

ARTS EDUCATION: ADVOCACY AND RESEARCH

A Session of the 2009 WESTAF Symposium:
Engaging the Now: Arguments, Research,
and New Environments for the Arts

The logo for WESTAF is rendered in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif typeface. The letters 'W', 'E', 'S', 'T', 'A', and 'F' are solid and blocky. The letter 'T' is replaced by a stylized, curved shape that resembles a comma or a flourish, which is also dark blue and matches the overall aesthetic of the logo.

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Arts Education: Advocacy and Research

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**Engaging the Now: Arguments, Research,
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Advocates for arts education have long cited research that demonstrates the contribution of arts education to the learning process. Unfortunately, some of the traditionally cited findings have emerged from research that does not stand up to rigorous scrutiny. Lynn Waldorf and Laurie Schell offer their thoughts about arts education advocacy and research. They also discuss current trends in arts education advocacy research.

Presentation

Lynn Waldorf

When I first became involved in arts education 10 years ago, I found that education researchers, whom we tend to perceive as being unbiased, are actually quite opinionated. People choose research as a career path not because they want to provide unbiased representations but often because they care deeply about specific topics related to their own experiences. By conducting research in those areas, they can position themselves as effective advocates for specific policies and practices. The specter of personal bias is especially present in situations where a researcher is hired to evaluate a program that may lose funding and, subsequently, staff jobs if negative findings are reported. Early in my training as an evaluator and researcher, I was actually advised not to include negative findings in written reports because neither the people running the programs nor the funders want to see them. One time, I ran into serious problems with a client when my project report exposed the pitfalls in the theory and student outcomes of the program.

Given the amount of political tension in the arts education field today caused by funding shortages and the difficulties posed in writing unbiased program reports, how can we discern which are quality research reports and which are not? If we want to use data to inform our decisions or to advocate for certain positions, how can we state our case using research that may later be re-analyzed and exposed as ineffectual?

It may be helpful to recall that the basic purpose of research is to inform decision making rather than to persuade people to change a belief or take a particular action, though it certainly is employed for those purposes as well. When a research report is used for arts education advocacy, there will be detractors on the other side who will look for

weaknesses in the study. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a perfect research study. There are some fairly good studies that show cause and effect and some not-so-good studies that claim to show the same but do not. The better studies tend to be very expensive, which places another limit on the number that can be conducted at any given time.

In recent years, program evaluation has been used as a more cost-effective process for analyzing trends in classroom activity and making educated guesses about how best to fund, implement, and support quality arts education programs. Evaluation can be considered a research short cut, though there are ramifications regarding the power of claims that can be made. In the last few years, some organizations have pushed the boundaries of ethical research by making public claims that do not stand up well under rigorous re-analysis. As a result, the arts education field has been charged with raising its research standards, which has been fairly effective to date.

There are three questions one should ask when evaluating the validity of a research study. The first question is: Who is doing the study and with what organization or institution are they affiliated? Talented researchers tend to be attracted to high-profile projects. Those studies are often successful because the researchers work hard to obtain reliable data and the resulting press releases attract money, which further positions the projects to produce good findings. Research studies conducted through research-oriented universities or private research organizations with good reputations are likely to be valuable for advocacy.

It is helpful to ask around in the field about the academic reputation of the researchers, and it is also important to look at their background training. Graduate students can acquire a master's degree and start conducting evaluation studies to make money. However, they may not have substantial knowledge about evaluation practices, such as how to do statistical analysis correctly, conduct an informative focus-group interview, or develop relevant and unbiased survey items. As a result, the quality and validity of their findings suffer, and the field suffers in turn. As professionals, we need to consider implementing a certification process for researchers and evaluators because currently anyone can call themselves such and start working in the field.

The second question to ask about a research study is: How independent is the research that is being conducted? Are the researchers being paid by a client, or have a group of people pursued a study grant together? It is also important to know if the agenda for a study was set by researchers or perhaps by a foundation or public agency that required a specific program of study be followed. Valid and reliable research can be pursued in any of these scenarios, but understanding the initial context can help in determining the strength of validity.

