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Creativity and Advocacy: In Libraries I Believe

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I focus on managing a community college library that strongly supports student learning, particularly with information literacy. I'm also interested in building bridges with community partners to raise the visibility of my library and make positive changes in the community.

The term “advocacy” is an ambiguous one. It’s used by all types of institutions and organizations in our society vying for support, engagement, and funding, so much so that it tends to lose its edge and meaning. Many times an organization advocates through its legislative representatives on various levels; sometimes through engagement of a community through social media; and most of the time the best advocacy occurs on a daily basis as librarians and paraprofessionals pursue daily activities in a consistent and effective manner. Advocacy, therefore, throws a wide net, which points to the definition of the term. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb: *advocate, v.* To call, summon, invite.

So, the question, then, is what does advocacy mean for the library profession? How do we best and most strategically call, summon, and invite our diverse audiences to support libraries? These are important questions that we strive to answer as individual professionals and as a group of professionals in the state of Oregon. Library advocacy is an active endeavor, one in which we engage on a daily basis, one that often pushes us beyond our daily boundaries, and one that includes many approaches—legislative, community-based, educational, service oriented, and more. Advocacy also wants and needs creativity in order to thrive. Stephen Tepper and George Kuh (2011) discuss the nuances of creativity in their *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “Let’s Get Serious about Cultivating Creativity.” They state, “Creativity is not a mysterious quality ... Rather, creativity is cultivated through rigorous training and by deliberately practicing certain core abilities and skills over an extended period of time.” Tepper and Kuh (2011) further describe these skills as:

- the ability to risk failure by taking initiative in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty;
- the ability to heed critical feedback to revise and improve an idea;
- a capacity to bring people, power, and resources together to implement novel ideas; and



- the expressive agility required to draw on multiple means (visual, oral, written, media-related) to communicate novel ideas to others.

In the quest to tie creativity to advocacy in a meaningful way, I, along with some colleagues, embarked two years ago on a creative, community project intended to advocate for libraries and librarians in my community on the north coast of Oregon. The benefits of the project, which I refer to as *In Libraries I Believe*, were plentiful on the community level. Overall, though, the project confirmed for me that there is no one way to advocate. True advocacy can take many forms and some of the most effective advocacy projects are happening at the local level. These creative, collaborative projects add to the other strong works of advocacy around the state to transmit a diverse and yet unified message that libraries are ever present and strong in our communities.

Project Formation

Two years ago, the Oregon Library Association Executive Board formed an Advocacy Taskforce to explore advocacy in our professional organization. I was privileged to be included on the taskforce led by then OLA President, Michele Burke. Through the many brainstorming sessions, we discussed various modes of advocacy and the need for creative approaches and projects that would resonate with a broader community, whether school administrators, city councilors, or just regular community members. The seeds were thus sown for my project—*In Libraries I Believe*. This project was to be an audio project, capturing and recording stories about libraries and librarians from community members and piecing them together into a story arc about the value of libraries in a community—think NPR and *Radiolab* or another catchy radio show for comparison. The stories could then be accessed as podcasts online and, perhaps, transmitted on local, community radio. But, how would I take this from idea to fruition?

I needed partners and I needed a strategic vision. I drew inspiration from a non-profit organization called The Center for Story-Based Strategy (CSS), and its work with “truth” and “narrative.” CSS describes truth as being the research and data that support an advocacy effort. All too often, even the most compelling truth is ignored by the very audience it targets. The message just doesn’t resonate. Narrative, on the other hand, translates into meaning and how it can successfully strike a chord in an audience. Narrative goes beyond the telling of a story. In order to create true narrative, the work must be collaboratively based with two or more organizations working together to communicate a message through various mediums. This creates a shared narrative that is more powerful than a mere story. The Center for Story-Based Strategy (2013) describes a successful advocacy campaign as containing both truth and shared narrative.

Shared narrative is such an important component in successful advocacy—to find common ground with other professions or community entities and use those common goals to combine efforts and communicate a message. I have a full-time job, a family, and outside responsibilities. I knew that if I were to be successful in such a robust project, I would need to create a shared vision between my home library—Clatsop Community College Library, Coast Community Radio: KMUN, and the Oregon Library Association’s Advocacy Taskforce. With the shared narrative between these organizations as my foundation, I would then elicit, record, and tie community members’ stories together with the truth, or research, about the impact of libraries and librarians on communities. Finally, I would work with



KMUN radio to edit the pieces and produce two radio segments to highlight the role of libraries and their professionals in our community.

