

Bridging Justice: A Tool Linking Anti-Racist and Anti-Ableist Practices in Community Arts Education

By Heidi Swevens and Alexandra Turner

This article introduces a new tool that emerged from [Inclusive Arts Vermont](#)'s participation in the National Guild's 2020-2021 [Rootwork Learning Cohort](#). The Cohort supported community arts educators in studying, developing, and documenting practices that are grounded in, and supportive of, the many varied lived experiences of our communities and responsive to the movements of our time. The tool provides concrete ways for community arts educators to make their practice more accessible for disabled people in ways that align with antidotes to white supremacy culture.

To access an audio recording of this article and a text-only version, visit the Guild's online [Resource Center](#).

INTRODUCTION

A special educator enters a classroom during an integrated arts residency. She anticipates potential ways she might intervene to support

some of the disabled students in the room. To her surprise, the students are all already engaged in learning. Students with and without disabilities are making art together. Instead of

intervening, the special educator stands near the doorway not wanting to distract. She observes the teaching artist focus on process rather than product. Students are



Process Focused Experience

White paper is taped to a wooden table top. Two sets of brown hands hold textured foam rollers with red, yellow and blue paint mixing into rainbow colors on the paper.

guided to take time as they explore and experiment with materials, colors, and textures. "They were in the zone," the special educator noted later when reflecting upon the residency. Other collaborators talk about that "sweet spot" in education where students are deeply engaged in the learning.

With the social unrest during the pandemic, the Inclusive Arts Vermont (IAV) team recognized that our focus on disability activism needed to expand to explicitly include anti-racism. The mission of Inclusive Arts Vermont is to use the magic of the arts to engage the capabilities and enhance the confidence of children and adults with disabilities. We do this through arts education, exhibitions, and capacity building programs for people of all ages. We believe in the inclusion of every voice, however that voice is expressed and understood. And we believe that every person is perfect and whole, exactly as they are.

Through our participation in the Rootwork Learning Cohort, we developed [Bridging Justice](#), a tool for arts educators to connect accessibility practices and resources for inclusion of people with disabilities to antidotes to white supremacy culture characteristics identified by [Tema Okun](#), [Kenneth Jones](#), and many others. According to [Okun et al](#), white supremacy culture characteristics are typically unnoticed attitudes, values and norms that pervade dominant culture and perpetuate racism.

The intention of the Bridging Justice tool is to contribute to the ongoing work of anti-racism by identifying and organizing inclusive practices for people with disabilities in a way that explicitly challenges white

supremacy culture characteristics. In many systems and spaces, the implicit assumptions of the "best" way to do things is narrow and marginalizes people with disabilities and members of BIPOC communities. White supremacy culture characteristics (including sense of urgency, perfectionism, quantity over quality, individualism, and worship of the written word) create barriers for people who do things differently and often have a timeframe that is outside of normalized expectations of

// Ableism and racism are similar in the ways they marginalize, exclude, and oppress. //

production. Organizations and individuals can be programmed to believe "time is money." But time isn't money. Time is time. Human value is inherent outside the constructs of time and money.

Ableism and racism are similar in the ways they marginalize, exclude, and oppress. Noted anti-racism scholar Ibram X. Kendi suggests anti-racism is "supporting anti-racist policy through action and expression of anti-racist ideas." In his podcast, ["Be Antiracist,"](#) Kendi connects anti-racism and anti-ableism, noting "it is pretty apparent to me that one cannot be anti-racist while still being ableist." He invited disability activist Rebecca Cokely into a conversation in which she compared the two as "roots of the same tree." Cokely offered a definition of 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 ideas are deeply rooted in Anti-Blackness."

In this article, we outline the Bridging Justice tool's current framework, provide a link to the full document, and provide some descriptive examples of inclusive practice in action. In transparency, the tool is in early stages of development, and we are eager to collaborate with others in the field as we continue to shape it.