The third question to ask is: How is the research study designed? Meta evaluations of multiple studies can be strong designs. The research volumes *Champions of Change* and *Critical Links* are not technically meta evaluations, but they are collections of some of the best available research in the field. Those reports were published by the Arts Education Partnership, which tends to fund rigorous studies. It is also worth knowing the sample size of the study you are considering as well as whether the people involved were randomly selected or volunteers. These factors all affect the legitimacy of claims.

And finally, those who wish to use research reports for advocacy need to fully read and digest the reports to understand them. The best way to get more information about a study you have just read is to call the author and ask about the study's strengths and weaknesses. If the author is willing to talk about the weaknesses of the study, the evaluator will have a better understanding of how to use the strengths without overstating claims.

Laurie Schell

When Proposition 13 was passed in the late 1970s in California, schools lost money as a result of a cap on property taxes. One of the first things to be moved to the margins in schools was the arts. In response, arts organizations argued that they had the knowledge and expertise to bring the arts back into schools. Funders were the only real audience for this argument. Advocates, at that time, had to convince funders to fund partnerships with schools so that state and local arts councils could fix the problem by putting visiting artists in schools. Arts organizations followed that strategy until the end of the 1980s.

Since the 1990s, the conversation has shifted to a broader stage. Now we are trying to increase knowledge and awareness among multiple target audiences. The first audience is the public. The second audience is decision makers, which include legislators, state elected leaders, and local decision makers. The third audience is advocates, which include parents, business leaders, grassroots advocates, arts teachers, artists, arts organizations, and others. The fourth audience is the education establishment, including superintendents, principals, and teachers' unions. Lastly, it is important to convince the media—the opinion makers—that the arts are a necessary component of education.

One of the first strategies most of us tried was the hero story. We found kids who persevered through adversity and grew up to become artists and model citizens. We said that those stories prove that participation in the arts increases the ability of children to succeed. We also gave awards to arts leaders, businesses, legislative leaders, and school district leaders, hoping to increase the visibility and value of the arts.

Since the 1990s, we have been moving toward accountability and data-driven decision-making coupled with values-based public opinion. We began to see public opinion surveys about the arts and legislative hearings based on research data. We then began to use research as an advocacy tool. Over the last 15 years, some claims were based on good, solid research. Some gave rise to skepticism. Here is a sample of some of the headlines: “The Arts Ensure Higher Scores on the SAT,” “The Arts Keep Disenfranchised Youth in School and Ensure College Acceptance,” “The Arts Foster Self-Discipline, Teamwork, Self-Confidence, Motivation, and Empathy,” “Mozart Makes Babies Smarter,” and “The Arts Create Better Communities.” As advocates, we have to look at the vast research and decide what we believe, who else might believe what we believe, and what will stick with our audiences.

We frequently argue among ourselves in the arts field. Some of us believe the benefits of the arts are intrinsic; others believe they are extrinsic. Because each artistic discipline has its distinct advocates, as a field we are not always as unified as we should be. This internal tension occasionally prevents us from presenting effective arguments to the decision makers.

In 2006, we passed a \$100 million budget item for arts education. This was accomplished largely because Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was our champion and put it on the agenda. Things have changed since then, but that was an uplifting time. Our job was to find the argument that would help him convince the other policy makers and the public that arts education is important. The California Alliance for Arts Education had recently published a briefing paper with a message of quality, equity, and access, and that was the message that worked. The research arguments had certainly laid a foundation, but what convinced policy makers was the argument that rich communities had arts education, and communities without private funds did not.

Now the landscape has changed again—California no longer has money, and the arts budget has been cut once again as it is in any economic recession. Arts education has been pushed to the margins in many schools. Although the \$109 million allocation we received is still on the books, schools are now free to raid it to pay whatever expenses they deem more important. What argument works now? The argument that has caught the attention of the public and policy makers is about creativity and innovation, and not just in relation to preparing workforces for the future. In *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink (2005) writes that manufacturing jobs can be done anywhere in the world, but the United States has creativity and innovation to offer.

