

Report on Storytelling Workshop as Advocacy for Others and Ourselves Presented at The Folklorists in the South (FITS) Retreat April 2017, Canton, Mississippi

By Susan Eleuterio using the *American Folklore Society Folklore Advocacy Tool Kit: A Mini Guide to Promoting and Sustaining Folklore Work in the United States*

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Folklore Advocacy Tool Kit: Developed by members of the Public Programs Section, American Folklore Society with Susan Eleuterio and Meghan McGrath. Available for free download on the AFS website at www.afsnet.org

Worksheets from the *Organization for Story Based Strategy: Battle of the Story, Narrative Power Media Analysis, and Points of Assumption* can be found for free download at <https://www.storybasedstrategy.org/tools.html>

Background and Context for Advocacy by Folklorists

The theme of the 2017 Folklorists in the South (FITS) Retreat was the “Power of Our Stories.”

Kiran Singh Sirah, President of the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee presented a workshop on exploring the role of storytelling as a tool for conflict prevention, community development and social change. Using examples of social justice, race relations and community cooperation, Kiran explained how personal relations developed through storytelling can help us to frame discussions to work through difficult conversations.

Representatives from the Library of Congress American Folklife Center and the National Endowment for the Arts presented updates and this included a discussion of proposed budget cuts to NEA, NEH and other agencies which fund

folklorists and community based work. A letter from the American Folklore Society was included in conference materials calling on members to contact Congressional representatives about these proposed cuts as well as proposed cuts to the IMLS, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Retreat attendees also viewed story presented through the film of “Shake “Em On Down” a biography of Fred McDowell, the godfather of the North Mississippi blues tradition and an important influence on contemporary American and British rock and roll, country music and blues. A series of fieldwork footage collected at the St. James Missionary Baptist Church in 1978 by Alan Lomax, Worth Long, and John Bishop was repatriated back to the community and followed by a discussion with church members and FITS attendees.

Participants in the retreat and workshop included directors of folklife programs and museums, independent folklorists, graduate students, filmmakers, archivists, state folklife specialists, and editors of journals.

Participants at the workshop on Advocacy received copies of the AFS tool kit along with worksheets on creating advocacy stories and actions from the *Organization for Story Based Strategy*.

Establishing a Need for Advocacy by Folklorists

We began by examining what participants felt they Know (K) and what they Wonder (W) about advocacy. *KWL* is a writing and collaborative learning strategy that solicits existing knowledge from participants along with questions they have about the subject. We ended the session discussing what participants Learned (L) about advocacy. (The facilitator (s) takes visual notes on a large sheet of paper- these are used at the end of the session to check that questions and concerns have been addressed.)

This strategy can be used when developing an advocacy plan to assess what participants know about a particular issue, along with its stakeholders and decision makers; what they wonder or want to know more about the issue, stakeholders and decision makers, and after a campaign to sum up what they learned about advocating for a particular issue.

Existing Knowledge about Advocacy

- Starts in forming relationships
- Soft lobbying
- Can't wait for the crisis
- Can't depend on someone else to do it
- Need to be clear outcomes
- We're not doing it alone

- Need communication, multiple strategies
- Short, no jargon
- Offering thanks
- Preserving what's good
- Starts organically everyday
- Specify different audience appeals

Wonders About Advocacy in our Field

- How to know if advocacy has been effective? Especially long term
- What's my role? What's appropriate for me in my role?
- How to be taken seriously?
- How to inspire diverse wider range of support
- How to approach people who disagree?
- Access? Power systems? How to shift power
- How to avoid conflict of interest? (e.g., using Facebook for organizational communications vs. advocacy) Other social media uses?
- How to represent others? ("Giving voice" versus amplifying voices)
- How to represent diverse constituency
- How to create a regional network?
- How do I learn other skills (tech for instance)

A frequent question is what is advocacy?

In the toolkit, we use the definition created by The Innovation Network (www.innonet.org/advocacy)

"We define advocacy as "a wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at various levels. " This definition intentionally includes not only traditional advocacy work like litigation, lobbying and public education, but also capacity building, network formation, relationship building, communication, and leadership development. From: [Pathfinder, A Practical Guide to Advocacy Evaluation](#).

Navigating Rules and Regulations Many people are nervous about lobbying, because they have some idea that lobbying is seen as negative, or have been explicitly told they can't lobby as a non-profit, or are concerned about being seen as a lobbyist. The toolkit provides links to guidelines for non-profits on lobbying. Lobbying "is defined as stating a position on specific legislation to legislators or other government employees who participate in the formulation of legislation (known as direct lobbying); or urging your members or the general public to contact their legislators with a position on specific legislation (a "call to action") known as grassroots lobbying. (For more information look under Resources: www.independentsector.org and in the Tool Kit Under Rules and Regulations)

One of the folklorists surveyed during the development of the AFS toolkit, Christina Barr, who has served as the Executive Director of Nevada Humanities since 2009, noted: "It's about relationship building and information sharing. You need to be able to talk effectively about what you do and why it matters."

