

MAKE ME Kits

Portable Kits Invite Unexpected Outcomes

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When Young Adult librarians, Youth Services librarians, and administrators at Ocean County (NJ) Library decided to apply for the Curiosity Creates grant, we were faced with a huge challenge—a 960-square-mile challenge. That’s the size of Ocean County, a large expanse of land that covers rural Pineland towns, beach communities, and urban areas.

The county’s library system is committed to the mission of “Connecting People, Building Community, Transforming Lives” and has twenty-one branches that serve thirty-two municipalities. The branches vary in size and in the population they serve. Resource sharing, especially for the smaller branches, is important. Therefore it was imperative that any grant funding be used for projects that were wide-reaching in scope and could be used throughout the county and at all branches.

Another factor for consideration was that in 2012, Ocean County was Ground Zero for super storm Sandy. The damage was devastating with more than forty thousand homes affected by the storm. Families were displaced. People lost their belongings, their homes, and their jobs. While many have returned to their homes, there’s still a large population who have not.

Emotional and financial resources are depleted. Many are finding it hard to rebound.

So how does this relate to creativity? Studies have shown that the same traits linked with creativity are predictors of resilience after a natural disaster.¹ We wanted to ensure that children and teens in our county learn resilience through the cultivation of creativity, by understanding that failures/mistakes and difficulties are all part of the creative process and that there is fun in flexible thinking, self-expression, and collaboration.

Our challenge was twofold: How do we come up with a county-wide library system initiative that can be used in all of the branches, by more than forty Young Adult/Youth Services team members for community outreach, library branch programs, and at schools? And how do we incorporate creative resilience into the project?

Our answer was MAKE ME Kits: portable kits designed to ignite imagination by focusing on the creative process. We hoped they would ignite sparks. They did. They changed perceptions and attitudes of the children/teen participants. And most



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surprisingly, they also changed the perceptions of the program facilitators.

MAKE ME Kits

MAKE ME kits are designed to celebrate mistakes. Even the names of the kits invite unexpected outcomes. There are six portable kits: MAKE ME BURN IT (for cooking); MAKE ME SHOW OFF (Green Screen); MAKE ME ACT OUT (Puppet stage); MAKE ME WRITE ON THE FLOORS (chalk making/graffiti); MAKE ME LOUD (Music Kit); and MAKE ME HACK IT (Makey Makey, Computers: Fun with Coding).

The kits do not circulate for patrons; rather, they are designed to be used by facilitators in branch programs or outreaches to begin a dialogue about the creative process. They demand interaction and collaboration.

Each kit contains equipment needed for projects, instructions, trivia on famous mistake-makers (a.k.a. scientists, inventors, artists, musicians, chefs), and fun facts about how failure can lead to success. For example, the MAKE ME BURN IT kit contains a waffle iron along with a variety of unusual foods that allowed kids to explore unexpected food combinations. An example of a “fun fact” is how eleven-year-old Frank Epperson accidentally left a spoon in a cup of sweetened water on the front porch on a chilly night and unintentionally invented the Popsicle.

While each kit focuses on different character traits of creativity, they all have the same basic objectives:

- Creativity is a process, not a “talent.”
- The decision to be creative is up to you.
- Taking risks and making “mistakes” are all part of the process.
- Collaboration = lots of ideas and creativity.

Every program in every branch began the same way. The facilitator asked the question, “Do you think you are creative?”

Surprisingly many of our participants, children between the ages of 6 and 14, didn’t view themselves as such. During the program, facilitators ask open-ended questions, focusing on the process and not the outcome. We try to cultivate a “just say yes” environment. As a result, mistakes are rebranded as positives.

At the end of each program, the question is asked again. In eighty different programs with more than twenty-five hundred participants, there was a 46 percent positive increase to the

answer of the question. Many children changed their point of view.

Through anecdotal feedback in the evaluation, we realized that we changed perceptions throughout a large library system by using brief impactful programs. We also realized that one of the most important ingredients in these kits were the facilitators, many of whom were part of the process from the start.

Creating the Kits

If we were going to expect a group of more than forty professionals from twenty-one branches to use these kits and be successful, we needed to make sure that everyone felt empowered.

We made this a collaboration from the beginning. Each kit had a workgroup of both YA/YS team members who made recommendations about what to purchase. They kept in mind the age of the participants, the ease of use, and the portability for outreach.

