Empowerment through Making in Senior Living Communities

## Introduction - What Is Making?

To begin, we would like to define what “making” is up front. The Maker Movement defines the social shift toward the idea that learning can be done through doing. The culture around this movement encourages people to work with their peers to share skills and resources as well as use technologies in new ways. The act of making can foster social empowerment by connecting people and enabling people to learn from each other. Throughout this guide, making will refer to the act of creating artifacts in an exploration of one’s creativity. The items produced through this activity help serve as a physical embodiment of the ideals of their respective makers, as well as that of the Maker Movement in general.

One of the difficulties that must be overcome in inspiring making is reaching out to disempowered groups and giving them a voice. There are many kinds of disempowerment that one may face when trying to find oneself as a maker. One of these is the simple fact of not understanding what making is and its connection to motivating and empowering oneself.

At the end of this document, we have included further resources that help explain more of what the Maker Movement is about, how one can get involved, and what it means to be a maker.

## Our Inspirees

We hope to use our project to empower residents of senior living homes. Generally speaking, this group is not well integrated into our present, fast-paced society. These people can spend 20-40 years of their life separated from the community around them, which is a disempowering experience. Through our program, we hope to provide these residents the autonomy to explore both old and new skills as well as build their confidence in their ability to express themselves as makers.

## Our Project

Our project consists of a set of making workshops facilitated by college students and/or staff at participating retirement home(s). As an optional end-of-program activity, the home may also run a community-wide event featuring works by participants who are willing to share and talk about their creations. This program will provide an opportunity for people to express themselves and work autonomously to make something while socializing with both their peers and facilitators. We hope this program will help create a stronger sense of community within the retirement home, as well as potentially in the greater community in which the home is situated. This is also an opportunity for these individuals to learn more about the Maker Movement (if they so please) as well as provide them information about how they can connect to local makers via maker faires.

The overarching goal of this project is to help facilitate creative and educational empowerment among elderly people in a setting and in a way that celebrates their unique skills, talents, and stories.

## Desired Impact

With our project, we hope to help inspire and empower the residents of the retirement home. We would provide them with a resource to learn new and simple technologies to create something that they could share with others. Through their work, they could tell their story as unique individuals with unique experiences and drives. They would also be given the tools needed to educate themselves about the Maker Movement if they wanted to, as well as information about where they could potentially meet up with and share with fellow makers.

## Maker Sessions

The following descriptions are examples of maker session activities. During these maker sessions, students and participants can socialize and interact with each other and the maker activities are there to facilitate conversation. The sessions are loosely structured where participants can come and go within a 1 to 2 hour time period, and as they arrive a facilitator pairs off with them for a one-on-one interaction. During this time, the facilitator and participant can do the activity as much or as little as they would like, and can have conversations. It is helpful to have multiple facilitators to enable more one-on-one interactions. In the event that there are more participants than facilitators create small groups with each facilitator and have group conversations (treating each participant with the same amount of attention).

In all of these activities, the materials can be scaled to the anticipated size of the group. Included are ratings on a scale of 1 to 5 of the preparation and difficulty of the activity. The preparation rating is for the facilitators of the activity, in the case Olin students, in terms of obtaining materials as well as learning how to do the activity if necessary. The difficulty rating is for the participants (Olin students and elderly participants) and rates the difficulty of carrying out the activity. There are also links to lists of proposed materials or useful documentation in each activity description.

**Session Descriptions**

### Paper Crafts - Quilling and Origami

Preparation: ●●○○○ Difficulty: ●●○○○

This activity involves creating paper crafts using quilling and origami. Quilling uses a tool to spin strips of paper into swirls that can be glued together and origami involves specially folding paper into 3d shapes like animals or objects.

Material List: <http://amzn.com/w/3O2T69F72BUYK>

### Yarn and Fabric Crafts - Weaving and knitting

Preparation: ●●○○○ Difficulty: ●●●●○

This session can involve any crafts using yarn and fabric, such as knitting, weaving, or sewing. An optional addition to this activity is using conductive thread, which can be used with electronic components.

Material List: <http://amzn.com/w/20FX6DSN8M2XO>

### Painting and Drawing

Preparation: ●●●○○ Difficulty: ●●●○○

This activity strongly encourages the use of different techniques for creating artwork. Since this session has much flexibility and individual work, it provides an opportunity for conversation about what each person is creating.

Material List: : <http://amzn.com/w/2Y4B8CKTPU61A>

*Photography*

Preparation: ●●●●○ Difficulty: ●●●○○

This session introduces participants to digital photography and creating art from photographs. This activity requires access to a camera or smartphone that can upload pictures to a computer. An optional addition is to introduce simple photo editing software.