Shared Narrative

My narrative: I wanted a project with broad appeal, one that would speak about libraries in a captivating way and appeal to a broad array of community listeners. In particular, though, I wanted to find a way to break through stereotypical ideas of what libraries and librarians are and do. The trick, I understood, would be to do this through others' voices, not mine; and that would take patience, the right approach, and a little luck.

KMUN's narrative: KMUN Coast Community Radio is vibrant local radio. It has diverse programming and large community support with over 15,000 listeners tuning in each week. When I reached out to Kathleen Morgaine, KMUN's Senior Morning Edition Host and Producer, she expressed the desire within KMUN to have a stronger bond with Clatsop Community College, my employer. So, the connection with KMUN was mutually beneficial. I found facilities, equipment, and expertise for recording and editing, as well as a medium for publication and communication. KMUN, on the other hand, found a bridge to the college and, perhaps, the beginning of more creative projects that would appeal to its listeners.

OLA's Advocacy Taskforce: Both my goals and KMUN's overlapped nicely with the ideas of OLA's Advocacy Taskforce. The Taskforce was looking for a creative advocacy effort—one that was local, community-based, and could appeal to the people in a community.

Collection of essays

My partner at KMUN, Kathleen Morgaine, and I decided initially to model our project after the NPR series, *This I Believe*, which records people's personal beliefs and showcases them on public radio. Similar to that series, we asked people to write a brief essay based on their personal beliefs and/or experiences with libraries. We released the call for participation to the community in September 2013 with specific guidelines for the essays, based on the *This I Believe* (2014) prompts. In general, we reminded people of the following:

1. **Tell a story:** Be specific. Take your belief out of the ether and ground it in the events of your life. Think of your own experience, work, and family, and tell of the things you know that no one else does. Your story need not be heart-warming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be real.
2. **Be brief:** Your statement should be between 350 and 500 words. That's about three minutes when read aloud at your natural pace.
3. **Be positive:** Please avoid preaching or editorializing. Tell us what you do believe, not what you don't believe. Avoid speaking in the editorial "we." Make your essay about you; speak in the first person.
4. **Be personal:** Write in words and phrases that are comfortable for you to speak. We recommend you read your essay aloud to yourself several times, and each time edit it and simplify it until you find the words, tone, and story that truly echo your belief and the way you speak.



The press release went to all press outlets on the North Coast. The deadline for entries was set for the beginning of December 2013.

Reality and Alternative Approaches

As the essays began rolling in, I realized that I would have to alter my approach to finding the “right” stories that could create an appealing story arc. While all of the essays were heartfelt and authentic experiences with libraries, most fell into the same category of: libraries = books = good. In other words, they were boring. If this project was to appeal to a diverse audience, I would need to find more diversity of experience, more diversity of perspective, more diversity ... period.

I decided to expand the boundaries of my vision for the project by reaching outside of the library discipline and my immediate community. I contacted Donna Lanclos, an anthropologist employed by the J. Murrey Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte. Like librarians, Donna is interested in how people search for and engage with information; however, she approaches it from the anthropological perspective. She discusses her work on her blog, the *Anthropologist in the Stacks*, which expounds on the basis for her research—the Visitors and Residents (V & R) project, a project that she and colleagues have worked on for the past several years. I thought that because of her similar and yet different approach to looking at the same issues she would offer valuable feedback for my project.

She didn't let me down. First, she was very kind and generous with her time and in sharing her perspective. I shared that I wanted, in particular, to find a way to talk about school libraries with students and teachers without eliciting the stereotypical response: libraries = books = good. I wanted to get to the heart of the matter: students need licensed school librarians to properly teach information literacy, a set of abilities that is essential to being college, career, and life ready. Donna suggested that I interview some high school students and draw upon the list of questions that she and her colleagues used in gathering information for their V & R project. You can view the questions in her article, “Visitors and Residents: What motivates engagement with the digital environment?” She also suggested that I interview the students without telling them of my true profession. This would help avoid the stereotypical response.

I followed her advice and got some amazing results. For example, one of the teens, Rachel Speakman, was incredibly savvy about the need for information literacy in her education. No, she did not describe it in those words—*information literacy*—but she hit it on the head in all other ways. Listen to Rachel's interview here as she describes her take on the use of technology and need for more guidance in using information. Note: the questions that I use are from the V & R project although I do alter them slightly.

