Breaking Barriers: Inclusive Interpretation in the Art Museum
Hilary Katz

How do visitors engage with museums without in-person facilitation? What forms of engagement make exhibitions accessible, inclusive, and worthwhile? How can museums allow visitors' voices to permeate through exhibitions? Since a majority of museumgoers visit galleries without guided facilitation from museum staff (Blake, Smith, & Adame, 2017), my research examines how initiating inclusive in-gallery interpretation, even without human interactions, can provide for meaningful engagement with and deeper understanding of artwork. The same level of understanding and engagement that can be achieved through tours and educator-facilitated programs could and should happen through in-gallery interpretation without an educator present.

My research considers how and to what extent providing interpretation experiences, through a critical multiculturalism and critical race theory framework, will create more accessible, inclusive, and meaningful opportunities. *Critical multiculturalism* differs from simply *multiculturalism*, as it not only studies and presents varied groups of people, but also identifies and examines power structures, privilege, and inequities (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009). Closely related to critical multiculturalism, *critical race theory* (CRT) problematizes race, delving into analyzing the actual problem of race rather than offering short-term solutions, as critical multiculturalism often does. Furthermore, CRT ultimately aims to wipe out racism and other injustices altogether (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). *Interpretation* consists of any tools to help visitors reach an understanding of the art (Anderson et al., 2017). More specifically, *inclusive interpretation* equalizes and empowers voices (visitor and institution) by employing socially-responsive methods in the galleries (Anderson et al., 2017; Reid, 2014). Inclusive interpretation builds off the foundations of critical multiculturalism (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004) to confront

injustices by promoting diverse voices, providing opportunities for multiple perspectives, and encouraging self-reflection (Anderson et al., 2017).

Purpose of Study

As Eisner and Dobbs (1988) state, "One reason why works of art for many visitors do not function is that they do not know what to make of what they look at" (p. 8). Most literature in the museum education field does not discuss the connections between critical multiculturalism and/or CRT and in-gallery interpretation; I aimed to fill this gap by merging CRT and critical multiculturalism with in-gallery interpretation. Museums often become inaccessible to visitors without an educator to tour them or lead a program. Recent statistics show that approximately eighty percent of museumgoers visit without facilitated programs, while most education departments still focus on and prioritize programming (Blake, Smith, & Adame, 2017). Critical multiculturalism and CRT frameworks drive my belief that interpretative materials make museum experiences more accessible. I investigated the intersection of inclusive in-gallery interpretation with critical multiculturalism and CRT by developing the interpretation strategies for the exhibition *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, on view May 1-June 8, 2018, at Dublin Arts Council. The exhibition explored the refugee experience by the works of art linking with adjacent paintings, using patterns, materials, and figures from one canvas to the next. This technique evokes the experience of crossing borders into unfamiliar territory, as refugees do. Thus, my research investigates these three primary questions:

- In what ways does critical multiculturalism and critical race theory provide a framework for developing and implementing effective, inclusive interpretation engagements that do not rely on human interactions?

- How can museum educators make the artwork accessible to visitors who may not have experience viewing and interpreting art?

- How can the interpretation materials facilitate opportunities to break down boundaries and explore identity, power relations, and race (key notions of critical multiculturalism and CRT)?

Project Methodology

For *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project* at Dublin Arts Council (DAC), I designed five interpretation activities. Based on my research, past experiences, and overall exhibition goals, I formulated the following goals for my interpretation strategies:

1. Encourage **deep looking** of the artwork and supply opportunities for visitors to return to observing the artwork (Werner-Avidon, Clearwaters, & Chan, 2017).

2. Present **multiple perspectives** and allow visitors to impart their own perspectives (Barrett, 2003; Werner-Avidon, Clearwaters, & Chan, 2017).

3. Provide **accessible** and **equitable** opportunities, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality, class, or background (Mayer, 2014).

4. **Break down barriers**, particularly about refugee stereotypes (Bhabha, 1994; Pegno & Farrar, 2017).

5. Support **meaning-making** of the works of art (Barrett, 2003; Bedford, 2014; Villeneuve, 2017).

In support of these objectives, I developed, implemented, and evaluated five interpretation strategies:

1. **Conversation Chairs:** Conversation starters placed on chairs to encourage close looking and dialogue among visitors about exhibition themes.

Figure 1. Conversation Chairs (in rotunda) in *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, 2018, Dublin Arts Council. Image courtesy of Dublin Arts Council.

