factors shaped by personal experience, identity, and the surrounding contexts in which power and inequity are at play.

Findings

Navigating Discomfort in Learning and Teaching

When describing the role of an art museum guide, participants named complementary yet distinct goals: facilitating reflection, encouraging and equipping visitors to read works of art independently, piquing interest, eliciting emotional responses, and exposing visitors to different perspectives. Examined as an ensemble, their responses reflect Claude's claim that if one were to ask guides to describe their role, no two answers would be the same. The variety of roles participants described speaks to both their individuality and a potential lack of certainty with regard to past learning and current institutional messages. Considering critical engagement with challenging subject matter, some participants also expressed their limits—most of which were related to discomfort.

History scholars Lehrer and Milton (2011) wrote that difficult knowledge of the past and present forces a confrontation with "the possibility that the conditions of our lives and the boundaries of our collective selves may be quite different from how we normally, reassuringly think of them" (p. 8). Camille rejected the idea that a guide should provoke, and Alex stated that while they believe their role is to "push the envelope," they are also careful not to push visitors too hard. Only when they believe the group will have time

to treat it fully and find closure will they open up risky dialogue. Alex, Claude, Sydney, and Yannick all expressed concerns about unintentionally triggering visitors with issues that may have touched their lives. Leslie stated that they prefer asking questions related to challenging subject matter when it has already been raised by visitors. Claude returned to the complexity of questioning strategies: "Asking a question that encourages people to reflect without it being too…too deep. Gauging how far you can go with people without making them uncomfortable."

Robin and Claude have both observed guides' discomfort with grey zones. Claude suggested, "It's like we'd prefer to stay on firm ground instead of adventuring out into the sea where the waves could take us to unknown places." Adult educator Lakey (2010) labelled the space outside one's comfort zone as the learning zone in order to "emphasize that learning can happen when people venture out, take risks, entertain new thoughts, and do things that feel scary" (pp. 18–19). In this context, Lakey made the important distinction between unsafe and uncomfortable. In the context of reconciliation, Regan (2010) proposed that "disturbing emotions are a critical pedagogical tool that can provoke decolonizing, transformative learning" (p. 13). Addressing racism in museum education, Dewhurst and Hendrick (2016) suggested that educators do themselves what they ask of students: "lean into the discomfort of learning—to embrace what is challenging, new, or different" (p. 27). Lopes and Thomas (2006) pointed to an important obstacle with regard to this effort. They suggested that a common group dynamic in racial equity work is White people's expectation "that their learning should happen with as little discomfort as possible" (p. 244). This is relevant to both guides and visitors, underscoring the urgency of fostering anti-oppression in art museums more broadly as well as its relationship to challenging subject matter. These discussions also suggest an important role that museum leadership can play in cultivating accountability and reflexivity among guides with White and other privileges as they navigate their own and visitors' discomfort.

At the same time, guides who expressed hesitation also described how they address historical injustices and contemporary social, economic, and cultural struggles through the work of contemporary artists. For example, Yannick discusses taboos around mental health with their groups and Yannick and Sasha both engage with the complexities of shame in coming to terms with settler colonial violence. Similarly, Leslie stated,

> Yes, it's disturbing, but it allows you to grasp what the artist wants to say, or their intention…I'll admit, [visitors] are troubled, but that's probably also part of what the artist is hoping for, I suppose: for us to reflect on our collective actions.

Reflecting on their ongoing learning related to challenging subject matter, both Leslie and Claude discussed the residential school system;[2] one read from the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the other took a two-day course on the system's history and impact. While both participants commented on the difficulty of confronting the realities of this history, their responses were distinct. For Leslie, it provided the additional and reliable information they sought to contextualize a contemporary artwork. For Claude,

2 The government-initiated, church-run residential school system lasted for over a century, until 1996. Over 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to leave their families, communities, and cultures.

their exposure to what historian Lonetree (2012) called "the hard truths of colonization" raised further doubts about what kind of information to share with visitors and how: "We're going to need training on this to clarify things because after two years I still have a lot of doubts."