The popularity of that argument has brought the business community into the fray. After 15 years of absence from the arts education conversation, they are suddenly leading the charge for creativity and innovation. However, the business community is having difficulty creating a firm link to the K-12 community. One advancing trend is in career technical education, which presents some opportunities for intersections with the arts, but also some threats to overrun the careful framework and standards that have been set. Another alternative is charter schools, which are becoming popular in California. Another option is to move arts education to out-of-school time. But how do we ensure the charter schools have the same opportunities as public schools? How do we advance out-of-school arts education for all students? These questions are part of a new conversation that will require research and a new messaging campaign. I think the strongest arguments we can make now are to link quality K-12 education to healthy communities and to the development of 21st-century skills. How do we link a quality education to a better workforce, better and more informed citizens, and engaged colleagues who can recreate the cycle for the next generation?

Discussion

André Pettigrew

The global economic crisis is creating an opportunity for us. The uncertainty of our economy and abstract nature of the economic events of the last 20 months call for a more creative and innovative way of thinking and problem solving. Most routine tasks have been automated using technology, so businesses see real value in the ability to think creatively and solve problems with imagination. If we can combine the creative arts, including music, we will have something quite powerful to offer the business community.

The business community often struggles to see the direct link between K-12 education and their business. K-12 education is a bureaucracy. The business model around education is changing, which creates room for entrepreneurial schools to spring up all over the country. These changes are an opportunity for us to help figure out how to rebuild our economy and workforce, and it is also a good time to send people a message about the value of a multidisciplinary approach that allows the arts to be a key ingredient in bringing together communities.

The arts and creativity have always been important in our country. In Detroit, Michigan, where I grew up, the automobile industry took off with Henry Ford's innovation of the assembly line. In my neighborhood, an autoworker named Berry Gordy founded Motown by creating an assembly line of musical talent. That opportunity for innovation existed forty years ago, and it exists today. In order to seize it, we need to connect the arts to economic development.

Julia Lowell

Arts education has different meanings for different people. It can mean music, visual arts, dance, and theater. What are we trying to achieve in those different areas? There is also a lot of disagreement about the goals of arts education. Are we educating for performance? Are we educating for arts appreciation? This ambiguity makes advocacy difficult. Research studies are scattered among very different arts education programs with very different goals, and it is hard to make convincing connections with such unfocused data.

Lynn Waldorf

I would like to respond to what Julia Lowell said about the wide breadth of what is valued in arts education. The content-standards movement in the arts, which is fairly new, is attempting to organize those values. Other core subject areas have had standards since 1893, but the arts were not given standards when the federally appointed education committee created the secondary curriculum. The committee thought the arts were important to teach, but the specifics of what was taught should be dictated by local values

and needs. As a result, we did not have a comprehensive and uniform set of standards for the next 100 years. We now have national standards in all the art forms, and most states are adopting their own related set of standards as well. This gives us a framework for pulling together those scattered values.

Steve Seidel (2009) published a report at Harvard University recently called *The Qualities of Quality*. He and his team interviewed 400 people and reviewed 1,000 research studies on the topic of defining quality arts education. Seidel found that there is some general agreement on the purposes of arts education, but, more important, he wrote that the purposes of arts education have to be grounded in the needs of the community. For example, when I recently facilitated a discussion about arts education and local needs in Los Angeles, local education leaders perceived that while arts education should focus on the visual and performing arts standards, it could also be used to address economic inequities, racial tensions, and regional workforce preparation, particularly involving film and digital technologies.

Laurie Schell

We frame our advocacy in California around state law, which says the arts shall be taught in California public schools. To the law, the arts means dance, music, theater, and visual arts, although there is a current movement to add new media. These arts education standards were adopted in California in 2001, and they describe what all children should know and be able to do by the time they graduate high school. That includes artistic perception, creative expression, historical and cultural context, aesthetic valuing, and understanding connections and relationships with other areas as well. Those five strands form the foundation for the state standards.

Kwende Kefentse

I think Larry Rothfield's (2007) research around how people create scenes by symbolizing their consumption in their locality is relevant here. Each municipality has local arts activity. If we can connect arts education to that local art, we will create a deeper ecosystem of education and feedback.

Laura Zucker

People seem to be moving away from the model that Laurie Schell mentioned earlier, in which arts organizations would simply provide the educational experience. We now view the delivery system as a three-legged stool. The arts organizations are important for connecting education to the local community and for bringing artists into the classroom; however, in order for an arts education program to be effective, it also needs trained generalist teachers as well as trained specialist teachers.