2. **Conversation Bowls:** Visitors asked and answered questions to contribute diverse
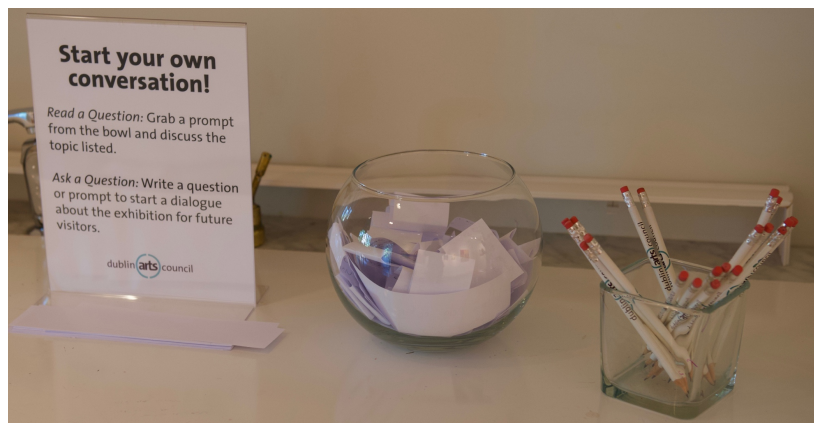
    perspectives about the exhibition.

Figure 2. Conversation Bowls in *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, 2018, Dublin Arts Council. Image courtesy of Dublin Arts Council.

3. ***Create, Connect, Contemplate* (C3) iPad app:** Digital interactive with which

    participants created a new artwork and story using existing works of art from *Crossing*

    Borders, in order to consider and empathize with the refugee experience.
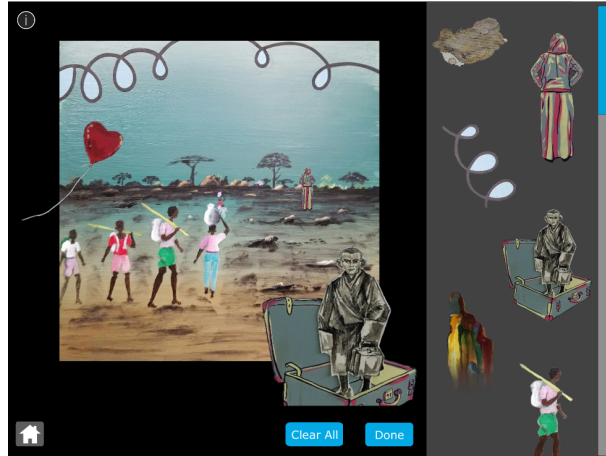
Figure 3. Play Screen of *Create, Connect, Contemplate* interactive. Katz, H. & Winegardner, Z., 2018. Dublin Arts Council.

4. **WEBS:** Participants reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of their homeland and connected their response to another one to which they related.

Figure 4. WEBS interactive with visitor responses in *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, 2018. Dublin Arts Council.

5. **Video Feedback Booth:** Through a video recording, visitors responded to open-ended questions about exhibition themes, made personal connections with refugees, and shared their own stories.
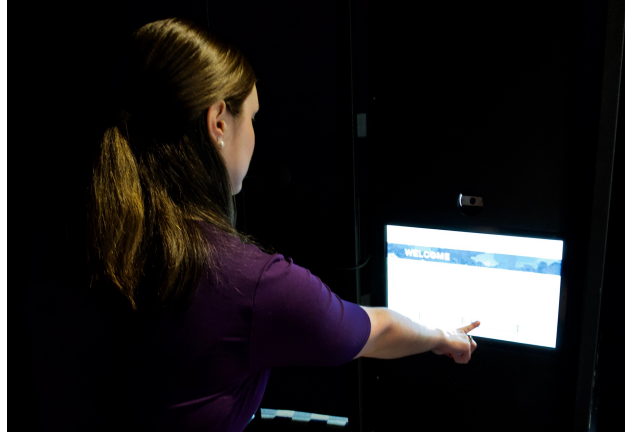
Figure 5. Video Feedback Booth in *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, 2018, Dublin Arts Council. Image courtesy of Dublin Arts Council.

By incorporating multiple opportunities for engagement, gallery visitors could utilize free choice to determine which interactive(s) to use or not use based on their interests, needs, and personal objectives (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Falk, 2005; Simon, 2010).