While Sydney and Robin described in depth their attempts to unpack certain settler artists' representations of First Nations Peoples with visitors, these efforts were among the only references to non-contemporary artworks. The influence of the 19th-century anglophone art market being one exception, very few participants reported critically engaging with the challenging content or contexts of historical paintings, ceremonial or decorative objects, or museum practices—a point I return to in the next section. Here it is important to note two diverging perspectives that emerged from the interviews: for Robin, controversial subjects often lead to interesting discussions and more interaction, and Maxime perceives little difficulty or risk in approaching subject matter they consider to be grounded in fact and/or in the past.

Recognizing the Challenges

With regard to future training, participants recommended sessions devoted to both art history and facilitation skills specifically related to challenging subject matter. Camille stressed the importance of being prepared for a range of possible visitor responses: "It's important to be well informed so that it doesn't come as a surprise—negative comments or a really critical reading." This speaks to Silvén's (2010) claim that "'difficulty' is not just something that exists; it has to be detected and is contextually conditioned" (p. 140). It also resonates with the following comment by Robin: "I would say that most of us are equipped in principle but not necessarily in practice, in the sense that we may or may not be able to recognize contentious issues in a particular work." The issue of recognition speaks to the questions I encourage students to critically ask themselves about what they relate to in works of art. These questions complement those that author and education scholar Dion (2004) proposed as starting points for educators engaging with stories of First Nations: "What did I not know before? Why didn't I know? What is the significance of not knowing?" (p. 71).

Participants' examples of challenging subject matter included assimilation policies, cultural appropriation, residential schools, mental health, military occupations, organized religion, explicit expressions of sexuality and gender, language politics, and sovereignty. Robin's claim that many guides are not necessarily equipped in practice to identify potential challenges is supported by the fact that participants did not mention challenging subject matter embedded in "seemingly innocent" (Silvén, 2010) objects or images. With decorative and ceremonial objects, for example, there was no mention of issues of provenance, decontextualization, repatriation, or resource extraction. Similarly, participants made few references to historical artworks such as landscapes serving imperial agendas (Nelson, 2016) or portraits and genre paintings conveying master national narrative templates that perpetuate patronizing stereotypes and/or settler myths (Anderson, 2017).

In their discussion of a Black feminist, community-led heritage project, Clarke and Lewis (2016) asserted that the cultural and adult education sector "subjugates multiple collective narratives that challenge the stability of institutions in favour of singular authoritative (non-representational) narratives" (p. 136). Clover and Sanford's (2016) research with women museum educators revealed a tendency to "retreat into 'neutrality', or presumed

neutrality, when ideas or actions [were] just too controversial" (p. 130). While participants in my study stressed the importance of contextualizing artworks with visitors, most stopped short of critically addressing dominant narratives or museum practices—despite both community activism and academic research that positions museums as inherently political spaces open to contestation (Anderson, 2017; English & Mayo, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Lynch, 2016; Ng, Ware, & Greenberg, 2017). Exceptionally, Alex spoke to an important gap, specifically the lack of Black artists and subjects in the Canadian collection, and the barrier this creates for visitors. In response, Alex has posed questions to visitors that address this absence and deliberately engaged with works by underrepresented artists in the nearby contemporary art collection.

Alex's strategies echo the critical museum pedagogy of El-Amin and Cohen (2018): "Allowing those narratives to exist, unchallenged, renders the museum complicit and allows the stereotypes and static histories that they evoke to stand as institutionally sanctioned rebukes to students' sense of belonging in museums" (p. 10). The authors drew on critical literacy and conscientization to train art museum guides to both critique problematic representations of people of colour and to draw attention to positive ones—primarily those created by artists of colour themselves. This recent example of critical workplace learning is an important model given that the omissions and stereotypes that museums exhibit both miseducate wider publics and alienate those misrepresented (Johnson, 2016). Other participants critiqued presenting modern art from uniquely European perspectives and inaccessible language on didactic panels; however, only Alex reported addressing their concern directly with visitors. This begs the question of what kind of training and other supports could equip guides to take on the challenging subject matter proposed by Trofanenko (2006)—that "an education in the museum needs to be an education *about* the museum, about how the world is re-presented, named, displayed, owned, and protected" (p. 61).

