

**Teaching arts advocacy to undergraduate students through experiential learning**

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Policy and Advocacy in the Arts (CCA 308) is an undergraduate course which helps Arts Management students understand the policy environment around the arts and culture, and arts advocacy to influence policy development and change. The class typically spends the first half of a semester learning about the actors and stakeholders involved on different policy levels, key issues, and processes. The latter half focuses on strategic arts advocacy, including students' engagement in hands-on advocacy practice. I have designed and taught the course for four semesters since 2020. The class size is usually around 15-20 students.

In this article, I discuss two key experiential arts advocacy activities in the course which take place over a three week-period during a semester. Specifically, I analyze how they contribute to helping students understand, conceptualize, and experiment with arts advocacy based on Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984). The activities are students' personal arts advocacy case development and participation in legislative meetings.

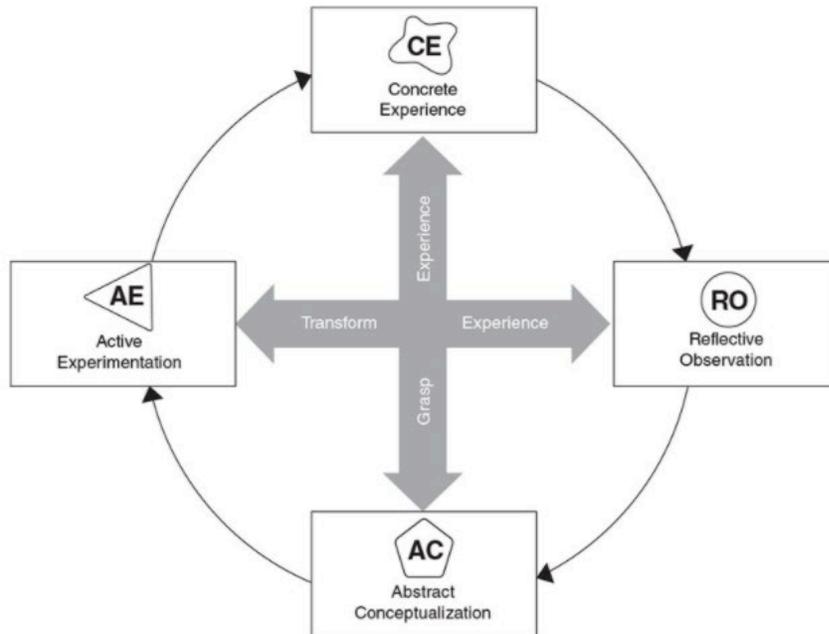
### **Theoretical Rationale**

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is an integrative framework of understanding the teaching-learning process (Kolb, 1984). In ELT, learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 49). The theory was largely influenced by progressive education philosophers including John Dewey (1938) and Jean Piaget (1952). ELT notably presents a way of understanding how the learning of abstract theories and concepts, and practical experience such as class activities are achieved in a class simultaneously in a mutually reinforcing manner. Abstract concepts and experience had been commonly considered contradictory elements which could not be addressed concurrently in a single class.

In experiential learning, learners play an active role in the learning process and apply the knowledge they have acquired in the classroom in real-life situations. More importantly, learners

converge their personal experience with its practical application which helps them process and understand abstract concepts. Learners learn not only from simply “doing” but also from their observations and reflections thereof, or “meaning-making,” through which they are able to conceptualize and experiment with their knowledge and experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Kolb (1984) theorized that experiential learning is a cyclical process that involves four stages, which are concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE) (See Figure 1). This process is usually initiated by a new concrete experience (CE) through which learners are able to observe, reflect upon, and interpret from different perspectives (RO). Based on their observations and reflections, learners are able to consider, assimilate, and process abstract concepts and theories (AC), and subsequently are able to apply these concepts to new situations and experiment with them (AE). This active experimentation stage is where learners transform experience into knowledge. Ideally, learners learn by “touching all the bases” from experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC), to acting (AE) in a recursive manner whereby new experiences are created (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

**Figure 1***The Experiential Learning Cycle*

Note: Kolb & Kolb, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

### Activities and Student Outcomes

Arts advocacy is an act of informing or educating legislators and stakeholders about the importance of the arts to influence their actions (National Association of State Arts Agencies, 2016). While advocacy can take place on personal, public, and legislative levels, I focus on addressing advocacy in the course as legislative advocacy, or lobbying, as it is most relevant to influencing policy. To this end, I have my students develop their personal arts advocacy cases and participate in legislative meetings during a three-week period in a semester. I illustrate the two activities and analyze how their different learning outcomes correspond to one or more learning stages identified in ELT.

