



The Power of Active Learning— Smart and Innovative Library Spaces

Libraries have long been focused on lifelong learning. Find out how active learning takes this focus to a new level.

Smart Space Goal

Co-create a space
with the community for
participatory, active learning
and social engagement

In a Smart Space, the community participates actively in creating and contributing to a learning space that is participatory and ripe for social engagement.

With OCLC support and a grant from IMLS, OCLC's WebJunction program launched Small Libraries Create Smart Spaces, leading a total of 30 small or rural libraries from across the country to strive for this goal. What we learned from the success of these small libraries can work for libraries of any size or type to create more dynamic, engaging learning spaces.

Active learning in libraries is...

*participatory, informal,
interest-driven
and relevant to real life*

- Learning happens by doing.
- Everyone can participate.
- Challenge is constant.
- Everything is interconnected.

We all know that libraries are evolving. There is a shift in the library's role in its community from passive to active engagement with community members. Active learning is at the core of this shift.

First we had to define what active learning means in a library setting. Libraries offer an informal setting outside of formal education environments where all members of the community can participate together in hands-on learning that is driven by their interests and meaningful to their lives.

Santa Domingo Pueblo Library definition

"Active learning means when the library is like 'a grand time in grandma's kitchen!'

Where it is boisterous, active learning is at its prime, and every moment is a learning moment."

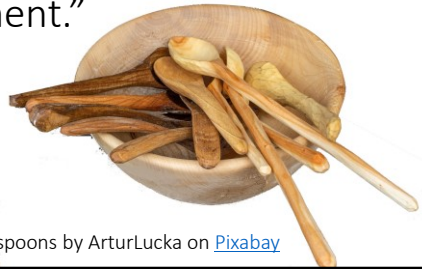


Photo: Wooden spoons by ArturLucka on [Pixabay](#)

The Santo Domingo Pueblo library in New Mexico offers this definition of active learning:

"Active learning means when the library is like 'a grand time in grandma's kitchen!' Where it is boisterous, active learning is at its prime, and every moment is a learning moment. Although our library facility is small, our library staff utilizes every square foot of space to encourage active learning. For maximum flexibility, all our library furniture is on casters so that one person can quickly rearrange the room to accommodate on-the-spot programming."

Learning happens by doing.



Maker challenge at Glenns Ferry Public Library (ID);
photo by B. Hoffman



Early learning and play teaches STEAM to young kids
at Tucker Free Library's KidSpace; by B. Gutsche

Strengthening the hand-brain connection

At its essence, active learning means learning that happens by doing.

Learners get messy for learning as they design and build and take apart things. Learning by doing engages the power of the hand-brain connection. When learners are offered multiple opportunities to actively engage and interact with objects, participate in social activities, and reflect on their discoveries, greater learning occurs.

These two Smart Space libraries provide a variety of low-cost materials and pose STEM challenges to kids. Read the full story of their transformations:

- **Glenns Ferry Public Library Transformation Story:**
<https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/Topics/smart-spaces/glenns-ferry-public-library-story.pdf>
- **Tucker Free Library Transformation Story:**
<https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/Topics/smart-spaces/tucker-free-library-story.pdf>

Everyone can participate.



Artist-in-Residence program in the SkillShare space at Bellingham Public Library (WA); courtesy of BPL

Learning is social.

DIY becomes DIT (do it together)



Repair Event at King County Library System (WA); courtesy of KCLS

Learning is social. Everyone can participate.

Active learning spaces create social connections where people learn together and from each other. It shifts DIY (do it yourself) to DIT –do it together. The space fosters a sense of community and participation in a community increases the motivation to learn.

- At the Bellingham Public Library (WA), the Skillshare space they created in 2014 is still energized by a full calendar of events that are often led by community members. Workshops like the Artist-in-Residence program (pictured) attract cross-generational groups. Read more of their story in **Durable Transformations**: <https://www.webjunction.org/documents/webjunction/durable-transformation.html>
- Repair Cafés are popular in many libraries; they tap the mechanical and electronic expertise of the community and get attendees involved in problem-solving. Learn more in a one-hour webinar **Reduce Waste, Build Community: Hosting Repair Events at Your Library**: <https://www.webjunction.org/events/webjunction/hosting-repair-events.html>

Challenge is constant.



