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Rebecca Kon & Kate Zankowicz

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Building Anti-Ableist Museum Education Practices: A Reflection and Facilitation Toolkit

Rebecca Kon and Kate Zankowicz

ABSTRACT

Building anti-ableist museum education practices into our toolboxes of educational skills is an important way to ensure that museum educators are dismantling the ableism at work in museum interpretation. This paper offers practical strategies for building anti-ableist museum education practices, which we model using one artwork, Enrique Martínez Celaya's sculpture *The Gambler*. These strategies include self-reflective practices for educators and facilitation strategies for use with program participants. We suggest these practices in a series of concrete activities based on self-reflection, dialogue and group experimentation with multiple points of view. These activities serve as tools to consider multiple points of view from disabled people and strategies for developing understandings of disability that counter ableist assumptions about disabled people's happiness, personal fulfillment, and quality of life – conversations that invariably arise when discussing the artistic representations of disabled people in museum collections.

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Introduction

The Gambler (Figure 1) is a bronze sculpture of a young boy who is using crutches to walk. He is about 5 feet tall. His legs are bowed, and he is hunched forward. Strapped around his neck is a large bronze shape, which suggests a house. His body is bent under the weight of the house, and his eyes are fixed to the ground. A tour guide walks their school group by the sculpture quickly, not stopping, averting their gaze as they direct students into the gallery. Usually, participants do stop and stare; they may point to the sculpture and have a side conversation with their friends, or stay quiet, their thoughts their own. After the tour, the guide mentions “Oh, I never stop there. It just makes the kids feel sad.”

This anecdote describes a scene at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, where Enrique Martínez Celaya's statue *The Gambler* is installed. Educators, both paid and unpaid, have often reported that they don't feature *The Gambler* in their tours because they are uncomfortable with the artwork, because it saddens them, or because they are afraid of saying something “wrong.” This occurs during a moment when DEAI initiatives and strategic plans are being institutionally touted at a fevered pitch, and the move to re-train docents, integrate non-dominant narratives into programming, and



Figure 1. Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Gambler*, 2010. Bronze, 69 × 30 × 38.5 in. Collection of The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.

diversify museum collections is at an institutional all-time high. Why the silence around the representation of disability?

As museum educators committed to anti-ableist education, our pedagogical practices are connected to our larger personal goals of ensuring that disability justice is woven into the core of institutional DEAI work. This means moving beyond the medical model of disability and away from framing disabled communities as communities who need our “help.” This paper attempts to rupture the silence around disability and to begin a conversation about how we can become anti-ableist museum educators, even while acknowledging the ableism we’ve internalized and the ableism that we work with, in our workplaces, and work through, in our practice, every day.

This paper offers practical strategies to build anti-ableist museum education practices, based on our experiences teaching with *The Gambler*. These strategies include self-reflective practices for educators and facilitation strategies for use with participants. Adding

anti-ableist museum education practices to our toolboxes of educational skills is an important way to ensure that museum educators are dismantling the ableism at work in museum interpretation.¹

After situating ourselves, we define anti-ableist museum education and position our work within constructivism, critical pedagogy, and social justice thought. We suggest anti-ableist museum education practices in a series of concrete activities based in self-reflection, dialogue, and group experimentation with multiple points of view. These activities are tools to consider multiple points of view from disabled people and strategies for developing understandings of disability that counter ableist assumptions about disabled people's happiness, personal fulfillment, and quality of life – conversations that invariably arise when discussing the artistic representations of disabled people in museum collections. This paper offers a way forward for those in our field who love museums and are also engaging in deep self-questioning about how to enact anti-ableist, anti-oppressive education strategies within exclusionary spaces.

Situating ourselves

We write from the perspective of two white disabled educators at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. Our teaching practice is a continuous act of negotiation.

