

Makerspaces: The Future of Public Libraries?

(Article by Emily LeGrand)

Sometimes teens want to get together to collaborate and learn from each other while creating art and new technologies, or while fixing appliances. People are starting to act on this desire in exciting ways, mainly through creating spaces that provide access to specialized tools and equipment, space to work, and space for people to come together to share knowledge.

These spaces, increasingly known as “makerspaces” or “hackerspaces,” are popping in public libraries all over North America. Makerspaces have been created in Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, London, Hamilton, Kitchener, and Guelph, as well as two in Winnipeg and four in Toronto (Canadian Maker Passport, 2013). With the completion of their new downtown branch, Halifax Public Libraries will also be joining the makerspace team. People from all walks of life are excited about makerspaces: do-it-yourselfers, inventors, entrepreneurs, educators, librarians, and, you guessed it: teens.

The first makerspace to appear in a public library was at the Fayetteville Free Library in New York State. This space came about as a result of a MLIS student’s thesis idea, which was pitched to the CEO of the nearby Fayetteville Free Library. This student, Lauren Britton, is now the Transliteracy Development Director at the Free Library (Britton, 2012).

The Westport Public Library (Connecticut) was also an early adopter of makerspaces. These ahead-of-the-curve libraries see tremendous opportunities to simultaneously expand the services of public libraries in creative and relevant ways, while also staying within the mission and mandate of public libraries to provide access to all

forms of knowledge to the public (Scott, 2012; Westport Public Library, 2013).

Now that Web 2.0 tools allow nearly anyone to create information and share it, the next step for libraries is to facilitate access to the tools and skills to fully participate in this new wave of the information revolution. By providing a setting for makerspaces, libraries become true partners with community members, moving away from the old expert librarian-patron dynamic. The Westport Public Library also emphasizes the economic development opportunities of makerspaces; these spaces remove the economic barriers for potential teen inventors and entrepreneurs to develop their ideas (Westport Public Library, 2013).

Examples of tools and technologies that may be present in makerspaces include 3D printers, soldering equipment, sewing machines, electronic equipment, bike repair tools, vinyl cutters, and many more. Lauren Britton, however, is quick to point out that makerspaces do not need to have a set list of fancy tools to start out. As teens and other community members begin projects, the tools needed for the project will help the collection grow naturally and responsively to the unique interests of the people who make up the library’s community (Britton, 2012). Community input will also ensure that you are getting the right tools and equipment: the ones that will truly support teens’ interests and needs.

Makerspaces offer tremendous opportunities for personal growth in teens in particular. These spaces provide a variety of ways to build teens’ developmental assets. For example, programs such as the non-profit YOUmedia, housed in the

Chicago Public Library, are makerspaces specifically for teens. YOUmedia is based around mentorship with creative adults who are experts in graphic design, radio, art, animation, film, music, and writing (YOUmedia, 2013). In this instance strong adult relationships, and adult role models, safe places, positive peer influence, creative activities, youth programs, reading for pleasure, planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, self-esteem, and sense of purpose are all potentially at play.

Through community support to learn new skills, create, and express themselves with other

teens, participating youth are given the space and tools (literally!) to explore who they are, what their strengths are, and what they might want to try next in their future. Makerspaces also offer a potentially paradigm-shifting opportunity for teens to create new identities for themselves: the identity of cultural creator and contributor, rather than passive consumer (Britton, 2012). For teens that choose to get involved in makerspace communities at public libraries, the experience can be truly transformative and life-changing.

For further resources, check out these initiatives and articles:

Britton, L. (October 1, 2012). The makings of makerspaces. *The Digital Shift*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedigitalshift.com/2012/10/public-services/the-makings-of-maker-spaces-part-1-space-for-creation-not-just-consumption/>

Canadian Maker Passport. (2013). Canadian Maker Spaces Map. *Canadian Maker Passport*. Retrieved from <http://www.thingtanklab.com/makerpassport/canadian-maker-spaces/>

Scott, S. H. (November 11, 2012). Making the case for public library makerspace. *Public Libraries Online*. Retrieved from <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2012/11/making-the-case-for-a-public-library-makerspace/>

Westport Public Library. (2013). Services: Maker Space. Retrieved from <http://www.westportlibrary.org/services/maker-space>.

YOUmedia Chicago. (2013). YOUMedia Chicago: Youth-powered 21st century learning. Retrieved from <http://youmediachicago.org/>