

Advocacy 101

Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the various ways they can ensure their voices are heard regarding issues they care about. To “help students appreciate their own value, intelligence, and potential as political actors” (Anyon, 2005, p. 179) students will role play different ways of taking political action and reflect on ways to more effectively lobby for change. As students begin to learn the tools of successful activism and “participate in contention, they develop new strategies of action out of everyday activities, routines, and cultural forms” (Anyon, 2005, p. 142).

Grades

8-12

Essential Questions

- What are the various ways young activists can advocate for change?
- Why should a citizen take the time to let those in charge know how they feel about particular issues?
- What skills are important for effective activism?

Materials

- Role Plays, attached
- “Young Advocates Tool Kit,” available for free download at http://www.ncchild.org/action/images/stories/AFC_YA_Toolkit_2007_web.pdf

Duration

60 minutes

Instructions

Advocating for Change

1. Ask students to brainstorm the various ways they can “do” democracy (meaning, how can they affect public policy and/or change in North Carolina, whether it is in their school, their community, a statewide law, etc.)? Note their thoughts on a sheet of chart paper. Ensure students consider options such as: making phone calls; writing letters and e-mails; signing petitions; finding local organizations to partner with/community organizing; setting up a meeting; attending a scheduled meeting (i.e. a school board meeting or a city council meeting); lobbying; speaking to the press; staging a march or educational event; fundraising; voting; canvassing; boycotting (i.e. refusing to shop at a particular store); encouraging others to participate/“power in numbers;” etc.

Further discuss:

- Why should a citizen take the time to let those in charge (i.e., public officials such as local, state, and federal representatives; principals & teachers; business CEOs; etc.) know how they are feeling about particular issues?
- Can one person make a difference? Explain.
- Why is it important to encourage others to advocate for their beliefs as well?

How to be Effective in Your Activism

2. Next, tell students that they are going to learn about various ways to “do” democracy and advocate for the causes they care about by participating in and watching role plays. Divide students into 8 groups and explain that they will each receive a scenario in which some students are attempting to advocate for their

beliefs, either to fellow community members or to public officials. However, the students in the scenes make some mistakes that could use improvement. The rest of the groups will serve as the audience. The audience will point out how the actors were attempting to “do” democracy, as well as how the people in the scene could have done a better job advocating for their cause once the scene is finished.

3. Give students 5-10 minutes to practice their scenes. If groups have more students than the scene has roles, students can add in additional characters to the scene or students can serve as support roles, such as a “Director.”
4. Once all students are ready to perform, go over respectful audience member expectations by asking students:
 - How can we show the performers that we are respecting and listening to them? (Facilitate answers such as: listen; don’t work on our own scene or talk while watching; look at the performers; clap loudly when they are finished; don’t tease or make fun of anyone; etc.)
 - Why is being a respectful audience member and classmate important? (Point out to students that the ways in which they treat one another and communicate with one another is also a part of democracy!)

Tell students that as they watch the scenes, they should note any mistakes the characters portrayed make when attempting to advocate for their cause.

5. Use the questions listed below to guide student discussion after each performance:
 - **Phone Call to a Senator**
 - Why was the student phoning Senator Smith?
 - Did the student do an effective job on this phone call? Why not?
 - What specific mistakes did he/she make? (Looking for answers such as: watching TV; noise in background; not focused; unorganized; didn’t have a script or something to say prepared; wasn’t specific regarding his/her cause or what he/she wanted from the Senator; didn’t seem serious; was rude/immature, etc.)
 - What could be improved? If he/she were to call another Senator in the future, what should he/she do differently?
 - What difference can phoning or writing your local, state, or federal representatives make, when doing it the proper way? If you want to phone or write your representatives, how can you find out who they are and how to contact them? (Explain to students that they can go to www.ncga.state.nc.us to find out this information.)
 - ✓ After discussing the role play, go over page 21-22 of the ‘Young Advocates Tool Kit,’ which details the proper way to place a phone call to a legislator, with students.
 - **Meeting With a Representative**
 - Evaluate the meeting with Representative Jones. Do you think he/she was moved by the students’ concerns for global warming? Why not?
 - How did the students do working together to inform Jones of their feelings?
 - What did you notice about how the characters were dressed (based on their conversation in the beginning of the scene)? What is an appropriate way to dress and present yourself when visiting your legislators? (It is recommended students dress business casual, unless they are with a group wearing t-shirts advertising their group’s name or cause; also discuss with students how to deliver a professional handshake and the importance of that first impression.)
 - ✓ Go over the information in Tab 4 (page 26) of the ‘Young Advocates Tool Kit,’ which deals with meeting with legislators and presenting at hearings/committee meetings.
 - **Voting**
 - What happened in this scene? What was the difference in opinion the two students had?