- Rebecca Kon: I'm an Autistic queer person.² Like all a/Autistic³ people, I grew up surrounded by brains that worked differently than mine and immersed in a narrative that I should be more like them. I still experience that narrative on a daily basis, but now I can partner with my brain and celebrate it for what it is. Celebrating my brain is an act of anti-ableist defiance. Because I am capable of masking (performing neurotypicality), my disability is invisible to program participants in both virtual and physical spaces.
- Kate Zankowicz: I'm a white woman with cerebral palsy, who has always been descriptively disabled and has only recently become "politically disabled," to use Mia Mingus's distinction.⁴ Like all educators, my physical presence is a part of my teaching. Working with Enrique Martínez Celaya's sculpture was the first time that I've engaged with an artwork that specifically addresses the representation of physical disability, but I did so on Zoom, a pedagogical space that erased my disability from view. I'm also a historian of museums, with a keen sense of how the beginning of museum education is the beginning of museum accessibility itself. Through my research about the development of museum education departments in museums, I've learned that accessibility in museums has a tricky history, steeped as it is in the charity model of disability, as well as in discourses of assimilation, "tolerance," and the idea of museums as institutions that are "doing good" for others.

Disability is always present in our workplaces, but many people do not disclose their identities due to the very real possibility of job repercussions for coming out as Mad, Deaf or disabled. Furthermore, we have created workplace environments that are unsupportive of disability and that actively negate disability culture from taking root in museums.

Situating the place

The Huntington Art Museum, Library and Botanical Gardens is situated on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Gabrielino-Tongva and Kizh Nation peoples, who continue to call the region home. The verdant, 207-acre estate lies nestled within the residential neighborhood of San Marino, a community that is one of the wealthiest in the U.S., in terms of household income.⁵ Henry and Arabella Huntington's private estate became "public" in 1919 as a collections-based research and educational institution with a mission to advance knowledge in the arts, humanities and sciences.⁶

The Huntington is home to European and American art collections and a research library containing more than eleven million manuscripts and rare books. Henry Huntington amassed a great fortune in the railway, real estate and municipal transit industries, a historical fact that is deeply ironic given the lack of accessibility by public transit, which privileges visitors who can and do drive. The Huntington's audience is shaped by these geographic and economic barriers. How do we, as anti-ableist museum educators, carry on our anti-ableist practice in an inaccessible place?

The program: *Art and Mindfulness*

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down The Huntington's site-based school programs, educators developed programs for remote delivery. Rebecca wrote several virtual K-12 programs, one of which was *Art and Mindfulness*. In this paper, we offer anti-ableist self-reflection practices and facilitation practices drawn from our experiences writing and facilitating the *Art and Mindfulness* program. The practices we share can be applied to remote or site-based programming.

Art and Mindfulness is designed to promote mindfulness when looking at and creating art. As part of the program, participants have the opportunity to select between two sculptures by Huntington Artist-in-Residence Enrique Martínez Celaya. One sculpture, *The Landmark*, is of a large bronze head of a child. The other, *The Gambler*, ([Figure 1](#)) depicts a physically disabled child walking with crutches. *Art and Mindfulness* is not a program about disability; it is a program in which disability often features, because disability is a natural feature of human diversity. Disability-centered programming is a wonderful and important facet of disability justice, especially programming created by disabled people, for disabled people.⁷ Equally important, and our focus in this paper, is infusing disability justice into museum education pedagogy in a way that impacts all programming, regardless of the program's focus.

The artwork and the artist

The Gambler is intentionally placed along a walkway in the grass, without a plinth and in a place where it is accessible, both visually and physically. When teaching virtually, it's important to take the time to include multiple photographs from multiple viewpoints in the presentation, and to verbally describe them with participants. A description of the side view of the sculpture reveals that the band around *The Gambler's* neck is tied to a large house-shaped form, the weight resting at the back of his head, which is felt through the bend of his back. He stares at the ground, which sometimes means that

participants project how he feels, and that it often correlates with how they feel about disability.

The Gambler is a sculpture by Enrique Martínez Celaya, an artist interested in exploring “ideations of home, exile ... and identity.”⁸ What does it mean when an artist (we don’t know if he identifies as disabled) puts a disabled body on display? How can we, as educators, move beyond the notions of “burden,” “suffering,” “pain,” and “pity” that this sculpture has sparked, as well as notions of “inspiration” and “strength?” How do we position *The Gambler*, and by extension, physical disability, as a natural variation of the human experience that everyone, currently disabled and currently non-disabled, can relate to? How do we ensure that we use his body and experience as a teaching, and not as an objectified body or a spectacle for the currently non-disabled gaze? How do we ensure that this teaching is grounded in the knowledge that disability is a profoundly human experience that we will probably all experience at some time, and that is part of being alive in a body? These are the complicated questions that guide our work in Disability Justice education programming in museums. None of these questions has an easy answer; the goal is to consistently ask these questions of ourselves in order to engage in anti-ableist work.