Training Is Not Enough: Building a Reflexive Guide Culture

A number of participants shed light on guides' hopes and expectations of the institution vis-à-vis critical engagement, challenging subject matter, and dialogical gallery teaching. While they discussed initial, current, and future training, they also indicated that training is not enough. All participants expressed some level of uncertainty with regard to the museum's expectations, intentions, or limits, identifying specific conditions that shape their learning and work. While Sasha and Maxime insisted that the museum should not shy away from dialogue about difficult history, Sydney expressed some doubts about how: "The sense I get at the museum these days is that it's an institution that wants to be really open, inclusive, etc. But there's a kind of discrepancy between where they want to go and where they want to take us." Claude put it simply: "Training doesn't solve everything in life." Similarly, Leslie suggested that if the museum wants guides to critically exchange with visitors on cultural politics and social issues, it should invest in further coaching and ongoing support. Robin acknowledged some pushback among guides while also expressing faith in their openness as learners:

> Even though I've detected there's a certain reluctance on the part of the guides when faced with some of these subjects—or lack of buy-in is maybe a better way to put it—that doesn't change the fact that I think

> everybody is very, very interested in exploring new subjects and being well-informed on them as well.

This echoes Sydney and Maxime's cautious optimism for a recent exhibition at the museum that took a new, explicitly critical curatorial approach. It also points to the need for museum staff to work honestly and productively through any resistance that may exist among both decision makers and their volunteers, and that this work become urgent, long-term, and ongoing.

Participants' comments point to the importance of reflective practice as a key component of guides' ongoing learning. Recent research tells us that while effective professional reflection requires exposure to the widest possible range of perspectives and frameworks (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Cabello, 2016), adult educators do not discuss teaching often enough with their peers (Cranton, 2016). Participants spoke about working in peer groups to refine key skills such as questioning strategies. Few, however, spoke to specific individual or collective efforts that consider how those skills are understood in relation to content, context, and their perceptions of both. Critical adult educators have long stressed the need to ensure reflexivity when engaging in reflective practice. Scholar and activist Michelson (2015) asked, "Where, precisely, are we standing when we 'reflect' on experience, and what kind of self is contracted in the process?" (p. 52). Museum educator Mayer (2014) argued that White museum educators should interrogate their personal biases and assumptions about art, teaching, and learning. This call speaks to Nielsen's (2016) study of White educators, which uncovered few references to "reflective practices that might shed light on the underlying assumptions, cultural mores, and conventions that direct curricular, pedagogical, and social encounters" (p. 52). Ng et al.'s (2017) recent work on allyship in museums described critical self-reflection activities for museum workers that address this. Their questions flesh out identity markers and positionality, which the authors suggested is a first step toward developing an anti-oppressive approach. In this regard, participants' comments about my focus on inclusive language and critical literacy in their initial training were revealing and bring us back to the tension Robin described:

> It's like we're walking on eggshells…People are willing to change their attitude. (Sydney)

> It's annoying, too, because sometimes it's just a question of semantics…I do think an update is necessary. (Yannick)

> You don't always agree with all of the white gloves you have to wear… Respect for others requires you to do something—at least consider it. So in that way, it's important. (Maxime)

That these responses oscillate between openness and resistance is worth noting, speaking to Yannick's motivation for participating in the research project: to deepen their reflection. It is also relevant to Sydney's suggestion that because the conscientization of guides is a work in progress, they would benefit from learning spaces that allow for error: "There needs to be a context where we can talk about all of this freely, without having the impression that if we say the wrong thing we've made an irreparable mistake."

Sold on Dialogue

Participants described the quality and depth of visitors' personal stories, observations, and questions. In doing so, they also gave examples of how they promote gallery dialogue. Sasha stated, "I'll encourage them to reflect, but it's going to be their reflection. I ask questions, I'm not going to give my interpretation." Alex reported that they look for difference: "I like to see different opinions emerge. For me the iceberg is there, and it's not just the tip. What's underneath the water is so important." Two others mentioned how they introduce their approach to visitors:

> At the beginning of the visit I tell them—so that they don't feel like there's a recipe to follow—that you don't have to look at a painting in a particular way, that we'll all see it in different ways. (Camille)

> I often say to people, "If you hear someone go on about something for an hour and you don't participate, not only will you check out, you won't retain anything. But if there's some back and forth, it will stick." (Yannick)