- Was this realistic? Do you think some people really feel like their vote won't matter? Why do you think people feel this way?
 - Can one vote make a difference? Explain.
 - Why is it important that every citizen register to vote, educate themselves regarding candidates and issues, and participate in elections, both local, state and federal?
 - Even if you are not old enough to vote, how can you still participate in the election process? (volunteer for a candidate of your choice, register voters, encourage others to vote, etc.)
- **Neighbor Dispute**
 - How would you characterize the behavior of the neighbors in this scene? Was this scene realistic (meaning, do neighbors sometimes behave in this way)?
 - What choices could each of the characters have made to keep this situation from escalating as it did?
 - When is it necessary to work out a situation in court? Why should we try to civilly work things out with our fellow community members?
 - ✓ Discuss with students how being respectful and having effective communication skills are a big piece of successful activism and democratic participation. Whether communicating with your neighbor regarding a conflict, or communicating with your legislator over an issue you disagree with, it is harder to accomplish anything without employing communication skills such as active listening, negotiation, validation, compromise, etc. It is important for all members of a community to try and see where others are coming from, rather than escalating conflicts with poor communication skills and insults.
- **Circulating a Petition**
 - What mistakes were made in this scene?
 - Did the students seem like they were really committed to their cause? Why not?
 - What do you think it takes to convince someone to sign a petition?
 - What difference can a petition make?
 - ✓ Go over page 23 of the "Young Advocates Tool Kit," which addresses how to start and circulate a petition.
- **Speaking to the Press/Media**
 - Did the students do an effective job speaking to the media? Explain.
 - In what ways can you use an opportunity like this (i.e. an interview with the news) to advocate for your cause?
 - What role do various media organizations have in influencing public policy?
 - What recommendations would you make to these students if they were going to be interviewed again? (Discuss issues such as being prepared; dressing appropriately; having clear and concise points and arguments; speaking maturely and clearly; looking confidently at the interviewer or into the camera; etc.)
 - Once you are prepared to advocate properly to the media/press, why is it a good idea to make them aware of any events you plan?
 - ✓ Discuss with students another aspect of activism and democracy also involving the media, which is viewing media elements (i.e., TV, movies, advertisements, promotional material, etc.) critically. Remind students that just because something is in the paper or on the news, it doesn't necessarily mean the information is accurate. For resources on media literacy, see <http://www.medialit.org/>.

- **Issue Campaign**
 - How many of you love complaining about things, whether it's a messy school or a decision an adult has made? Why is complaining about something completely ineffective unless you make your thoughts known in an official capacity?
 - How many of you have had similar feelings to the character in the role play who said adults don't listen? What makes you feel like adults don't listen? What are some ways that you can get adults to listen?
 - Let's assume these students decided to tackle this issue. What responsible steps would you recommend they take to ensure they are taken seriously and heard?
 - While organizing a group of like-minded people might take work and commitment, why is this an effective way to bring about change?
 - What other examples can you note of ways groups can together make a difference? (Discuss examples of how there is power in numbers - i.e., boycotting, protesting, community organizing, etc.)