Project Analysis

To determine how the interpretation strategies facilitated opportunities to break down boundaries and explore identity, power relations, and race, I analyzed trends in visitors' responses indicating the interpretation strategy:

a) Addressed power by focusing on privilege, empowerment, and the opportunity to provide the visitor's voice (AAM, 1992; Alexander, Barton, & Goeser, 2013; McIntosh, 1990; Pegno & Farrar, 2017; Quinn & Pegno, 2014; Reid, 2014; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009; trivedi, 2015),

b) Addressed identity, ethnicity, and race through self-reflection and reflection on the stories conveyed through the paintings and by other visitors (Bedford, 2014; Collins & Daniel, 2014; Crum & Hendrick, 2014; Kroll, 2008; Mayer, 2014; Reid, 2014; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009), and

c) Broke stereotypes through an understanding of cultural hybridity and the realities of the refugee experience (Bhabha, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Kester, 2005; Malkki, 1992; Padilla, 2018; Pegno & Farrar, 2017; Quinn & Pegno, 2014).

Based on the general survey, 83% of visitors agreed or strongly agreed that after viewing the exhibition, they could better empathize with the realities refugees face. Eight-six percent of visitors agreed or strongly agreed they heard from multiple perspectives in the exhibition. For example, a student reflected, "The exhibition is similar to my story because we are all from another country or different countries." Forty percent of visitors agreed or strongly agreed they felt like their voice was heard or represented in the exhibition and gallery activities. Supporting these data, one student commented, "Everyone has a voice and should use it." Seventy-five percent of visitors agreed or strongly agreed the exhibition inspired them to learn more about the refugee experience and possibly take further action. A student meditated on his/her/their experience with *Crossing Borders*: "It is inspiring and it teaches you that things can be connected even if they don't seem the same." Therefore, a majority of visitors, including both the public and students, self-indicated that they met several of my interpretation goals, notably empathy, multiple perspectives, giving voice, and social action.

According to the general exhibition survey, 76% of respondents used the Conversation Chairs in some way. Of those, 84% thought discussing the topics on the chairs enhanced their experience with *Crossing Borders*. Whether visitors read all or some of the Conversation Chairs, or responded out loud to another visitor about their reaction to the prompt, overall, visitors successfully met my interpretation goals. In particular, many visitors reached deeper understandings of the refugee experience by expressing empathy, countering stereotypes, and connecting the refugee story to their personal stories (Pegno & Farrar, 2017; Quinn & Pegno,

2014). Prompted by the Conversation Chairs, visitors could, to a greater extent, use the artwork as a springboard to discuss pertinent social issues (Montgomery & Heller, 2017; Reid, 2014). Since the Conversation Chairs were open-ended and did not require visitors to document their responses, it provided a low-pressure environment to earnestly explore the exhibition themes (Montgomery & Heller, 2017; Quinn & Pegno, 2014; Simon, 2010).

The Conversation Bowls were an extension of the Conversation Chairs as visitors could ask their own questions relating to the exhibition as well as make statements in reaction to the chair prompts, by placing their responses in the bowls for future visitors to read. Ultimately, I aimed for the bowls to provide an outlet to present multiple perspectives, with visitors supplying responses relating to the exhibition themes, close looking of works of art, deeper meaning-making for works of art, and social change. Considering visitors' responses to the Conversation Bowls in sum, they offered multiple perspectives. By presenting and listening to multiple perspectives, participants could experience empathy, reject stereotypes, accept and value multiple truths, and make connections back to their own lives (Padilla, 2018; Quinn & Pegno, 2014). Sleeter & Grant (2007) ask, "Is it true?... Who says so? Who benefits most when people believe it is true? How are we taught to accept that it is true? What alternative ways of looking at the problem can we see?" (p. 260). Likewise, participants' responses in the Conversation Bowls pose alternate ways of knowing and question preconceived truths about refugees. For example, a participant inquired, "How do refugees end up in places like where they used to live?" (Figure 5). This participant wants to understand the root of refugees' situations–how they ended up in a place with disastrous war and/or persecution. Desai and Chalmers (2007) conclude, "Socially engaged works of art require us to ask critical questions about our political, social, economic, and cultural situation. And, through this questioning, we arrive at different ways of looking at

our situation, and hopefully, creating some change." Therefore, this visitor, as well as many

others, asked "critical questions" that beckoned the audience to engage in a deeper evaluation of