In *Conserving Culture*, folklorist Mary Hufford notes, "cultural conservation ...applies to advocacy in all three heritage areas (natural environment, built environment, and the folklife/cultural environment) *advocacy that is ethnographic rather than ethnocentric.*¹ (Italics mine)

Folklorist and long time activist, Archie Green, wrote about advocacy:

"We need a coalition, perhaps a clearinghouse/lobby/editorial chamber. We agree that efforts to preserve cultural material must include its presentation...*Cultural conservationists cannot escape political action, whether testifying on local zoning laws or articulating outrage at the sight of oil drenched otters in the Prince William Sound or oil-drenched cormorants in the Persian Gulf*...We train to explicate artistry in all its settings to probe metaphor's limits...***In using plain speech to communicate with others inside and outside our professions, we undergird analysis, advance action, and step into coalitions.***²

A 2014 survey of folklorists produced this list of challenges which could be partially met by advocacy efforts:

- Making our expertise as cultural documentarians, presenters and conservationists increasingly visible and more relevant to both the public and our academic peers, leading to greater public understanding of folklore and folk arts
- Consistent funding from government for folk arts and humanities - on local, state, and federal levels
- Maintaining folk arts as a distinct discipline

¹ Hufford, Mary. P. 4 *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*, 1994.

² *Conserving Culture*, p. 249

- Integrating traditional arts and culture (and artists') issues into broader cultural/social policy discussions
- Creating new (and more) resources
- Additional support for rural artists/communities who are pressed economically and often lost in state-funding for art programs, because of "cultural centers" focus on cities
- Taking field-wide stands on domestic issues
- Valuation of traditional cultures/communities

Strategies for Storytelling As Advocacy

1) Craft a Plan and Know Your Audience

Before developing an advocacy story, it's essential to create an advocacy plan (see the Toolkit for steps) and that you know your audience. Any one issue may have multiple audiences, and there are times, in the case of the National Endowment programs for instance, when the main target may be federal, but the impact will be felt at every level for either success or failure.

Communicating with legislators, whether federal, state, or local has some commonalities, but knowing the specifics can make a difference. If the first time your legislator sees you is an opponent, they will be less likely to be willing to hear your message. Social media may work well for a specific cause but may also be off-putting to a legislator who feels under fire. Town hall meetings are an opportunity for you to meet your legislator face to face, so that in the future when you call, email, or write a letter, they can begin to connect you to the issues you are advocating. A number of organizations both at the state and national level host advocacy days where groups of constituents go together to advocate for their work and communities.

2) Storytelling

Storytelling techniques can enhance a group's ability to rally support around a project or issue and is particularly suited for projects that require the buy-in of community members and/or policymakers. Being able to present your organization's mission (or issue) at different levels of specificity can be a powerful tool. The Center for Storytelling Based Strategy recommends adapting your message to at least three tiers:

- 1) A main slogan or motto which is informed by your organization's key message and the spirit and direction of your campaign.

- 2) A slogan accompanied by a brief, two or three line summary of what you are advocating for and/or against.
- 3) The slogan and a complete explanation of your position, individual and group stories, citations, and contact information.

Key Points

- Who is your intended audience? Who are the specific individuals or groups of people you most need to reach and persuade to achieve your goals?
- Does the narrative you're crafting resonate with the base you are trying to rally? IS the base fairly represented in the storytelling and images?
- What are the unstated assumptions? What assumptions are you challenging? What does someone have to believe to accept the story as true? What values are represented in the story?
- Are the folks most impacted by an issue able to speak for themselves, as experts on their own lives?

Note: We discussed how important this point is in terms of the concept of amplifying voices of those impacted instead of thinking you are “giving” them voice. Everyone has a voice, some voices need to be given the opportunity to be heard, but they are always present.

- Is there any part of your message that might compromise the mission of allied communities? If so, revise!
- How does your message/story advocate for positive change?

Additional points we reviewed using the worksheets were how to tighten the story using the Narrative Power Media Analysis worksheet

Source: The Center for Story-Based Strategy “Battle of the Story”, “Influence Map,” “Narrative Power Media Analysis,” and “Points of Intervention” Worksheets.