Musical librarians participated in researching materials for the MAKE ME LOUD kit. Our library staff members who are talented cooks worked on the MAKE ME BURN IT kit. Those with a technological leaning worked on MAKE ME HACK IT. Artists and storytellers worked on others. The kit creators also made instructional materials, worked on open-ended questions, and came up with fun-facts about famous mistake makers (aka inventors). We allowed for time to make changes in the content of the kits. Each member of the team had a say.

Approximately \$6,000 of the total grant went towards the creation of the kits. As a result, we were able to purchase items such as a green screen kit, an iPod, and Little Bits. Once the kits were purchased (and even before they were completely done) they travelled to branch meetings, where facilitators got a chance to get comfortable with the equipment and technology. We let our facilitators learn through play and made sure they understood the creativity elements and processes.

Communication and information sharing was key. We talked, answered questions, and gave demonstrations at many meetings. We created a newsletter and an intranet page (filled with documents and instructions). This learning process took longer than we expected, but it was crucial to the success of the grant. Creativity started with the people who would be presenting this to the children/teens. We made mistakes. We kept going. We had fun.

It was here that our shift in thinking began. YA librarians and YS librarians tend to be a creative group, and we bring that

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creativity to our constituents. But our thinking changed as we ourselves began to focus on process.

Outcomes

Because of their portability, the kits lent themselves to partnerships and outreach. Throughout the duration of the grant, we participated with many groups and organizations including school districts, the county department of health, homeschoolers, income-qualified apartment complexes, and special needs organizations.

Many of the programs brought “new eyes” and awareness to the library. It’s not uncommon for customers to walk by and make a positive comment about the programs and the scope of library services. When these kits were in the branch, children gathered round and began to explore and create in a very informal way. The table they gathered around became a maker space.

In one branch, a group of children were reticent and reluctant to participate, but after several programs, they became confident in their creative abilities and enthusiastic about coming to the library. They demanded more. And as a result, the librarians now have regular drop-in programs using the kits.

Changed Perceptions

One of the most satisfying parts of each program was watching the attitudes of children and teens change. The one thread that ran through all of the programs was the focus on resilience.

Children and teens learned that making mistakes and moving forward from them is part of the process and that creative confidence comes from overcoming fears.

Many programs had a moment where a child or teen came into her own. During one program, a thirteen-year-old who described herself as “socially awkward” was working with some younger children to create music. They learned not to be afraid of “wrong notes.” By the end, she was belting out “Part of Your World” from *The Little Mermaid* in the library’s atrium, accompanied by the younger girls.

The facilitators learned not to focus on wrong notes too. It changed the way that many of us look at programming and creativity. We make sure to focus on *process*. We remember to be creative. We talk about the components/process to children/teens and other staff members. Because of the MAKE ME Kits and the Curiosity Creates grant, there was a paradigm shift in thinking. This shift will have a great impact on the children/teens we work with.

We have great plans for the future. Even though the grant period has ended, we continue to book programs for future

dates. We have also begun to make the kits available for adult services to use. In terms of expanding our own and our community’s perception of creativity, we’ve only begun to build momentum. ☺

References

1. Einat S. Metz, “The Role of Creative Thinking in Resilience after Hurricane Katrina,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* 3, no. 2 (April 2009).

Replicating Kits

The kits are easy to replicate. While some of them required a large capital expense, others can be made for a relatively small cost.

- **Involve staff early.** Make sure every staff member who will be using the portable kits has an opportunity to be part of the creating process. Take advantage of your staff’s strengths and talents to make kits they will enjoy.
- **Keep everyone informed.** Use intranets and meetings. Create newsletters. Informal discussions are also a great way to inform staff. If you have organizations you work with regularly, tell them about your plans.
- **Train through play.** It’s hard to teach fearlessness and risk-taking until you feel confident and fearless. Allow time for staff to make their own creative discoveries by using the kits the way that children and teens would.
- **Grab and Go means Grab and Go.** Have all of the elements ready and in one place. Make it as easy-to-use as possible. We used Tupperware containers and stored them at the main branch. They were transferred through our interoffice mail service.
- **Collaborate.** Everyone learns differently and has a different comfort level with technology. Allow the kit creators to go with staff members who are less confident. Make sure that every kit has a person available to answer questions.
- **Embrace creativity.** Don’t be afraid to take your own creative chances even when it comes to planning programs. Embrace the message you’re trying to teach. It’s okay to make mistakes and try new things. Have fun.