

Students as Change-Makers: Five Steps to Advocacy Research

When students used a solutions journalism approach to research local problems, their attitudes about research changed and their commitment to action grew.

“S

o, I wanna bring people together, and be like, ‘Hey! Let’s do this.’ I wanna get the information out to the people.” These are the words of Ericka, a twelfth grader articulating the aim of her research project in journalism class (student names are pseudonyms). At this point in the eight-week unit, Ericka was convinced that she could advocate for curbing food waste at the grocery store where she worked and help repurpose the salvaged food to feed hungry people in her community. But she did not start her research with this attitude. It grew over time.

In this article, we describe our experimental effort to position students as “change-makers” (Manning and Costello 198) through the Five Steps to Advocacy Research unit. “We” are the English teacher (Liz) who taught the unit and two university researchers, teacher educators, and former English teachers (Valerie and Jayne) who collaborated with her. To frame our work, we drew on Ernest Morrell’s notion of *literacies of power* (“Critical English Education” 314). We offer our account as an invitation to English language arts (ELA) teachers curious about advocacy-based approaches to research projects. But first, a bit more about Ericka and the educational context motivating our work.

Born in Puerto Rico, Ericka moved with her family to our city—one with a high concentration of childhood poverty, racial segregation, and under-resourced public schools—when she was nine. Spanish is her first and home language. Liz first came

to know Ericka as a student in her eleventh-grade English class who worked diligently to complete classwork and stayed quiet during class discussions; Ericka seemed to avoid participation. As a senior in Liz’s journalism course, Ericka showed determination by asking for help from one of her classmates, with whom she would work out her discussion responses in Spanish before offering her ideas in English. Liz began to see Ericka’s “fire” when class topics turned to social issues that bothered her. Ericka would argue her points without rehearsal or hesitation. During the Five Steps to Advocacy Research unit, we watched Ericka direct that energy into her research. She began to see how she could address a community issue.

Optimally, ELA research units encourage student researchers like Ericka to engage with problems they care about—gathering information, checking facts, imagining solutions, and building arguments. Yet in schools such as ours, under pressure to meet accountability improvement measures, teachers often feel compelled to turn their attention away from socially conscious instruction to prepare students for standardized assessments (Tienken and Zhao 114). This preparation typically involves remedial coursework and focuses disproportionately on students of color, thus widening the opportunity gap by narrowing their curricula (Cammarota 88). English teachers find that the “external constraints imposed by the latest testing regime leave [them] alienated, ambivalent arbiters of a hotly contested and highly ambiguous discipline” (Morrell “Critical English Education”

312). Students lose motivation and experience frustration and boredom (Cammarota 88). A different approach to curriculum is needed, especially for students attending school in underserved communities of color. Liz devoted instructional time to testable ELA skills such as complex text comprehension and literary analysis, but she was also determined to provide students with instruction designed to critique and address local issues.

Our unit aimed to disrupt the tendency to exclude historically underserved students from a fuller range of curricular experiences. We did so by focusing on school-based research and writing designed around a positional shift—students reimagining themselves as central, rather than peripheral, to social change. We orchestrated this pivot by inviting students to consider local problems they cared about (Bomer 21). They then defined and explored potential solutions, and ultimately argued for change, addressing public audiences through written texts and a TED Talk-style video. Over eight weeks, students began to see themselves as Ericka did—“bringing people together” to make a difference in the community. Conducting research became not just a perfunctory exercise, but rather “a practice of freedom” (Coffey 4), which comes when young people use the knowledge gleaned through research to give voice to their advocacy—both in their writing and in their speaking—to pursue change in their worlds.

FOSTERING LITERACIES OF POWER

In their recent essay for *Research in the Teaching of English*, high school administrators Logan Manning and Christopher Costello encourage teachers to “nourish change-makers in our classrooms” (198). Relatedly, Bettina Love calls for teachers to “work in solidarity with communities of color . . . to eradicate injustice inside and outside of schools” (3). Yet, the concurrent forces of outcomes-driven and skills-focused test preparation continue to curtail teaching and learning that strive for these goals (Tienken and Zhao 114).

According to Love, Black and Brown students attending schools in underserved areas are disenfranchised by a “civic empowerment gap” whereby they

miss out on important advocacy learning because “civics education is no longer a space that teaches youth how to petition, protest, speak in public, solve social issues with groups of people from diverse backgrounds” (70). And according to Jerrica Coffey, teachers working to address the civic empowerment gap must convince students that “literacy can be a tool to fight for justice . . . particularly when their material conditions reflect the accumulation of generations of political, economic, and social dispossession” (3). Likewise, when Liz introduced the unit, Ericka and her classmates were skeptical, dubious that their work could result in actual change in their communities.

