



The Value of Multiple Perspectives in Advocacy

Laurie T. Schell*

Creative Generation; Nashville, TN, USA

abstract:

This article explores the meaning of perspective in making the case for the arts and arts education. It underscores the importance of advocacy that sees the larger system while working within a local context. Three perspectives are described which are most often represented in arts, culture, and arts education advocacy: "practitioner advocate," "field-builder advocate," and "policy advocate." Each group has its constituents, ranging from teachers to corporate citizens to national advocacy coalitions. Effective advocacy is accomplished by understanding first where you are, then embracing perspectives beyond your own. Using the metaphor of being in the balcony or on the dance floor to describe the vantage points of different perspectives, the article makes the point that it is time for casemakers and systems-changers to combine their perspectives to drive the changes they wish to see in the creative education of our youth. The article concludes with four recommended strategies and guiding questions for connecting multiple points of view, enabling everyone's ability to see the bigger picture while acting locally: Enhance your perspective; own your expertise; embrace learning; and commit to action.

keywords:

arts and culture, systems change, case-making, advocacy, social justice, arts education, music education

suggested citation:

Schell, Laurie T. (2022) The Value of Multiple Perspectives in Advocacy, Creative Generation Journal, 3:1, 16-24, DOI: 10.51163/creative-gen012

**Laurie T. Schell is founder of Elevate Arts Ed and a Sr. Specialist, Content & Training with Creative Generation; laurie@elevateartsed.org.*

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 visual art, the term perspective is used when drawing solid objects on a two-dimensional surface so as to give the right impression of their height, width, depth, and position in relation to each other when viewed from a particular point. A perspective drawing shows the viewer what is seen or experienced from a singular point of view.

Perspective is also defined more broadly as having a particular point of view. What do we see from where we are standing? What might we see if we shift positions? Will that shift in perspective lead to greater understanding? Will it lead to action?

In *"Introduction to Case-making and Systems Change"*, 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 in our programs, communities, and around the world.

My previous article, *The Power of the Individual in Advocacy*, describes the roles and responsibilities of individuals at the heart of advocacy strategy through four lenses, with suggestions for action.

This article continues the theme of *Advocacy for Self* by exploring the meaning of perspective in making the case for the arts and arts education. The article underscores the importance of seeing the larger system while working within a local context. After an exploration of core concepts and ideas, I conclude with some steps which any advocate can take:

- Enhance your perspective;
- Own your expertise;
- Embrace learning; and
- Commit to action.

Where Do You Stand?

It begins with us: who we are, what we know, and how we see and experience our work. Whether you are an arts educator, working everyday to advance students' creative learning experiences; an artist, creating meaningful connections in your community; or an administrator, working on policy and programmatic levers that will advance educational and social change through the arts and culture - your perspective is valid.

When we aim to make the case for arts and cultural education or use arts and cultural education to drive systems change for other complex challenges, we must bring our perspectives to the forefront of our efforts. First begin by naming your most prevalent perspective.

From my many years of leading advocacy efforts, I have observed hundreds of individuals clarify what they bring to the work. Here are three perspectives which are most often represented in arts, culture, and arts education advocacy:

- *Practitioner Advocate*: Teachers, teaching artists, artists, community arts organization staff, parents, and administrators would fall within this

group. They are doing the everyday work of providing creative learning experiences to youth, directly in the classroom and community and indirectly through parenting, partnerships, and administrative support. They engage with field-builders and policy advocates with their real-life examples of impact and positive change.

- *Field-builder Advocate*: Researchers, funders, corporate citizens, faculty at institutions of higher education, or staffers at organizations such as arts service organizations and professional educator associations are in this group. They engage with practitioner and policy advocates to build understanding and knowledge and to increase capacity in the field.
- *Policy Advocate*: National, state, and local advocacy coalitions are in this category. These are the folks who advance policy agendas and resource allocations in support of the arts and cultural education at the municipal, state or regional and national levels. They educate decision-makers and advocates through public engagement, amplify messages, mobilize constituencies for action, and seek to influence

(or even lobby) policymakers. They engage with practitioner and field-builder advocates by learning from the grassroots levels to bring about the changes needed and by informing their peers about the realities of public policy processes.

Effective advocacy is accomplished by understanding first where you are, then embracing perspectives beyond your own.

Achieving Multiple Perspectives

In *Leadership on the Line*, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky use a balcony and dance floor metaphor to describe a multi-focused perspective.