Jennifer Hahn

As Julia Lowell said earlier, it is difficult to use data as a tool for advocacy because they are so scattered. However, I would argue that mobilization is the main obstacle to effective advocacy. We do fight among ourselves about how the arts should be taught, and this conversation should be internal only. Every time we expose that internal argument to the public and the powers that be, we undercut what we are trying to achieve as advocates. Similarly, every time we talk about arts education being at the bottom of the totem pole, we ensure that we will be treated that way. Perhaps I have lower standards as someone who simply creates advocacy campaigns and pushes to make them work, but I believe that we already know more than we need to know in order to mobilize people for this cause. We simply are not mobilizing people as well as we could.

Joaquín Herranz

When I worked with the Urban Institute, it seemed to me that there is substantial research demonstrating the positive effects of integrating the arts with education. If we have so many reports we can use to build our argument for arts education, why does the argument have no traction?

Jennifer Novak-Leonard

I am intrigued by the notion of basing a new messaging campaign on creativity and innovation, and I think that argument has traction because it is coming not just from the arts field but from many stakeholders in our society and our economy who want creative workforces and a creative, civically engaged citizenry. Many arts organizations are focused on survival and utilizing arts education as a way of ensuring future appreciators of art, but that doesn't tend to resonate with the general public. I am wondering how arts organizations could collaboratively team with other efforts underway to build a campaign based on creativity and innovation. To respond to Joaquín Herranz's comment about research-based arguments having no traction, I believe that happens because the arguments are often coming from the arts community itself—as in many fields—and distinguishing between research and advocacy can be difficult.

Laurie Schell

To respond to Jennifer Novak-Leonard's comment about why arts organizations want arts education, it is true that we want an audience for the arts in the future. However, the arts community also agrees that we need citizens who understand and are engaged in culture. We need citizens who are engaged in the political process. We need engagement. The argument for arts education is not as self-referential as it used to be.

Ilona Kish

I recently attended the world summit on arts and culture in Johannesburg, and the closing plenary session was called something like “Can Art Save the World?” The majority of the arts advocates there even argued that the millennium development goals are failing because there was no cultural component. This argument carries little weight, but what arguments are credible? Regarding arts education, I recommend the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) study of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2004). One last thing I want to mention is that the European Union has thematic promotional years, and this year is the year of creativity and innovation. These “years” often become empty buzz words, and they have not done the arts community any good so far.

Laura Zucker

I would like to add to Joaquín Herranz's question about why we have no traction even though we have more than enough research data. I think that the messenger is a critical component in making these arguments. We have not addressed this yet, but we should think about who is delivering the message and how.

Danielle Endres

I agree with Lynn Waldorf's earlier point that research is not an inherently persuasive argument to the public, and we do have a lot of work to do in messaging and advocacy. She also mentioned that the quality of university research is important in gathering data. To what extent are universities collaborating with local or state arts agencies to create useful research? I ask because I am an argumentation scholar, and we frequently do community-based research to help communities make the arguments they need to make.

Lynn Waldorf

Universities are often criticized for being myopic in their vision and refusing to create partnerships with others, although sometimes that is because of how the university fiscal model is set up and other times due to restrictive intellectual property policies. My organization, the Griffin Center for Inspired Instruction, is working to change that model by creating partnerships among universities, local school districts, arts organizations, and state agencies. I can think of a few other highly visible non-profits that make a point of doing this well. Hopefully, more will follow suit.

Steven Tepper

I agree with Jennifer Novak-Leonard's suggestion that there is value in the argument about creativity and innovation. There are core creative competencies, and the arts are not the only disciplines that contribute to them. Also, as Julia Lowell pointed out, the arts are not all one thing.

Even though it is not good for advocacy, as we move forward with a research agenda, we should be clear that we are not claiming that every type of art and arts training produces those core creative competencies. There are plenty of arts that are not taught in a creative way, do not inspire kids creatively, and are essentially no different from learning the rote skills of lab work in a science class. We need to articulate which outcomes we are claiming are caused by which activities in the arts.