We, Heidi and Alexandra, write to you as collaborators in what was articulated in the Rootwork cohort as "the work of our time": the work of dismantling systems of oppression and creating truly inclusive communities. Alexandra is a white, cis, woman, mother of two, teaching artist, lover of nature, glass artist, dancer, daughter, sister, aunt, and wife. She has devoted her life to practicing the craft of teaching artistry, and experiences mental health challenges, Multiple Chemical Sensitivities, and chronic migraines. Heidi is a white, queer, disabled human, an artist, deep questioner, friend, neighbor, colleague, daughter, sister, aunt, lover of nature, and of roller coasters. She became legally blind in her early 20s which sparked both inner and outer exploration of what it means to "see."

We are both part of the management team at Inclusive Arts Vermont. Our community is composed of people with and without disabilities. Through our work with and on behalf of people with disabilities over the last 36 years, we have gathered approaches and practices that provide access for disabled individuals of all ages. The

development of this tool is part of our team's ongoing process of examining and changing policies and practices that uphold systemic racism and ableism in our organization and our broader community. For more info on our process and action steps, see our [social justice page](#).

CONSIDERING "DISABILITY"

Before we continue, we acknowledge that you, the reader, bring your own depth of experience to the moment. We invite you to pause and consider what comes to mind and heart when you encounter the word "disability."

Disability.

Dis-ability.

Feel free to pause before reading on as you engage this question. Write. Doodle. Dance. Sing. Move. Or be still.

What do you think of when you read the word "disability"?

Like many words, the meaning of "disability" is individualized. It changes with information, experience, connection, and context. The word itself can miscommunicate as well as communicate. It is a word that expresses elements of lived experience that, paradoxically, cannot always be put into words. Still, it feels important to consciously bring a thread of your understanding of disability into this process as we offer the foundation Bridging Justice is built upon.

We engage disability from a perspective of pride. Disability Pride.

While this approach seems ordinary to us at Inclusive Arts Vermont, it has been "eye-opening" for several

partners when used in casual conversation. Disrupting systems of oppression can sometimes occur by reframing a word that begins with "dis" as something positive. We use the word disability with this understanding while also recognizing that not all people or groups we connect with relate to disability identity, definitions, or descriptions in this same way.

From a policy perspective, another key point when defining disability is that it is intertwined with notions of life activities and the ways in which productivity, behavior, function, and doing have value in dominant culture. The Americans with Disabilities Act defines a person with a disability as someone who

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We engage disability from a perspective of pride.
Disability Pride. \\\

"has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment." (["A Guide to Disability Rights"](#))

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), 26% of adults and 13% of children in the US have a disability. [Census](#) and [CDC](#) data shows that disability is more prevalent among some racial groups and is more prevalent for people living with poverty. When invisible disabilities are included, some estimate that 70% of individuals experience disability.

As artists and educators, we recognize the inherent bias of data collection and use, and the way that data can be weaponized against people. We mention these statistics to emphasize the relevance and importance of ensuring access for people with disabilities in that people with disabilities are integral members of every community. Teaching artists and arts organizations already engage many people with visible and invisible disabilities. As community-embedded institutions, we have an imperative to make our work accessible and inclusive.

Disability is part of the human journey. It is experienced by people of all races, genders, ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. Disability experiences can be fluid and changing. Visible and invisible. Individual and intersectional. We invite you to continue to explore your understandings and assumptions of disability, as internalized ableism works similarly to internalized racism.

"BRIDGING JUSTICE": THE TOOL

While learning, reflection, and inner work are foundational to dismantling systems of oppression, we also need to act. We need to utilize practices in education that are truly inclusive, anti-ableist, anti-racist, and anti-oppression. The Bridging Justice tool offers some ideas for what can be done in planning sessions, classrooms, and communities where arts education takes place.

The tool is organized as an outline that matches each [white supremacy culture](#) characteristic and its antidotes with suggestions of inclusive practices (i.e., action steps). The practices are illuminated with links, images, and audio and visual resources that support access for

people with disabilities specifically in arts education settings, but many of which will be applicable in a variety of contexts.

