



CITY LORE and the HAROLD HUNTER FOUNDATION

***KICKFLIP Program Guiding Principles For Engaging Hard To Reach Youth In
Digital Media Training Programs***

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I. KICKFLIP: A Vision for Long Term Impact

Kickflip is an interest-driven, connected learning program designed to impact teen skateboarders for whom school is often not a safe or constructive learning environment.

The program was developed through a partnership between City Lore and the Harold Hunter Foundation and funded by the Hive Digital Media Learning Fund of the New York Community Trust. Additional partners have included Reelworks Teen Filmmaking and Parsons School of Design.

The program is carefully designed to link skateboarders' identities and interests in order to support their development and expand their skill sets. The skills endemic to this population are not often supported in a traditional classroom setting. We seek to empower these teens by helping them to understand and value what they learn as they pursue their passions, and to see how those skills can serve them as they plan for their future. **Kickflip** has been developed as a model that can be applied to other teen subcultures ranging from hobby-based subcultures such as Comic Book Fans, Gamers, Manga, and Spoken Word; music-based subcultures such as Hip-Hop/B-Boys/Graffiti, Emo, and Metalheads; fashion-based subcultures such as Haul Girls and Sneakerheads; and other formal and informal sports-based subcultures such as BMX, Parkour, and Street Ball.

Population Served

Our target demographic for **Kickflip** is youth between the ages of 15 and 25 who struggle academically or behaviorally, but who are already engaged in skateboarding activities during after-school hours and the summer. Many of the students we engage struggle with a variety of social, emotional and behavioral issues that have distanced them from activities at school.

Skateboarding provides a space that helps them to develop improved self-control, focus, and commitment, and offers a positive diversion from less healthy and potentially destructive behaviors. Through partnerships with local community and faith-based organizations, as well as youth interns and participants, the Harold Hunter Foundation (HHF) has strong connections with students from some of the most underserved areas, which have the highest concentration of high-risk disengaged youth (i.e. youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and are not employed) - particularly Brownsville, East New York, and the South Bronx.



Population Needs

As a group, teen skateboarders in NYC are often an underserved and misunderstood population who do not consider themselves college-bound prospects. However, their commitment to learning in their pursuit of their passion is an asset. Their craft often draws them together in spaces around the city to socialize, experiment and perfect their skills.

At least 95% of the youth served by the **Kickflip** program are Black and Latino skateboarders from low income and often single parent households in neighborhoods with the highest rates of poverty, violence, and incarceration. Many of the very qualities, abilities, and characteristics that draw these youth to skateboarding also make them vulnerable to a variety of pitfalls. Skateboarders have unique learning styles, and socio-emotional and behavioral needs that are often not adequately addressed by traditional organizations and institutions, particularly in resource-poor neighborhoods. Such circumstances hinder development of their creativity and innovative spirit, and often leave them disengaged from school.

Through the **Kickflip** program we sought to fill the void left by more traditional organizations and institutions by providing an out of school program specifically and creatively tailored to harness and develop potential while addressing the specific challenges skateboarders often face in academic settings. Though often perceived as a disaffected group who disrespect authority, skateboarders have inherent strengths: tenacity, passion, flexibility, creativity, and patience. These strengths, if harnessed, can serve them well, not only in their sport, but in both academic and professional settings. Skateboarding offers a healthy outlet that diverts youth from gang participation, prevents a sedentary lifestyle, builds character, provides a coping strategy to channel difficult feelings, and instills a spirit of community involvement, self-efficacy, and entrepreneurship. It is particularly well suited to youth with emotional, behavioral, and learning issues.

Services

Kickflip is an arts and media program that takes place via intensive summer workshops. Participants work in teams on iterative design processes emanating from their passion for skateboarding to create projects in graphic, web, fashion and game design, digital filmmaking, coding and app development. Participants can specialize and go deep in one area of interest or choose to be exposed to a range of media and skill sets. Participants receive mentorship and coaching from instructors and industry professionals to support their artistic and academic growth and expand notions about their skills and career and college prospects.



In past workshops students have created documentary films, designed and play-tested skateboarding games, designed interactive apps, and created and programmed Arduino enhanced skateboards. Arduino is a peripheral circuit board that can be programmed to measure trick accuracy by counting the number of times the skateboard flips and/or rotates. Youth who took part in the program coded a game-scoring app that utilized this technology.

