



Photographs: High Tech High

# A Reel-y Authentic Food Truck

*High school students experience deep learning while creating a food truck that shows movies*

By **Daisy Sharrock** and **Liz Perry**

**A**T FIRST, WE THOUGHT this was a little bit crazy,” parents informed us at our all school exhibition of student work in December 2013. Raising thousands of dollars in a short period of time to start a student-run, non-profit food truck had seemed perhaps a bit ambitious back in September. Yet, by mid-December, three weeks into our six week Kickstarter campaign to raise \$35,000, the possibility of success seemed much greater. “You’ll definitely make it,” parents now said with increased confidence. Admittedly, we were still a bit nervous. Despite all the hard work we had accomplished already, our team, made up of 52 high school sophomores and three teachers, still had a ways to go. Using Kickstarter<sup>1</sup>, an all-or-nothing platform for raising money for creative projects, clearly presented a risk to our team. Yet it was the risk that offered the greatest reward: the opportunity to engage in authentic learning experiences with the real possibility of success or failure. As such, whether we met our funding goal or not, we were confident that the project was serving its purpose.

In the Spring of 2013, we sat down as a teaching team to start mapping out our project for the next academic year.

This would be our first semester working together, but it was clear from the get go that we had many shared passions that could lead to an authentic project for our students. As ideas evolved, we narrowed our focus on food trucks, an industry that is taking off around North America, and one that had many clear connections to our core academic content, including math, chemistry, humanities, and Spanish. In an exercise often encouraged at High Tech High, a forward-thinking progressive charter high school in San Diego, we then began to dream. In the absence of limitations, how far could we run with this? It was in our willingness to dream that the idea of starting a student-run food truck surfaced, and from there, the pieces quickly started falling into place. We could clearly see how using a platform like Kickstarter would engage students in Deeper Learning. A term defined by the Hewlett Foundation as learning in which students “are mastering core academic content, like reading, writing, math, and science, while learning how to think critically, collaborate, communicate effectively, direct their own learning, and believe in themselves (known as an “academic mindset”).”<sup>2</sup> The end product, a fully functional, student-run food truck, would be our vehicle for engaging students in these powerful learning experiences.



smell to create our experience of flavors. They identified the different molecular structures of esters, carbohydrates, proteins and salts, and also explored what makes a molecule bitter. Students made use of Science & Cooking: From Haute Cuisine to Soft Matter Science, a massive open online course (MOOC) on the science behind cooking. Through this course, students explored how contrasting textures and flavors can keep a dish interesting and prevent taste bud fatigue and the chemistry behind spherification. They also learned about the chemical concept of mole through analyzing the ingredients in chocolate chip cookies. Finally, students used their newfound understanding of cooking to generate signature dishes for their food truck proposals.

### **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:**

*Students think critically, analytically, and creatively. They know how to find, evaluate, and synthesize information to construct arguments. They can design their own solutions to complex problems. – (HF)*

Creativity is one of the cornerstones of effective problem solving. After completing their ethnographic field research, we challenged students to use their insight into the San Diego food truck scene to generate their own

## **Deeper Learning Through Reel Delicious**

**Mastery of Core Academic Content:** *Students build their academic foundation in subjects like reading, writing, math, and science. They understand key principles and procedures, recall facts, use the correct language, and draw on their knowledge to complete new tasks. – Hewlett Foundation (HF)*

Starting and running a successful business would first require the students to gain a solid understanding of the industry. In other words, we needed to do our research. Prior to launching the Reel Delicious Kickstarter campaign, students examined the food truck industry from various perspectives. In the first few weeks of school, students went out into the community to conduct ethnographic field research. In teams of two to three, students observed the day-to-day operations of a food truck and interviewed food truck owners, employees, and customers to get a better sense of what it takes to start and maintain a successful food truck business. They learned to design research and interview questions, to analyze qualitative data, and to draw conclusions from their observations and interactions. Their qualitative data was then used to write ethnographies in English and Spanish. Their ethnographies highlight important aspects of the industry, from having a “punny” name, such as *God Save the Cuisine*, to using social media to build a community of supporters.

In chemistry, students analyzed the biochemical basis of the five components of taste and how they interact with

concepts for a successful food truck business. “The whole idea of entrepreneurship,” stated student Natalya Volk, “is being creative.” To be successful in this component of the project, students would have to engage their creativity and entrepreneurial spirits to come up with an original food truck concept that met the needs of the community. In pairs, they designed food truck themes, logos, and menus and presented their ideas to a large public audience. Using peer critique and the inquiry process, students developed unique dishes to accompany their food truck concepts. Students generated ideas such as: *Eh for Effort!*, a food truck specializing in Canadian foods, such as poutine; *Primordial Bacon*, a food truck featuring everything bacon, including peanut butter and bacon sandwiches and popcorn cooked in bacon fat; and *The Yard*, a food truck that turns kids menu favorites into adult-friendly delicacies, such as parmesan crusted chicken tenders. Four local food trucks joined the students as they exhibited their concepts, drawing a large crowd of interested students, staff, and community members.

We used this step in the process as a formal brainstorming session to generate a pool of ideas that the class could collectively draw from to create the final concept for our Kickstarter campaign. Many of the students’ creative concepts had strong international themes that resonated with the class focus of diversity and cultural awareness.

Furthermore, many students felt strongly about, and included in their designs, sourcing foods locally and from farms that use sustainable practices. One of the groups proposed working with the local Latino and Asian film festivals and showing movies on their truck, and the seeds of our project were planted. The class was now moving forward



with *Reel Delicious*, a food truck that promotes cultural understanding through food and film.

