

DIY movement: Teachers and students as makers

By Samuel Reed

Imagine a learning space where teachers and students collaborate on making stuff, document their tinkering, and disseminate their knowledge to a community of other makers. Could this type of learning be a viable alternative to the dominate test preparation culture found in many schools? Would engaging students in Do It Yourself (DIY) culture provide better context to improve reading, writing, and critical thinking skills?

The National Writing Project (NWP) and MAKE Magazine are partnering to pilot a project through which teachers and students explore the connections between writing and "making." Teacher-consultants from Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) along with teacher-consultant teams from the Central California Writing Project, Southern Colorado Writing Project, Hoosier Writing Project, and Ozarks Writing Project are creating authentic contexts for teachers and students to work together in making, remixing, building, and then documenting, writing, and sharing their "Make Projects" both in school and out of school.

MAKE Magazine founder and publisher Dale Dougherty is dedicated to the spirit of DIY and creating a hands-on maker culture. In his blog post "Teachers as Makers" he notes that teaching informative writing is a requirement in schools. However, he would like to see more invigorating assignments, not uninspiring ones, like the staple "how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich" how-to essay.

Students attending Beeber Middle School's Saturdays Road to Academic Proficiency (RTAP), at Saint Josephs University are participating in an exciting hands-on project with Spiral Q Puppet Theater. Through support from ArtsRising, Spiral Q is collaborating with teachers, students, and parents on a multi-disciplinary service learning project. Students will collaboratively create larger scale puppets and make individual DIY puppets. The puppet making, technical writing, and digital documentation has students buzzing about attending school on Saturdays.

The main goal of the Saturday RTAP program is to prepare students for the PSSA test set to start on March 14. However, at the end of each Saturday enrichment session, students participate in alternative learning that allows them to demonstrate other ways they are really smart, which may not show upon the test.

As a member of PhilWP's Make Inquiry team I intend to share my new DIY media practices and inform other educators about authentic ways to collaborate with artists, makers, and students in both in-school and out-of-school spaces.

Other PhilWP teacher-consultants from Overbrook Elementary, Lea School, and Franklin Learning Center (FLC) are doing varied DIY and Makers projects. Teachers and students at Lea are making digital comics. Overbrook Elementary plans to create “green” recycling products, while FLC students will be making props for filming a student produced documentary.

I had a group of 6-8th grade students from Beeber make their own DIY pocket size puppet books. Students made pocket sizes books to journal and write poetry chap books about how we plan to use puppets as agents for social change. You can find the steps for making pocket size books on the NWP's Digital Notebook located on the Posterous website.

I am curious what other type DIY projects would interest teachers and students. Share your ideas to engage teachers and students in a "Makers" movement.