Teens deciphering a lockbox mystery at Cornwall Public Library (NY); courtesy of Cornwall Library



IdeaSpace at Ignacio Community Library (CO); courtesy of ICL

Working together to co-create solutions

In an active learning space, challenge is constant and multi-faceted. Participants encounter ever-changing situations and work together to co-create solutions.

Active learning spaces are intentionally equipped to pose designing, crafting, or building challenges. It's not always about using technology; the primary emphasis is on the collaborative and imaginative making and problem-solving.

The examples pictured here are Smart Space libraries.

- At **Cornwall Public Library** (NY), teens enliven their Smart Space with a digital version of an escape room activity, ripe for collaborative problem-solving. Read the full story of their transformation:
<https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/Topics/smart-spaces/cornwall-public-library-story.pdf>
- The **IdeaSpace** at rural, remote **Ignacio Community Library** provides a space and equipment where local entrepreneurs learn how to create photos or videos of their crafts and how to market effectively on sites like Etsy. Read the full story of their transformation:
<https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/Topics/smart-spaces/ignacio-community-library-story.pdf>

Everything is interconnected.



Community Garden Project at the Sangaree Library (SC); used with permission



Teens Cooking Mediterranean by [Pioneer Library System](#) on [Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

From garden to culinary literacy center

Active learning provides pathways to foster multiple literacies where the learning environment leads to interconnected inquiries.

Many libraries are growing learners young and old through gardening. In addition to learning how to cultivate plants and food, garden experiences lead to education about nutrition, healthy eating and environmental health, as well as learning accountability.

Some libraries are even installing kitchens or partnering with organizations that can provide kitchen space while the library provides the programming. It's not just about learning to cook, although that's always a good thing to know. Often branded as "culinary literacy centers," there are ripe opportunities to learn about health and nutrition, and the science and chemistry of cooking. In the heat of the kitchen, learners must work together as teams and come up with solutions to unexpected situations.

Outdoors is learning space too.



The Wilton Public Library (NH) enlivened their outdoor space with a story walk and permanent installation of weatherproof musical instruments; photos courtesy of Wilton Public Library

Smart Spaces are not confined to indoors, as the gardening example demonstrates. Consider the vitality of the library's outdoor spaces.

Wilton Public Library (NH) had a large expanse of boring grass lawn where they saw opportunity to align with the town's plan to make their community feel more livable and convivial. The library felt that "If we are visible outside of these walls and people are having positive interactions, it is more likely that they will make it a point to come to visit the [inside] space as well." They installed a performance stage and weatherproof musical instruments, plus tables and seating for outdoor programming. Read the full **Wilton Public & Gregg Free LibraryTransformation Story**:
<https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/Topics/smart-spaces/wilton-gregg-library-story.pdf>

Story Walks have become very popular as a way to engage families outdoors during the COVID-19 restrictions. It is literally about reading a story while taking a walk. Learn more from this article **Take a StoryWalk Through Downtown with the Library**:
<https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/StoryWalk-through-downtown.html>

And makerspaces, of course...



Digital Media Lab, Laurel (DE) Public Library; by Tameca Beckett



You can make it by [Fabrice Florin](#) on [Flickr](#)

Makerspaces are often the first thing that comes to mind when talking about active learning. These spaces definitely encompass the essence of that participatory, inquiry-based, problem-solving learning that brings people together and forges connections.

Digital media labs, like the one pictured at Laurel Public Library (DE) provide equipment for recording and video-taping and then let teens find their own pathways to learning and creating. Read more about Laurel's **Shoestring Digital Media Lab:**

How one little underfunded library made it happen:

<https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/shoestring-digital-media-lab.html>

Makerspaces are not just for kids! Adults find powerful learning in hands-on designing and crafting. Entrepreneurial opportunities often spring from the adult play and exploration spaces. For more resources on makerspaces, see **Makerspace and Digital Media Lab Resources:**

<https://www.webjunction.org/news/webjunction/resources-makerspace-digital-media-lab.html>

**Active
learning
in
libraries
is...**

"The community is the heart of the library.

They are the experts. They know what they want.

Ask them, then listen to them, trust and absorb their thoughts.

They are the best compass for change you can have."

—Mary Lou Carolan, Director,
Newburgh Free Library

Across all ages and types of spaces, the active learning challenge is constant. Learners explore together, find new challenges and co-create solutions in an ongoing cycle.

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Thank you!