- **Dispute with Teacher**
 - Describe what took place in this scene. In what way was this teacher abusing his/her power?
 - ✓ Discuss all aspects of this scene with students. The student had misbehaved to receive detention and then arrived late for detention. It would certainly have been more ideal to have stayed out of trouble to begin with. However, even though he/she may have deserved a consequence for past actions, nothing merits a teacher responding in this way.
 - Do situations like this occur in reality, either in school, in the workplace, in the government, etc., when people in power abuse the rights of others?
 - While experiencing a situation like this might cause you to feel furious, what are appropriate ways that you can advocate for your rights, even when very angry?
 - ✓ Discuss how in this situation, the student would have every right to yell at the teacher and throw a tantrum. However, keeping your cool and remaining professional in any type of dispute is likely to better serve your own interests. If the student responded by hurling insults, while deserved, the student could have gotten into even more trouble. Instead, documenting the situation, making the choice to talk to a parent, the principal, etc., and reporting the abuse in a mature and rational way is more likely to result in the situation being rectified. If after taking those steps nothing is done to correct the situation, a student could escalate the situation to the school board or by writing a letter to the editor.
 - Are we saying that every time you get mad at a teacher, you should lead a protest or go to the principal?
 - ✓ Ensure students understand that being angry with authority figures is natural. But part of being a responsible activist is really examining a situation and being sure the situation at hand merits a political response. "My teacher made me mad for assigning homework so I'm going to try and get her fired" isn't the mantra of a mature activist.

Optional: After discussing each role play, teachers may want to have each group create their own scene showing the proper way to advocate within each of these topics.

Always Be Prepared

6. Explain to students that if they have a particular issue that they are interested in advocating for, it is a good idea to be ready to clearly explain and discuss their feelings on that issue at any given moment. Opportunities often arise unexpectedly, so it is important to always be prepared. One way to do this is by creating an "elevator speech," so called because it is a quick explanation that can be given in a few minutes (the time it would take to ride an elevator).

7. Instruct students to work individually or in partners to create an elevator speech that addresses a cause they care about. While it is called a “speech,” it is really a description of an issue that you are interested in that can be delivered over the phone, at a meeting, to the press, etc. Having an elevator speech will result in your always being prepared to speak efficiently on the topic you are concerned about. Give student the following parameters for their “elevator speech:”
- Introduce yourself (name, school, age/grade)
 - Clearly state your purpose (What issue concerns you? What cause are you advocating for and why?)
 - Explain the issue, its negative impact, and specific ways those in charge (school board, city council, legislators, business owner, etc.) should take action to alleviate the negative impact.
 - Be mature and persuasive; note how this issue is relevant and why it is thus important to take your recommended action.
 - Note the negative consequences that may arise if those in charge do not take your recommended action.
 - Note why you care about this issue and why you are trying to promote this agenda (personalize it).
 - Deliver your speech in an effective way:
 - Clear pronunciation and appropriate volume
 - Energetic and varied tone
 - Eye contact, appropriate facial expressions, appropriate movement
8. Once students have prepared their speeches, allow them to present to the class and critique one another. Students can offer positive feedback to one another regarding what they liked and make suggestions on ways to improve each speech. Teachers can assign particular circumstances for students to present their speech within (i.e., you are at a banquet and you notice that your state representative is a guest - pretend to walk up to him/her at the reception and share your concerns. Or, you receive a phone call from the local paper who wants to hear your opinion on an issue that is important to you..., etc.)

Resources

Anyon, Jean. (2005). *Radical possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York, NY: Routledge.

STUDENT HANDOUTS

Phone Call to a Senator

Roles (2): 1 Student, 1 Secretary

Overview: This scene illustrates mistakes made by a person who phones his/her Senator to advocate for children's health care.

(When the scene starts, the student should be sitting in his or her living room, watching TV while placing the call. Senator Smith's secretary should be sitting at a desk when answering the call.)

Student: *(picks up a phone and dials a number while smacking chewing gum and flipping through channels on the TV)* Man, nothing good is on MTV today!

Secretary: *(picking up the phone)* Good afternoon, Senator Smith's office.