In addition to a rigorous and engaging curriculum, we conduct an evaluation process that allows us to assess how the program contributes to changes in students' perception of themselves as learners, and their feelings of college and career readiness. We have also been the subject of studies to measure youth trajectories, interest-driven learning models, and youth engagement with connected learning and technology.

II. KICKFLIP: PROGRAM MODEL AND BEST PRACTICES

How does an interest-driven, connected learning program such as **Kickflip** impact students for whom school is not a safe or constructive learning environment? How does it use their strong identity to support their development and expand their ideas of their skill sets?

How can similar youth populations be connected with opportunities to grow their existing skill sets, develop new skills, connect with adult mentors invested in their ongoing development, and access alternative pathways to academic and career success?

In designing and refining the **Kickflip** program over the course of 3 iterations, we developed best practices that other organizations can use to design programs that harness the strengths of hard to reach youth populations by targeting a specific subculture of youth, and/or to adapt existing programs to work more effectively with the youth they currently serve.

This set of Guiding Principles are based on Basic Assumptions about the population, the nature of traditional learning spaces, and the best practices for creating an optimal interest-driven connected learning environment.

These Basic Assumptions and Guiding Principles were derived through our experience working with student skateboarders and adult mentors and instructors from the skateboard community, discussions and interviews with instructors and adults from the community, observations of students in workshops, analysis of video- and audio-taped one-on-one interviews with program participants, and feedback from an advisory group made up of program participants and interns.



BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

About the Population

- Our students are on a spectrum of disengagement from school.
- Our students are on a spectrum of a psychosocial profile (ADHD, dyslexia, issues with authority, thrill-seeking, etc.) that attracts them to skateboarding.
- The characteristics associated with our students' psychosocial profile are typically viewed as deficits in traditional school environments, but are strengths in skateboarding, and are in fact strengths in game design and coding.
- The characteristics associated with our students' psychosocial profile lead them to value and benefit from play and experiential, embodied learning.
- Our students have a unique set of skills and point of view that, while often not valued in traditional learning environments, is valued in the tech world.
- For many of our students school is not a conducive environment for developing the very skills and behaviors that are necessary for school success.

About Schools/Traditional Learning Spaces

- School and career success is impacted by a range of complex factors and interactions that have much to do with students' experiences and environments both inside and outside of school.
- The sets of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies that are valued in traditional school environments, and which are therefore crucial to school success, can feel alienating to certain populations.
- Students' expertise gained through learning/knowledge outside of the classroom isn't always valued or appreciated.
- Schools can be a disempowering, de-authorizing, demoralizing space for many students, especially those who don't fit the "norms".

About (Best Practices for) Connected Teaching/Learning & Engaging a "Special" Population

- Professional caliber training and professional equipment are key.
- 360-degree transparency between the students, group leaders, teachers and guests is crucial.
- Group work and teamwork, both among students and between/with instructors, administrators/staff, and students are essential.



- Working within a subculture and harnessing existing social networks improves learning.
- Students need to feel that their needs/desires are being accommodated.
- Empowerment is essential for learning to occur.
- Students will thrive in an environment of mutual respect, where students, instructors and administrators are on equal footing, and where students' expertise is valued.
- Learning must be engaging so that it is simultaneously challenging and fun.
- Learning and knowledge that develops through experiences outside of a formal classroom space are relevant and should be drawn upon to enhance students' learning in the classroom.
- Repeated "failure" is an essential part of learning and mastery.
- Failure and difficulty don't have to be demoralizing if the process is transparent, and the learning applies to what is relevant to students' lives.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In our review of student and instructor interviews, class observations, and both formal and informal discussions with a number of stakeholders including student participants, instructors, staff, and guests, we identified 3 overarching themes that were fundamental in guiding effective practice: BUILDING A COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY APPROACH, LEVERAGING IDENTITY AND INTEREST, and APPLYING CONNECTED LEARNING PRINCIPLES. Each theme consisted of 2-4 underlying guiding principles and associated practices.

THEME 1: BUILDING A COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Effective programs are developed through an equitable partnership between a variety of stakeholders that includes community members, instructors, professionals, members of community-based and grassroots organizations that serve the specific community, educational institutions, and most importantly the students to be served. All parties bring unique expertise, perspectives, and skills to bear, and their input and feedback throughout the process of program design, development, execution, and evaluation is essential to successful outcomes.