**Collaboration:** *Collaborative students work well in teams. They communicate and understand multiple points of view and they know how to cooperate to achieve a shared goal. – (HF)*

After researching successful Kickstarter campaigns, we generated a list of seven committees to tackle the various components of launching a successful campaign and creating a new business. Students selected their top four committee preferences, which were then used to place students into groups. The logo and design committee took on the daunting challenge of coming up with the truck name, *Reel Delicious*, designing a logo, and creating the look and feel of the campaign and future business. They worked closely with the pledge perks committee, which was responsible for creating the kickbacks for different donation levels during the campaign. The cooking group generated and refined the fusion recipes that would form the core staples of our menu, and the legal and finance committees researched the permits and regulations needed to start a business and wrote a business plan. A public relations team wrote press releases, developed the social media strategy, and attended community events to promote the project. The final student committee was responsible for creating the video that was to be featured on the Kickstarter website, a key component to any successful campaign.

In each committee, students had to work closely with one another to accomplish their tasks. Be it within a committee to divvy up responsibilities and set deadlines or between one committee and another, students needed to interact and depend on one another to get the job done. Luis Garcia, an often quiet classmate and member of the cooking committee expressed, “the thing I struggled with most was working with others. I don’t always work well with others; I’d rather be by myself working. I sort of achieved this by putting myself in a group and depending on them more.” In order to accomplish the various tasks at hand, students had to draw on and learn from the strengths of others and trust one another. The real possibility, that without the help of everyone, we might not meet our goal pushed students to work together and give their best effort. In the end, the collaboration of students and pooling of diverse strengths resulted in the creation of a professional, polished Kickstarter campaign that represented the best work of the entire group.

**Effective Communication:** *Students communicate effectively in writing and in oral presentations. They structure information in meaningful ways, listen to and give feedback, and construct messages for particular audiences. – (HF)*

Successful Kickstarter campaigns rely on the support of the community, and each step of the way students reached out to existing and new networks of supporters. In collaborating with one another and with members of the local community, students had to consider their audience and communicate effectively. Students sought support from two local film festivals, the *Latino Film Festival* and the *Pacific Arts Movement* (which organizes the San Diego Asian Film Festi-

val) and attended events hosted by each organization to promote their vision. In addition, students visited local farms to source organic and sustainable ingredients and reached out to local chefs for feedback on their recipe development. The finance and legal teams researched and discussed business strategies with our school’s Chief Financial Officer and lawyers from the community. Students met with politicians and attended a San Diego Planning Commission meeting, where new policies for food truck operators in San Diego were being discussed. Our public relations team sent out hundreds of emails to news organizations around the country, spreading the word about *Reel Delicious*. Rachel Dunkin, a formerly shy, soft-spoken student, remarked, “I have never been so comfortable with myself than I am this year because of the food truck project. I am a more confident student, a reliable leader and an enthusiastic learner because of this project.” Reaching out to community partners, local professionals, and even contacting family and friends, students practiced their ability to communicate professionally and to overcome uncomfortable or challenging scenarios.

**Self-directed Learning:** *Students develop an ability to direct their own learning. They set goals, monitor their own progress, and reflect on their own strengths and areas for improvement. They learn to see setbacks as opportunities for feedback and growth. Students who learn through self-direction are more adaptive than their peers. – (HF)*

Over the course of the project, students directed their own learning, setting weekly and daily goals and reporting on their progress to the entire team. Each committee, consisting of four to eight students, was assigned a designated leader. Leaders helped the group to determine a timeline for accomplishing goals and served as a point person to address questions or challenging situations. As students generated their lists, it was clear that they would have to accomplish tasks that they had never done before, and perhaps knew little to nothing about.

**An “Academic Mindset”:** *Students with an academic mindset have a strong belief in themselves. They trust their own abilities and believe their hard work will pay off, so they persist to overcome obstacles. They also learn from and support each other. They see the relevance of their schoolwork to the real world and their own future success. – (HF)*

On January 23rd, 2014, the last day of our Kickstarter campaign, we reached our funding goal, raising over \$35,000 in less than six weeks. What seemed like an incredible reach just three short months ago, had become a reality. “I, as well as every other student on this team am a major component to making this project a success, and it makes me feel good knowing I can accomplish something so immense,” said Dunkin. Through the project, students came to see that their collective hard work could lead them to accomplish something they weren’t sure they could do. Students not only impressed themselves with their own success, but their parents and the rest of the High Tech High community.



By breaking down the complex challenge of raising such a large sum and starting a business into tasks performed by different committees, the class mirrored the real life process that entrepreneurs and successful companies must undertake to succeed. Regarding this process, student Mia Higgins said, “It’s not going to always be really fun, but if you have an amazing idea then the end result will actually be awesome. You just have to stick to it and put all your effort into it.”

This project created its own energy. It involved relevant, real work that is traditionally only found outside school settings. Each new step in the process inspired the rest of the class. A great logo inspired unique perks. One newspaper article sparked others, a moving video galvanized those that had doubts, and discussing the project with our new, growing community of supporters became second nature to everyone involved. While the Food Truck project—like many school projects—does not endure in the same form from year to year, it lives on for the students who gained new understanding, skills and levels of self-confidence. They grew as individuals as they took ownership of the project and of their learning and created their own *reel* success story.

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#### Notes

1. [www.kickstarter.com/](http://www.kickstarter.com/)
2. What is Deeper Learning? (2014, March 28). Hewlett Foundation News. [www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning/what-deeper-learning](http://www.hewlett.org/programs/education/deeper-learning/what-deeper-learning)



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