Student: *(smacking gum)* Uh, yeah, hey. I wanna' talk to Senator Smith. *(drops remote control)* Dang it!

Secretary: Excuse me?

Student: Oh, sorry. I just dropped the remote control to the TV. MTV really sucks today!

Secretary: EXCUSE ME?

Student: Whatever... can I just speak to Senator Smith or what?

Secretary: I'm afraid Senator Smith is out of the office right now. Can I help you with something?

Student: Uh, NO. I want to speak to Senator Smith. I am real peeved about this whole children's health care thing.

Secretary: Alright, would you like to leave a message?

Student: Oh, oh! Hold on! This is my jam! *(starts focusing on the TV and singing along with a music video)*

Secretary: HELLO? Is this a prank call?

Student: No this ain't a prank call lady. I want Senator Smith to do something about this health care for children stuff. Don't you care about sick kids? Put the Senator on the phone.

Secretary: As I said, the Senator is out of the office. I'm happy to take a message.

Student: Ok, fine. You tell the Senator that _____ *(insert your name)* called, and I expect a call back to talk about this kid's health thing. OK?

Secretary: Sure. Ok. I'll give the Senator the message.

Meeting with a State Representative

Roles (3): 2 students, 1 legislator

Overview: Two students wait outside their Representative's office for a meeting, poorly dressed. Once the meeting begins it becomes evident they are inadequately prepared.

(Students sit in chairs, waiting for their meeting with Representative Jones.)

Student A: Do you like my jeans?

Student B: Yeah, those are cool. They look good with your tennis shoes. I wish I hadn't worn these flip-flops.

Student A: Yeah, but your t-shirt is really cool. What band is that on the front?

(Representative Jones enters and the students turn their attention to him/her)

Jones: Hello. I'm Representative Jones. I understand you have some issues of concern you would like to talk about. *(Jones offers his/her hand to shake hands with the students. Instead, the students slap the representative's hand in "high-5" style.)*

Student A: Your office is really small. What's up with that?

Student B: Yeah, do you like working here?

Jones: I do like working here. I feel very lucky to serve the great state of North Carolina. Did you two have something you wanted to talk about?

Student A: Yeah we did. *(Hits Student B on the shoulder)* Go ahead. Tell him/her.

Student B: *(Hits Student A back on shoulder)* We said you would talk first. You say it.

Student A: GOD, you make me so mad sometimes! *(Turns back to Representative Jones)* Ok, so we are here because we are really upset about global warming.

Jones: I can understand that. What exactly are you upset about?

Student A: Um, well, you know. It's just really bad. There is like, A LOT of carbon and stuff. And the polar bears are dying.

Student B: Yeah, all those poor polar bears!

Jones: So you want me to save the polar bears? There aren't any polar bears in North Carolina.

Student A: Oh yeah. Well, we just want you to vote for that bill.

Jones: Which bill?

Student B: You know, that environmental bill.

Jones: There are many environmental bills. Which one are you referring to?

Student A: Oh, we don't know. We just want you to fight global warming. The General Assembly really needs to care about the environment. It's important.

Jones: Could you explain exactly why you feel it's important?

Student B: It just is!

Jones: Well, thank you for coming. I've got to run to a meeting now.

Voting

Roles (2): 2 students

Overview: Students discuss voting, one arguing that voting doesn't matter.

Student A: I am so upset about the fact that these politicians don't seem to care about how much money our schools get. Have you noticed our text books are 10 years old?

Student B: You're right, but hey, it's Election Day! I'm going to vote. Do you want to come?

Student A: Man, no way. I'm going to play some basket ball. I don't have any time for that mess.

Student B: Are you sure? Voting is really important. If you don't vote, you don't have a say in the decisions the government makes for us.

Student A: Why should I care?

Student B: The two candidates running for Governor have really different ideas for educational policies. One of the candidates is really interested in trying to improve funding for education and has vowed to allocate state lottery funds to school reform.

Student A: So what? They're all liars anyway.

