Makerspaces: Surveying the Scene in Illinois

Defined as a space for people to come together to create, share, and collaborate, makerspaces are the latest buzz in libraries across the country. Their popularity led to Maker Monday, a full day at the 2013 American Library Association’s Midwinter Meeting in Seattle devoted to the topic. But you don’t have to leave Illinois to get a sense of this exciting movement that combines community engagement, participatory programming, and both high- and low-tech maker environments.

Eighteen Illinois libraries responded to a survey last fall, sharing what they were doing, and even this limited sample turned up a few trends. Seven of the libraries reported having had a media lab in place for several years, while an additional seven have labs under construction or are considering building one in the near future. Six of the survey respondents have makerspaces in place or in development. Many or most are aimed at teen and youth audiences, but with plenty to interest other patrons.

Cost, limited resources, and space were identified as the biggest challenges to developing a makerspace or media lab, but neither community size nor location seemed to be a barrier. Of the responding libraries with some form of makerspace, service populations range from 1,400 to over 200,000. Respondents represent urban, suburban, and rural areas of the state.

Libraries with spaces either recently opened or set to launch include:

- Gail Borden Public Library District’s Digital Media Lab, set to open summer 2013. The 600-square-foot space is designed to attract young people to invent, collaborate, and evaluate, using digital media such as video, sound recording, photography, design, game development, editing, and remixing. The digital studio will be open to others in the community when not used by young people.

- Urbana Free Library’s Fab Lab (http://urbanafreelibrary.org/blog/teen-servicesblog/2013/01/22/tufl-teen-tech-series) will host a weekly after-school teen technology series. Youth will have a chance to learn digital productive technologies and techniques, including scanning, modeling, and printing in 3D, image manipulation with Adobe Photoshop, digital storytelling in stop motion, video game creation, and sharing with musical instruments.

- Fountaindale Public Library’s Studio 300 (http://fplstudio300.wordpress.com) opened its doors in March 2013. With eighteen editing stations, six sound recording studios, two video recording studios with a shared control room, and three group collaboration rooms, this technology-rich environment will be a teen magnet.

Chicago Public Library has also recently announced plans to create a makerspace in addition to their existing media lab, You Media. Four other area libraries featured below share their stories of how their makerspaces came to be.

“Makerspaces are the latest buzz in libraries across the country.”

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Oak Park Public Library
Population: 51,000
Makerspace: The Idea Box
Staff Contact: Monica Harris, customer services manager

Oak Park Public Library (OPPL) has made a concerted effort to move from more traditional programming to a focus on participatory programming — engaging its audience and getting them involved in a real way. The Idea Box is a physical extension of this philosophy, a constantly changing participatory exhibit space in the main library’s vestibule. It isn’t focused on things commonly found in makerspaces, like 3D printers and laser cutters. Its focus is to encourage participation from the community, foster play and imagination in all ages, and keep customers surprised and delighted.

The Idea Box opened without a budget in vacant cafe space and has hosted thirteen subsequent exhibits since its opening in March 2012. The Best Books exhibit encouraged people to write about their favorite books on post-it notes and garnered more than 1,900 individual notes, and additional “interaction” from responses to comments!

A big part of what makes the space special is its focus on freshness and change — if something doesn’t work, it’s only a month until there’s something new. Programming the space requires little to no direct staff interaction on a day-to-day basis. A staff team meets quarterly to set the exhibit schedule, and the customer service staff develops the exhibits. The project’s success led to it being added to the 2013 budget.

Morton Grove Public Library
Population: 23,000
Makerspace: Programming Extravaganza
Staff Contact: Natalya Fishman, head of adult services

Morton Grove Public Library’s (MGPL) foray into the makerspace movement started in 2011 with its first Card Making Extravaganza, a big event providing space, materials, and instruction for making greeting cards both by hand and on a computer. The idea for the event came specifically with that thought in mind: provide space and instruction and foster the creativity of patrons of all ages.

