ABOUT THE PROJECT

Making has been proven to empower students in the classroom setting. Learning does not stop at the end of the school day nor do the societal issues that children face. Their empowerment through making can be translated to other challenges that they face, specifically within the realm of injustice and inequity. With intentional scaffolding and a supportive environment, youth are able to take making into their own hands and use it as a method for bringing their agency to fruition, changing their lives and their communities. Making affords youth the tools and skills to share their voice and validate their unique perspective with the world. Through this collaboration, Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh and Assemble have created a model for integrating making as an education practice into social justice and community organizing, and therefore, fostering youth as the change-makers of tomorrow.

While we have extensive experience working with youth, it’s important for our organizations to acknowledge social justice and equity work as part of our ongoing learning journey as we strive to serve the full child. This document is meant to share our experiences and lessons learned over the year-long partnership, Making a Difference, in hopes of inspiring informal educators, formal school teachers, and other stakeholders to continue to push this work forward.

This resource includes eight recommendations for educators working with youth. It should be noted that authenticity, representation, power dynamics, and community are not stand alone ideas, but rather are deeply woven throughout each of these suggestions. Our educators also emphasize that this work and systemic change take time and require lots of on-going work - it’s going to be a non-linear journey. Keep putting in the work and the impact will follow.

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ABOUT CMP + MUSEUMLAB
Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh was founded in 1983 with just 5,000 square feet of space in the Allegheny City Post Office and has grown to encompass two museums across four buildings that form the largest cultural campus for children in the United States. Through its hands-on exhibits, programs, artist residencies, research, professional development, and work in the community, the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh has become recognized as a national leader in innovative informal education and cutting-edge learning design. The mission of Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh is to provide innovative and inclusive museum experiences that inspire kindness, joy, creativity and curiosity for all learners. We forge connections with artists, community partners and neighbors to work on behalf of children, youth and families.

MuseumLab, the Museum’s space for older youth, is designed for middle school aged youth, and reflects a new audience for the Museum. With this new audience, the Museum has been learning how middle schoolers think, act, learn, and process their emotions differently than younger children. MuseumLab offers two unique experiences for youth -- After School and Thought Bubble Youth Advisory Council.

ABOUT ASSEMBLE
Assemble, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit organization, is dedicated to fostering learning and creativity. Assemble envisions diverse neighborhoods of empowered people who create, connect, learn, and transform together. We build confidence through making by uniting communities of artists, technologists, makers, and learners both in our Garfield studio space and beyond.

Assemble offers five days of after school programming throughout the week, each with its own audience and focus. Each week students explore the dynamic world of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, & Math) through hands-on activities and dreaming up creative inventions together. Virtual Assemble after school sessions also include special visits from local artists, makers, and technologists who share their passion and talents with the group. Assemble has been doing work to support teens and encourage their civic engagement through its Hack the Future program for students in grades 9-12 in addition to its weekly after school programming.
BUILD A BRAVE SPACE

Trust and respect are ESSENTIAL to working with youth. You can’t expect someone to trust you without intentionally creating a brave space. Creating a space, practice, and routine that feel good to both youth and facilitators is key. A brave space is a place where youth and educators alike can be vulnerable and honest. Establishing norms or community guidelines as a group is a great way to build trust, gain respect, and foster community in your space. Youth need a space where they can talk about their lives, have their experiences validated, and know that they are capable of big thoughts and ideas.

TRY IT OUT:
CREATE A ROUTINE OF DOING QUICK EMOTIONAL CHECK-INS USING A FEELINGS BAROMETER.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:
- Define what an open and transparent space looks like to you.
- How can I be vulnerable and transparent with youth and have us learn together?
- How can I invite youth to the table and affirm that they are capable of big thoughts and ideas?
FOSTER YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

This section goes hand in hand with Build a Brave Space. The atmosphere you create, whether in-person or virtual, needs to support peer interactions and relationship building. Playing games is a great way to build community among the group as they allow for natural conversations. Encourage silly side conversations, build in lots of time for sharing, allow for venting, support excitement. Maintaining a routine of unstructured time allows for settling in, one-on-one check ins, and building camaraderie naturally. Feeling seen and heard is crucial to making connections.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:

- How can I encourage peer to peer conversations and relationships, not just youth-adult relationships with me?
- What do I want our community environment to look like? How do I want youth (and adults) to feel in this space?

TRY IT OUT:

TURN QUESTIONS DIRECTED TO YOU AS THE EDUCATOR BACK TO THE GROUP AS A WHOLE. USE QUESTIONS LIKE “HAS ANYONE ELSE HAD A SIMILAR EXPERIENCE?” OR “CAN ANYONE RELATE?”
LET YOUTH LEAD

One of the most important lessons learned was the importance of keeping programming flexible. You may have your own goals as an educator for certain activities or lessons, but for successful youth programs, you have to let them lead the conversation. The more often you incorporate social justice issues into casual conversation, the better chance you have of having deep and meaningful discussions. But remember, it can’t be forced and should be integrated into hands-on making. It’s not about your lesson plan or final product, but rather about the youth and what they need at that exact moment. The activity is just a means to an end. Additionally, be sure to provide “breathing room” where youth can reflect and express themselves as they choose. And finally, remember that everyone shows up differently, especially in a virtual setting, and that’s okay! Don’t force youth to turn cameras on or interact in any ways they are hesitant to.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:

- What changes, in environment or routines, can I implement to empower youth to take ownership of the space?
- How do I want youth to feel in this space?
- How can I actively make space for conversations that aren’t able to be had in a traditional classroom setting?
- What are a few easy activities or topics I can keep in my back pocket to pull out as needed?

