



The Power of the Individual in Advocacy

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abstract:

A central component to case-making and systems change is personal advocacy, driven by the individual. How we translate our personal beliefs and biases into tactics for advocacy is an essential skill for all practitioners. This article shares four tactics to guide practitioners through this process, including storytelling, social media use, word choice, and relationship forming. Within each, guiding questions are formed through three lenses focused on communications strategies, the dynamics of systems change, and acknowledging progress. It concludes with a call to action about the professional responsibility of arts and cultural education practitioners to become effective advocates to make the case and affect systems change.

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As part of our commitment to authentically engaged learning, this article has been formatted to encourage critical dialogue with the text. Throughout, there are numerous spaces to write, draw, or otherwise reflect while reading the text.

Introduction

In the the introductory article in *Case-making and Systems Change in Arts & Cultural Education*, I shared an emerging model for how practitioners - such as artists, educators, community leaders, and more - can make the case for and also advocate through arts and culture to drive systemic change and address the complex challenges we were facing.

At the center of this model is *Advocacy for Self*, and thus individuals stand at the heart of advocacy strategy. We advocate every day, formally and informally. We advance causes for ourselves and others in the workplace, for our children at school, and for those within our communities.

As the individual is the heart of advocacy, advocacy is always personal. It starts with us, with our unique inherent beliefs and biases. How we translate these beliefs and biases can be tactical, so we must understand how to personally engage with them.

In this article, I will share four tactics through which a practitioner can begin to craft their next — personal — steps towards advocacy actions. One might think:

- What stories am I telling?
- How can I use social media?
- Which words do I use?
- What relationships am I forming?

Within each of these tactics practitioners can apply three cross-cutting lenses:

1. How we can link communications strategies to goals;
2. How we may deepen our understanding of the dynamics of systems change; and
3. How we can acknowledge progress at all levels.

Each of these lenses add dimension, texture, and relevance to the actions a practitioner can take. In each section below, they are formulated into guiding questions.

Focusing Your Motivation

Motivation for engaging in advocacy typically falls into three areas: the personal, professional, or philosophical. Your motivation may be a blend of all three:

- Personal (I feel successful in my creative work.)
- Professional (I seek to contribute as a creative professional.)
- Philosophical (I believe that every person has the right to creativity and culture.)

Most arts and cultural education stakeholders have a touchstone experience that has shaped their passion for the arts: a reason to be involved in the work. This may be an experience as a student, parent, educator, or artist. It's important to understand how those experiences motivate our actions.

These touchstone experiences may be positive ("I loved my art class as a kid!") or negative ("Those kids learned nothing during the field trip to the museum."). As a result, we may desire to replicate the same experiences we had or witnessed, but we may also be responding to

those experiences in order to improve them for future generations. Thus, we must be intentional about how we shape our motivations into appropriate advocacy actions.

This self-awareness is crucial; we must be prepared to think through how our stories will be received. We should think about this story in the form of a constructive case, ending in an ask - your "why." If an advocacy 'ask' is perceived as too motivated by personal self-interest (e.g., your "why" is tied to your own individual benefit or highly responsive to a specific negative scenario), then it is likely to have less impact.

Guiding questions:

- Does my story clearly relate to my advocacy goal?
- Can my story illustrate a challenge or solution within the system(s)?
- How can my story celebrate progress?

Words Matter, So Choose Wisely

As humans, we tend to “go with our gut,” letting our emotions rule over reason. Research on decision making shows that humans make effective decisions when we slow down and think about our thinking, using both emotional and cognitive parts of our brain (Lehrer, 2010). This is a good reminder to examine our biases. We must dig deep and acknowledge our own unconscious biases about race, class, sex, gender, orientation, age, religion, ethnicity, and the like. These impact our actions, messages, and advocacy.

Similarly, we must also be careful about the bias of exceptionalism. Arts and cultural education are often separated from other curricula within schools and communities as a result of our field’s own actions over time. Arts classes are often called “specials” and arts educators “specialists,” leading to artists feeling isolated or misunderstood within the educational context. This has resulted in our field’s own advocacy for a special - exceptional - placement of the arts within the school day. Unintentionally, we have segmented ourselves into a silo which can be treated differently

(both positively or negatively) (Palmarini, 2015).

Ironically, decades of making the case for the unique contributions of the arts may have a side effect of separating the arts from the larger community, making it more difficult to be viewed as part of the whole. When we use the “us vs. them” argument (e.g., the arts vs. other subjects or areas of need, like sports), we set ourselves apart, which has been shown to result in disparities among certain student populations (i.e. less access for students of color, decreased supports for students with disabilities, etc.). In a world that is often harshly divided, our language must reflect belonging and the greater good. As is often said, it isn’t about getting a bigger piece of the pie, it’s about making the pie bigger (and more delicious).

Guiding questions:

- How am I getting feedback from others on language, tone, messaging?
- Am I aligning with others outside of my immediate field?
- How do my words and actions lead to a sense of belonging?

Employing Social Media for Movement Building

Research has shown the power social media has to create social capital through the vehicle of storytelling. 'Social capital' is defined as a set of shared values that allows individuals to work together in a group to effectively achieve a common purpose. The more conversations we have, either formal or informal, the more we build social capital links to a broader community (Juris, 2014).

In traditional advocacy strategy, practitioners focused on interpersonal conversations, however, we can now harness the power of technology to achieve the growth of social capital (Hawkins, 2012). By using the technology of social media platforms – specifically by using their algorithms to connect to broader movements – practitioners can amplify the voices of individual stakeholders in order to effect social change. According to Maryman and Scott (2016), social media has several benefits within advocacy efforts.