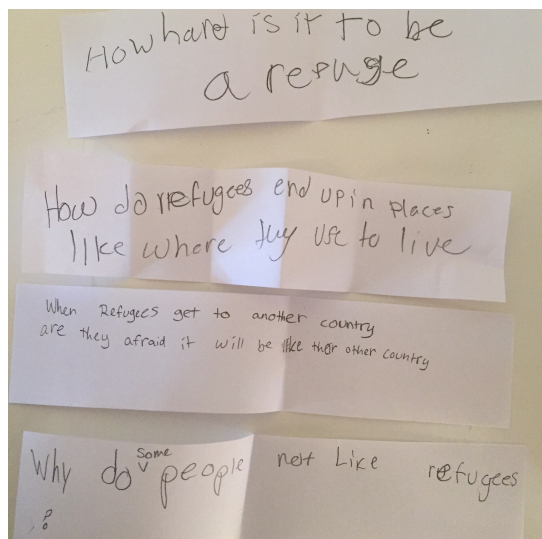refugees' situations through an alternative lens (Desai & Chalmers, 2007).

Figure 5. Conversation Bowl responses in *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, 2018, Dublin Arts Council. Photo by Hilar Katz.

The iPad app, *Create, Connect, Contemplate*, deepened visitors' experiences by

encouraging them to think more thoroughly about the exhibition themes (Alexander, Barton, &

Goeser, 2013; Bedford, 2014). Sixty-five percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed they

interacted with the exhibition themes when they created their own artwork during this activity,

indicating the importance of interpretation strategies such as this app to support visitors to think

more deeply about exhibition concepts (Werner-Avidon, Clearwater, & Chan, 2017). The digital

interactive helped participants think more profoundly about the refugee experience, experience

compassion for refugees, and make connections among all people. Fifty-nine percent of

participants agreed or strongly agreed the artwork in the galleries inspired them to think about

refugees' experiences and 58% of participants agreed or strongly agreed this activity helped

them better understand the challenges and rewards of navigating an unknown space. Werner-

Avidon, Clearwater, & Chan (2017) describe how interpretation experiences can proffer "deeper

contextual understanding of an art object by telling a story depicted through an artwork, showing similar objects in context, or simply providing deeper information about the artwork and its importance" (p. 63). Providing multiple avenues, such as through this hands-on digital engagement, enables visitors to reach earnest understandings of works of art. (Figure 6 reveals an artwork created by a middle school student). Reciprocally, I hoped visitors would look at the works of art in the galleries to inspire their own digital artworks, encouraging them to look more closely at the gallery artworks' details and spend more time experiencing the exhibition (Alexander, Barton, & Goeser, 2013; Villeneuve, 2017; Werner-Avidon, Clearwater, & Chan, 2017). In line with my goals, 63% of participants agreed or strongly agreed the artwork in the galleries inspired them to imagine their own story in their digital artwork. By using new media, I tapped into the younger population's tendency to understand and naturally interact with a digital interface. Furthermore, the digital app gamified and added play to the otherwise serious subject of the refugee experience (Alexander, Barton, & Goeser, 2013; Simon, 2010). Play and imagination, in turn, allowed visitors to make personal connections, provide their own perspective, and challenge preconceived ideas (Bedford, 2014; Greene, 2001).
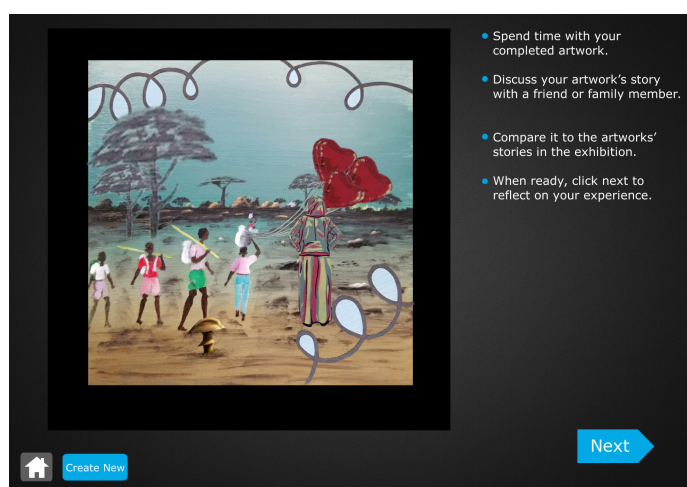

Figure 6. Screenshot of completed artwork by middle school student for *Create, Connect, Contemplate*. In *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, 2018, Dublin Arts Council.