What should we focus our research on, and what is the scope? There are 970,000 instructional guitar videos on YouTube. Outside of school, kids have unbelievable access to information about how to produce art. If we are claiming that type of instruction is not as good as in-school arts education, we should at least do some research to figure out if that is true. We should also recognize that, in making that claim, we are discounting the vast majority of ways in which young people learn their craft. Our research should take into account the entire broad arena of how people learn to be creative, including new technologies and partners we do not usually think about. For example, the guitar shops that teach guitar lessons in every city are our partners.

We have two problems. We are too narrow in our focus, and we are too expansive in our claim that all arts produce the creative outcomes we seek. We have to find a more balanced position as we move forward.

Ann Markusen

Larry Gross (1995) argues that art teachers, unlike teachers of other disciplines, instruct students that art is only for certain people. Gross calls the result “the artist’s reservation.” He suggests that people in this society do not think the arts are important because art classes emphasize quality, and only a few students rise to the top. In other words, learning about art is not important because it is just for the specially talented. Is anyone addressing the issue of how art is taught? Is it possible to transform the arts curriculum so that students would not only learn who the great artists are but would also feel like artists themselves?

Lynn Waldorf

No one knows what is going on in art classes, and no one is holding the teachers accountable to anything related to the quality or even the content of instruction. That is one area in which research is lacking, although some newer studies are beginning to explore it. We need to look at how teachers are evaluated, professional development and who delivers it, and the content that is taught.

Larry Meeker

We are really talking about two things: advocacy and research. When we go out and advocate as arts enthusiasts, our audience perceives us as just coming from the arts community. We could use interdisciplinary research to create relationships that would in turn create other advocates for the arts. For example, does the film industry bring economic development benefits? Does arts education result in better employees or students? If we use research to link to other disciplines, we may be able to align their agendas with our own.

Laura Zucker

One barrier to conducting effective research, as I understand it, is that it is nearly impossible to isolate the effects of arts education—in order to substantiate it—from everything else that is happening in a child's environment.

John Holden

In my paper “Cultural Learning,” I addressed the question of what barriers are preventing arts education arguments from getting traction (Holden, 2008). One barrier is the difficulty of using research to prove cause and effect. Another barrier is confusion. I found 20 different ways of defining cultural learning, for example. Another limitation is the capacity of the arts sector. What happens if we succeed? Our lack of coordination with other efforts is a problem as well. But the two biggest issues were the structures in education and the receptivity of teachers.

Not long ago, there was an administrative announcement that every child in the U.K. would be taught five hours of arts and culture. The teaching unions complained about having to teach yet another subject. There was no imagination about how to integrate the arts with the rest of the curriculum or how to teach the arts outside school hours with other parts of the community. We need to work on the teaching profession and not just arts teachers. When theater practitioners go into schools, teachers often feel threatened because the kids have fun for a day, but when the teachers come back, they are disappointed. We are not getting traction because we need to work on teachers, not on the arts.

Laura Zucker

Laurie Schell mentioned earlier that we are now having conversations with people on as many different leverage points as possible. That is certainly what is happening in Los Angeles County. We are talking to the public, teachers, superintendents, principals, and others. You never know who can effectively carry the message. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger surprised us by putting \$100 million into the budget for arts education, and he did that, as I understand it, because his sister-in-law, a member of the California Arts Council, suggested he do it over Thanksgiving dinner.

Frank Hamsher

Engaging those who are not arts educators in this conversation is important. You need to create a cohesive message that speaks to the outside as well as the inside. Figure out what you want people to understand, and use the best data you have to back up your message. Laurie Schell read a long list of all the arguments that have been made for arts education at one time or another, and almost all of them are true. But hearing the entire list at once left me with an amorphous feeling. If you want people to advocate for continued funding at school boards and the state legislature, you need to stop changing the theme of the message every year. Instead, find some cohesion, explain the basis for your argument, and be persistent.

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Symposium Presenters and Discussants

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Bibliography of Symposium Preliminary Readings

The items presented below served as background reading for symposium participants and observers of the 2009 WESTAF Symposium. Readings appear in the order in which they were presented to readers in the original symposium reading packets.

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