Social media enables individuals to:

- contribute to participatory dialogue about social issues,

- collaborate on change efforts, and
- establish a sense of community.

When used in conjunction with personal narratives and concise and effective storytelling, social media can create a bond between diverse yet like-minded activists, especially when linked to a larger goal (Yang, 2016). Through the use of strategic hashtags and interconnectedness between social media platforms, this bond can create an amplified effect of messaging that can reach millions of people with a common message.

This process in turn generates powerful social capital among participants in the movement, carrying the same message digitally. This social capital acts as currency in engaging systems change outside of the traditional interpersonal relationships.

Guiding questions:

- How are my social media messages advancing my goal?
- Which existing movements are my messages aligned with?
- How am I celebrating benchmarks? (e.g., reach, likes, engagement)

Form Strong Relationships... Locally

Due to the 10th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, most education policy is made by district or municipal decision-makers. So, if a practitioner is wondering where to spend time forming relationships, this is it.

Local advocacy can have both immediate and long-term impact. A simple conversation today can lay the foundation for tomorrow's support. Here are a few actions you can take:

- Build relationships with decision-makers in your community, like school board members, civil servants, municipal leaders, and local nonprofits.
- Leverage good news stories for greater impact, by sharing with your community, decision-makers, and on social media.
- Join a trusted professional association with a mission that can advance your personal beliefs - and contribute to their work.
- Use your voice to amplify messages that are tied to your specific goal.
- Widen your network to include colleagues outside your usual circle.

These steps can help build a stronger network. Imagine the possibilities when decision-makers are influenced by your story, message, and advocacy ask because they show up in conversation, on social media, on meeting agendas, and more. Your expanded network can really influence change quite effectively.

Guiding questions:

- Do I know the decision makers in my community (school board, city council, state representatives, congressional representatives)?
- What am I doing to cultivate a positive relationship with my network?
- How am I developing relationships with my professional colleagues?

So, Let's Get Going

The arts and cultural education field are coming around to the idea that advocacy is part of our everyday life, not only when we want or need something. Yet, we're also really good at putting it off. I mean, we are here to be making art, right?

Just as we are here to be making art and cultivating creativity in young people, so, too, are we the experts on the topic of arts and cultural education. So, we must accept that in order for decision-makers to be best informed, advocacy has to be part of our professional work — it is our responsibility.

We live in a world that requires reminders of the essential value of creative individuals; the impact of their creativity in society; and the power of arts, culture, and creativity in learning. Civic and political decision-makers must balance numerous priorities day-to-day, so may need a gentle reminder about these specific items. The general public may not fully understand the importance of the artistic lens which reflects our society's struggles as well as its triumphs. We, as a field, must be the cheerleaders and

standard bearers. To be engaged in advocacy is to advance our field, our sector, and society as a whole.

From my time working with advocates, I have compiled some common barriers to advocacy and possible solutions:

- Lack of Time ... A quick phone call, email or post is often all that's needed.
- Lack of Knowledge ... Ask a friend; develop reliable go-to resources.
- Fear of reprisal ... Tread lightly; frame as a question, not a demand.
- Someone else will do it ... If not you, then who?
- My voice doesn't count ... Yes, it does.

At the end of the day, your personal involvement is critical. Engaging in advocacy reminds us of what is important as human beings and as members of a global community. It doesn't mean you'll win all the time; however, it does mean that every conversation, every parent meeting, social media post, and board presentation will move arts and cultural education forward.

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GENERATION**

Creative Generation believes that youth create change. We are a values-driven global collective that collaborates with young creatives and those who cultivate their creativity to take local actions towards global changes in pursuit of a more just world. Founded in 2019, Creative Generation operates five signature programs: The Campaign for a Creative Generation, the Institute for Creative Social Transformation,

The Academy for Creative Leadership, the Incubator for Creative Impact, and the Foundation for a Creative Generation. www.Creative-Generation.org

The Creative Generation Journal aims to create a scholarly space to amplify the voices of young creatives and practitioners who catalyze social transformation and document and disseminate promising cultural, education, and social change practices which cultivate creativity in youth.

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Laurie Schell (she/her) serves as the Senior Specialist for Content and Training with a focus on case making and systems change. In this role, she contributes to specific projects related to professional development and curriculum development.

Laurie is founding principal of Laurie Schell Associates | ElevateArtsEd, providing consulting services and issue expertise in arts education. Widely recognized for leadership in the nonprofit and education sectors, Laurie Schell has worked to foster arts education through strategic alliances and partnerships, policy and advocacy campaigns, innovative programs, directed research, and mobilizing constituencies for action.

Ms. Schell served as the the inaugural director of Music Makes Us (2012-2017), the public/private music education initiative in Metro Nashville Public Schools, jointly supported by the mayor's office, music industry, and the school district. During her tenure, participation in music increased to over 60% of the K-12 student population. Forty-five classes were added in 18 schools, with over \$5 million raised in private and government funds to augment district funding.

Previously, Ms. Schell was the executive director of the California Alliance for Arts Education (2001 – 2011), where she led a successful campaign to secure a historic \$605

million investment in K-12 arts education, co-edited numerous policy papers, and co-created the Insider's Guide to Arts Education Planning, now in its 3rd edition.

Ms. Schell holds a B.A. from Stanford University, an M.A. in Liberal Studies/ Dance from Wesleyan University in Connecticut and pursued further studies at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She currently serves on the board of Save the Music Foundation and ArtsEd Tennessee, a statewide advocacy coalition.