As the above examples demonstrate, participants expressed appreciation for, and openness to, the multiplicity of meanings and perspectives that can emerge during a guided visit. Participants also shared their thoughts on the skills and predispositions necessary to engage visitors. Reinforced through practice and acquired through prior experience, training, and peer learning, the key skills participants most frequently mentioned were questioning strategies, non-verbal communication, and listening. In gallery dialogue, these cannot be separated. Museum educators Dewhurst and Hendrick (2016), for example, rely on the question "What do you see that makes you say that?" to lead inquiry. "At the root of this question is a belief in the value of multiple perspectives and listening as a radical act of learning" (p. 27). Alex, Camille, and Leslie all stated that they integrate visitors' comments into future visits, demonstrating that together in dialogue, educators and adult learners are well positioned to co-create new knowledge (Connolly, 2008). Leslie also stated, "With delicate subjects it's even more important, the ability to listen and then make the links."

Adult educator Cranton (2016) recommended that in order to maintain equal participation in dialogue, facilitators must remain conscious of non-verbal communication—smiles, nods, eye contact—that can unintentionally signal approval. By contrast, participants' references to non-verbal cues were grounded in their positive intentions—sending a message of openness, building a climate of trust, and reading discomfort. Alex stressed the role of body language in intercultural and multilingual learning contexts, and Maxime reflected that "at the start, a lot of things go unspoken, meaning it's in the gestures, in the way we communicate with the people around us. You need to have confidence so that people have confidence in you." Yannick, Camille, and Sasha in particular spoke to the importance of non-judgment, sharing their thoughts on the museum as a public space that encourages self-expression. Sasha stated: "You can be judged at school by your peers, you can be judged at work…but here, it's like a space that's more liberal. You can let your thoughts go." Their responses reflect both the importance they accord to the group dynamic and their perception of the museum as a site conducive to learning for all visitors. These questions of intention and perception raise further considerations about the creation of safer learning spaces, the discourse of which has had less currency in museums than in adult education milieus. Vella (2002) listed some of the signs of a safe adult learning situation: laughter,

ease and camaraderie, questions, and the teacher's invitation for comments on the process. While these signs speak to the participants' conception of welcoming, visitor-centred gallery dialogue, Vella's list nevertheless understates issues of difference and power—as did participants' responses. Lifelong-education researchers Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2000) argued that "by stripping learners and teachers of their place in the hierarchies of social life, this view assumes that we stage adult education where politics of everyday life do not operate or matter" (p. 153). Analyzing the personal narratives of art museum educators of colour through the lens of critical race theory, Reid (2014) pointed out that the "othering" that occurs through exhibition content and display can also happen between visitors. Working from a critical queer perspective, adult educator Misawa (2010) reminded us that certain socio-cultural identities are invisible and thus unseen by educators looking only for visible signs of difference. If adult educators do not consider "hidden aspects of positionality" (p. 196), it is impossible to achieve safe learning spaces.

These concerns lead us to a particular set of emerging tensions that point to the need to remain critical when training guides to use a dialogical approach. First, in discussing the group dynamics of gallery dialogue, no participants named their own positionality. Second, while participants expressed their concerns about visitors' discomfort, there was little critical reflection on it—for example, how the images, issues, or histories that trigger discomfort vary from one visitor (or group) to the next; how guides may project their own discomfort onto visitors; or how *not* addressing certain subject matter may be cause for discomfort, or even a lack of safety. Finally, while a visitor-centred approach requires guides to relinquish significant control over the content and direction of group learning, relying on visitors' leads as entry points may inadvertently allow guides to avoid challenging subject matter.

Museums are not neutral. The people who represent them subjectively decide exhibition themes, interpretive strategies, which objects to collect, exhibit, or omit, and who to consult (Gray, 2016). Within this politically charged system, guides make further choices about which artworks to open up to dialogue and what questions to ask. Visitors' comments, how guides respond, and their readings of artworks cannot be separated from the myriad sensitivities, convictions, assumptions, experiences, and power dynamics alive and well in a guided group visit. This subjectivity was not named by participants, however, which points to the possibility that it may also be overlooked during their gallery dialogues with visitors.