What is anti-ableism?

Anti-ableism is dynamic and changing, rejecting and responding to the different manifestations of ableism. As museum educators who are committed to anti-ableism in museums, we necessarily draw upon models of anti-ableism that are intersectional; there are no single-issue identities, and there are multiple oppressions and realities. We wish to position this article as building upon the work of Talila Lewis, abolitionist community lawyer, educator, and organizer, who has defined ableism as:

A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and “behave.” You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.⁹

Lewis’s recognition of the foundational nature of ableism, and its connection to all oppressions, is one that changed our own equity work, and we seek to uphold these teachings. In Lewis’s words, “We will never dismantle any oppressive institutions if advocates, community builders and others who are in struggle do not name, analyze and dismantle ableism. Ableism undergirds, depends upon and reifies every other oppression.”¹⁰

What do you notice about this? How traditional museum education practice is ableist

Current museum education paradigms and pedagogy have ableism baked into their very foundations. The ableist refrain of a museum education experience often involves open-ended question-based facilitation techniques, a staple in museum education pedagogy. We often find ourselves asking a variation on this ocularcentric theme: “What do you

see? What do you see that makes you say that?”¹¹ Historically, the goal of open-ended inquiry as a pedagogy in museums was to democratize access to art. By focusing on questions based on direct experience with a work of art together in real time, academic art-historical knowledge was no longer seen as the only way to “know” about art. It’s worth mentioning that at their core, methods of inquiry-based teaching were meant to affirm the power of interpretation that rested on direct responses from individuals. However, how can we move beyond the ocularcentric limitations of these pedagogical methods? What would it mean if instead we, as educators, described what we saw (if we are sighted) and then said: “how does it make you feel?”

As education and liberation writers remind us, teaching is never neutral.¹² Educators are political beings with responsibilities to rupture harmful dominant narratives. One of the most prevalent facilitation strategies in modern museum education is posing open-ended questions to promote the verbalization of thoughts and questions. At The Huntington, we use a format called The Huntington Framework with the following question structure: What do you see? What does it mean? What do you see that makes you think that? What questions do you have? If you do facilitation, particularly in an art museum setting, chances are you have asked similar questions. Employing open-ended questions can be a great way to start dialogue about a piece and to build participants’ identities as people who can look at and talk about art. However, this format on its own upholds oppressive structures. A frequent exchange for *The Gambler in Art and Mindfulness* went something like:

- Us: What do you see?
- Participant: A boy walking with crutches with something heavy on his back.
- Us: What does it mean?
- Participant: He is suffering and he can’t walk and he is in pain.
- Us: What do you see that makes you think that?
- Participant: His legs are bent inward and he’s hunched over on his crutches.
- Us: What questions do you have?
- Participant: What happened to his legs? Is he suffering? Is he in pain?

The examples above point to how disability is framed as something to be fixed, managed, or cured. It sees disability as something pitiful and as a problem. Ableism, like all the -isms, permeates society and is internalized. Open-ended facilitation prompts, as lauded as they are in the field, can merely be mechanisms by which internalized ableism is put on display. By taking it a step further, and working through that internalized ableism, the harm that arises from the ocularcentric question “what do you see?” can be sat with, wrestled with, and interrogated, using anti-ableist self-reflection techniques.

We have heard participants express grief, sadness, shame, hurt, and many other negative emotions when responding to an image of a disabled person. While we do not know exactly what prompted these responses in each participant, we can say, in general, that participants are responding to what they think they know about disability and what they’ve heard before. They may be expressing their own ideas about disability or expressing internalized ableism, and thinking about how the boy might feel living in an ableist world. We also don’t know if participants identified as disabled, and since sharing viewpoints was voluntary, if all participants felt the same way about the artwork.