Participants in *We Each Begin Somewhere* (WEBS) identified eighteen countries as their

homeland (Table 1):

Country	Total Number of Participants
Bangladesh	1
Canada	2
China	1
Germany	4
Ghana	1
India	6
Iraq	2
Ireland	2
Italy	1
Japan	4
Jordan	1
Mexico	1
Morocco	1
Pakistan	2
Palestine	1
Syria	1
United States of America	143
Unknown	10

Table 1. Countries represented in WEBS, 2018. Dublin Arts Council.

Directly responding to the WEBS prompt, which asked about participants' advantages and

disadvantages of their homeland (Figure 7), participants touched on advantages ranging from

freedom, rights, democracy, equality, and political leaders to their country's food and people,

capacity to obtain basic necessities, and ability to help others. Participants discussed

disadvantages including war, people's perception of their country, political leaders, religion, and

systemic corruption. Several people considered their country's advantages *and* disadvantages,

commenting on topics such as race, a desire for increased acceptance and respect, and privileges.

By physically connecting a string from one person's experience to someone else's with a

relatable experience, participants could begin to establish empathy and realize that other people

have similar experiences to their own (Anderson et al., 2017; Bedford, 2014; Greene, 2001; Kester, 2005; Simon, 2010). This "connecting" process happened both with and beyond the refugee community, connecting participants in some unexpected ways, such as through discussions about political leaders, rights and privileges, and daily life (Figure 8). Participants who engaged in WEBS employed critical multiculturalism and CRT frameworks by reflecting and commenting on power, privilege, identity, ethnicity, race, and culture (Reid, 2014). Through WEBS, gallery visitors presented personal anecdotes and connected to that of others in order to understand multiple viewpoints about cultures across the globe (Anderson et al., 2017; Bhabha, 1993; Werner-Avidon, Clearwater, & Chan, 2017). With participants from a multitude of homelands, museum visitors could share the museum's authority as conveyor of knowledge as well as demonstrate alternative ways of knowing (Bedford, 2014; Goins, 2014; Kester, 2005; Kroll, 2008; Pegno & Farrar, 2017).
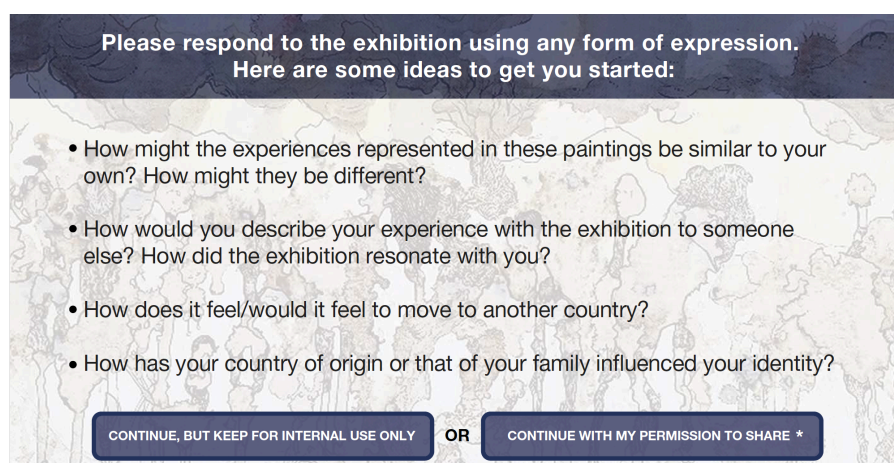

Figure 7 (left). WEBS instructions, 2018. Dublin Arts Council.
Figure 8 (right). Close-up of connections made through WEBS. In *The Columbus Crossing Borders Project*, 2018, Dublin Arts Council.

Lastly, the Video Feedback Booth provided a tool for participants to break stereotypes, experience empathy for refugees, address ethnicity, address power, and deepen meaning-making for works of art. Ninety-eight percent of the responses addressed one or more of the aforementioned goals, evidencing effective inclusive interpretation, with many visitor responses addressing multiple trends (Figure 9). A majority of visitors felt empathy for refugees by using phrases that indicated how they do or would feel if they were forced to leave their home as refugees. Some respondents were refugees and immigrants, so they had undergone a similar situation in their lifetime. The Video Feedback Booth provided relevance to participants' own lives (Simon, 2010), which, in turn, spurred visitors to experience empathy for refugees. By allowing multiple perspectives from any visitor who wanted to participate, the interpretation strategy gave voice to those who often do not have a platform in a museum setting (Bedford, 2014; Quinn & Pegno, 2014; Simon, 2010). Many visitors reached a deeper understanding of the *Crossing Borders* works of art, leading to a more nuanced awareness of the realities refugees face and greater insight into cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Kester, 2005; Padilla, 2018; Pegno & Farrar, 2017; Quinn & Pegno, 2014).