“Let’s say you are dancing in a big ballroom with a balcony up above.... Most of your attention focuses on your dance partner.... You let yourself be carried away by the music, your partner, and the moment. But if you had gone up to the balcony and looked down on the dance floor, you might have seen a very different picture. You would have noticed all sorts of patterns.... Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only for a moment.

The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray.” (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002, p. 53.)

I would posit the opposite is true, as well. The only way for a balcony observer to understand what’s happening on the dance floor is to join the dance, even if only briefly.

Here are a few real world examples. Take a moment to consider if the advocate is on the dance floor or in the balcony:

- As a classroom arts educator (practitioner advocate), I see the needs of my students, their level of engagement, and learning progress. I see a need for instructional materials, such as instruments, theatre or studio spaces, and art supplies. What I don’t see (or fully understand) are the policies and budgetary decision-making process that impact my program.
- As a funder (field-builder advocate), I provide support for practitioner advocates that aligns with my organization’s mission and values. What I don’t see (or fully understand) is how financial contributions strengthen the work

on the ground, like connections between people or institutions, and cultivate a greater movement to advance pedagogy or practices.

- As a staffer at a state advocacy coalition (policy advocate), I see what exists in education policy that informs arts and cultural education in my state. I see gaps in policy and implementation that could be improved. What I don't see (or fully understand) is how the gaps between policy and implementation can be addressed and what steps could be taken at the local level to empower the most localized decision-makers to shift priorities which will improve access to and participation in creative learning experiences.

Connect Multiple Points of View to Advocacy

With a multitude of perspectives, and an increased awareness from both the balcony and the dance floor, it is time for casemakers and systems-changers to combine their perspectives to drive the changes they wish to see. What follows are four strategies for connecting multiple points of view and enhancing your ability to see the bigger picture while acting locally.

Enhance Your Perspective

- Take on the role of observer at a meeting rather than being a participant (Heifetz, 2009). Observe a class, attend a board meeting, or observe committee meetings.
- Set up rigorous data systems that enable objectivity (McCannon, 2017). Use existing data systems that track access and participation: this could be as complex as examining state longitudinal data or could be as simple as a teaching journal about the changes you witness in students..
- Establish solid channels of communication through a network of advocates (Kearns, 2007). State advocacy organizations have a robust network of local advocates, community, and content experts that inform a statewide legislative advocacy agenda.

Guiding questions:

- What do I observe in terms of decision making protocols, teaching/learning strategies, and power dynamics?
- What does the data tell me? What questions remain?
- What can I learn from ongoing dialogue with others in the field?

Own Your Expertise

- Look for opportunities to claim your knowledge and experience and share with others in peer-to-peer learning networks.
- To craft effective policies, practitioner advocates are the best source for what works (or doesn't work). Speak at school board meetings, sit on school improvement committees, volunteer for planning work.
- To earn the trust of a policymaker, policy advocates guide us to create compelling narratives that are based on data. Use social media and build relationships locally.

Guiding questions:

- What is my expertise?
- How can I use my expertise to inform others?
- How can I reach out to decision makers to be a resource for them?

Embrace Learning

- Take advantage of learning opportunities in your community and at state and national conferences.

These sessions are useful in presenting a big picture perspective and practical in providing concrete action steps. Americans for the Arts, Arts Education Partnership, NAMM Foundation, the professional arts educator associations, and others are providing rich opportunities to advance knowledge and professional learning for our field.

- Connect with Creative Generation. Through research, podcasts, blogs, and internships, they provide multiple learning platforms for young creatives who want to cultivate their creativity and take local actions in pursuit of global change.
- To look outside of the field, check out Upswell hosted by Independent Sector. If you cannot attend scheduled sessions, recordings are often available for your use.

Guiding questions:

- What organizations will broaden my perspective?
- What types of learning suits my learning style best?
- Who is doing work outside of my field that I admire?

Commit to Action

- Take a moment to experience the bigger picture (balcony) if you are a practitioner advocate (dance floor). Look for patterns in behavior or decision making, relationships and power dynamics, and pathways or processes that are visible only from a distance.
- If you work from a removed perspective as a field or policy advocate (balcony), spend some time in the classroom or with students (dance floor) to understand the day-to-day challenges and workings of creative learning at the student/educator level.

Guiding question:

- What actions will I take to experience a perspective that is different from my own?

We all have an important role to play in the creative education of our youth. We can better advance our cause through multiple perspectives. Balcony *and* dance floor.

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Article adapted by the author from "Forest And the Trees: Perspectives in Arts Education Advocacy," on ElevateArtsEd.

**CREATIVE
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.

Laurie T. Schell
Senior Specialist, Content & Training
Creative Generation; Nashville, TN

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.