

# **The Ripple Effect: Involving Community in Arts Education Advocacy**

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## **A Parable of Purpose**

“Whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is well done!” (Van Gogh, 2014). This quote personifies the feeling or the need to advocate, and when we love something so much we will work hard at it and for it, we can accomplish more than we thought we could.

When I began to think about contemporary art education issues that might be of professional interest to art educators I thought of the scarcity of public school art programs in my local area of Los Angeles. I also thought of how precariously fragile the programs that do exist often are, and the extreme need there is to advocate for their existence. I also thought about the sense of smallness I feel when I am advocating for something I love, like art education; the fear of such an enormous task with seemingly insurmountable odds.

In the book, *The Little Gardener* (2015), a thumb sized gardener joyfully works on his garden. It is his home. It is his joy. As hardworking as he is though he finds he is just too small for such an enormous task. As ill-matched as he is to his garden mission, he continues on until his work pays off and a single beautiful flower blossoms. This makes him want to work harder, but his efforts begin to fail. He is just too small. As he goes to bed one night he sends a wish into the universe for someone to help him. No one heard his tiny voice, but someone saw the one beautiful flower. “It gave the someone hope. It made someone want to work harder” (Hughes, 2015, p. 10). This regular sized someone began to tend the garden, and when the little gardener awoke, he awoke to a beautiful, transformed garden.

This little parable of purpose is a great look at the convergence of faith and humbleness; of a tale of feeling small in the face of an enormous task, but a belief in what could be. It is a tale

of contagious perseverance and shared purpose. In this paper I will look at the intersection of art education, advocacy, and the need for community support.

### **Agent of Influence**

Art teachers generally believe in the importance of art in schools, but some colleagues and some administrators do not (Rufer, Lake, Robinson & Hicks, 1998). Administrators and education reformers continuously omit or downgrade information and arts and humanities content when contending with curriculum and other important skills in major publications. For example Rufer et al. (1998) mentions that education reformers will often focus on the importance of communication skills, but omit visual communication as an area of significance.

However, most Americans believe art in schools is vital and important. In fact a 2005 Harris poll shows that 93% of Americans believe that arts are integral to a balanced education. A majority believe the arts should receive support from the government, public, and private resources, and would pay an extra \$15 dollars per year in federal taxes to support the arts (Dunn, 1985). Moreover, there is a growing need for creativity and artists within business. Rufer et al. (1998), reminds us that more and more businesses are hiring artists internationally because there is lack of trained artists in the United States.

Advocacy for arts and arts education is crucial for 21st century art educators, and it starts from within us as an individual. An advocate is someone who believes, pleads the cause, and supports or promotes an interest or something of personal value. In order to affect change and encourage something of significance, we need to first understand and acknowledge who we are, what we believe in and be able to clearly articulate it (Boyd, Collins, Hess, Johnson,& Trimble,

2009). From there we can take action, and begin our efforts of intention that leaves a ripple effect on the people and community around us.

For example, the urban activist, JR (2011) once found a camera on the subway. He turned that camera into his voice, and shared his message with the community around him, one photo, a can of wheatpaste, and one wall at a time. By the belief in his idea he started a global phenomenon for change. His idea was his passion and his message. Art educators can look to JR or any number of artists who use the medium of art to voice their message for change, one small idea, and one community at a time.

### **Involving Community**

How can art teachers contribute to a real grassroots education reform for art education? First realize that their values, beliefs, and voices are important, and let it be heard, then they must form partnerships. Dunn (1985) implores art educators to consider advocacy more like marketing, and that the partnerships he wants teachers to form are in actuality, potential purchasers.

Advocacy is an important part of being an art educator today. It is about raising questions, engaging community, redefining issues, and taking action, not necessarily by utilizing bumper stickers and picket signs, but by human interactions, gaining knowledge, and promoting awareness. We have the power to make bridges and connections between art, education, and community, and we can all benefit one from another.

Regular classroom teachers don't usually need to promote or persuade anyone of the importance of their content, but art educators do not have that luxury. Now more than ever the

challenges of art education must be met. Art teachers can't be shy. They need to brag about student work, and show people the amazing things being done in their classrooms.

“Advocacy begins when someone speaks to another person about the importance of arts education” (Boyd et al., 2009). Art educators should feel empowered to promote their programs, and stand up for the students and ideals they believe in. As Bobick and DiCindio (2012) implore, “we cannot sit on the sidelines and expect others to advocate for us” (p. 22). Ulbricht (2002) reminds us that today we must rely on the public for support; that gone are the days of church, royalty, and the wealthy individual patronage of the arts.

### **Circles of Influence**

“To teach art to today's students, we have to go beyond the walls of our schools” (Rufer et al., 1998). Freedman (2011) also writes about gaining community support for the survival of arts education programming. In addition to working with those who already support and believe in the same cause, arts educators can benefit from extending their network to those who share a common interest, such as parents and students.

We often overlook these valuable allies, but students know the value of arts programming and what improvements are often needed. Parents as well, often have strong voices, and well-developed connections. They are invested in their children's education, care about the quality of education their children receive, as well as wanting access to all opportunities for their children. Businesses and community leaders can also be exceptional allies. They are deeply rooted in the community and have large existing networks. They have a vested interest in the community at large, which includes places of education and its students.

Lake (1998) discusses strategies she used to help gain needed equipment for her students. She explains how she utilized a local business' space for a student photography exhibition in which she slyly incorporated photos of darkroom equipment she needed. She describes how after the exhibition closed she received \$3,000.00 worth of donated supplies. Then she tells how impressed her local district was with this feat that they created a darkroom for her. Making community connections is how arts programming stays relevant in society and in turn relevant to district leaders, and connecting community to the needs of students will guarantee support for programming.

Heyn (n.d.) gives 50 different ways of involving community in an art teacher's advocacy efforts. Her list includes things as simple as sending an email to colleagues showcasing a student's work, or asking a librarian to pull books; to creating an online gallery of student work or a social media account for parents to follow; as well as involving local businesses for showcasing student work and creating art shows for parent engagement. Involving community can be as simple or as complicated as the educator is comfortable with; remembering their voice and identity needs to be taken into account when advocating for their programs.

## **Conclusion**

Successful art programs in the future will not be determined by historic precedence nor traditional rationales. They will be determined by strong community involvement and support, meeting student needs, and by art teachers being open to an ever changing content. (Rufer et al., 1998)

Community involvement in art education advocacy is necessary. We must acknowledge our beliefs and what we hold to be valuable, clearly articulate it, and realize that our voice matters;

from there we must garner community partnerships, realizing the potentially valuable allies of those who are closest to us. If we choose to do nothing it is a choice, but there will be people who will step into the void, take your power, and use it to accomplish what they want. We must do what is necessary to run a successful program, and ensure it's future.

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