TRY IT OUT:

HAVE YOUTH LEAD ACTIVITIES OR DISCUSSIONS BASED ON THEIR PERSONAL INTERESTS.
SHOW YOUTH THEY MATTER

Taking an interest in your youth’s lives beyond your program adds to that necessary relationship building. Entangle your life with theirs. Show up at their football games, their fundraisers, walk the streets in their neighborhoods. Seeing them outside of your program will also help with building relationships with their parents or guardians. It shows youth that they matter - to you and to society. Mattering also includes representation and making sure that youth are seeing people who share their race, gender identity, beliefs, etc.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:
- How am I showing others that they matter?
- How can I take an interest in my students’ lives beyond this program? How can I entangle my life with theirs?
- How are BIPOC folks being represented in our programming? In our staff? In guest artists or makers? In the partners we work with?
- How can I seek out new perspectives and voices to listen to and learn from?

TRY IT OUT:

ESTABLISH A YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL TO STAY INFORMED ON WHAT ISSUES ARE RELEVANT TO YOUTH.
MAKE SPACE FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

As an educator, you may not have tons of time to care for yourself. But in order to show up and do this work authentically with youth, you need to invest in yourself and make space for your own practice. You deserve to love yourself. Consider your own self-care, personal growth, and vulnerability, and how improving your mindset as an educator will allow you to show up for your youth with more empathy, compassion, and authenticity. Most importantly, be gentle with yourself and others.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:
- What support do I need to show up as my full, authentic self?
- How else could I be practicing my own self-care?
- What is one thing I am already doing to make space for my own self-care? What is something new I could try to support another part of my well-being?
- If hurt people hurt people, think about how healing people can heal people...
- How can I equip myself to have hard conversations with youth?

TRY IT OUT:
EXPLORE RESOURCES FROM TA’LOR PINKSTON AT THE HEART ADVOCATE TO DIVE DEEPER INTO YOUR OWN SELF-LOVE JOURNEY.
CONTINUE THE RIPPLE

Change takes time. Educators need to be encouraged and supported to continue our own learning around social justice issues. It’s more than just a single professional development workshop though. It requires a second, third, and fourth step to follow. Be sure to revisit this work regularly. Keep in mind, it’s not a linear process and requires lots of work, and sometimes you need to revisit that work time and time again.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:
- What support do I need to continue to educate myself around social justice issues? From my peers? From my leadership or administration? From outside of my organization?
- How can I create space for muscle-building in learning spaces to develop agency?
- Where can I go next to continue my learning?

TRY IT OUT:
TALK TO THOSE WHO ARE ALREADY INVOLVED IN THE CONVERSATION. CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES - THE GRAPEVINE, UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN, OR THE NICE WHITE PARENTS PODCAST.
ALL HANDS ON DECK

While systemic change may seem daunting, change happens when each of us plays a role. This “power in numbers” mentality applies at both the programmatic level as well as the wider organizational culture level. Having more than one educator involved in the planning and facilitation of youth programming is key. Find yourself an ally to partner with, brainstorm ideas, and troubleshoot issues that may arise. It will add cohesion and create a stronger program for empowering youth. At a higher level, doing the work around social justice and equity issues with a similar organization allows for the inclusion of more perspectives, helps keep momentum productive, and maintains accountability.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:
- How can I hold myself accountable while recognizing that I am still learning?
- Who are my peers and allies, both within my organization and externally, and how can I partner with them to do this work?
- How can I connect with my community and develop buy-in from my community members? Think of organizations outside of your field, policy makers, etc?

TRY IT OUT:
SEEK OUT ALLIES, BOTH WITHIN MY ORGANIZATION AND EXTERNALLY, TO DO THIS WORK WITH.
QUESTION THE SYSTEM

“The system always seems to win because whiteness has the scorecard.” The system will work without us, which is why each of us need to take intentional action to disrupt it. Examine the system, challenge it, ask why. Consider who holds the power and who makes the rules. Do those who hold the power represent you? Reflect on these things internally and also with the youth you work with. You have the opportunity to teach and empower youth to interact with government and society in ways that will affect actual societal change.

REFLECT ON THESE QUESTIONS:

- Reflect on what systems you are a part of. Why am I a part of those systems? What is my role?
- In what small ways can I disrupt the education system?
- How am I perpetuating the power dynamics in my spaces? How can I work towards dismantling them and ensure that power is authentically shared?
- How can I ensure I’m not only practicing these things with our youth, but in my full life? Am I practicing having these conversations outside of these youth spaces? With my peers? My supervisors?

TRY IT OUT:

LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR OWN IMPLICIT BIASES BY COMPLETING TESTS FROM HARVARD’S PROJECT IMPLICIT.
“I GUESS MY DEFINITION [OF SOCIAL JUSTICE] HASN'T REALLY CHANGED, BUT HOW I APPROACH IT IN LEARNING SPACES HAS. IT DOESN'T ALWAYS NEED TO BE A BIG AND HEAVY CONVERSATION. SOCIAL JUSTICE IS WOVEN INTO EVERY SINGLE PART OF OUR LIVES AND PARALLELS WILL BE DRAWN IN SO MANY DIFFERENT WAYS!”

—CMP TEACHING ARTIST

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