

What Is the Philosophy of Your Makerspace?

This month we asked school librarians to tell us about the philosophy of their makerspace, if they had one. Most respondents' answers fell into one of five categories: free range, guided, structured, all of the above, or I don't have a makerspace. Out of nearly 500 responses, 38% reported they did not have a makerspace, and nearly a quarter of respondents said their makerspace reflected all of the approaches. The least-popular response, by far, was a structured makerspace, with only 1.2% of librarians reporting their makerspace to be a place where only librarian-led activities happened.

A sentiment shared by many of our respondents is that a combination of free-range and guided philosophies is ideal. Several commented about having the goal of getting to free range but needing more structure to start. Choice and the freedom to create are highly valued in a makerspace setting, but I also want to argue for the merits of a highly structured situation.

Free range makerspaces speak to certain kids who have the patience and vision to sit down, and without much modeling or instruction, create something amazing. Of course we want to encourage those kinds of experiences. But, structure can empower students who don't naturally gravitate to a certain kind of crafting, building, or making and give them the resources and support they need to develop skills they otherwise wouldn't. Not all students will take advantage of walk-up opportunities. Not all students have had experiences that have taught them they are capable of using the materials or tech being offered, and not all students will have the confidence to start a project on their own.



In the past year, the single most successful experience that came out of my makerspace would definitely fall within the bounds of a high structured philosophy. The project came about through a collaboration with a middle school STEM teacher, Kendra Waddell, who was doing a unit on vector design. Students started with a template file and then added their own designs or created designs from artwork they had permission to reuse. It was not a simple task. The project stretched several weeks, included a prototyping phase in cardstock, before culminating with their designs being cut from wood in the laser cutter. They walked away with rather stunning lamps that looked like someone much more skilled than a middle-schooler had made them. You could tell from their faces that some of them had never made anything so impressive before.

This project brings me to another point I'd like to make. While some people may struggle to see the connection between libraries and makerspaces, I have found that makerspaces can actually function as a highly effective engine for teaching about the ethical use of information. This isn't a concept I see discussed very much, but there is huge potential for using a makerspace as the setting for discussions about Creative Commons licensing, trademark issues, and attribution. Students use a makerspace to create new things—often inspired by projects they see online. They might use an image for a background in a video they are making, an STL file from Thingiverse to 3d print as part of a project, a picture to put on a button, or a logo to make into a vinyl decal. These situations almost always come with a conversation regarding how the students know they have permission to use whatever it is that they have downloaded and then a follow up conversation concerning what responsibility they have to give attribution and what that can look like when their project isn't a paper with a references section.

Librarians are built to have these conversations! At no other time will a student be more willing to engage in a conversation about the ethical use of information than when he or she is dying to make something they are excited about. This is an opportunity to teach smart search strategies. This gives us the chance to talk about Creative Commons licenses and how they might not all meet our needs. We can harness that enthusiasm and let students leave with more respect for the resources they use to make and a better understanding of how they can contribute and share what they've made with other makers.

About the Author

Jen Gilbert, MSLIS, is a K-12 teacher librarian at Eminence Independent Schools in Eminence, KY and part-time faculty at the University of Kentucky. She earned her bachelor's in English teaching from Brigham Young University and her master's in library and information science from the University of Kentucky.

Jen loves spending her days in her school library, the EDhub, and promises a VIP tour to any fellow school librarians who want to check out the EDhub's impressive maker space.

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