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# Makerspaces for All: Serving LGBTQ Makers in School Libraries

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# MAKERSPACES FOR ALL: SERVING LGBTQ MAKERS IN SCHOOL LIBRARIES



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### Introduction

Nearly 1.3 million youth, approximately 8 percent of high school students in the United States, identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Schlanger 2017). About one hundred and fifty thousand, or 0.7 percent, identify as transgender (Herman et al. 2017). Bharat Mehra and Donna Braquet (2011) estimate there are 2.5 million LGBTQ teenagers in the United States, spanning middle and high school as well as early college age. These statistics give us in school libraries a very clear picture. LGBTQ students are in our schools, classrooms, and libraries, whether or not we know of their sexual and gender orientations. If by some chance we don't have LGBTQ students, we can be confident that our students know or are related to someone who identifies as LGBTQ (Oltmann 2016).

Laura Fleming has defined a makerspace as "a metaphor for a unique learning environment that encourages tinkering, play, and open-ended exploration for all" (2016). This definition does not specify a type of technology to be used within makerspaces, nor does it identify a group or population that should use them. Makerspaces exist for tinkering, play, and exploration among all students. These

learning spaces can also be locations for problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration. Makerspaces have the potential to be safe spaces for LGBTQ youth. Youth may be empowered within makerspaces to create products that establish and communicate their LGBTQ identities. Makerspaces also have the potential to give LGBTQ youth the confidence to defy stereotypes based on sexual orientation and gender to create in spaces that may not be traditionally designed with them in mind (Meyer 2018). If you have a makerspace in your school library, you already have a location that is inviting to your student population and potentially emancipatory for LGBTQ youth. As we write this article, we hope to encourage further thought and consideration of how to take advantage of your makerspace to empower LGBTQ students.

### LGBTQ Students and Libraries

Before discussing makerspaces specifically, it is important to understand how LGBTQ youth perceive the libraries that host these spaces. This understanding can give an idea of how to leverage makerspaces as a way to make LGBTQ youth feel included within the larger school library context. Within the

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field of Library and Information Science (LIS), a lack of empirical research exists on LGBTQ youth (Robinson 2016). Several factors contribute to this lack of research,

including the difficulty of obtaining informed consent to participate in research studies. Participants under the age of eighteen may want to participate in a study but not make their parents or guardians aware of their LGBTQ identities (Mustanski 2011). For this reason and others, LIS work about LGBTQ youth is primarily anecdotal (Robinson 2016).

What we do know from LIS research on LGBTQ adult populations is that they perceive the library as an important yet disappointing resource for identity-related information (Hamer 2003). Libraries often mirror broader society and culture, wherein LGBTQ identities are not the norm. Practices like cataloging reflect this mirroring, where subject headings lack terms that convey the fluidity and multiplicity of LGBTQ identities, as well as adequate cross-referencing (Rothbauer 2004).

While LGBTQ individuals do not see themselves reflected in libraries, they do seek alternate sources of identity-related information. Similar to LIS studies of other marginalized groups, research demonstrates that LGBTQ individuals value information provided by other LGBTQ people who share their experiences (Fox and Ralston 2016). The Web can serve as an essential resource for this information since online environments encourage people to create and share information, not only consume it. For LGBTQ individuals, this participatory culture can lead to opportunities for informal teaching, as individuals with experiential knowledge can write blogs, create videos, and answer questions within Q&A forums (Fox and Ralston 2016).

Research findings illustrate two key points. First, LGBTQ individuals do not necessarily view a library as a trustworthy information source for identity-related information. Second, LGBTQ individuals are actively creating information that

can be affirmative and relevant for others. Makerspaces are a location for school librarians to encourage LGBTQ individuals to create and share information with their peers, leading to several beneficial outcomes; among them are increased visibility and inclusivity of LGBTQ students within schools. In addition, LGBTQ youth may begin to exercise more trust in libraries that host inclusive makerspaces. Making makerspaces inclusive of LGBTQ

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identities starts with ensuring that they are safe spaces for all students. Inclusivity within a maker learning location in the library creates a safe environment within and for our school community and establishes students' trust in the library.

### **Makerspaces = Safe Spaces**

A safe space can be described as a location (digital or in person) where groups can escape societal and mainstream stereotypes and

marginalization (Geek Feminism Wiki n.d.). Creating a safe space can be challenging because it can be difficult to balance the priorities of various student groups. However, the idea of cultivating a safe space is that if the most-marginalized groups of students can feel included, it benefits all students. The idea is a safe space for all. When thinking about your school library or makerspace as a safe space, think about the following:

1. If you have rules in your library, do these rules include respect for all visitors and makers?
2. As a librarian do you intervene when there is bullying either in person or online?
3. Do you have LGBTQ materials (books, periodicals, etc.) in your library and makerspace?
4. Is diversity exhibited across your library in displays and on posters and bulletin boards?
5. Do you celebrate and support LGBTQ events in your community?
6. Are your library and makerspace safe and accessible for all patrons?
7. Do you provide meeting space or host activities for LGBTQ student groups and maker events? (GLSEN n.d.)

The members of your library community are the heart of the makerspace. Making gives students opportunities to tinker, hack, make, problem solve, and collaborate. Makerspaces in library locations can provide anyone the opportunity to explore and create new possibilities for the future (Britton 2012). Ideally, makerspaces are safe places for *all* students to explore and enjoy the idea of creating and making. In the

following section we discuss practical ideas for fostering such inclusivity in your school library makerspace.

## Ideas for School Librarians

Beyond making sure your library is a safe space for LGBTQ students, what are some ways that you can encourage their creating and making? Here, we offer recommendations organized by three themes informed by prior empirical research (Kitzie 2017).