**Developing Personal Arts Advocacy Cases**

An initial activity to engage students in arts lobbying is through having them individually develop their personal arts advocacy cases over the first two-week period during the latter half of a semester. An advocacy case is a short 2-3 minute speech that students would present in arts lobbying situations.

The development of personal advocacy cases is an important experiential activity (CE) for students to concretize their understanding of the abstract concept of arts advocacy (AC) by applying the knowledge and skills they acquired in the classroom to hands-on advocacy.

An arts advocacy case typically comprises a personal story; relevant facts and figures; and a “big ask” for lawmakers which is intended to influence their legislative actions including voting (Milling & Poulin, 2017).

***Personal Story***

Students’ advocacy cases address their personal stories concerning the value and impact of the arts in their lives which connect to policy issues such as public funding for the arts or arts education. Storytelling is a powerful tool for advocacy as stories are often attention-grabbing, relatable, and emotional which make them inherently persuasive (Austin & Connell, 2019). Stories thus tend to elicit empathy better than factual information and lower their resistance to new ideas (Austin & Connell, 2019).

Before students develop their own stories, we first explore some key components of effective storytelling through examples such as Disney short films and President Ronald Reagan’s addresses, who is well-known for his narrative presidency (Wilson, 2015). We discuss some key components of effective storytelling as character, conflict, spark, change in character, and takeaway (Karia, 2015; as cited in Baer, 2020).

With this understanding of persuasive storytelling, students each develop their personal stories which often concern how their arts practice and education have impacted their physical, mental, and social well-being, or how the arts have helped them become creative, competent individuals. I have found that students are often introspective (RO) and vulnerable when crafting their stories.

### ***Facts and Figures***

While stories can be powerful, they are anecdotal in nature which means that they may not be able to convey the complex social, economic, structural issues around arts policy in an objective manner. This is why stories are combined with factual data in students' personal advocacy cases, which is known as evidence-based advocacy. Evidence-based advocacy is “the deliberate process, based on demonstrated evidence, to directly and indirectly influence decision makers... to support and implement actions that contribute to issues of common interest” (SNV, 2016, p. 1). Advocacy based on factual information has shown to be successful in convincing legislators regardless of their personal beliefs on an issue (SNV, 2016).

Students strengthen their personal advocacy cases by pairing their personal stories with relevant facts and figures which helps add objectivity to their advocacy cases. Up-to-date research data that support arts advocacy is widely available thanks to increased demand from and efforts in the arts and culture sector. Useful resources include the Congressional Arts Handbook (Americans for the Arts, 2021) which is published annually for the National Arts Action Summit, the largest arts advocacy gathering in the country, and the Advocacy Report by DataArts (Tools for Arts Advocates, n.d.). Reports published by arts agencies and arts advocacy organizations on the state level, such as the Ohio Citizens for the Arts, provide more state-focused data.

***“Big Ask”***

Based on their stories and factual data to support their stories, students close their advocacy cases with an action item for legislators, or a “big ask,” which urges them to support or vote for the development of a new arts policy or changes to an existing one. Students are encouraged to make their ask as specific as possible, for example, to ask for the increase of the annual budget for National Endowment for the Arts and federal arts education by a certain amount. On the state-level, for example, students have urged legislators to pass the pending art therapy licensure bill for in Ohio.

**Participation in Legislative Meetings**

Once students have developed their personal advocacy cases, I organize an experience in the course where they can practice arts lobbying, primarily through in-person legislative meetings. This typically takes place during a week following their personal advocacy case development. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent lack of in-person lobbying opportunities, however, I have tried two different variations, virtual legislative meetings and in-class mock legislative meetings, which have led to similar learning outcomes.

Students in my class have participated in state-level advocacy events such as the Miami University Statehouse Day, both in-person and virtually. The Statehouse Day is an annual university-wide lobbying event where my students have met with state legislators to advocate for the arts and culture, and higher education. I have facilitated mock legislative meetings in class in lieu of real-life ones during the pandemic. Students play the roles of both an advocate and a fictional or real-life legislator in mock legislative meetings.

Lobbying opportunities are where students are able to actively experiment (AE) with their conceptualized understanding (AC) of arts advocacy. Regardless of actual or mock

legislative meetings, students practice strategically communicating their advocacy cases, and consider policymakers' perspectives, on the flip side, within the process. Moreover, students' observations and reflections (RO) from this experience inform their future arts advocacy endeavors, or new experiences (CE), outside of classroom or in the professional world.