Yet, English classrooms can be sites for *literacies of power*, which reposition students as “agents of change” (Morrell “Critical Media Literacy” 158) who, through the practice of literacy, can question, critique, and transform oppressive social structures. Literacies of power engage youth not only in deconstructing dominant narratives, but also in creating their own texts that they can use “in the struggle for social justice” (Morrell “Critical English Education” 313). Ericka and her classmates synthesized their research by composing multimodal texts in the style of TED Talks to inform and move their communities to enact change. In doing so, they found power in advocacy.

PARTNERING TO TRANSFORM A SCHOOL

The high school where Liz taught this unit was midway into a multiyear transformation in partnership with a nearby university. Our collaboration was situated within this ongoing university-school partnership. According to state education data (2019), the student population was majority Black and Brown (88 percent) and economically disadvantaged (83 percent). In 2015, with rates of 33 percent graduation, 77 percent attendance, and 8 percent of students scoring as “college ready” on state ELA assessments, the school faced forced closure by the state education department. Since then, the school has tracked progress on demonstrable indicators of improvement. Liz and her colleagues keep records about students’ performance in relation to tested skills and articulate

plans to bring students closer to meeting the necessary standards, thus keeping the school in compliance with state education department requirements.

We came together in early 2019. Years prior, Valerie had led a professional learning circle for English teachers at the school; Liz, who has taught there for sixteen years, participated. They formed a relationship rooted in conversations about student learning and agency in English classrooms. When we learned of Liz's idea to design an advocacy-focused research project, we asked how we could support her. Together we designed, implemented, and studied the Five Steps to Advocacy Research unit in both sections of Liz's journalism class during the fourth quarter of the 2018–19 school year. The school's new mission, which prioritized "advocating for self and others," aligned with our literacies of power approach to reposition students as change-makers in this unit.

Throughout implementation, we met weekly to discuss the evolution of the unit and share resources. Valerie and Jayne regularly visited both journalism class periods (twenty-three students were enrolled), capturing field notes and supporting Liz and the students by participating in conferences as described in Step 1 and helping students rehearse their talks in Step 5. At the conclusion of the unit, we recorded a final reflective conversation documenting our collaboration, our reactions to the unit, and changes Liz wanted to make for future implementation. We remain connected, collaboratively analyzing data and planning for a post-COVID study of the unit that reflects what we have learned.

In implementing Five Steps to Advocacy Research, we were guided by a goal for students to reenvision their roles—from researchers to advocates.

TEACHING FIVE STEPS TO ADVOCACY RESEARCH

Months ahead of this unit, Liz had been working with students on writing assignments that foregrounded advocacy for their newly restructured school community. The visibility of the school's university partnership drew a local journalist's

attention. She visited Liz's class for a feature story on their advocacy-focused writing and introduced Liz to solutions journalism, which responds to societal problems through a process of systematic research. Liz recognized how this approach might complement and extend students' advocacy work. Combined, these ideas became the Five Steps to Advocacy Research project, which teaches students to study an issue from multiple perspectives, meets curricular expectations for developing students' research writing skills, and fosters creativity in the later steps when they propose a solution to their intended audience. The TED Talk-style presentations published on the school YouTube channel furthered dialogue and contributed students' voices to community conversations.

In implementing Five Steps to Advocacy Research, we were guided by a goal for students to reenvision their roles—from researchers to advocates. Researchers find information; advocates argue for approaches to community problems based on research. The following steps structured this repositioning. (We indicate which steps draw on solutions journalism and which draw on the school's advocacy mission.)

1. Identifying a local problem the student cares about (advocacy mission)
2. Researching how that problem has been addressed locally and nationally, and evaluating effectiveness (solutions journalism)
3. Considering adjacent issues (solutions journalism)
4. Proposing a solution (advocacy mission)
5. Presenting their solution to the community (advocacy mission)

We describe each step's implementation, first explaining classroom activity and assessment, followed by a focus on Ericka's path to seeing herself as a community advocate.