Currently, the tool is in document format. The final version of the tool needs to be available in multiple formats for access purposes including digital options, like interactive platforms, that we have not yet had the capacity to create. We expect that the organization of the tool will continue to shift as more people engage with it, adding suggestions, content, and ideas.

Below is a content excerpt of the tool where we map connections

between inclusive practices in arts learning to the antidotes for the white supremacy culture characteristic, "sense of urgency." This page comes after an overall description of what the tool is and how it might be utilized. At the top is the title, "Sense of Urgency," along with a description of how that can show up, according to Okun, et al, along with their antidotes. Following that, we offer a series of inclusive practices that may also serve as antidotes, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL). We provide links to more resources for many of these practices, including UDL so that practitioners can investigate further. [UDL is a framework](#) that

supports access for students with disabilities and undermines a sense of urgency (and many other white supremacy culture characteristics). It provides multiple options for sharing and receiving information, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of action or expression. In this model, inclusion takes precedence over expediency which offers more ways into the learning and creative process. Following the excerpt, we illustrate how some of the practices noted in the tool might be used in a classroom setting.

For the full tool, [see our website](#).

CONTENT EXCERPT OF BRIDGING JUSTICE TOOL

<Beginning of Excerpt>

Sense of Urgency: (as set forth by Okun et al)

- Continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences
- Frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community)
- Reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little

Antidotes: (as set forth by Okun et al)

- Realistic work plans
- Leadership understands things

often take longer than expected

- Discuss and plan for goals around inclusivity and diversity
- Learn from past about how long things take
- Write realistic funding proposals with realistic timeframes
- Be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency

Inclusive Practices:

- [Account for and include time for planning for accommodation request, coordination and delivery](#) (Plan ahead to avoid exclusion)
- **Make accommodations** such as American Sign Language, Verbal Descriptions and Translations, (these can take more time, so build it into your agenda!)
- Sometimes the accommodation IS **extra time** to work on things
- [Universal Design for Learning:](#) planning and implementation

can take more time to develop/ implement and are key

- Focus on **process** over product
- Whenever possible, **share materials ahead** of time to give participants additional processing time
- Practice **leaving space in conversation**, recognize that people process in different ways and in different paces/cadences- take the hierarchy out! (i.e. faster is not inherently better)
- **Go deeper** with learning and projects rather than more
- **Pause** at beginning of meetings (mindful moments) and **Reflect** at end of meetings. Reflection is integral to the process
- Focus on **Relationships**
- **Flexible plans** that **honor the moment**/energy/interest/curiosity of participants
- **Scaffolded** learning plans

<End of Excerpt>

EXAMPLE IN ACTION:

How might some of these practices operate in a classroom, studio, or other community arts learning program?

Imagine.

The final day of a six-session integrated arts residency with kindergarteners is abuzz with movement. A student adds a painting of a fox to the top step of the risers, which has transformed into an installation. Another student finds a spot to hang her depiction of brightly colored flowers and butterflies representing the warm places that some creatures migrate to. Some students use a visual and text prompt sheet to practice presenting. This hour of the residency feels celebratory as students share their art and learning.

Yet, a process focus remains amidst the myriad of activities, balancing what could feel like a sense of

urgency to get it all done. A sense of pride emerges with the diverse expressions of learning and creativity from each student.

As a teaching artist focused on inclusive practices I, Alexandra, often wrestle with the balance of process versus product. I know there are expectations of something nice to look at, but I choose to focus on each moment with participants, finding ways to engage their leadership and trusting in the process. When I let go of needing to control the outcome, I can undermine the sense of urgency that can be so pervasive in school culture. Instead, we sink into using multiple modalities to explore our subject. We use movement and music to embody the animals before we sit down to paint or sculpt them. We let there be silence in the circle while we formulate our thoughts and wait for others to respond. Even though there is a designated "celebration" of our art, we take the time to explore the possibilities of our

materials throughout the residencies. The essence of the creative process is not only linked to tangible art and installations, but also in supporting mutual relationships and cultivating inclusive communities.