In our experience with anti-ableist facilitation, participants often pose their initial observations back in the form of questions. “He is in pain” becomes “Is he in pain?” Participants, like all of us, hold ableist perceptions; however, within the context of a constructivist learning environment, participants are often willing to interrogate those perceptions. They *want* to question – as anti-ableist educators, it is our job to help them question.

Anti-ableist self-reflection and facilitation practices for educators

Being an anti-ableist educator means acknowledging the ableism that is already “in the room,” both in our participants and in ourselves. We all hold internalized ableist assumptions, whether about ourselves or about other people, and accepting and acknowledging this is essential to authentic questioning.

In the following sections, we expand on three anti-ableist education principles we have employed to this end: (1) contextualize disability within the social model; (2) build intersectional understandings of wholeness; and (3) foster interdependence. For each practice, we describe the practice, offer self-reflection prompts for educators, and suggest facilitation strategies to use with program participants. While we separate self-reflection from facilitation in these sections, we encourage you to consider the ways you might weave the self-reflection prompts into your own facilitation as well.

Contextualize disability within the social model

What is this principle?

Multiple models of disability exist within museum education work, including the medical model, the charity model, and the social model. The dominant narrative regarding disability is still situated within the medical model of disability, which conceptualizes disability as an innate condition within an individual which inherently limits what the individual can do and how the individual is able to engage with the world. The medical model interprets disability as something to be fixed, managed, or cured, a problem to be remedied rather than a beautiful and powerful part of human existence. This model, like all knowledge, is culturally situated. It is intimately connected with the medicalization of disability. To most people living in Western and colonized societies, the medical model is the way we have learned to perceive disability.

The charity model is also one that still haunts museum education work. It can best be summed up as “for us, not with us,” as A.J. Withers has written. The charity model is centered on the notion that museum education programming is an act of “benevolence” done *for* a community – often conceptualized as a segregated audience that requires specialized programming. This has been embedded within museum education history and practice since its beginnings.¹³ Accessible and inclusive programs in museums today are often laced with ableist power dynamics that may rest on the notion of disability as a deficit, with disabled visitors seen as visitors who “need help” to be able to access the collections the way they “should” be accessed in a particular physical way (visually, cognitively etc.). In the words of A.J. Withers,

the charity approach to disability is viewed as being in the ‘best interests’ of disabled people but it does not consider disabled people’s experiences and knowledge as necessarily valuable or essential. This approach is about well-meaning “do-gooders” acting on our behalf without us. Because we aren’t in control of the process little good, or even harm, is often the result.¹⁴

Withers also notes that within the charity model, the language of resistance and liberation is co-opted and transferred to speak about “fighting,” “resisting,” and “beating” *disabilities* [italics ours], thereby locating oppression within our disabled bodies and minds, and not within socially created barriers or systemic issues. As Withers has written, the entire charity approach is “designed to ensure that no real change occurs ... it is about the agents of charity – the do-gooders feeling better about themselves and the world they live in.”¹⁵

The social model pushes back on the dominant narratives provided by the medical and charity models, and instead conceptualizes disability as created by systemic barriers and biases within society.¹⁶ To illustrate this distinction, we include a second photograph of *The Gambler*, this one taken when the grasses surrounding the sculpture had grown to the boy’s knees (Figure 2). What is disabling the boy here, his legs or the path? By encouraging participants to see the built environment as a socially constructed barrier that can be changed, participants begin to notice the many ways in which a society can “disable” people. We begin with the notion that a society with built environments that include overgrown walkways disables people with mobility aids. In subsequent experiences, we hope to build out this program to highlight the ways in which socially constructed barriers and biases disable us, and encourage participants to reflect on moments when they have experienced that disablism.