PRINCIPLE 1A: IDENTIFYING AND SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships are essential to the development of an effective interest-driven program targeting a particular youth subculture. We engaged adult mentors, instructors, and organizations that were already invested in the skateboard community to help us understand the learning assets of youth skateboarders and design a program with their needs and habits in mind.



Practices for Meaningful Collaboration:

- ***Collaboration with Mentors & Instructors.*** We engage noteworthy stakeholders from the skateboarding community to participate in the program as instructors and mentors, consultants in program design and curriculum development, and as guests. Wherever possible, we make sure that these adults reflect students' own experiences whether through similar racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, experiences and struggles with school, and/or through their own strong connection to or identification with skateboarding culture. In the three years since the programs' inception, we've brought in professional skateboarders as well as those who worked in related design and technology fields. These guests served as subjects for interview workshops and career-based Q&As, as reputable sources of constructive feedback regarding the students' projects, and as credible and approachable role models that the students could relate to.
- ***Collaboration with Institutions.*** We held our program at the New School/Parsons School of Design, and worked with professors and students from the university because we wanted students to have exposure to and experience in a setting for higher education. In addition to shared values and expertise, the access to the state of the arts facilities provided by The New School introduced a different model of what academic spaces look and feel like to students. We worked actively with security and other personnel to make sure our students were made to feel welcome and comfortable in what was for many a new and at times foreign environment.

PRINCIPLE 1B: STRUCTURING A POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Students will feel safer taking on challenges and trying on new identities as learners if the space is safe and comfortable. We constructed a space where students felt a sense of community that was friendly, welcoming and safe, and where they experienced acceptance, support, and a sense of mutual intergenerational respect between students and instructors, as well as a sense of mentorship. A high priority was placed on creating an environment where students were able to learn at their own pace and feel comfortable asking for help.

Values of a Positive Learning Environment:

- There is a sense of connectedness and a feeling of being a part of something larger than oneself.
- Everyone works as a collective towards a common goal and project.
- The curriculum supports creativity and expression, offering myriad opportunities to take risks and feel challenged.
- Failure doesn't feel scary because making mistakes is treated as an essential part of the learning process.



PRINCIPLE 1C: CREATING A CULTURE OF EMPOWERMENT AND RESPECT

The program is designed to value student voice and aims to create a safe and supportive environment that suits the learning needs of the youth population. In our instructional strategy we worked to reduce the power dynamics inherent to student-teacher relationships. Projects were based around a respect for student expertise and lived experience. While instructors defined the learning goals and skill-sets, students were given autonomy to decide how to solve problems and use class time.

Practices for Nurturing Youth Voice:

- **Teachers as Facilitators.** Teachers are positioned as project managers and facilitators, the goal being to help each student to feel confident, and to help build an optimal environment for learning and bringing expertise and resources to bear.
- **Supporting Autonomy.** By the second half of the program, students take on roles of project management for their work groups. Teachers remain on hand to help work through problems, and offer support, but students are allowed freedom and control within a structured environment.
- **Fostering Mentorship.** We utilize youth mentorship by hiring former students as interns who also serve as documenters and action researchers to conduct inquiry into the impact of the program. In many cases students lead the conversation about what impact looked like for them.
- **Cultivating Freedom.** We design projects to have flexible paths towards goals, self-directed learning, and many different ways to solve a problem or execute a project. While clear goals are set at the start of each day, students are encouraged to take their time and enjoy the process.
- **Valuing Student Expertise.** Teachers are not the only experts; they have knowledge and skills sets and so do students. Students' expertise is acknowledged and utilized in the learning and design process. When students have their efforts and talents recognized they can stretch their learning skills and take on skills or challenges that may initially be more difficult for them.
- **Flexibility with Structure.** We establish group norms and expectations through dialogue with students at the beginning of the course so that common expectations for behavior are defined and non-negotiable. However, we maintain an ongoing conversation about what norms and expectations are and what they mean and are willing to adjust norms where needed.



THEME 2: LEVERAGING IDENTITY AND INTEREST

Interest-driven identities can be leveraged to provide students with an entry point to participate in a technology-related community, and to help students accomplish learning goals by using their expertise and legitimacy in the community as a starting point for meaningful project work and skill building.

PRINCIPLE 2A: BUILDING HABITS OF LEARNING/IDENTITY AS LEARNERS

Program design can shift the way students interact within an educational context and alter how they see themselves as learners by providing a different kind of access to spaces and teachers than they might encounter at school or in other programs. Our program is designed at all levels to give students a different educational experience than those they may be accustomed to. The educational space is designed to offer a different model of what learning looks like and what it can be. When students participate in models of learning that work for them educators are able to highlight how learning can be different from the model they may experience in school.