Material List: <https://goo.gl/E1UpZw>

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### 3D Modelling - Cardboard with computer-aided design

Preparation: ●●●●○ Difficulty: ●●●●○

In this activity, people will learn how to create 3D models using 123D Make and cardboard. In the session, participants will model something and create it using cardboard cutouts. You will need cardboard and cardboard cutters. <http://www.123dapp.com/make>

### 3D Modelling - Cookie cutters and 3D printing

Preparation: ●●●●● Difficulty: ●●●●○

This session requires access to a 3D printer, either directly or remotely. Participants will create their own design and 3D print it themselves. <http://www.cookiecaster.com/#editor>

## Maker Session Outcomes

We hope that activities such as these foster conversation and create an engaging environment that allows Olin students and residents to share their experiences and form relationships. These conversations should be two-way interactions where students learn from the residents and residents learn from the students, not just in terms of the activity, but also in terms of sharing their interests and stories.

## Our Experience

We started this project with the hope of getting seniors more involved in the making community. We were under the impression that those in senior living homes often felt isolated from their local community. Making is used in many other contexts to reach out to commonly isolated and disempowered groups, like convicts and under-resourced communities. However, bringing the elderly to the making community turned out to be difficult for numerous reasons. Mostly, there was little interest in the larger making community from the residents of North Hill, many of whom already belonged to smaller making groups within the retirement home, such as a knitting group or the art gallery. We believe this disinterest was a result of a misunderstanding of the concept of making. We view making as a vehicle for social empowerment, while the retirement home administrators and residents viewed making more as arts and crafts.

We adapted to this challenge, of providing for residents who weren’t excited about making, by leveraging our particular scenario. We couldn’t make the seniors want to engage with the maker community, but they did want to engage with us. North Hill and our school, Olin College of Engineering, have a program to encourage collaboration between the two institutions, but the students and residents rarely get to know each other. We realized that we could socially empower the residents of North Hill by using making to bring them into our community, and then hopefully, if they were interested, the maker community at large. Our workshops morphed into more of a social hour with making. This hour-long session would connect college students and the residents by providing a space to make and converse in a free environment.

## **Reflection** and **Future Possibilities**

One of the things we learned from this experience is how difficult it is to explain the importance of the maker movement and inspire others to make. Making is a complex act and its significance is best explained through a conversation in which the uninformed party may contribute and ask questions to build on their comprehension of the topic. In a certain light, making may be looked down upon as simple arts and crafts. This, however, is not the case. It is an expression and assertion of the creative self, as well as a way to inform and educate others.

Another lesson we learned was that the activation energy needed to start a program like ours is fairly high. One roadblock that we came across when attempting to run our program was the difficulty that comes with informing the community of an upcoming event and organizing for said event. There are many factors that must be taken into consideration, such as the schedule already in place at the place the program is taking place, the timing of the event such that all facilitators are able to attend and the highest number of participants may take part, and the time it may take for correspondance to take part. If we were to have the ability to “do-over” our project, we would likely reach out sooner with a more specific list of activities we would be interested in helping run.  
 Finally, the needs of the people being empowered must come *first and foremost.* The activity is not about the facilitators, or the place, or even the materials used. It is about creating the most empowering experience for the participants possible. Having an activity that can be tailored to the skills and drives of the people taking part is the most important aspect of this program. Take, for example, two cases. In one, there is a resident in excellent health with prior experience in the skills involved in the activity. To keep them engaged, the best course of action may be to not have them following along, but perhaps helping teach the skills to their peers. This is an enriching experience for both the resident teaching, as they can share their skills in a meaningful way, as well as for the person being taught, as they may interact with someone they may relate to more. Take a second case, in which a resident is unable to take part in an activity in a “conventional” manner due to an impairment such as hand tremors. If the activity involves drawing, they may be given a bigger marker to make both gripping and drawing easier. If the activity involves typing, or using a computer, they may work with a facilitator or peer and dictate what they would like done. Naturally, any accommodations would be made on a case by case basis, with some activities more adaptable than others. This is why we have included as many as we have.

In the future, we would hope to find a network through which we may distribute the materials contained in this guide so that the activities within it may be facilitated in the home or by communities around a home (e.g. a college or institution willing to provide space and materials). This program could create or strengthen connections between the residences and the communities around them.

## Additional Resources

### Books

Doorley, Scott and Scott Witthoft. *Make Space: How to Set the Stage for Creative Collaboration*.

Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012. Print.

This book contains short sections on a variety of actions and arrangements of space that can help shape the way people communicate and collaborate.

*Additional Readings and Videos*

## Who are we?

We are a group of students at Olin College of Engineering taking part in a course called Designing Resources for Empowerment and Making (DREAM). This class culminates in a 5-week group project through which our team has been given the chance to help create opportunities that encourage aging members of our community to express themselves through making and share their works and experiences with others.