The social model of disability is not perfect, and the medical model of disability does have a role to play. However, in general, the medical model upholds ableist assumptions of deficit and the need for a cure, while the social model upholds anti-ableist assertions of wholeness and interdependence. As Annie Elaney says, “when a disabled person thrives, it’s not their disability they’ve overcome but an ableist society that would rather they not exist.”¹⁷

Educator self-reflection practices

As people raised within the narratives of the medical and charity models, we have all internalized ableist negative and patronizing perceptions of disabled people. It’s why educators might feel sad looking at *The Gambler*, and why seeking out disabled voices to challenge these perceptions is crucial. In order to interrogate dominant narratives and explore the social model paradigm, it’s important to identify ableist thought processes. Below, we invite you to reflect on and counter some common ableist assumptions (note: these assumptions may be triggering to some readers). Consider the following:

- (1) When you first saw or read the description of *The Gambler*, what were your initial thoughts? Do these thoughts come from the medical model of disability, the charity model of disability, or the social model of disability? If the medical or charity model seems to be at play, try analyzing the piece through a social model lens. What changes with this paradigm shift?



Figure 2. Enrique Martínez Celaya, *The Gambler*, 2010. Bronze, 69 × 30 × 38.5 in. Collection of The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.

- (2) Have you ever thought someone was “faking” a disability? Why? Perhaps they stood from their wheelchair to walk up some steps or appeared to make eye contact with you despite having told you they’re a/Autistic (not everyone who uses a wheelchair is unable to stand and/or walk, and not every a/Autistic person struggles with eye contact).
- (3) The idea of disabled and non-disabled is a false binary. In what ways are you currently disabled? In what ways have you been disabled in the past? In what ways might you be disabled in the future? In what ways are you currently non-disabled?
- (4) What ableist assumptions have you made in your practice? This can range from making assumptions about people’s abilities, avoiding talking about disability

because of personal discomfort, or engaging with disabled people out of a misguided belief that they need your help.

Facilitation practices

What follows are some initial guidelines for developing facilitation practices to encourage social model thinking in your lessons:

- (1) Create space for participants to reflect on their own bodies and lived experiences and to see themselves within a continuum of disability. Having conversations about crutches, for example, can subvert the notion that crutches are an object of pity, and encourage broader thinking about crutches as useful tools that can help people get around.
- (2) Reframe participant questions in the social model. When a participant looks at *The Gambler* and says “he can’t walk,” the ableist educator would sit with the notion that *The Gambler* is meant to inspire pity and not do the work to dismantle that ableist thought. The anti-ableist museum educator will re-orient the observation to instead focus on the ways in which disability is a positive experience, and having crutches, an important tool to aid mobility.
- (3) Encourage participants to think about the built environment. Young participants likely have chairs and work tables that have been made deliberately small while older participants likely have larger chairs and work tables. Invite students to reflect on a time, or imagine a scenario, where they were made to work in an environment that was not made for their bodies. Again, here we can invite participants to consider the principles of anti-ableist thinking within the contexts of their own experiences.

Build intersectional understandings of wholeness

What is this principle?

In her TED talk, disability activist Stella Young speaks out against the objectification of disability, specifically in the context of depictions of disabled people being seen as “inspirational” for the benefit of non-disabled people.¹⁸ This objectification reduces disabled people to one facet of our existence, simplifying our complex life experiences into something palatable to non-disabled audiences. Defying this objectification is an act of recognizing wholeness- of valuing people for who they are outside of what they can produce (including inspiration).

Participants interpreted *The Gambler* within multiple identities and systems of oppression. At times the experience of the “gamble” of immigration, and the risk it entails, was what was remarked upon. Because we included audio from the artist, who spoke of the experience of migration,¹⁹ participants often vocalized ideas about the immigration experience and saw the boy as someone who was leaving his family behind and “risking everything.” Martínez Celaya was born in Cuba and raised in Spain and Puerto Rico. This artwork is also a statement on

being in exile and the migrations that he has experienced in his own life. According to the not-for-profit education advocacy organization *The74*, 1 in 8 students in California has parents who are undocumented²⁰ and 250,000 students enrolled in public schools in California are undocumented.²¹ *The Gambler* is a piece that we have approached intersectionally, as an artwork that provides space for participants to express themselves about immigration or migration, and can also be a way into conversations about the U.S. immigration system and injustice, particularly as it relates to communities of color, both disabled and currently-non-disabled.

