APPENDIX E

METHODS OF DOCUMENTATION

Photo: Maker Ed

There are many ways to capture and share children's thinking, work, play, and projects. In this appendix, we provide brief tips and suggestions for methods of documentation using notebooks, photo, video, and audio. Each approach can be used by anyone in your space. Youth, in particular, always provide unique perspectives given the tools to document their own efforts and those of their peers. You'll be especially amazed by the perspectives offered by the youngest of makers.

Notebooks

Comparing invention notebooks hacked with electronics.
Photo: Opal School

Before looking at modes of documenting involving gadgets, let's pay homage to the simplest, most accessible tools to start with: a notebook and pen. The humble notebook can become a powerful record of ideas, prototypes, processes, and mistakes, providing a focal point for reflection and iteration.

However notebooks are used, regular use can encourage growth in writing, drawing, dreaming, planning, and sharing. Any notebook will do. They can even be made more personal and fun by encouraging modifications and customization.

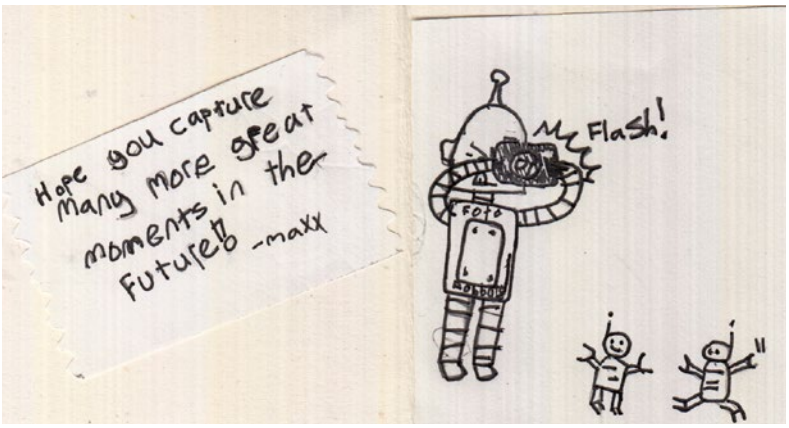
Simply asking, "Can I take a look at your notebook? I'd love to see your ideas!" can be incredibly empowering and encouraging of regular notebook use. Entries can also become a source of project ideas, intriguing and meaningful questions, and thoughts that spark excitement among peers when shared and recognized.

Photo and Video

We live in an era where quality cameras are now ubiquitous, especially in the form of most smartphones. How might we make best use of them for documentation purposes? How might we also empower youth in our spaces to capture and share their work, play, and perspectives?

It's powerful to hand a camera to a student and ask for their eye on things. This can also provide a positive role for anyone seeking to take a break and offer ways for youth to see, share, and show appreciation for all that goes on in the space. Youth see things and take images in a way that vastly differs from adults. You'll appreciate their unique vision.

A note of encouragement from 10 y.o. Maxx.
Photo: Maker Ed



For spacemakers, cameras can play pivotal roles in both restraint and engagement when it comes to supporting youth-centered approaches. Taking on the role of documenter allows educators to actively roam and see what's happening without necessarily directing. It provides a way to focus attention toward what is being made while showing care and curiosity.

Often, the majority of photos taken of project work are those of a child posing, looking directly at the camera while holding up their final creation. While these kinds of photos can be effective in showing appreciation for and value of the product, candid shots throughout the entire process show a fuller story and can capture genuine moments of triumph, collaboration, struggle, and joy.

Still, care must be taken to respect the space of youth at work and play. Often, it's enough to ask permission to record their work and to assure them that you understand if they would prefer some privacy.

This also touches on a larger issue: since we're mainly focusing on youth makerspaces in this playbook, it's important to be mindful of how images and videos featuring children are used. Establishing rules and managing expectations in your space is essential. Getting signed photo releases from parents or guardians is one way to ensure consent of use. Some folks avoid using a child's full name in any public-facing content for safety reason, while others deem this unnecessary. There's a wide range of rules. Tailor yours to suit the needs and desires of your community.

PHOTO AND VIDEO SHOT LIST

Here are some ideas to help encourage a variety of truly useful and versatile moving and still images.

- Setups: Materials and environment "before" shots, including the space and tables
- Wide-angle context shots: Where is this happening? What does the whole environment look like?
- Medium and small-group shots
- Close-ups of hands working with tools and materials, as well as of faces showing emotion
- Table-level shots showing work and faces in the same shot
- Overhead shots
- Documentation of other forms of documentation (How very meta!)
- Before and after pictures of the space: Helpful for maintaining organization by providing an image of how the space should ideally be left after an activity while celebrating the creative chaos of making

Yes, this can result in a large amount of media, perhaps too much. Keep in mind that photos and videos are only useful when you can locate them. It helps to select, curate, organize, and label/tag photos soon after taking them. Having youth, volunteers, and family members lend a hand can make the task more manageable.

Sounds of Making

There's great value in capturing just words and sounds. Removed from images, issues like permissions and technical considerations like lighting are removed. The same phones and tablets we use as cameras are also audio recorders. Some applications even continuously record audio in a buffer and only save a selected period of time when you push a button, for example, after an amazing reaction, ideation, or celebration.

Recording discussions can lead to amazing content. Transcribing conversations can take it to another level, providing quotes and showing the evolution of ideas and collaboration. This is yet another role that can be taken on by a volunteer.

A last note about sound: It's actually among the most important, yet often neglected, aspects of video. Poor sound can take away a huge amount of the impact of even the most beautiful moving images. If you have the means and choice, investing in decent microphones can pay off tremendously. Still, even poor-quality audio can be transcribed, making the voices of youth more visible.

It's also important to take breaks from documentation. The "fear of missing out" on the perfect shot can, at times, interfere with other aspects of the moment, including simply experiencing and enjoying it. As much as we encourage documentation, fantastic work still happens, even if it's not recorded in some way other than memory and the personal impact of the experience.

Photo: CoLab Tinkering