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Butchers, Bakers, Makers, and Opposable Thumbs

By **Peter Gow** on **September 13, 2013 9:01 AM** | [2 Comments](#)

When I was in the seventh grade my classmates and I, eager lads at a reputedly fine independent school, were once or twice a week forced to become ink-stained wretches. Not the sort of wretches who wrote, mind you, although leaky ink cartridge pens were popular among us before the dawn of the Bic Age, but wretches who set type and printed.

We learned to use a job-stick, the difference between an em and an en space, and how to form up a piece of text for the press. We inked platens, ran proofs, and ultimately produced our own stationery. I'm guessing each of us can still recognize that rare and evocative thing, the smell of ink.

We also spent a term that year producing cranberry scoop planters, complete with tin pans we snipped and soldered ourselves to hold the soil.

Most of this was semi-old hat, as the late fifties and early sixties were the high water mark of plastic models, kit radios, and other things that kids, or at least many boy-type kids, were expected to enjoy putting together. If the plastic car models were carefully formed to fit together, there were lots of opportunities for customization using parts from other models, wild paint schemes, and--for the brave--hot knives and epoxy putty.

In those days driver's ed included some mandatory instruction in engine anatomy and physiology and in basic tasks like changing tires and windshield wipers. Even prep school dandies--boys and girls alike--were used to getting our hands dirty.

Summer jobs in those days often had a similar flavor. No internships marketing with entrepreneurs, but shoveling sand or cutting grass for the golf course or highway department. Some of my classmates got jobs in the steel plants, heading off to the graveyard shift in heavy canvas clothing, steel-toed boots with metatarsal guards, hard-hats, and goggles. Like the steel plants in Buffalo, those jobs are gone, although their successors still exist and are filled today with adults who need the income.

I spoke the other day with a school head who was surprised by the result of a school parent survey in which the top area of interest was "making"--these parents wanted their kids to be tinkering with things, hands on. This result is certainly in line with the hot topics in education today: fabrication labs, maker spaces, design thinking, prototyping.

There is something quintessentially human about messing around with our hands to accomplish something. Our opposable thumbs may have allowed us to manipulate the world in ways that made way for enormous growth in our brains--see [Frank Wilson's fascinating 1999 book *The Hand*](#) for more on this--but we still have those thumbs. And, it appears, we desperately want to use them.

In the past forty years or so our society has actually managed to shrink the range of what we expect kids to do with their hands; keyboarding is not model-building, and intensive supervised town sports are not the same as building treehouses, poking around in the woods, pounding nails, or learning a craft from an older relative or friend.

The Maker Movement, it strikes me, is a kind of glorified acknowledgment, often without the actual

acknowledgment, that human children--and adults--need to be handling things and actually doing things physically every bit as much as they need to be thinking about them, talking about them, exploring them on the internet, or figuring out ways to sell them via social media. Just as people find the game of Jenga relaxing and enjoyable, we seem to find constructing things, concocting things, and even taking things apart and putting them back together--often in new ways--existentially rewarding.

We even have a space in our society for celebrating this at the adult level. Who is more revered these days than the creator of "artisanal" this and that, from bread at the hipster bakery to microbrewery beer to steampunk clothing to Escher-themed crocheted tea cozies from Etsy? And how much cooler do we think it is when the be-floured baker of our town's best ciabatta is revealed to be an M.I.T. or Stanford graduate who "quit the rat race" to work with their hands? Our hearts root for hands.

So I guess I'd like to put it out there that Maker-ness is nothing more or less than a response to an impulse that we've been suppressing for a while and that is as necessary to learning as knowing one's ABCs or multiplication tables.

What Maker educators have to do, and many are already really good at this, is to restore to the maker process that combination of open-ended exploration and the mastery of craft that kids once learned while building customized model cars, playing outdoors, or hammering stuff together out of the scraps leftover from building cranberry scoops in shop class. The hands and the brain are linked, in ways that schools in recent years--whether hotbeds of tech innovation or bastions of crusty textbook-centered learning--have been ignoring and that Maker culture can restore to a more proper, and more human, balance.

Let's help kids make more stuff, do more stuff! Let's liberate those opposable thumbs!

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