In the audio guide, Martínez Celaya speaks about this sculpture as a “boy who carries this image of his home on his back.”²² The sculpture is a representation of “resolve,” of “resilience no matter what happens.”²³ In his words, it’s about the gamble of carrying our history and our past on our backs as we migrate. For him, it’s important that the sculpture is in Los Angeles, a city of immigrants, who have to make sense of “who they have been, who they are and who they want to become.”²⁴

Given the ableism inherent in the immigration process in the U.S., the fact that Martínez Celaya’s sculpture is a boy who uses crutches is notable, even if his intentions were to use disability metaphorically. People with visible physical disabilities historically faced and still face ableism when attempting to immigrate to the United States. As disability historian Kim E. Nielsen reminds us: the “desirable” citizen of the U.S. was an able-bodied white man with capital.²⁵ People with disabilities were not seen as productive laborers (in a Western white capitalist context). U.S. Citizenship has always been tied to the ability to labor and to be a “productive” part of capitalism.

Anti-ableist practice needs to be rooted in a concept of the individuality of identity (no one used to represent a category of experience), and grounded in a recognition of the wholeness of identity. This means that we are building a model of museum education that recognizes the diversities that exist within identities.

Educator self-reflection practices

Self-reflection practices for fostering intersectional thinking focus on considering the multifaceted lived experiences of all disabled people, and the ways in which various identities interact within an individual. We encourage you to practice self-reflection with the following prompts:

- (1) We all have many facets to our identity. How do you identify? Which facets of your identity are most important to you? How has your identity changed over time?
- (2) Identities impact one another. How do the different facets of your identities relate to one another?
- (3) People make assumptions. What assumptions do people make about you based on your visible/externally apparent identity markers? What assumptions do you make about your participants based on their visible/externally apparent identity markers?

Facilitation practices

Below are some initial guidelines for developing facilitation practices that foster intersectional thinking in your anti-ableist lessons.

- (1) Invite participants to consider their own identities. Which facets of their identities do they share with one another? Which facets of their identities do they imagine they share with the subject of the artwork? If enacting this facilitation practice, it is crucial to keep the space as safe as possible for participants who are not comfortable sharing facets of their identity with others. Journaling can be a wonderful alternative to dialogue for this practice.
- (2) Invite participants to identify identity markers in the subject of the artwork. If there are multiple people in an artwork with overlapping identity markers, invite participants to identify additional identities each of the people might possess and consider how each person might experience the scene differently.
- (3) Celebrate participants in imagining non-externally identifiable identity markers. Discussing possible non-externally identifiable identities such as gender, sexuality, religion, immigration status, etc. complexify our understanding of the subject. Once, a participant observed that we can't really know for sure if the sculpture is of a boy, so we should be using "they" instead of "he." This was a wonderful moment as it invited conversations about gender and allowed us to complexify our understanding of the subject.

Foster interdependence

What is this principle?

One important facet of anti-ableist museum education work is celebrating interdependence in our teaching practice. Interdependence recognizes the inherent connectedness of liberations. What would it mean if disability was not an individual experience? What would it mean if justice was not individual justice? Collective liberation, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and other activists have reminded us, is about acknowledging interdependence, an ecological fact that problematizes our capitalist realities, in which caring for ourselves, our friends, and our families is considered a social burden, and some of the lowest paid work in our society.²⁶

Capitalism rests on the myth of individual independence. In her book *Emergent Strategy*, adrienne maree brown identifies interdependence, paired with decentralization of power, as an essential element of shaping the complex systems of our world.²⁷

It is important to note that fostering interdependence can, and must, coexist with fostering independence. Independence means something specific within the disability rights movement. Writing about this distinction, Patty Berne shares: "The disability rights call for independence pried disabled people from systems of patronage and being spoken for and about."²⁸ The struggle for independence, for the right to self-determination and autonomy, has been a cornerstone of self-advocacy for decades. We honor this call for

independence as we consider the ways in which we can find collective liberation through helping to meet one another's needs.

