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Exploring creative spaces in Australian libraries

From collection to creation

Creative spaces, or makerspaces, is an emerging and global phenomenon in libraries. Over the last five years, they have grown in numbers, both in Sweden and internationally. Public, school and academic libraries have, inspired by the maker movement, implemented creative spaces for informal learning, tinkering, and exploring in digital and physical technologies. Instead of focusing on organising and providing access to print and online resources, creative spaces can be strategies for libraries to promote content creation and community engagement – to transition "from collection to creation".[2] Library and information science research strongly focus on the practical nature of makerspaces: the development, history and stories of success.[3] Research done with a critical approach is rare.

Undertaking Uppsala University's master program in ALM off campus, while living in Australia, I was curious about the motives behind creative spaces as well as the purposes they fulfil in the Australian library context. Are they spontaneous, temporary projects, or are they based on long-term, strategic decisions to support social inclusion and bridge the digital divide? To answer these questions, I interviewed seven library professionals who work with creative spaces at three public and one state library. Additionally, I conducted observations of activities in the creative spaces, which included an Arduino workshop, an open workshop session, a Raspberry Pi meet-up and an electronics workshop for children.[4]

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[2] Jochumsen, Skot-Hansen & Hvenegaard Rasmussen (2015), p. 1.

[3] Fourie & Meyer (2015) p. 519.

[4] Arduino is a microcontroller with open source hard- and software that can be programmed to control lights and engines and be utilised in interactive projects. Raspberry Pi is a small, cheap computer developed to promote the teaching of basic computer science in schools and developing countries.

The study's theoretical framework comprised "The Four Spaces Model", created by Danish researchers Henrik Jochumsen, Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen and Dorte Skot-Hansen. According to the model, the library's objective is to support the goals *experience*, *involvement*, *empowerment* and *innovation*. The library spaces, in which these goals should be supported, are *the inspiration space*, *the learning space*, *the meeting space* and *the performative space*.
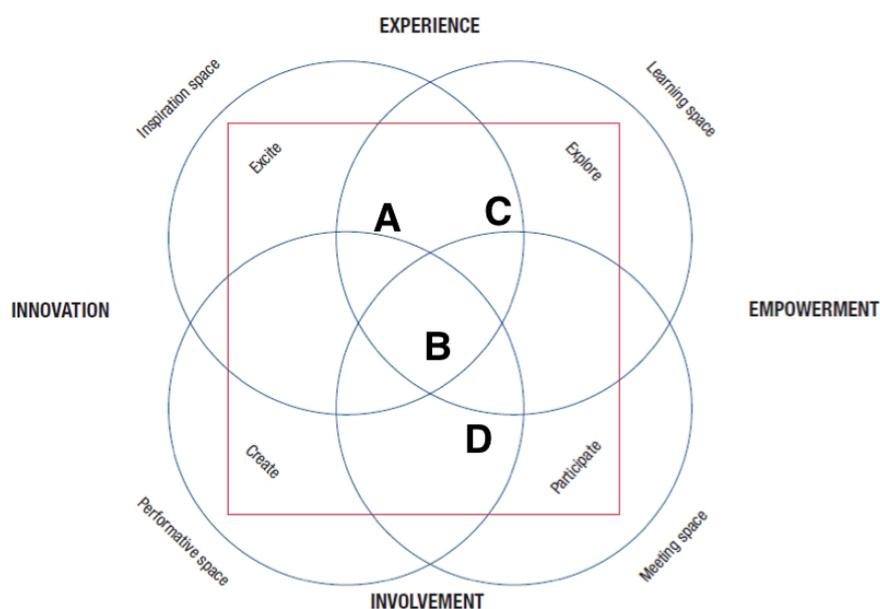

Image 1. The participating libraries' positions within the four spaces model.[5]
(Image source: Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen & Skot-Hansen 2012, p. 589.)

