NEED SOME **MAKERSPACE** ADVICE?

Left: A battery holder.   Right: Ordbot wiring.

Makerspaces have been a hot topic at library conferences for a while, with good reason. Jennifer Strover says LIS professionals should be visiting established makerspaces and hackerspaces for tips, ideas and experienced help.

A makerspace can be an exciting way to engage with a whole new range of users, a dynamic extension to children's and youth programs, incubators for local tech entrepreneurs… and the list goes on. But in my experience, very few library and information professionals have visited one of the many established makerspaces dotted all over Australia, in capital cities and some regional centres. In some areas they're called hackerspaces, and are part of a worldwide 'Maker Movement'.

You can find a list at wiki.hackerspaces.org/Australia. It's not comprehensive though, so Google 'hackerspace' and your town or city for more information. If there's no hackerspace in your area, there may be a Men's Shed (www.mensshed.org); these have a similar ethos and, despite the name, welcome female visitors.

So what will you find there that's so important? Of course there are the gadgets: 3D printers, laser cutters, and an array of other high tech tools. But ultimately, the real value of a hackerspace lies in its community.

Hackerspaces are run by members, for members. They're places to share ideas and get the support and encouragement to learn amazing new things. Community engagement is another term that's used a lot at library conferences, and a hackerspace can be a great place to experience a thoroughly engaged community.
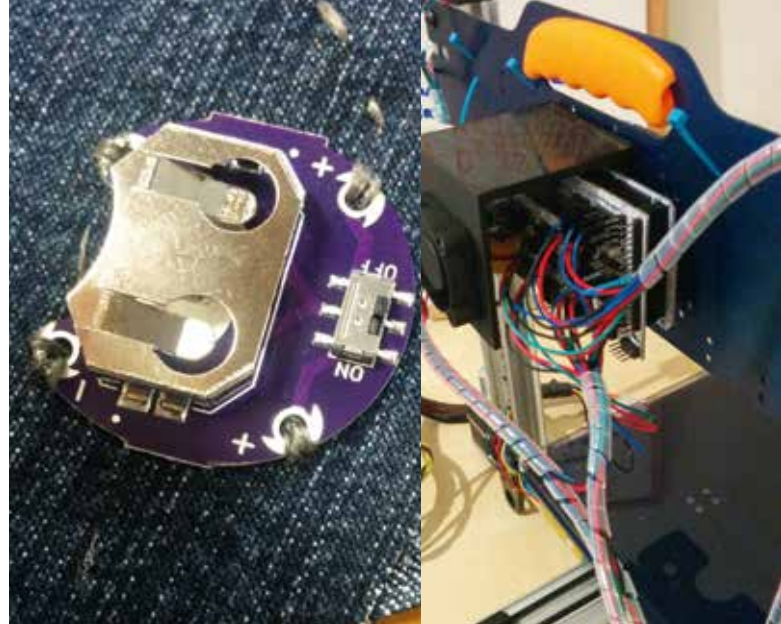
So get out there and learn by doing, Maker Movement style! Here are some tips for your first hackerspace visit:

PLAN YOUR VISIT

Hackerspaces usually have a general or open session each week, which is the best time to visit as a newcomer. If you're interested in a specific discipline (3D printing for example), there might be a specialist session you can join in on.

IT'S CHAOS, BUT IT'S ORGANISED CHAOS

Some spaces offer classes, but most often hackerspace meetings are unstructured, giving everyone an opportunity to do their own thing and collaborate. This means you'll see a wide variety of projects and disciplines in action. Each hackerspace has its own focus, such as robotics, rocketry, or interactive art, so you'll be able to see what goes on in this particular space, and what kind of projects you find most inspiring.

YOU DON'T NEED TO KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING

In fact, this is really the point. A hackerspace is a place of learning and discovery. There's no need to be ashamed of looking like a newbie, as long as you're willing to listen and learn.

START CONVERSATIONS AND ASK QUESTIONS

Hackerspace members are super-enthusiastic geeks, and love to talk about their projects or help you with yours. If they've never seen anything like what you're trying to make, so much the better. A new challenge is always exciting.

DON'T LET THE GENDER (OR ETHNICITY, OR DISABILITY) GAP GET YOU DOWN

Fair warning: hackerspace members are overwhelmingly white and male. But hackerspaces don't have a 'bro' culture. All humans are welcome and diversity is embraced. In my personal experience, it doesn't matter who you are, as long as you're enthusiastic about DIY technology. Interestingly, because of the kind of activities that go on there, hackerspaces generally cater well for people on the Autism spectrum.

And tell them you're from a library. Geeks love libraries.

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