Educator self-reflection practices

Self-reflection practices for fostering interdependence focus on interrogating the myth of independence. Within capitalist societies, independence is hailed as an ideal to strive toward. The dominant paradigm holds that our value as humans rests within what we are capable of individually producing. In reality, each of us exists within networks of human and more-than-human relationships. We encourage you to practice self-reflection with the following prompts:

- (1) We are not in this alone. What is an accomplishment you are proud of? Who, and what, helped you?
- (2) We need things from others. After considering an individual accomplishment as a starting point, broaden your reflection to include other aspects of your life. In what ways do you rely on others to get your needs met? Who uplifts you?
- (3) Others need things from us. In what ways do others rely on you? How do you help uplift others?
- (4) Interdependence exists at many scales. How can you embrace the interdependencies within your life?
- (5) Interdependence is a mindset that you can cultivate. One of the fears we have encountered among fellow educators regarding disability justice teaching is the fear of "saying the wrong thing." Allow us to reassure you: you *will* say the wrong thing. If you make disability justice a part of your approach to teaching and learning in museum spaces, you will say or do something that either comes across differently than you intended (we've done this) or comes across as you intended because you lacked an understanding (we've done this too). The wonderful thing about interdependence is it means there are people in our community who can help us learn and grow.

Facilitation practices

What follows are some initial guidelines for developing facilitation practices to foster interdependence in your anti-ableist lessons. Recognize, honor, and value these relationships:

- (1) Name and highlight interdependence as a feature of the program. Identify ways in which participants help build each other up.
- (2) Have participants imagine the subject's communities. Some artworks may depict community overtly. Others, like *The Gambler*, feature a single person. Prompts like "who do you think is important in this person's life?" or "what do you think this person likes to do with their friends?" can serve as jumping-off points for considering the person as a part of an interconnected network. Once participants have situated the subject within a network, invite participants to consider the ways in

which the network can support the subject and the ways in which the subject can support others in the network.

- (3) Explore interdependence between artist and viewer. *The Gambler* presents an interesting ingress for exploring this idea with participants. In his book *On Art and Mindfulness*, Martínez Celaya writes “there is no work of art without the viewer.”²⁹ In our program, we show participants both the Martínez Celaya sculptures along with this quotation and invite them to engage with the artwork as an act of co-creation with the artist.

Finding disability in museum collections

You may feel that you don’t have an object in your museum collection that is connected to disability history or disability culture. In our own place of employment, disability can be difficult to find. When we do find disability in The Huntington collections, it is usually in the form of our medical history collections, collections that are charged with harm. This includes material from local eugenics organizations, such as the Human Betterment Foundation.³⁰ While those materials are instead reserved for researchers and are not accessible to the museum-going public, it is notable to us that these are the records wherein we find reference to disability. As museum educators who are aware of the ways these materials can traumatize and re-traumatize, we have not used them in our teachings.³¹

While explicit disability can be conspicuously absent from museum collections, many pieces can lend themselves to a disability justice interpretive lens. For example, consider a piece in which someone is portrayed in a resting position, using supportive architecture, or averting their gaze. How might you introduce notions of wholeness, interdependence, and a complexity of life experience when using those artworks with participants? As anti-ableist educators, we have a responsibility to engage with artworks that represent disability, and take note of disabled life experiences when we see them. However, we can also find ways to speak about ableism in our everyday interactions with art, work to unpack perceived notions of productivity, and support ideas about the fullness and diversity of human experience.

Conclusion

Adding anti-ableist practices to your everyday museum education toolkit is an act of disability justice in museums. By using these tools for self-reflection, dialogue, and group experimentation with multiple points of view, we can clear space for understandings of disability that counter ableist assumptions about disabled people’s lives and experiences. It is in this spirit that we ask that we all “stop at the sculpture” with our program participants.

Notes

1. We are grateful for the work of Wendy Ng, Syrus Marcus Ware, and Alyssa Greenberg whose paper “Activating Diversity and Inclusion: A Blueprint for Museum Educators as Allies and Changemakers” provided an invaluable framework for this paper.

