Community Action and the Student Maker

Feature

by Kristina Holzweiss and Gina Seymour, October 2016

"In our democratic society, the library stands for hope, for learning, for progress, for literacy, for self-improvement and for civic engagement." —Vartan Gregorian

It's no wonder why the maker movement is one of the hottest trends in education today. Promoting problem-solving, critical thinking, hands-on learning, differentiation, collaboration, organizational skills, and independent thinking, the maker movement is a welcome reprieve from standardized testing and rote memorization.

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In addition to academic benefits, the act of making is also good for the psyche and emotional development of students. The simple act of making fosters a human connection which, in turn, can be therapeutic—"the more you reshape something outside yourself, the more you reshape your inside" (Barron 2012, 13). Through opportunities for making, students of all ages can help to make a difference. Younger students can develop a sense of empathy and learn to care about and respect others. Working together promotes a feeling of community and teamwork important for helping children develop into responsible young adults. Students can feel good about themselves while doing something positive. This can be as simple as helping one person, or participating in a cause as an activist. Working together fosters an environment not only of tolerance, but also of understanding and appreciation.

Our libraries "can play a valuable role in helping young children and teens better understand, become involved in, and make a contribution to their community. Programs that foster civic engagement among youth are making an investment in future citizen activism" (Durrance et al. 2001, 57). In the spirit of the election season, we look to how we can engage students in active citizenry. We look to encourage youth to care about and be cognizant of the world around them. By examining local issues and developing a plan for ameliorating a situation about which they are passionate, students are able to take an active role in the change they wish to see around them.

A Community of Making

Creating a community of making is easier than you think. Reach out to organizations locally and nationally. Investigate areas in which your students can participate or, better still, have students research organizations and causes. Find activities that match your students' abilities, your school's mission, or find one that fits the curriculum. Chelsea Clinton's book, *It's Your World: Get Informed, Get Inspired & Get Going!*, inspires kids to make a difference in the world. Her book proposes that we each can play a part through theme-based service projects such as those listed in the book and on the companion website, which includes vetted organizations. The CitizenKid collection published by Kids Can Press is also a wonderful springboard to educate children about topics such as water conservation, citizenship, and global awareness. Additional information and resources are provided as addenda to these picture books for older children.

Another book to inspire students is *I Am Malala.* We've both developed maker activities focused on the work of Malala Yousafzai. *I Stand #withMalala* buttons were designed, made, and worn by Gina's students to emphasize the importance of education around the world. To show unity in their school, Kristina's students created wreaths by having the students trace their hands on multicolored construction paper and writing quotes by Malala on hearts. They were displayed on classroom doors throughout the school.

Not all civic engagement needs to be global. As Mother Teresa advised, "Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest you." Inspire students to embrace a local cause and have them advocate for change through public service announcements, presentations to local leaders, and even social media. All this can be supported in a library, with or without a makerspace.

We encouraged students to participate in running our annual community SLIME – Students of Long Island Maker Expo. Scores of students from multiple school districts participated in the community-wide event. Not only did our students volunteer their time during the event, they were also instrumental in making hundreds of buttons for the swag bags and for our volunteers. They created an Exploratorium for the event, complete with wind tubes and marble runs, and there were "Make and Donate" stations scattered throughout the expo promoting simple ways that children and adults could work together for a cause. Old t-shirts were transformed into pillows for puppies at a local shelter and no-sew baby blankets were fashioned from fleece fabric for Project Linus. Participants also created "Welcome Home" signs for Habitat for Humanity and wrote thank you notes to our military. The local Lions Club donated toiletries for distribution in gift bags decorated with positive messages by the participants. Such events demonstrate to students that contributing in small ways helps us to work together for a common goal.

Our students have used the 3-D printer to make missing and broken parts for teachers' classrooms thus helping their community at the most basic level, the school community. Hopefully this will encourage students to engage in local, state, national, and global issues as well. We want to see students develop into empowered citizens

and community leaders.

Being a part of something larger than one's self has a positive impact on emotional development, and an environment of understanding can be cultivated when students feel that their contributions have value. Students in Kristina's NYS Liberty Partnerships Program made flower pens and stationery, sold them to students and teachers, and then used the money to purchase True Hope dolls to donate to children at the local Ronald McDonald House. But it didn't end there. The students went on a field trip to tour the Ronald McDonald House and see how it offers a safe haven for families whose children are patients in local hospitals. Seeing how their personally donated dolls were used enabled the students to put their making in context.

What Do You Need?

You can change the world on a small budget. For example, Islip (NY) High School runs an book sale every spring. Students collect gently used books that are then sold during the annual Read to Feed book sale. Students make amazing signs and videos marketing the popular event. Proceeds go to Heifer International, an organization dedicated to ending world hunger.

Maker craft items can be created from recyclables and sold at a profit, with proceeds benefitting a worthwhile cause. Students can set up an old-fashioned lemonade stand in support of Alex's Lemonade Stand Foundation for Childhood Cancer or write a letter to Santa to participate in the annual Macy's Make-A-Wish Believe campaign. For more expensive items, you can ask for sponsors or donations from local civic associations and companies. In the course of raising funds and making items to benefit an organization, students learn more about the world around them and how to participate fully as global citizens. Think of all the themes you can discuss with students—economics, upcycling, world hunger, and poverty to name a few.

Our Role

As school librarians, we can help transform youth to become civically engaged. "By providing kids with opportunities to find out more about their communities and to become involved and make a difference in their communities, there is a chance that a new civic generation will emerge" (Durrance et al. 2001, 57). Maker activist projects might not always be specifically curriculum-based, but they do promote the well-rounded child on the way to becoming a productive citizen in the community, country, and world. Our students can also develop work-related experiences and become college and career ready by learning how to communicate, organize, prioritize, demonstrate commitment, and plan. Through community network connections, teens can include these activities on college applications and résumés.

As mentors, we provide space, assist in making, gather supplies, and serve as role models. Librarians are the "go to" people for making connections as we tend to have the resources, know people in the community, and can locate names and contact information. As the youth-adult connection, we act as the liaison for organizations and our students.

Conclusion

Your students can learn responsible citizenship by taking an active role in their community and you can foster and develop maker activists in your school library. In an overloaded curriculum, there's little time for authentic projects with human impact. However, with the assistance of the school librarian, our students can be empowered to make a difference in others' lives.

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