

Non-representational Advocacy

What is it that makes advocacy unique? Amongst other things Henry Fisher suggests that a more careful look at its non-representational approaches could be useful for understanding and developing advocacy practice.

For many years now I have been quietly getting on with doing advocacy work with people. I never knew very much about the links between what I was doing and other advocates' work, and I didn't really mind.

Then one fateful day I got a proper job, working with local refugees. I soon noticed that some of the refugees who spoke a bit more English were acting as informal advocates within their communities, quite like I had been doing, and I realised that if I was going to properly support them I needed to find out a bit more about how advocacy really worked in the UK.

That was a little over two years ago, and since then everything's been in a bit of a spin. I've read lots, and I've spoken to many people from Somerset to Tyne & Wear. Everyone was very generous with information and encouragement (I'm still sure that advocacy is the friendliest of all fields to work in), but the problem was everyone had a slightly different angle on what advocacy *was*.

Since no one seemed to be able to decide on a simple definition, they often gave several alternatives side by side - Advocacy 2000's three sentences, followed by three longer paragraphs, and then by another section on "independent advocacy" is a good example.

After this would come sections on different types of advocacy (citizen, professional, peer, crisis, etc), and often a section on what advocacy *wasn't*.

The refugees I was working with had no experience of the voluntary sector, and often limited English. The distinction between a housing support worker, a Job Centre Plus Advisor, and an advice worker at the CAB was complicated enough.

Trying to explain how these long drawn out definitions of advocacy could be adapted and made use of was a character-building challenge indeed.

Rasa Advocacy Project is now quite independent, and my role has developed into working with all the advocacy projects across Wakefield District, finding ways of supporting and developing provision. And still I am asked what advocacy *is* - only I don't like this question, and apart from having to have some sort of short response for the people we work with, as practising advocates I'm not sure it's really appropriate.

I'm happier with questions like 'what is advocacy for?' or even better, 'how does advocacy work?' In our practice as advocates these are the questions that really matter, that make a difference to what we do.

Rather than listing all the styles of advocacy, I like to think about Wolfensberger's expressive and instrumental approaches to advocacy, or Henderson and Pochin's personal and technical approaches. For me advocacy really is about relationships, drama and expression, as these authors suggest, although I'm also delighted that more technical or instrumental interventions by advocates can also work so well, where other professional approaches sometimes flounder.

I was also very happy to hear Joel Rasbash make the distinction between a human rights approach and a person centred approach to non-directed advocacy at the NAN conference last November.

One of the good things about all these descriptions of how advocacy works is

that they can be practised across all the different styles of advocacy. So a professional advocate can adopt a person centred approach, and a peer advocate could take a technical approach for example.

Also, all advocates can use these ideas to reflect on their own practice. If we are simply given that old list of advocacy styles on the other hand, it is quite tempting just to say "I'm a citizen advocate" or "I'm a crisis advocate" and leave it at that.

The thing that really got me into advocacy however, and still cements my commitment to it, is what I call its non-representational approach - and I still haven't seen or heard anyone speaking about this directly yet.

The best way of seeing how the non-representational approach comes into advocacy debates is in the question of whether we advocate *on behalf of people*.

In my own practice I come down firmly on the side of disliking this statement. There are plenty of people who act on behalf of others, but for me advocacy is more about disappearing into the background as your partner becomes better at speaking for themselves. Even for the very rare people who will never be able to speak for themselves, it is possible, as Joel described, for an advocate to gradually convert their observations and experiences with someone into simply expressed wishes.

It seems to me that if an advocate speaks at all to service providers, they should try to use the words of their partner as far as possible.

The non-representational approach is thus very close to person-centred advocacy, but thinking about it enables us to go in different directions again.

Speaking on behalf of people on the other hand can easily move in the direction of representation. Many advocates in my experience still see themselves as

providing a 'service' where they talk to people to find out what they want, and then write letters or speak to doctors 'on their behalf.' By doing this they 'help' people to solve their problems - a noble aim, but not much different from social work practice, and not necessarily very empowering.

There is another problem. When we decide 'what' someone wants, we form an idea or representation of it in our heads. Then if we speak on someone's behalf, we are re-presenting it again to a third party. This is what politicians do, with questionable success. Even when we try to decide what we want ourselves we find it difficult, and simplifying people's wishes into representations like these is full of problems. Far better to get people to speak for themselves - and work through the drama of communication, argument and hopefully persuasion.

When we aim towards self advocacy, when we support real empowerment, when we avoid the patronising attitudes of so many professionals, we are working in non-representational ways. But society is steeped in the tradition of representation and it is very easy to fall into representational ways of thinking. The fact that George Bush is now advocating for an end to terrorism and Gillian (You Are What You Eat) McKeith is advocating for avocados (seriously - see p.12) doesn't help matters.

It is still common to see advocacy described as speaking on behalf of people. I would like to call for a conscious move against this, with the emphasis on advocacy as first of all being about people's voices being heard directly.