Practices for Supporting Positive Identities as Learners:

- **Leveraging Student Expertise to Build Motivation.** Youth are encouraged to position themselves as content experts who can advise on various aspects of game and app development, including appropriate skateboard tricks to reference, how other skateboarders would react, etc. Asked to think about media and design from the point of view of end users from that peer group, they enter into the learning process already experts. By being seen as valued members with specialized knowledge, youth remain motivated to engage in other central practices of the program (i.e., the game design and coding activities), which require content mastery and consistent participation.
- **Expanding Perceived Identity.** Youth are encouraged to think about other identities that may exist concurrently. In some cases the focus is about expanding or adding identities (e.g., coder, hacker, learner), and in others it is about shifting how their existing identities are seen by outsiders (i.e., skaters are productive, creative citizens and city dwellers not hoodlums or delinquents), or highlighting how skaters use their unique skills and perspectives to be good learners.
- **Connecting Interests to Skills.** Projects are designed to relate to aspects of youth culture that students already participate in such as film, video games, and remix/modding. The curriculum was designed to explicitly make connections between skating and other art forms. This allows students to feel more comfortable in the space, more valued as participants and members of the learning community, and more motivated to master material that is foreign and challenging such as design, wiring, and coding.



- **Developing a Growth Mindset.** Messages that promote a growth mind-set are integrated into all aspects of the curriculum and communicated throughout. Examples include:
 - We believe in your potential and are committed to helping everyone get smarter.
 - We value (and praise) taking on challenges, exerting effort, and surmounting obstacles more than we value (and praise) "natural" talent and easy success.
 - No one here expects you to do anything perfectly on the first try.
 - Working hard to learn new things makes you smarter and better at what you are trying to do. It makes your brain grow new connections.
 - Kickflip is not a place that judges you. It is a place where people help your brain grow new connections.

PRINCIPLE 2B: MAKING LEARNING INTERESTING AND RELEVANT

The curriculum taps into students' passion and then works to illuminate and strengthen student's related skill sets (e.g., creative and dynamic thinking, capacity to be persistent and try something hard many times to perfect it, playfulness in learning, strong social ties, built in peer mentorship). Our program is designed to model good learning habits and define expectations continuously. This means that while we are careful to distinguish the learning that takes place in our program from what might happen in a school classroom, we also design lessons with the goal of offering a model of what classroom learning can look like that is participatory, interesting and relevant.

Learning is treated as a participatory process that functions to counter the top-down schooling model where many of our students' unique attributes are not welcomed or supported. We pay special attention to creating an educational context where students can feel the difference. Once students are willing participants, we are purposeful about naming and making transparent learning processes and goals so that students' perceptions and attitudes about how they learn changes.

Practices for Making Learning Interesting and Relevant:

- **Establishing Clear, Transparent Learning Goals.** Instructors make learning goals explicit, but not compulsory or punitive. Each day has concrete tasks. Some parts are discussion-based, some are hands-on and technical, some are physical and exploratory (e.g., play-testing) and bring the students outdoors.
- **Maintaining Open Communication around Goals/Activities.** Instructors and staff conduct regular check-ins and provide opportunities to pivot if an activity isn't holding. They engage in conversations and brainstorming, and active gameplay with students whenever possible.



- **Highlighting Characteristics Students Already Possess.** The curriculum is designed to highlight and expand upon the persistence, reflection, self-control, and group work that many of our students already bring to the table. As they work, teachers highlight the academic and work habits they are using and connect them back to skateboarding. As the students learned the skills of web design and began coding program, facilitators referred often and intentionally to the process of skateboarding and the skills of persistence that students already possess. When they began something challenging, whether it was film editing, computing, prototyping, coding or a spreadsheet to track scores, they were warned “this will be hard and it may be frustrating, but I’ve seen you physically fall on your face 50 times while learning a new trick, so I know you have the capacity to push through and learn this.”
- **Strengthening and Supplementing Existing Skills.** The curriculum is designed to strengthen and supplement the skills students already possess, many of which might be considered “soft skills” such as creative problem solving, a tendency to learn through experiential and kinetic learning, ability to communicate and galvanize a certain set of shared interests and values, and comfort with peers and adult mentors of different ages and backgrounds. This is accomplished through direct instruction and positive reinforcement around good work habits and successful group dynamics.