Accounting for the time it takes to provide accommodations is critical to creating inclusive classrooms, meetings, programs, and events. Colleagues and other collaborators may be part of this coordination and may need some of these same accommodations. It is an often-made mistake to assume that the accommodations or inclusive practices are "only for others." Sometimes the accommodation identified is "extra time." Visiting teaching artists may not know which students or colleagues experience which specific disabilities. Regardless, being aware that not all students have the same timeline for assignment completion can cultivate belonging.



Winter Landscape Installation

The corner of a classroom is transformed into a winter landscape with brown and white sheets draped over risers, representing soil and snow, blue cellophane representing water, and the base of a tree made from paper. Pink signs label different parts of the landscape. Animal paintings, sculptures and drawings are tucked throughout the landscape.

Using UDL is another accessibility practice that addresses a sense of urgency. Variations of time are inherent in providing multiple options for sharing information, engaging with materials, and expression of learning. We plan for multiple options and follow the student's lead on what interests them most, even when it is different from the teachers', teaching artists' or administrators' ideas.

To practice UDL in the arts integrated residency about animals in winter, we read and studied books about what animals in the northern forests do in winter. We accessed information from websites, made animal tracks with toy animals, and studied line drawings and photos of animals. We made big paintings on sheets with rollers and brushes to represent the above the snow, subnivean, and underground habitats. We twisted and scrunched paper to create a tree, and together, bit by bit, we created an installation representing a landscape in Vermont winter in which to house our representations of animals. We offered students choices, options, authentic engagement, unconditional positive regard, multiple modalities, and rigorous learning, with an emphasis on relationships and deep respect for each learner. If sitting and being still was not working for a student, they were invited to mash and mush clay, or tear and twist paper, rather than be excluded or punished. Inclusive practices can undermine norms and standard practices that perpetuate white supremacy culture, ableist frameworks, and other forms of oppression in educational settings.

Another example of a practice that subverts the sense of urgency is "leaving space in conversation." This simply recognizes and respects that people process and communicate

information in different ways at different times. It challenges an assumption of one preferred pace with which individuals must operate to be valued. There must be time available for everyone to process and share for everyone to feel respected and included.

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Is it radical to expect that the ideas of 6-year-olds are just as valid as the "expert teaching artist" or teacher in the room? What about the autistic 6-year-old who uses an iPad to communicate? Or the 6-year-old who "can't sit still"?

When we place participants in the center of our planning and teaching, and work to elevate their curiosity rather than operate from a place of needing to produce something on a timeline, we can change the traditional power dynamics of oppressive education systems. This can be new, anxiety producing, and freeing to classroom teachers who so often are caught in the matrix of needing students to perform to standards for others to think the teachers are "doing a good job."

In this article, we have focused on the sense of urgency, because it is so pervasive in work and education

settings, but we want to also highlight that each of these inclusive practices undermine many of the characteristics of white supremacy culture. By focusing on the process, even as we work to create a "product," and offering feedback without judgement, we subvert striving for perfection, as well as the sense of urgency. We eliminate the idea that there is one correct way to do the project.

INVITATION

Imagine.

A digital space where community arts educators can share practices and ideas that work to dismantle systems of oppression. The Bridging Justice tool is under construction. We see it as a living document that is meant to be adapted, re-worked, and edited. You can find the working draft and engage with it on our [website](#).

We hope you and many others will help us build it. We are by no means experts on anti-racism. Neither are we an authority on anti-ableist practice. We are committed to working collaboratively, sharing what we do know, learning from others, and doing what needs to be done to dismantle the isms of hierarchy keeping so many of us marginalized and oppressed. We are committed to creating inclusive communities.

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