Discussion

Future Learning and Support

Participants in this study proposed specific topics for further training that included identifying artworks that may provoke conflict, teaching through discomfort, and designing questioning strategies for challenging subject matter. Some also agreed that training is but one part of a bigger picture that includes clear and consistent messages, directives, and limits from the museum. This is especially relevant as the museum embarks on new, critically curated exhibitions. It should be noted that participants' commitment to their learning, the museum, and positive visitor experience was palpable in their responses. That their perspectives, perceptions, and behaviours are shaped by their positionality (as well as the predominantly White institution, peer group, and art historical canon they refer to),

however, cannot be ignored. Therefore, learning opportunities should include reflexive, deliberate, and regular opportunities for guides to both practise skills and reflect critically on content and their relationship to it. Supervised and peer-led activities that focus on research and facilitation should consider challenging subject matter in relation to the museum's orientations, guides' and visitors' identities, and museum practices more broadly.

Implications for Teaching and Research

The results of this study will be used to inform training and new tools for both prospective guides and, it is hoped, more experienced ones. Participants' suggestions for new learning opportunities are complementary to the museum's current program of ongoing lectures and workshops, and some suggestions are already being implemented. With regard to initial training, I will revise content that critically engages prospective guides and builds on their existing skills and knowledge. Areas for curriculum revisions consider my own limits and privileges, and include reflexivity and peer feedback; Indigenous world views on listening and dialogue; the interplay of positionality, unconscious bias, and micro-aggressions in gallery dialogue; and advanced questioning strategies related to challenging subject matter.

Art museums' perceived, well-guarded, and yet challenged power and authority make them key institutional sites to consider the relationship between collections of material and visual culture, critical engagement, and challenging subject matter. Potential areas for further inquiry into the lived experience of art museum guides include their relationships to curatorial authority, institutional change, visitor experiences, and other educators. This research could fill gaps in the limited scholarship on educators' learning in art museums and contribute to the work of adult education researchers concerned with the politics of representation and display, critical literacy and older learners, anti-oppression in cultural institutions, adult peer learning, and dialogical teaching.

Conclusion

Situating participants' responses in their dual role as adult learner/educator, this article has examined how, to what extent, and under what conditions guides detect, navigate, and reflect on challenging subject matter. I have asked what learning opportunities could equip art museum guides to critically engage in gallery dialogue and touched on key issues of discomfort, uncertainty, reluctance, reflexivity, and positionality—issues that are multilayered and deserving of both personal and institutional attention. Participants' responses touched on concerns about visitor well-being, "political correctness," a desire for a volunteer experience that is not unduly heavy, unconscious and deliberate avoidance of problematic representations, and visitor ambivalence to attempts at critical engagement. Some guides are open in theory but don't always recognize contentious content, or hesitate to draw attention to it for fear of acting beyond, or in contradiction to, the museum's expectations of them as volunteers. Others still embrace controversy as an engagement strategy or simply don't perceive risk or difficulty when faced with challenging subject matter.

Participants consistently expressed their commitment to using the dialogical approach they were trained to use. While participants acknowledged that both content and contextual factors such as physical space and time can limit the feasibility of gallery dialogue, they are ready and willing to put visitors' voices at the centre of guided group visits. Interview

responses also revealed consistent efforts to do solid research in order to adequately contextualize artworks. That said, with few exceptions, guides' critical engagement with challenging subject matter appears in large part limited to what is explicitly addressed by contemporary artists and/or visitors themselves. Participants spoke about their engagement with contemporary artworks that are critical of social inequality, misrepresentation, and violence of the past and present. Equally urgent for critical attention with groups, however, are art objects that merit deeper anti-oppressive readings than previously allocated to them by curators and educators with multiple privileges. In both cases, further learning and support that apply a critical framework to reading artworks and facilitating gallery dialogue are required.

As eager adult learners themselves, guides' curiosity, listening skills, and desire to exchange with visitors and each other should be met with training on challenging subject matter that is (1) intentional and self-reflexive and (2) informed by a multiplicity of critical perspectives from within and beyond the art and museum worlds. Findings suggest that the support guides require from the institution goes beyond training to include clear boundaries and shared opportunities for reflection. With this support, guides would be better placed to build their capacities beyond their prior experience, initial training, and ongoing learning. At a time when art museums are being called upon to make systemic change toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusivity within their institutions, critical workplace learning initiatives deserve increased attention. In order for gallery dialogue to be more responsive, volunteers and professionals alike must be more representative of the publics they serve. As more art museums work toward this goal, they should also ensure that all those facilitating gallery dialogue with visitors are both open and able to identify and critically engage with the social issues, multiple histories, and cultural politics of challenging subject matter.

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