Re-defining resources

The study shows that the four creative spaces support different activities, but tend to position themselves closer to the learning space than to the performative space. The creative space at Library B shows most diversity and multipurpose of all the spaces, which can be explained by financial resources and the time it has been in operation. The most distinct motives behind the creative spaces are the goals experience and empowerment, which indicates that a mix of traditional and newer library values influenced the implementations. Involvement and innovation are also present, but not as prominent.

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[5] A is a newly built public branch library in a major city, B is part of a state library in another major city, C is a newly built public library in a medium sized town, D is a small public library branch in a major city suburb.

A common view among the library professionals is that creative spaces are implemented to attract more people to the library's traditional services, as well as to manifest the range of different experiences libraries can offer. "It gives people an opportunity to see that libraries are not just dry places to come and just read" as one informant states.[6] By giving access to emerging technologies, still too expensive for most individuals to purchase, like Virtual Reality and 3D printing, the libraries create images of being early adopters and pro-active agents in the societal shift to a knowledge economy. It is also an example of a re-definition of the resource concept. As one informant puts it: "we have taken this idea of public resource to mean something beyond books and multimedia, it's actually facilities and abilities to create things and do stuff."[7] Overall, providing access to resources is one of the most prominent motives behind the creative spaces.

The creative space as learning space

Findings reveal that learning is a central purpose for the creative spaces. The learning space is the most distinguishable area in the four spaces model where the libraries position themselves by drawing on arguments related to both democracy and empowerment. Above all, the creative spaces support STEM-based (science, technology, engineering and maths) learning and digital literacy, and in one case, textile craft.

The libraries in general and the creative spaces in particular are, according to the informants, tools that can be utilised to bridge the digital divide. The pedagogical methods vary from completely individual to completely collaborative and the learning takes place in informal settings where play is a significant factor. Some library professionals perceive the collaborative learning methods as unusual. Individual learning is offered at all libraries. A reason for this is that the libraries already provide individual training sessions, and therefore have the resources and skills required for the particular pedagogy. This makes the libraries unique in relation to independent and commercial makerspaces where collaborative learning is dominant. The libraries can function as incubators and "trampoline services" for inexperienced makers who, when they have acquired the basic skills, can move on to independent makerspaces.

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[6] Edin (2016) p. 37.
[7] Edin (2016) p. 48.

Meeting the community's needs

The study further suggests that libraries implement certain ideas and activities derived from the maker movement, but refrain from adopting others. One example is the libraries' focus on *learning*, rather than *creating*, which is the focal point of the maker movement. The library professionals stress that the creative spaces do not exist for the sake of the libraries, but for the users and that it is crucial to support and facilitate the initiatives communicated by the community. One informant describes it as "not what can *we* do, but what can the *patrons* do, and how can we facilitate them through that."[8] All informants state that creative spaces have to meet the community's needs and interests, which are necessary parts in a successful implementation. Activities organised by libraries always run a risk of not being able to engage its community, and there has to be a balance between promoting new, emerging technologies, and listening to what the community needs and wants in terms of programming. Nevertheless "sometimes you have to start by putting things out there, and seeing what sticks"[9] as one informant says. Because of this "personalisation", no two creative spaces will offer the exact same activities to its users. This variation in creative spaces, combined with the complexity of defining what a creative space actually *is*, is paradoxically its most characteristic feature.

Within the library field, there is a movement "from collection to creation", where user-driven creation and participation are central components. Although this change is evident today, the notion of providing access to resources is still one of the central objectives among the libraries in this study. The transactional model still pervades, but with a different and extended concept of what resources and collections are and can be. This study shows that creative spaces can fulfil a range of different goals in a library context, such as experience and empowerment. It is however important that these goals and objectives are clearly stated by the libraries in an early stage of implementation to prevent that conflicts occur between different objectives.

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[8] Edin (2016) p. 43.
[9] Edin (2016) p. 41.

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