Figure 9. Prompts for ages 13+ from Video Feedback Booth, 2018. Dublin Arts Council.

Implications & Reflection

Since my prompts for each activity were open-ended, visitors often took their responses in any direction they saw fit. Notably, viewers utilized free choice to determine which interpretation strategies to use, allowing them to pick which activity best suits their interests and needs, rather than necessarily engaging in all (or any) of the interpretation strategies offered (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Falk, 2005; Simon, 2010). Notwithstanding with which strategies they chose to engage, visitors addressed many issues essential to critical multiculturalism and CRT. Some visitors felt empowered through expressing their voices and inclined to take social action (Alexander, Barton, & Goeser, 2013; Goins, 2014; Greene, 2001; Love & Villeneuve, 2017). Others addressed power by focusing on privilege, lack of power, empowerment, and the opportunity to provide their voice (AAM, 1992; Alexander, Barton, & Goeser, 2013; McIntosh, 1990; Pegno & Farrar, 2017; Quinn & Pegno, 2014; Reid, 2014; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009; trivedi, 2015). Still others addressed identity, ethnicity, and race through self-reflection and reflection on the stories conveyed through the paintings and by other visitors (Bedford, 2014; Collins & Daniel, 2014; Crum & Hendrick, 2014; Kroll, 2008; Mayer, 2014; Reid, 2014; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2009). Lastly, others broke stereotypes through an understanding of cultural hybridity and empathy for the realities of the refugee experience (Bhabha, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; Kester, 2005; Malkki, 1992; Padilla, 2018; Pegno & Farrar, 2017; Quinn & Pegno, 2014).

Building upon existing critical frameworks and museum education best practices, I created a successful model of inclusive interpretation. In addition to surveys, observations, and other formal reflections, DAC received welcome feedback from local students, administrators, teachers, and parents on Twitter (Figures 10 and 11). The exhibition, in conjunction with the

interpretation, provided local students with a way to access difficult social issues (Anderson et al, 2017; Simon, 2010). Therefore, the interpretative strategies I designed and implemented at Dublin Arts Council can serve as an exemplar for other institutions wanting to develop cutting-edge interpretation. For the art education field at large, art educators can employ inclusive interpretation in their classrooms. Although in a different setting, the same strategies employed for *Crossing Borders* can be used in a classroom to inspire reflection, critical thinking, and social action. Other kinds of institutions can use interpretation, though critical multiculturalism and CRT frameworks, in any text, graphic, wall label, sign, seating, pamphlet, interactive, or other material that aims to supplement an organization's purpose. Key to successfully conveying information and engaging the public, organizations must: 1) pick the most appropriate format to suit the institution and, more importantly, the visitors' needs and desires, 2) display the interpretation in a way accessible to a variety of ages, abilities, and backgrounds, and 3) design the strategy with ease of use in mind. Moreover, all texts and images should employ culturally-responsive language to cater to visitors of all backgrounds as well as offer and allow for multiple perspectives. Employing inclusive interpretation allows organizations to encourage multi-vocal viewpoints to permeate the space and make the space relevant to its community and public.

Figures 10 and 11. Tweets from local schools, teachers, and parents about *Crossing Borders*. Accessed from Dublin Art Council's Twitter, 2018.

Through my research and analysis, I can confidently claim: IF museums integrate non-guided interpretation into exhibitions, thereby building on the basic tenets of in-person museum education best practices by adopting culturally responsive language, promoting multiple perspectives, and encouraging close observation in the galleries, THEN they increase accessibility, inclusion, and engagement. Moving forward, museum educators and all people can notice how institutions use or do not use interpretation to deepen understanding of and engagement with art and pertinent issues. With increased interpretation, museum educators can make small and large change within their institutions to make every label, chair, and sign accessible to every person who enters its doors. When museums make interpretation a priority to complement in-person facilitation, visitors can engage with exhibitions to feel empowered, share their stories, and possibly take social action.

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