Rachel Speakman, Astoria High School Student

Listen to Rachel's interview: <http://lrc.clatsopcc.edu/sites/default/files/file/Rachel.mp3>

I combined Speakman's interview with a high school teacher's interview. Together, the student and teacher told the same story with different words: technology is not the issue—education is. We need help in teaching and learning how to use and interact with the information world. In other words, both student and teacher felt that they needed more support for information literacy education, i.e. the usual domain of a school librarian if employed in a school. In my recordings, I combined these narratives with the “truth” or research about the



impact of school librarians on learning in the K-12 environment. The combined result was ideal—an authentic narrative about the educational gap in our schools, a gap that could be bridged with the employment of school librarians.

In deviating from the project’s original plan of solely collecting essays to, instead, mixing essays with interviews, I brought much needed life, depth, and perspective to the project. I have Donna Lanclos to thank for that.

The final mix of essays and interviews included seven voices from the community interspersed with the context that I provided. The community members included:

- Isaiah Mohr
a young man serving time at the Oregon Youth Authority in Warrenton, Oregon
- Rachel Speakman
a student at Astoria High School
- Jessica West
a teacher at Warrenton High School
- Alison Ruch
a teacher and writer in Astoria
- Drew Herzig
a city council member
- David Mooney
a homeless man who frequented the Clatsop Community College library during the summer of 2013
- Bob Pyle
renowned nature writer and lepidopterist

Editing and Publishing

My partnership with KMUN was integral to the editing and publishing of the project. I did not have the time, skills, or facilities at Clatsop Community College to properly edit and publish this project to a wide, community audience. Kathleen Morgaine at KMUN provided assistance with all of these aspects. While I did most of the recording and edited the interviews down to key blocks, she pieced them together with music and final editing touches. She also found space in KMUN’s programming for the shows and promoted them. The shows aired over two consecutive weeks on KMUN’s *The Bridge*, a weekly half-hour program which has a listenership of over 3,000. Overall, the project would not have come to fruition, been as polished, or been as widely disseminated without Kathleen’s expertise and KMUN’s willing partnership.

Lessons Learned

My deadline for this project pushed me to the finish line. The end result was a solid project that met the initial goal: to create a project with a shared vision that communicated to a broad community audience the value of libraries to a community. The effort that went into this project has and will come back tenfold. A community like Astoria thrives on local, community networks. It values community voices that are passionate about diverse things, whether art, politics, or fishing. This time the community voiced its passion for libraries—and it worked! I’ll use this success as a springboard for future advocacy efforts in my community.



For those interested in emulating this project in other communities, here are some lessons learned along the way.

1. **Form partnerships:** Community partnerships are key and the effects are long lasting. My KMUN partnership was central to this project in giving me partners with expertise, technology, and the proper facilities for an audio project. My connection with KMUN also laid the foundation for future projects. I intend to work with Kathleen Morgaine on more audio essays in my Honors 101 Inquiry class that I teach in fall 2014. Students will publish their works on the radio. Community partnerships pay forward.
2. **Reach out:** Reaching out to colleagues pays off. Donna Lanclos' perspective added much needed depth to the project. I also connected with Char Booth, Librarian at Claremont College in California. Char was also gracious with her feedback and, in general, just knocking around some ideas. These conversations, though, helped me to shape the project. My point is that our colleagues—like both Donna and Char—both took the time to talk with me because they are sincerely interested in furthering the interests of libraries. Their feedback was invaluable.
3. **Take risks:** It may not be perfect, but creating and pulling off a risky project is fulfilling. Also, it's ok to be ambitious about a project. The more community partnerships that you form, the more realistic it is that you can successfully undertake an ambitious project; and, again, the benefits of those partnerships will last far beyond the project itself.
4. **Stretch beyond your immediate environment:** As a community college librarian, I focus mainly on students in the first two years of college. Because of the perfect storm, though—Governor Kitzhaber's 40-40-20, Common Core Standards with high standards for information literacy, and a drastic reduction of licensed school librarians to teach information literacy in K-12—I have to stretch my boundaries and become more involved in local schools and in advocating for strong school libraries. An advocacy project such as *In Libraries I Believe* can be used for this purpose, capturing narratives that point to the need for strength in this area.
5. **Ask for support from your professional community:** Ask OLA for support of your project. The request doesn't have to be for funding; it can be for OLA Association "buy-in" or backing of your project. Knowing that OLA supports creative advocacy efforts not only gives you confidence in moving forward but it says to your community that a broad base of library professionals in the state Oregon supports your efforts. This backing strengthens what you do.

To view and listen to all of the interviews, visit the *In Libraries I Believe* webpage at Clatsop Community College Library, <http://lrc.clatsopcc.edu/content/libraries-i-believe>.



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