

**Panel on  
Arts Advocacy – A debate  
Dennis F. Tupman**

**Discussion questions**

1. "The role of advocacy is played most effectively by amateurs, by aficionados, and by those who control some portion of the bully pit." Colwell
  2. "With all the evidence supporting the value of arts education, it is difficult to understand why its existence is still threatened." Pitkealty
  3. "As advocacy has risen in popularity in journalistic writing and in the organizational vocabulary, it has begun to be used indiscriminately and pejoratively as a buzzword for such activities as lobbying for personal or political interests." Shore – American Psychiatrist
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**I**n addressing these questions, I wish to deal with a few larger issues first. These questions are crying out in my mind for comments on what is the larger social/cultural milieu that we find ourselves at this time.

To begin with may I say that I subscribe to some degree to the notion (albeit with some qualifications and limitations) that we live in what has often been dubbed, for want of a better expression, the **postmodern age**. The attendant phenomenon of postmodernism is philosophical **constructivism**. Postmodernism espouses the idea that we are past the age of certainty where there is a commonly agreed upon set of values and philosophies which enable us to connect as a society with mutual understanding. The global village with its exchange of world views, the effect of the massed media, particularly TV, and the pervasive effects of all technology – to name three influences - have caused numbing change. Toffler so aptly described this as Future Shock. Much more could be said about this.

In this confusing environment, some current philosophers maintain that truth has become more a socially constructed phenomenon. They argue that individuals create their own truths rather than inherit a pervasive body of truths from the community.

Many have reacted to this notion. These folk reassert what might be called fundamentalist/conservative views or traditional values. These two extreme ideas clash with one another all the time in our schools, in our churches, in our communities and even in our homes. And the volume is being turned up on this dissonance.

Now, given this increasing turmoil in these competing extremes it makes sense that there would be a variety of groups which would be advocating for their differing points of view. Call them pressure groups if you will. (For indeed I believe that arts advocacy

also embodies tactics of a pressure group.) Anyway, examples of these competing extremes abound. Environmentalists on the one hand, the developers on the other; fundamental theologians on the one hand, liberal theologians on the other. To come closer to home, the alternative schools on one hand, the back-to-basic, fundamentalist schools on the other.

The over riding process at work here is to restore a sense of order in people's minds because most folk dislike living in this uncertainty. Some have no problem with these value ambiguities, but I believe that most people do have difficulty and find some way to create order out of perceived chaos. Even the Chaology movement tries to see order in apparent randomness. This is what fractal mathematics is essentially about. It asserts some form or order for understanding and eventually for a sense of personal meaning. Therefore, it follows that there will be what Shore described in all these competing, personal interests. He seems, however, to feel that pressure grouping is a contamination of what might be called the pure advocacy process. I would contend that pressure grouping is a natural outcome and perhaps even essential in what we might call advocacy. That is what advocacy looks like these days, different interests competing for their share of a shrinking pie, I would submit. Fundamentally competing values. Our task, therefore as arts advocates, is to believe that what we have to offer in an arts education is essential.

**I would therefore maintain that the increasing number of advocacy groups and processes at work today and the relatively high amplitude of their messaging are directly proportional to the need by the people involved to restore personal order and meaning in their lives. Meaning is determined by what we value.**

**I would further contend that some form of persuasion advocacy activity is going to have to be part and parcel of all educators, particularly those in the arts.**

**I would also contend that this advocacy process will have a strengthening effect on our subjects in the overall curriculum as we evolve and deepen in our approach to our subjects and our teaching. Perhaps this is what Karl Marx was saying about the positive and even essential need for revolution as a social purification.**

It is this fact of constant change and attending to competing interests that makes it so hard these days to run any institution such as governments or schools, and even families. Everything seems up for grabs. We don't seem to be able to depend on anyone sharing all our values.

Now this brings me to the arts and music advocacy. We would like to think that everyone is compellingly willing to bow to the considerable and persuasive research that is out there in support of the arts. And we know there is a lot – more all the time. In our enthusiasm we may feel that all we have to do is to bring this information to the attention of the powers that be and then whammo – we get what we want.

Sure this process of informational persuasion may have some effect. It is where we should be best involved in advocacy, second to our excellence in teaching, which goes without saying. But I believe that advocacy is a process that encompasses informational persuasion on one end of the spectrum, and large P Political activity on the other end, and everything else in between.

It is in this large P Political process that we as educators have difficulty. Most of us as educators are not trained in this process and are even repelled by it. In my experience I have found this so. Most teachers, in other words, hate politics. And yet who said that politics is "*the art of the possible*." Ask most educators to get involved in political activity and their eyes glaze over. "This is not what I am trained to do," they think. "Leave me alone and let me teach."

And so I believe that Colwell may have a point in saying that advocacy, at least the large P Political activity end of it, is best left to the pit bull with all that that image demonstrates. Our role could be better left to persuasion, fine teaching, and networking with others who will fight the Political battles. We back teachers with the where with all to carry the torch.

Furthermore, those of us who have been relentlessly involved in advocacy for over 30 years know that our cause in arts education is best championed by the parents or by those who are not seen to have a non-student vested interest. If the truth is known, the basis of parent power is that they have a vote. It is the vote which is the advocate's best Political tool. Therefore, if we have had difficulty in advancing the benefits of the arts, it follows then, that too few parents and other members of the public have been touched by the arts. It is our job to turn these other folk on to become the front-line advocates. The best advocates come from those who have been touched by excellent programs. We are then in a vicious circle. Cut the arts – fewer benefit – fewer advocate, and so forth.

And so along with parents, the aficionados (I take this to mean lovers of art), the doers of art, those who have the artistic fire in their bellies and want all to share this experience - these are our main supporters, our advocates, says Colwell. Often when teachers advocate it seems it is viewed as self-interest rather than for student interest. This is not always the case, but in the courts of Political power this is how it is generally viewed.

Now to comment on what Pitkeathly says – to refresh – why do we have to keep up the struggle in support of the arts? Why is it not fixed and that's that? Once and for all. Well, as I have indicated in the rapidly changing times that we find ourselves in we are never fixed. Arts advocacy will always be with us in this changing world. Change is a process and not an event that passes.

One more point, I think that it would be helpful also if we took what might be called a more connected approach to our arts education. Too often, and perhaps rightly so, we are viewed as elitist and separate in our own ghettos. Perhaps we need to be "heads up" teachers searching for ways where we can in and out of our classrooms connect more the

experience of art with the experience of daily living. Tall order? You bet. Possibly that should be on the top our agendas in the future, that is to see how we can connect in our teaching, and how we can support one another in its implementation. This is essentially a soulful task.