Elements of makerspace are incorporated in MGPL’s annual Tech Fests by including hands-on stations for Google Search Stories, a QR Code scavenger hunt, digital storytelling, and more. The 2012 Tech Fest included Bristle Bot mini-robot construction and local social media blogger, Morton Grove Maker Mom (www.themakermom.com)

These innovative programs help MGPL “compete” with larger and better-equipped libraries nearby with full support from staff, administration, and the library board. Creative and technologically savvy staff members make it happen. Even without a media lab or dedicated makerspace, it’s possible to incorporate elements into library programming, fostering content creation and encouraging the community to see the library as a “tech beacon.”

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Arlington Heights Memorial Library
Population Size: 75,000
Media Lab: The Studio
Staff Contact: Richard Kong, digital service manager

A library customer recently used a scanner and Photoshop in our digital media lab to repair a flood-damaged photograph of her grandmother, not the typical library experience of a decade (or even a year) ago. In 2011, Arlington Heights Memorial Library began to think seriously about Joan Frye Williams’ idea that libraries should be more like kitchens (i.e., places for creating and producing things) rather than grocery stores (i.e., places for consuming things).

In January 2012, AHML opened a pilot digital media lab and received an immediate positive response from the community. Users create videos for business and personal use, digitize and touch up old family photographs, make original multi-track recordings, design websites, and add new job skills. Staff frequently provides one-on-one assistance and teaches classes on topics such as Photoshop, iMovie, and GarageBand. A recently renovated 744-square-foot studio includes an isolation booth for high-quality sound recording and a production room with backdrops and lighting for photography and video projects. Three smaller post-production suites provide editing facilities, while cameras, external hard drives, field recorders, and tripods are available for check-out. The Friends of the Library covered the $15,000 start-up cost for the initial pilot lab and later donated $24,500 more for the renovated studio; several departments contributed to planning, installing, and staffing the space.

For libraries considering a digital media space, focus on what people will do with the technology and space. Whether it’s a local teen creating a video for a film festival or an entrepreneur working on media to help promote her/his business, the library can open doors to digital media that would otherwise be beyond their reach. The equipment and software are just the tools bringing libraries and their users together. For more information, visit ahml.info/studio.
Glen Ellyn Public Library  
**Population:** 27,000  
**Media Lab:** 3-D Printer Fab Lab  
**Staff Contact:** Ridgeway Burns, youth outreach librarian

There is a new staff member at the Glen Ellyn Public Library. While the rest of the staff sleeps, the library’s three-dimensional (3D) printer works tirelessly on the creations of library patrons. This printer is translating patron-created 3D images, from computer-assisted design (CAD) programs, into exact physical replicas in plastic. For over a year, workshops for fourth to eighth grade students have been attracting students to the library, teaching valuable skills, and encouraging digital creativity.

The Makerbot Replicator 3D printer cost $2,000, while rolls of plastic filament, the printer’s “ink,” cost around $45 and each filament roll lasts multiple months. The open source software used to design 3D models and operate the printer is a free download and can run on any library computer. Once it was clear that the printer’s noise and slight odor would be mitigated by the printer operating outside of their office area, the library administration and staff were on board with the unique project idea.

Given the quantity of student designs generated plus the slow printing speed, students are asked to return in a week to pick up their designs. Despite the delay, they have embraced the 3D printer, creating and printing hundreds of designs. A great tool for introducing patrons to the “makerspace” idea, 3D printers don’t require a large space or major infrastructure. It might be time to hire a new employee at your library — the 3D printer!

**MAKING COMMUNITY SPACE**

School and academic libraries are joining the maker movement, as well as other community centers and organizations. The key ingredients seem to be combining space with some level of technology and know-how to allow and inspire creative uses. What seems to distinguish the movement from a factory model is that the goal is not simply the goods produced but the shared experience of producing them. For libraries looking to find a new place in a changing world, making space for makerspaces seems to be a good fit.

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**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

For those looking to join the maker movement, here are a few additional resources:

- Facebook Group, https://www.facebook.com/groups/librarymaker
- Make magazine, http://makezine.com/
- Online community, http://makerspace.com/
- Travis Good’s blog, http://www.goodpursuits.com/?cat=58