For actual legislative meetings, a group of two to five students from each class typically meets with some five legislators or their staffers, respectively, for around 30 minutes. An important part of preparing for such meetings is researching the lawmakers to tailor students' advocacy cases to their personal backgrounds in, and position or voting records on arts and culture, and their general policy interests. Students work on strategically tailoring their cases to establish personal connection with lawmakers and to address their policy interests. I help participating students strategize, and feel more confident and prepared going into legislative meetings through trial meetings in advance which take place outside of class. Although not all students in class participate in legislative meetings, I make sure to spend adequate class time afterwards to debrief the meetings and participating students' experience and reflections from them as a whole class.

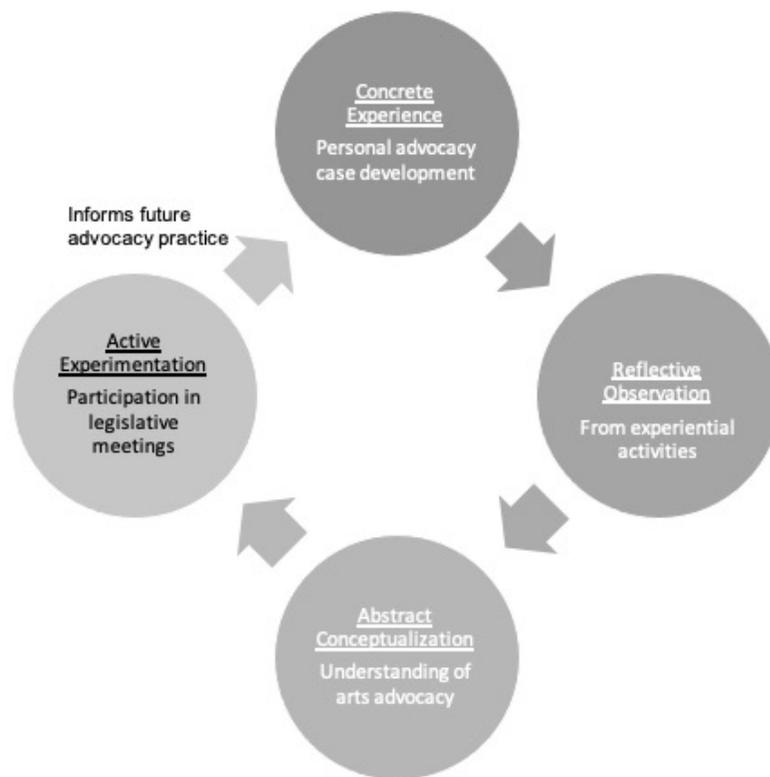
In legislative meetings, brief greetings and introductions are followed by each student presenting their advocacy cases. Meetings are mostly conversational, where legislators would listen, respond, and ask questions to students regarding their thoughts, and policy agenda and interests, and vice versa. These conversations often lead to subsequent follow-up emails between them exchanging information and feedback on policy issues.

Mock legislative meetings in class, meanwhile, are beneficial as all students participate in the process of preparing for, practicing, and reflecting on hands-on arts lobbying despite the lack of a real-life factor. Students playing both the roles as an arts advocate and a legislator

particularly enables them to have a well-rounded understanding of the interconnectedness of policy and advocacy. Mock legislative meetings are individual but also an inclusive and collective experiment, and learning experience for students.

## Figure 2

### *Arts Advocacy as Experiential Learning*



### **Debriefing and Appraisal**

Two major experiential activities in my Policy and Advocacy in the Arts course, advocacy case development and legislative meetings, help students learn by transforming their experiential advocacy practice into knowledge. I believe these activities can be flexibly adopted in most courses that involve arts advocacy as a learning objective, with applications to a wide

range of policy issues and legislators on different levels. The possibility of mock legislative meetings in class makes the activities more inclusive and feasible regardless of the availability of actual lobbying opportunities.

With experiential activities, a large part of students' learning naturally comes from actual experience. Students have discussed in reflection writings on having learned from the direct application of the knowledge they acquired in the classroom to real-life or hands-on arts lobbying. They have discussed in debriefing sessions in classes following legislative meetings a sense of empowerment which resulted from this real-life application of knowledge and action components. Students have written in reflection writings about how they have found mock legislative meetings to be hands-on and enjoyable but without the nervousness or pressure that are often associated with actual ones.

More importantly, the impact of experiential activities goes beyond students merely learning by doing but making meaning thereof, namely conceptualizing and actively experimenting with arts advocacy. Students have discussed how their observations and reflections from the activities helped them concretize their understanding of arts advocacy and how they also helped inform their future arts advocacy endeavors outside of the classroom.

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