STEP 1: DEFINE THE PROBLEM

Students began the unit by thinking about and eventually choosing one important, local problem they cared deeply about and believed could be changed

to improve the lives of those in our community. Randy Bomer claims that inviting students to consider issues affecting their lives as integral to their schoolwork is a way to affirm and appreciate their “already existing interests” (21). Students considered a series of questions: What is the nature of the problem? Why does it matter? To whom? What can be improved by “fixing” or addressing it? Liz shared examples of other youth successfully working for change in their communities, such as the Parkland, Florida high school shooting survivors advocating for gun legislation. Students also interviewed someone who had been personally affected by the issue they chose. They conducted additional research online to fully explain their issue. Most students entered this phase with apprehension around finding not only a problem that they cared about (e.g., climate change), but one that manifested itself locally (e.g., paper waste at school). We supported their work by including ample conference time with the teacher (or other adults) and each other as “thought buddies,” as well as whole-class activities that scaffolded the process of clearly defining their problems. Liz assessed student work formatively (via in-class exercises) as students explored and localized a problem.

During an early scaffolding activity, Ericka identified the problem she cared about. Liz had asked students to journal about one day of their lives, noting what bothered them as they moved through it. During class discussion that followed, Ericka shared an upsetting problem from her part-time job at a local grocery store sub shop:

I see sixty to seventy loaves of bread being thrown away every single day! On my way home from work, I see people hungry, living in the street, sleeping in the streets, begging at the stop sign or at the light, asking for money to get food. And that really hurts me. Not even four miles away, I am seeing all this waste of food and then going down the street and seeing people begging for food, it just hurts [*starts crying*]. I'm sorry.

In observing her store's daily dumping of good food juxtaposed with the hungry people she passed on the street, Ericka knew she had found her problem, “because I have seen the waste and I can relate to it.”

STEP 2: RESEARCH THE PROBLEM

Once students identified their problems, they began researching how others had previously addressed them. Students explored solutions attempted locally (e.g., the move to Google Classroom to reduce paper use at the school) and elsewhere. Following the solutions journalism approach, Liz directed students to analyze the effectiveness of these attempts, noting successes and failures. To help students gain access to literacies of power, she taught mini-lessons about how to evaluate the credibility and biases of sources (Morrell “Critical English Education” 313) and proper citation methods. Individual conferences with students continued, inspiring another lesson about how to right-size their problems to focus their research. Liz assessed research quality and the depth to which students investigated what had been tried before. She looked for how they evaluated the promises and pitfalls of previous attempts.

As Ericka explored current and previous attempts to address the parallel problems of food waste and hunger, she discovered that while her employer already donated to a local food bank, the sub shops did not participate. Her conversations with the high school's culinary arts teacher, her store's head chef, and her manager generated potential solutions. She considered asking her manager to donate food to her school's kitchen and securing a food truck to drive food directly to the homeless in the community. With each conversation, Ericka found that she “wanted to go more in deep into it” as she homed in on viable options. For example, when evaluating food trucks, Ericka realized that without financial resources this idea was not realistic. Spurred by her passion to “minimize the waste of food that we do around the store,” Ericka's research led her to evaluate existing food pantry and homeless shelter programs in the area, and she learned about how they sourced supplies and her store's participation in those programs.

STEP 3: CONSIDER “ADJACENT” ISSUES

As students explored the intricacies of their chosen problems and solutions that had been applied, they came across other, related problems. They evaluated

the extent to which adjacent issues affected their problem. Some of the questions we explored were “How do adjacent issues contribute to the problem you’re exploring?” and “How do they need to be changed in order to affect your issue?” Sometimes, students adjusted their focus to incorporate these adjacent issues. For example, “gross” food in the cafeteria was a problem, but the fact that the school district must adhere to state nutrition mandates with a limited budget was found to be an adjacent issue that complicated the problem. Therefore, the problem of gross cafeteria food became more nuanced, changing to “How can we improve the cafeteria food cheaply and efficiently?” Researching adjacent issues gave students a sense of the complexity and interconnectedness of societal problems. For ELA instruction to help close the civic empowerment gap, as Love proposes (3), it needs to support students in learning to wrestle with layers and contingencies of issues. Liz assessed students’ work for this step based on the degree to which they investigated one to two issues affecting their problem and how they articulated the relationship between these issues and their problem.