The first recommendation is to position LGBTQ students as experts. Rather than assume what makerspace events and activities are relevant to your LGBTQ students, ask *them* to identify their making needs. Your role should be to give them the resources to meet these needs. These needs might reflect the everyday practicalities and barriers to living an LGBTQ life, such as the need for a sewing class that would appeal to transgender, genderqueer, and other gender creative students who may wish to alter their wardrobes. These needs could also integrate with school-wide activities, such as designing affirmative posters and signs for Pride month in June.

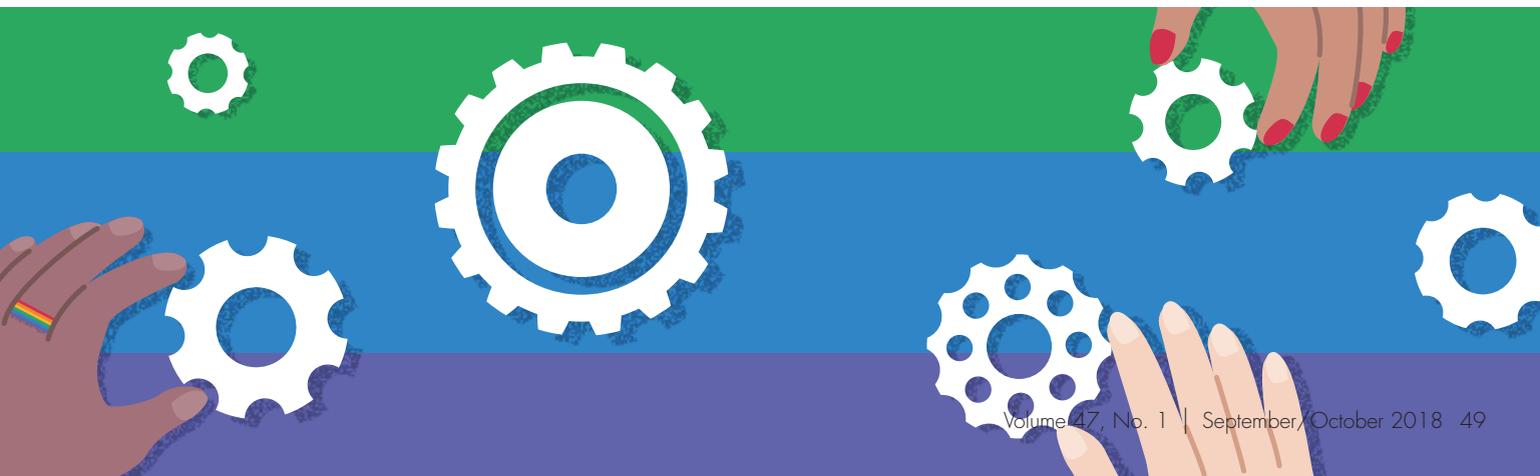
The second recommendation is to recognize the rich variety of LGBTQ experiences that exist. These identities are not monolithic. Not only can other, intersecting identity categories shape a student's experience, but also students have individual agency over their own

lives. For instance, while some students might want to engage in makerspace activities that are visibly LGBTQ, other students may not feel comfortable participating in these events. Therefore, it is essential to make all makerspace activities inclusive, not just those that are LGBTQ. For instance, you can incorporate LGBTQ voices from outside the school into your making activities, such as assigning a reading list about a making activity and including on the list works by LGBTQ people who are experts in the field. Or you might, when sponsoring coding activities in your makerspace, assign a reading list that includes works by LGBTQ programmers.

Finally, appreciate the informativeness of the products your LGBTQ students create. Information is not just found in books and other formal sources. Information LGBTQ students—and other students—consider valuable may very well come from themselves and other learners. As a result, what LGBTQ students make in your schools has value after the making process. Your school library may wish to consider working with willing and eager students to share and disseminate their content, for example by recording oral histories and allowing others to listen to them in the library. Another idea is to have an LGBTQ creator in residence, who can suggest ideas for making and have their creations displayed and archived by the school library.

Based on these three themes, here are some further recommendations to encourage LGBTQ making within your makerspace:

- Run your makerspace horizontally, rather than as a hierarchy. Let students contribute their ideas for making activities and run various making sessions.
- Come up with a code of conduct for your makerspace generated by the students. Identify barriers to participation (e.g., language, dress) and have students identify in the code of conduct how these barriers can be addressed.
- Question what making activities you might inherently privilege, such as programming activities over crafting ones. How might privileging certain activities over others influence who feels comfortable doing the making?
- Recognize that different types of making might be considered gendered (e.g., sewing is for girls; engineering is for boys). Encourage all students to see how *any* of these activities can be valuable, technical, and precise. Create spaces for students to engage in activities they may have been discouraged from pursuing because the activities were perceived as too feminine or too masculine.



- Embrace failure. Often what we consider to be a “failure” within a makerspace can question the underlying assumptions we have about makerspaces that may be keeping certain groups, including LGBTQ ones, out.

## Final Thoughts

Makerspaces are relevant to all students and, therefore, should be inclusive for all students. If you have implemented a maker learning space in your library, you are well on your way to offering a safe spot for ideas, creation, and collaboration for all. This article is offered in the spirit of encouragement to think about all students, their identities, and how they can best be served throughout your library and maker location.



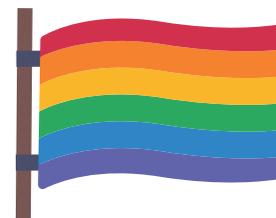
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