Elevator Stories

After considering some of the materials from the Center for Story Based Strategy we divided into pairs or small groups to craft “elevator stories.” Many folklorists working in non-profits are aware of the “elevator speech,” a short statement you can use to explain the value of your work during the time it takes to go down a few floors in an elevator. We discussed the fact that in rural/suburban areas, this might need a different metaphor- perhaps, “standing in line to pay at the farmer’s market” speech. The “elevator story” is a story that’s quick and to the point, and captures a listener’s interest enough to help them become a fellow advocate.

One example I used was from advocating with fellow residents of my state for the Affordable Care Act (ACA). We scheduled a meeting with a staffer of our US Senator and each of us selected one short story to share about the need for the ACA. An emergency room nurse noted, “Before the Affordable Care Act, patients would come into the ER on their feet and leave in a body bag. They were so sick by the time we saw them that they often succumbed to illness and died. Now that the ACA has been in effect for a few years, they come in on their feet and we can help them because they received medical care and are no longer so sick. “ This dramatic story captures the impact of legislation on everyday life and death issues.

Each participant then spent about 20 minutes working on a draft of an elevator story and then shared it with a partner. We didn’t end up with much time for sharing and this is one change I would make to this process- it needed 2 hours so that participants could craft stories, share them, and refine them, and then discuss with the group.

Outcomes

Some issues which participants discussed included:

- Organizational/institutional issues: How can you sit down and talk with your organization about how you can advocate in ways they are comfortable with? A follow-up to this was managing your boss’s expectations; considering which audiences are critical, what messages to share, how much follow up might be needed.
- There are no “silly stories” – be need to be passionate about our work
- Identifying points of intersection/access between groups – e.g., “spiritual well-being” as a rallying concept.

Things Learned included

- Advocacy, marketing, fundraising are connected
- Need to retell to refine
- Consider who is your audience?
- Make sure you check the boxes of your audience
- Need to manage boss/audience/expectations
- Power of recognition
- Use Specific examples
- Look for resources in people/places that do this work
- Look for models
- Question assumptions/strategies
- Uplifted (locally) in community / remember your role as a constituent to legislators/funders
- Peace building

- Personal, spiritual well being
- Hearts, minds, American spirit, culture, family, anniversaries, cultural health, bridges, preservation
- Interview; social evidence, publish, show impact, communality

Additional comments from FITS Retreat Evaluation:

From the Advocacy discussion, I learned how to better and more efficiently explain my work and justify its' relevance which can be applied in a variety of ways that doesn't necessarily have to involve political activism.

Knowledge of other's work and ideas about applications to mine and local colleagues' work? Yes-it has already contributed to work through advocacy!

FITS provided both great hands-on professional experience through the professional development workshops.

The retreat theme was successful in generating creative thinking around how we might frame and communicate the impact of our work more effectively-the connection to advocacy for folklore and the arts was particularly timely.

Focusing on the use of stories for advocacy, planning and engagement was very helpful, even energizing. We are the process of planning, education, and engaging our stakeholders as we approach an uncertain future. The retreat helped to refine our strategies.

The sessions were valuable for seeing what work others are doing, learning more about how to do advocacy for our field, and thinking about why we do the work we do.

Recommendations

Participants were enthusiastic about the tool kit and the methodology of creating stories for advocacy. Suggestions were to have a longer session to provide more time for developing stories, getting feedback and refining the story.

Our final strategy was to examine resources for building narratives using data from research. South Arts has a number of publications and resources which provide this material. Other regional and national arts and cultural organizations along with Americans for the Arts, Alliance for Justice, the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy, and of course, the American Folklore Society, also provide material which is useful in making a case.

We reviewed one example from research conducted in Georgia which is posted on the South Arts website at <https://www.southarts.org/resources/research-and-publications/research>. This example provides folklorists with a model of how to

consider their work in concert with other fields and disciplines (creative industries), how to use specific data related to concerns of many legislators and voters (job creation, economic development, etc) and can be combined with specific stories to make a case for funding and support.

The Arts and the Creative Industries in Georgia

Not only is arts learning crucial to student education and college and career readiness in general, but the arts are specifically essential as a background for work in the creative industries, which represent significant economic revenue and job creation in Georgia.

The creative industries represent 200,000 jobs, \$8 billion in wages and earnings, \$29 billion in industry revenue, and \$48 billion in economic impact for the state. The creative industries are the fifth largest industry in the state by number of establishments, and the fourth largest industry by number of people employed.

In addition, Georgia is experiencing real growth in such creative industries as film and television production, video game production, digital media, and music production, among others. To capitalize on this growth and to provide a well-trained workforce for this expanding field, Georgia needs graduates with an understanding of and a background in the arts.