As Ericka interviewed her manager and learned about store policy for food donations, she found out about food safety requirements, the store’s inconsistent donation practice, and its “zero waste” initiative. She researched adjacent issues of local hunger, poverty, and a lack of community awareness about resources available to help address food waste and hunger. She discovered that most unused food at the grocery store gets donated for compost, benefiting gardeners but not the hungry community members she wanted to help. Ericka gained a more specific understanding of what it takes to donate unused food, complicating her problem, but also requiring her to engage in the complexity of addressing it. She explained, “We have to make sure the food is cooked safely and is at a safe temperature. And if the food has an expiration date, it has to be cooked before that. It’s just they’re very strict about the food safety policy.” Ericka also discovered a nonprofit organization in our city that leads the region in food assistance.

STEP 4: PROPOSE SOLUTIONS

After they conducted the research, students used literacy as their “tool to fight for justice” (Coffey 3) as they wrote a two-hundred- to three-hundred-word article for their school newspaper. In her assessment, Liz looked for clarity in articulations of problems and explanations of their community importance. Students presented information about solutions that had been tried and proposed a course of action, supported by at least three valid reasons and evidence from their research. Though students’ problems may have overlapped, as when multiple students researched climate change, their individual approaches to refining their problems resulted in divergent and complementary articles, exploring the impact of their school’s recycling program and paper overconsumption.

Ericka’s research on food donation policy and past solutions to waste helped her see that volunteering within an existing program like the local food pantry would not satisfy her specific need to effect change. She argued, “I want to do it myself to see how it works ’cause I know there’s a lot of programs out there fighting hunger, but I don’t know what they’re doing wrong.” Instead, she secured an agreement from her store manager to donate food that the school’s culinary program students could safely prepare in their kitchen. She proposed that her mom help her deliver the meals to a local homeless shelter. Ericka’s plan accounted for food safety concerns, financial limitations, and the resources available to her at work, school, and home.

STEP 5: PRESENT TO THE COMMUNITY

Students finalized their research papers and distilled their writing into a three- to four-minute TED Talk-style video. Liz evaluated the papers based on issue description, research quality, adjacent issues addressed, solutions proposed, proper citations, and writing craft (see Figure 1). The TED Talks captured the students’ voices and contributed to community awareness, dialogue, and potential action. The degrees to which they demonstrated their preparation, clarity of speech, hook, eye contact, and body language were the criteria with which Liz assessed their talks.

Advocacy Project Written Rubric				
	4	3	2	1
Description of the Issue	The issue is extensively explored and the nature of the issue is thoroughly defined. Includes a thoughtful interview with a person directly affected by this issue.	The issue is thoroughly explored and the nature of the issue is clearly defined. Includes an adequate interview with a person directly affected by this issue.	The issue is adequately explored and the nature of the issue is mostly defined. May or may not include an interview with a person affected by this issue.	The issue is somewhat explored and the nature of the issue is inconsistently defined. May or may not include an interview with a person affected by this issue.
Quality of Research	Research is thorough and extensive . Project shows insightful research into the issue. 2-3 credible sources.	Research is thorough . Project shows thoughtful research into the issue. 2-3 credible sources.	Research is adequate . Project shows some research into the issue. May have fewer than 2-3 credible sources.	Research is inconsistent . Project shows minimal research into the issue. May have fewer than 2-3 credible sources.
Adjacent Issues Addressed	Paper thoroughly explores 1-2 connected issues and insightfully explains the relationship between the issues.	Paper adequately explores 1-2 connected issues and fully explains the relationship between the issues.	Paper attempts to explore 1-2 connected issues and adequately explains the relationship between the issues.	Paper does not explore 1-2 connected issues and does not explain the relationship between the issues.
Solutions Proposed	Paper includes a thoroughly nuanced claim about an effective course of action, supported with at least 3 strong, insightful reasons and strong evidence.	Paper includes a fairly nuanced claim about an effective course of action, supported with at least 3 strong, valid reasons and strong evidence.	Paper attempts to include a nuanced claim about an effective course of action, supported with at least 1-2 strong, valid reasons and strong evidence.	Paper fails to include a nuanced claim about an effective course of action, may or may not be supported with strong, valid reasons and strong evidence.
Citations, Mechanics, Language Usage	All citations are correct, in APA format. Few to no errors in mechanics and language use.	Most citations are correct, in APA format. Few errors in mechanics and language use.	Some citations are correct, in APA format. Several errors in mechanics and language use.	Few citations are correct, in APA format. Many errors in mechanics and language use.

FIGURE 1

The final research paper rubric corresponds with the first four steps of the Five Steps to Advocacy Research unit.