Student B: That's exactly why you need to participate and vote. That's the only way to be sure we don't elect a liar, or someone who won't fight for our educations.

Student A: Whatever. One vote won't make a difference. Besides, I don't care anything about any of those politicians. I just want them to fix the educational system. That's their job. They shouldn't need me to tell them that.

Dispute with a Neighbor

Roles (4): Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez and Mr. and Mrs. Henson

Overview: The Gonzalez's and the Henson's live next door to one another and quickly escalate a dispute over a tree on their shared property line.

(When the scene starts, Mr. and Mrs. Gonzalez are in their front yard doing some landscaping. They are discussing the branch of their neighbor's tree that is hanging over into their yard. When the Henson's walk outside, a dispute ensues.)

Mrs. Gonzalez: *(raking the yard)* Jeff, can you believe all these leaves? This is ridiculous! It's because of that stupid tree there that belongs to the Henson's next door.

Mr. Gonzalez: *(bagging leaves)* I know honey. They should really cut the branch that is hanging over onto our property. I've got a good mind to march right over there and tell them that they can either cut that tree or pay for a yard crew for us.

(The Henson's exit their home, on the way out.)

Mrs. Gonzalez: Um, you there! You guys! Over here!

(The Henson's walk over to where the Gonzalez's are working.)

Mrs. Henson: Hello. Is there something we can do for you?

Mr. Gonzalez: Yes, there certainly is something you can do. You can do something about your stupid tree! It's right on the property line here, and the one branch is hanging over on our side. It's dumping leaves everywhere!

Mr. Henson: What's the big deal with a few leaves? Besides, I hardly see how you can blame Mother Nature on us. Maybe the two of you should chill out a little bit. *(To his wife)* Come on honey, we are late.

Mrs. Gonzalez: Chill out? Excuse me?! No you did not just say that! The two of you need to do something about this ugly tree, or we are going to do something for you!

Mrs. Henson: Are you threatening our tree?

Mrs. Gonzalez: I don't make threats! Honey, get the chainsaw! I've had it with this branch and its stupid leaves!

Mr. Henson: You had better not touch that tree or we'll see you in court!

Mr. Gonzalez: How about we see you in court anyway? There is no way letting your leaves dump all over our lawn is legal.

Mrs. Henson: Fine! We'll see you in court!

Circulating a Petition

Roles (3): 3 people at a mall

Overview: Two students stand outside of a store trying to get signatures on a petition.

- Student A: Hey, I'm going to go stand outside of the mall here and see if I can get some people to sign this petition.
- Student B: What's the petition about?
- Student A: It's to get the North Carolina General Assembly to support election reform in our state.
- Student B: I'll stay with you and help, and then we can go shopping.
- Student A: Oh, yeah, that sounds good. Hey, here comes someone now. *(to a person walking up)* Excuse me, would you like to sign our petition encouraging our state government to support election reform?
- Student C: I don't know...I don't really know what you mean by election reform.
- Student A: Whatever then...Bye. *(Student C walks off)*
- Student B: I can't believe that dummy didn't sign.
- Student A: Yeah, tell me about it. I mean, we are obviously smart, cool people. You would think people would just sign what we ask them to sign.
- Student B: Are you sure you don't just want to go shopping?
- Student A: But I haven't gotten any signatures.
- Student B: Well, I'll sign. And then you can sign, and that will be two signatures.
- Student A: Do you think two is enough?
- Student B: Sure, two is better than none? Right? *(Student C walks back up)*
- Student C: Hey. I'm finished with my errand, so if you want to tell me a little more about your petition, I might sign it now.
- Student A: Oh, sorry, we aren't collecting signatures any more. We're going shopping.