2. Kon: I reflected for a long time on whether I should “out” myself as Autistic in this paper. I asked multiple people whether they think this is a career-killing move on my part. We all settled on the same takeaway: I need to embody the future I hope to see in museum education. So yes, I am Autistic.
3. Some people capitalize Autistic as an identity and community marker and some people choose not to capitalize autistic. We use a/Autistic as a recognition of personal preference.
4. Mingus, “Reflecting on Frida Kahlo’s Birthday.”
5. En.wikipedia.org, “San Marino, California – Wikipedia.”
6. For more information see: The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens, “A Collections-Based Research and Educational Institution.”
7. For more on this facet, we recommend Smith’s “The Beauty of Spaced Created for and by Disabled People” in Wong, *Disability Visibility*, 2020.
8. Martínez Celaya, “Biography – Enrique Martínez Celaya.” Enrique Martínez Celaya is an “artist, author and former scientist whose work has been exhibited and collected by major museums worldwide. His monumental and multifaceted body of work connects art to literature, philosophy, and science.” Martínez Celaya sees art as an “ethical effort that turns thinking into action.” *The Gambler* is a sculpture that Martínez Celaya has installed in numerous locations, including indoor and outdoor spaces.
9. Lewis, “A Working Definition by Talila ‘TL’ Lewis in conversation with Disabled Black and other negatively racialized folk, especially Dustin Gibson; updated January 2020” from “Ableism 2020: An Updated Definition.”
10. Lewis, from Withers et al., “Radical Disability Politics – Wordpress.com,” 187.
11. There are many educational techniques that use open-ended questions, such as discovery-based learning, conversational learning, and so on. Visual Thinking Strategies is another popular participant-centered facilitation method in galleries that depends on visual engagement with an object. For more information see: <https://vtshome.org>.
12. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.
13. See for example, “Objects in Museum Handled by Blind: Visitors Handle Stone Age Objects While Lecturer Explains Uses.” The Boston Globe, 8. Some of the first disabled audience experiences, the “war-wounded” white male veterans returning after World War I, were framed as acts of charity, because museum directors “waived the rules” and “sightless charges” were “permitted to handle the various objects.”
14. Withers, “The Charity Model.
15. Ibid.
16. Burke, “Why I hate Being Called ‘Differently Abled’.”
17. Elaine, “What Does It Mean to ‘Overcome Disability’?”
18. Young, “Inspiration Porn and the Objectification of Disability.”
19. The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens, “Audio for Stop 535: The Gambler.”
20. Keierleber, “Immigration Fears in California Schools.”
21. Los Angeles Times, “Opinion: LAUSD vs. Undocumented participants.”
22. The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens, “Audio for Stop 535: The Gambler.”
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States*.
26. Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*.
27. Brown, *Emergent Strategy*.
28. Berne, “Disability Justice.”
29. Martínez Celaya, *On Art and Mindfulness*, 99.
30. George Dock papers, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
31. While a trauma-aware practice is being developed in the context of art museums (see: <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2020/06/29/trauma-aware-art-museum-education-principles-practices/>),

we have yet to find museum educators who are working with eugenics medical collections in a trauma-informed way.

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About the authors

Rebecca Kon (she/her/hers) is a museum education practitioner and curriculum developer. She is experienced in identifying objects with the capacity to illuminate diverse pasts and presents, and in contextualizing these objects with learners. As an Autistic museum educator, she advocates for inclusive practice within educational programming. She received her M.A. in Education Studies with a certificate in Museum Studies from the University of Michigan. Rebecca currently serves as the Curriculum Development Specialist at The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens. In her role as Curriculum Development Specialist, Rebecca crafts programming and resources designed to activate the collections for K-12 students and their teachers.

Kate Zankowicz (she/her/hers) is a museum education practitioner who has created community-driven, inclusive programming in museums in Canada and the U.S. for almost twenty years. Her practice has centered around creating collaborative programming with, not for, communities. As a museum educator with a disability, Zankowicz's museum education pedagogy and philosophy are grounded in her lived experience. She has served as an accessibility consultant for various arts organizations, and she has been part of multiple accessibility projects within museums, including creating accessible exhibits and displays, writing verbal description audio tours, and developing multisensory tours. She has also developed and implemented training programs for museum staff about disability, accessibility, and inclusion. Zankowicz holds a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Toronto (OISE). Zankowicz currently serves as the Manager of Youth, Family and Community Engagement at The Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens.

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