Chapter 9

Johnson County Library Makerspace

ABSTRACT

The Johnson County Library Makerspace occupies 1700 ft² (158 m²) of space in the Central Resource Library in Johnson County, Kansas. Originally intended as a modernization of the small business services resource area within the library, the vision for the space quickly pivoted towards a community-based educational experience centered on making. In its original form, the space had one 3D printer and an idea to create a series of summer, mobile maker experiences dispersed amongst the 13 branch libraries. The widely popular mobile makerspace program paved the way to a permanent space for library patrons young and old. The space adheres to the central mission of the library to provide educational experiences for the public. Accordingly, the library has democratized creativity and innovation by providing free access to the equipment and information to the public. The space has reached out to incarcerated youth to inspire them to take up making and use it as a way to build job skills. In addition, the space provides patrons with a pathway to connect and form learning communities around making skills and interest. This chapter explores the Johnson County Library Makerspace.

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People always come in and they’re like, “Why would you even have this; what is this used for?” They don’t have any idea and then you start to tell them what’s possible and they go away, they think about it for a while, and suddenly things change and they come back and they don’t stop having ideas. That’s when it sort of starts. The first time they see something, they’re just sort of, “Who knew you could do this?” — Meredith Nelson

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Meredith Nelson, the founder of the Johnson County Library Makerspace, recalls how on her first day of work in 2012 as a business librarian she was thrust into the world of making when her supervisor asked if she had heard of a 3D printer. She commented:

My first day of work my boss sat me down and said, “Have you ever heard of a 3D printer?” Of course, it was my first day, so I said, “Yes, of course I have! What a great idea!” Then I ran back to my desk and started googling stuff and the first 3D printers hit, one of the, I forget which library it was, but someone was talking about 3D printing in libraries. Then very slowly over the next year, we started developing a plan. At the same time, everybody else was sort of developing plans as well. Towards the end of that year we started construction on a very small space that was at the time being unused.

Nelson was originally hired to make changes to the way the library supported business in the community. She shared a vision that would permit the library to support entrepreneurs and business people by providing co-working spaces and providing access to different kinds of software. From modest beginnings in 2013, the first iteration of the makerspace was very small: the size of the current sound booth in the space with a 3D printer and a few Macintosh computers. With no IT support Nelson cobbled together equipment like cameras and microphones, usually purchased online. Once the first space was open, the library immediately set out to great a larger space which opened in March of 2014. According to Nelson they began offering programs just before the opening of the new space and then with the opening in March, the popularity of the new space skyrocketed. Nelson was quickly overwhelmed with visitors to the space, who in turn appreciated the ability to print in 3D and not have to pay for the materials.
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