THEME 3: APPLYING CONNECTED LEARNING PRINCIPLES

Connected learning uses a learner-focused and interest-driven approach to develop projects that are hands on, experiential, process-oriented, and project-based. Students get to hone concrete skills that have a practical application to their interests and that are translatable to career pathways. Practices of play, tinkering, and making using a range of tools both digital and analog are central to the curriculum.

PRINCIPLE 3A: DEVELOPING DIGITAL MEDIA FLUENCY

The program places an emphasis on the experiential process of creating media (e.g., apps, games, films, websites, etc.) that is important to students and that is connected to activities they naturally participate in as part of their subculture.

Practices to Develop Media Fluency:

- **Deconstructing Familiar Media.** Through the process of deconstructing video games, apps, and other media they are familiar with, students are guided in a deeper analysis and discussion of the media and products they engage with on a daily basis.



- ***Learning Skills and Languages of Media.*** Students gain hands-on experience with a variety of digital media skills such as coding, video editing, web design, circuitry, and game theory by working on multi-faceted collaborative projects.
- ***Shifting from Consumer to Creator.*** The process of engaging in discussing, deconstructing, and making original media products through hands-on media making projects shifts students' awareness from being a consumer of media to being a creator.

PRINCIPLE 3B: NURTURING COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

Students work in collaborative teams on projects that directly relate to their interests and identities. Projects consist of complex tasks that require lots of people and diverse types of skills, expertise, and perspectives to complete through collaborative effort. Students have the opportunity to specialize in particular skills or gain a broad set of skills, and new skills are reinforced through collaborative work.

Practices to Engender Collaboration:

- ***Collaborative Student Work Groups.*** Projects are structured so each student is part of a specialized department (e.g., coding, graphic design, game design) within a larger team of students, allowing them to experience what work is like in real life creative and technological work environments.
- ***Instructors as Collaborators.*** Over the course of the workshop, instructors shift from a teaching/facilitation role into a project manager role, and act as both resources to students as they work through specific design or coding challenges, and as collaborators on the final product.
- ***Mentors/Guests as Collaborators.*** Visits by industry professionals who provide constructive feedback and criticism, reinforce the iterative and collaborative nature of the design process.

PRINCIPLE 3C: MAKING LEARNING PLAYFUL

Learning should be fun, joyful, and playful. When students get enjoyment out of the work they do, they naturally enter a state of flow, they are motivated to practice and get better, and habits of discipline and mastery naturally follow, leading to greater self-esteem, confidence and perceived self-efficacy.



Practices to Make Learning Playful:

- ***Integrating Games into Instruction.*** Games are integrated throughout all aspects of the program from icebreakers to mini-lessons, to user experience brainstorming, and practice tests.
- ***Encouraging Experimentation.*** Play-testing is a central part of the design process. Students are encouraged to share the media they develop both within their groups and in the real world, and to tweak their designs based on feedback.
- ***Connecting Play to Mastery.*** Students are continually encouraged to make the connection between the process of developing mastery through play they engage in as skateboarders and the coding and design process.

PRINCIPLE 3D: SUPPORTING POSITIVE RISK-TAKING

The utility of failure in the process of learning and the importance of practice in developing mastery are central to the curriculum. In game design and coding, messing up is key to the process and often yields positive results. The program is designed to provide a supportive environment that strengthens students' capacity to constructively confront challenges in their own lives, to develop a growth mind-set, and to think more broadly about what they would be good at doing in the future.

Practices that Support Positive Risk-Taking:

- ***Emphasizing the Importance of Practice.*** Discussions around process, practice, and mastery are built into the lessons of design and coding. Practice is framed as the process of trying and failing over and over until you figure out what you're doing wrong and how to tweak it until you get it right.
- ***Acknowledging that Failure is an Important Part of Success.*** One of the fundamentals of game design that we drill into students from the start is that the first draft of their game will not be very good. New School Game Design Professor Nick Fortuno has them repeat the mantra "My first game will suck" three times before they begin the design process.
- ***Providing Honest Feedback.*** A structured feedback and iteration process that includes feedback from all members of the learning community (i.e., instructors, students, and guests) supports the notion that it is okay when something takes time to perfect.
- ***Sharing Stories of Mistakes Made and Challenges Overcome.*** Instructors, staff, and guests regularly share their own stories of struggling with and overcoming failure or uncertainty throughout their career as learners and as professionals.



Resources & References

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