Students could be nervous at this point, as they had spent eight weeks learning about their problems and researching solutions; many had started to believe that their work could change their communities for the better. When preparing to record the videos, some sat by themselves, rehearsing lines written on index cards, and others listened seriously as each classmate stood and delivered their talk to the camera. They cleared their throats. They started, then stopped and

started again. A technology teacher taking her free period to assist with recording asked several students to slow down and “treat each period as a pause.” In their talks, they called attention to their issues: “It’s not just slow Internet that’s a problem. It’s access that’s a bigger problem.” They articulated potential solutions: “We need more affordable daycares at colleges [for young parents]! We also need more government funding for these institutions to exist!” They urged

their audiences to take action: “We as humans have to take better care of our environment if we plan to live longer and sustain our earth!” Morrell argues that students need to “see themselves as media producers” so they can experience “empowered literacy learning” (“Critical Media Literacy” 156). Eventually uploading these recordings to the school’s YouTube channel, each student offered their community a message that advocated for improvement.

Ericka—like most of her classmates—studied the structure of TED Talks as a model for her own. She began by capturing her audience’s attention with a narrative about her observations of food waste in the sub shop, followed by her painful witness to the hungry, homeless members of her community. She went on to explain some of what she had learned about food safety, educating her audience. She corrected misconceptions about “sell by” and “use by” dates stamped on food packages, explaining how and when to cook food for donation so that it follows safety guidelines. She illustrated the rationale of her

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solution with an example of a brown-spotted bunch of bananas that typical shoppers might reject, but that the average hungry person values. The browning banana “won’t hurt them,” she explained. “It won’t get

them sick.” Ericka’s hope was that her TED Talk “raises awareness about this problem so that you’ll think twice.” She posited, “[I]f people know about waste, what’s it going to make them do? How will they be different? They will volunteer more at the food cupboard, United Way, [and other programs] to help people get donations from [local grocery stores]—to feed the people who really need it.” At this point, Ericka could see how her work could change people’s minds and lives.

BECOMING CHANGE-MAKERS

When teachers expand curricula to include students’ concerns and develop their potential as advocates, powerful results follow. Ericka and her classmates began with reticence, which evolved into motivation.

They came to realize that they were creating and presenting their own texts “in the struggle for social justice” (Morrell “Critical English Education” 313). Once Ericka made the shift to change-maker, she felt she needed to “do something . . . instead of just making it a paper or a TED Talk.” After the unit concluded, she implemented a modified version of her advocacy idea, securing food from her store and working with her mom to make and deliver one hundred sandwiches to the homeless shelter. “I want to see it happen,” she explained, “and maybe if people will see that just a senior from high school is doing it, maybe it will encourage them to do it.”

Even though not all of her classmates *achieved* change, the unit supported students in *becoming* advocates. Our experimental effort at designing and redesigning Liz’s research unit resulted in a five-step process that developed students’ academic skills, encouraged them to question and critique societal structures, and facilitated their production and dissemination of texts arguing for change. These are literacies of power!

The challenges experienced by Ericka and her classmates during this first implementation of the unit also revealed that students needed support to develop these literacies. Teachers who embark on this unit will need to help students identify, localize, and articulate their chosen problems. They will need to scaffold the literacies required for each step: sustained research, evidence-based writing, and public speaking, for example. Introducing, practicing, and developing these literacies in advance of the unit, throughout the school year, will facilitate a more robust and agentic experience of student advocacy work.

Nevertheless, we believe that the Five Steps to Advocacy Research unit provided students with a different possibility for school-based research, its potential to achieve change, and the power of their concerns to motivate the research process. Seeing themselves as change-makers was new to most of them; yet young people are increasingly pushing for change in our world. Some of our most visible climate, education, and gun control activists, among others, are high school students making real improvements in their communities and garnering international attention to the issues that matter to

them. Why shouldn't all students believe that they can use their voices to address problems that they've researched? As Ericka put it, "Young people can make things happen because we're the future, so if we start with us, we can teach our kids, we can teach our grandchildren to care a little bit more, to see beyond." Research that incorporates literacies of power invites students into a practice of freedom (Coffey 4) that gives their research purpose and impact. **EJ**

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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In this lesson, after brainstorming a list of local issues, students select and research an issue that concerns them, using multiple sources. Next, students review the concepts of purpose and audience. They then argue a position on their selected issue in letters to two different audiences, addressing their purpose and considering the needs of the audience in each letter. Students work with peer groups as they use an online tool to draft and revise their letters. Finally, letters are published and then sent to their intended readers. <https://bit.ly/3ktrLSb>