Speak to the Press/Media

Roles (3): 1 reporter, 2 students

Overview: A TV reporter stands in front of the General Assembly and attempts to interview

- Reporter: I'm standing outside of the General Assembly here live in Raleigh, where many students have gathered to speak with North Carolina's legislators about the importance of making state colleges more affordable (*several students come up behind the reporter and start waving to the camera as they try to get onto TV*) I'm going to see if we can speak with one of the students here today to tell us why this is such an important issue to them. (*reporter turns to the waving students to interview them*) Excuse me, could I ask you a few questions?
- Student A: Who us? Oh definitely!
- Student B: We love to be on TV! (*both students run up beside the report and continue to wave into the camera*)
- Student A: Hi mom! Hi dad!
- Student B: Oh, can I say hi to my best friend? Hey Cindy!
- Reporter: OK, let's get to the point of why you are here. Could you tell the people at home why you are at the General Assembly today?
- Student A: Oh, right. We are here...
- Student B: (*cuts Student A off and steps in front*) We are here because we care about the frat parties and...
- Student A: (*to Student B*) Um, excuse you?
- Student B: What? I'm answering the reporter's question.
- Student A: Um, NO...I was answering the reporter's question. YOU are trying to be a camera hog.
- Student B: I am not!
- Student A: You are too!
- Reporter: Can one of you just tell the THOUSANDS of people watching why you are here at the General Assembly today? What do you hope to accomplish?
- Student B: Thousands? (*looks scared*)
- Student A: Did you say thousands? (*also looks scared and starts to stutter*) Um, um...we are here...we are here because...Um...(nudges friend)...You tell them.
- Student B: I don't know what to say! Uh, it's important to go to college...and dress right while you are there. And it's important to get to go to college for cheap. Uh, because we said so.
- Reporter: Ok, that about does it. We're going to wrap up here. Thank you for tuning in viewers. And as to what is happening here at the General Assembly today, well...hopefully we'll have more on that at eleven.

Organize an Issue Campaign

Roles (3): 3 students are in the school bathroom

Overview: 2 students complain about the unsanitary conditions in the school restroom; another student tries to convince them to take action on the issue

Student A: Our bathrooms are disgusting and I am sick of it!

Student B: Tell me about it. I don't even want to walk in here. Ugh!

Student A: Look at this. Someone has written all over the mirror in lipstick and the trash can is overflowing.

Student B: Gross. I can't believe people at this school are such pigs.

Student C: Rather than complaining about it, why don't you guys try to actually improve the situation?

Student B: What are you talking about? We shouldn't have to do anything. We aren't the ones trashing the place.

Student C: Right, but it's a public space that we all use, so that means if you want it improved, you might actually have to do something about it besides complain. It wouldn't take that much time for us to make some posters encouraging people to be more tidy in here, since it's a space we all use. And, we could write up something to be put on the morning announcements or to be read at the next assembly. I bet if we tried, we could get more people on board.

Student A: Yeah, right. Like anyone is going to listen to us at this school.

Student C: Sure they would. We could even write a letter to the principal and tell her we want extra security to keep the bathrooms from getting so trashed that they are unusable. We deserve better than this.

Student A: I don't know – I'm already pretty busy.

Student C: You can't complain if you don't actually try to do something about the problem. Think about it.

Conflict with a Teacher

Roles(2): 1 teacher & 1 student

Overview: When a student arrives late for detention, the teacher wrongfully threatens to lower his/her test grade in anger.

(A teacher is sitting at his/her desk grading papers when a student enters the room to serve detention. The student is 15 minutes late for serving detention.)

Teacher: Well, how nice of you to show up!

Student: I'm really sorry – I couldn't get my locker to open and I wanted to get some of my homework done while serving my detention with you. The janitor was able to help me. He can vouch for where I was.

Teacher: I do not care where you were – all I care about is that you were not here. What kind of loser kid gets detention for talking in class then shows up LATE to detention? You have GOT to be kidding me.

Student: I don't appreciate being called a loser and I said I was sorry!

Teacher: Sorry isn't good enough. Just like you aren't good enough to even be in my class. I'm going to make sure I take a few points off your test grade since you decided to show up to detention 15 minutes late.

Student: You can't do that! That's not fair!!!

Teacher: Tough. Life isn't fair. Now sit down and shut up before I take your score down even lower.