Open Exploration in a Makerspace: What it is and Why We Need It - Renovated Learning

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4–5 minutes

In a thriving makerspace, there is a balance. **Design challenges** allow students to work together on a similar theme coming from a design prompt. The challenge creates constraints, but not necessarily structure. **Workshops** are focused more on learning a specific skill. Usually everyone makes a similar project. There is more guidance and structure to these activities, much like guided projects. **Open Exploration**, on the other hand, is a time with little structure. Students can express their voice in choosing what tools and materials they use, what they want their projects to be. What they make could be practical or whimsical. It could be for a class or it could be a way to express their fandoms. Ideally, a makerspace should have a balance of open exploration, workshops and design challenges, although the proportions of each can and should vary depending on school culture and programs.

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What does Open Exploration look like?

When you give students free reign in your makerspace, it will look

different every time. One student might want to tinker with LEGOs. Another wants to create an obstacle course to drive a robot around. You may have students that have a project idea for class that they want to work on. And there may be a student who is getting ready for a ComicCon and wants to build part of their cosplay costume. Open exploration is just that – open.

When does it happen?

Open exploration can happen anytime in a makerspace, but it works best during times that are naturally unstructured anyway. During lunch, club periods, before or after school are all fantastic opportunities if they work within your school schedule. In middle and high school, I've found lunch times very effective as students want to hang out in the library anyhow. At my previous school, I encouraged teachers to use library passes to send students to the makerspace. I'd often have students come who had finished work early. Other teachers would give students free time in the makerspace as an incentive. At my current school, we have "Open Make" time during our afterschool Maker Mondays about once a month. This year, I'm starting up Open Maker Lab times every Friday afterschool.

Within a class structure, I would think of Open Exploration like Drop Everything and Read. It can be a specific time within a class where the focus is on making whatever the students are interested in.

How do you support Open Exploration?

Part of allowing for successful Open Exploration time is developing student skills beforehand. Workshops and Guided Projects can

allow students to learn new tools and techniques. They can refine their techniques before trying them out on their own projects. Creating a regular or on-demand maker workshop schedule can help students to prepare ahead of time.

Organization of supplies and tools is also critical for open-ended time in a makerspace. If students don't know where to find a specific item, it can stall their making. They might ask you or another teacher, but they also might just abandon their projects. Make sure that things are clearly labeled and easy for all students to access. For more details on the logistics and best practices for an effective open exploration experience, **check out Part 2 next week**.

Do you have Open Exploration opportunities in your makerspace? What kinds of project ideas have students come up with?

If you liked this post, you'd probably also like my book, [Challenge-Based Learning in the School Library Makerspace](#) . Along with my co-authors [Colleen Graves](#) and [Aaron Graves](#), we cover everything from getting started, building a maker culture and setting up the physical space of your makerspace to organizing global collaborations, partnering with

maker experts and documenting learning with maker journals. We go into detail about how to create design challenge prompts that will spur on creativity in your students. The book includes grade-level specific sections for elementary and secondary that offer curriculum connected challenges and activities.