



Photo by Abby Ronner

## Expanding Digital Learning Opportunities for Skateboarders and Other Teen Subcultures

by Tal Bar-Zemer and Jessica Forsyth

*Skateboarding, it really is a community. You could see another skateboarder you've never met and you feel that connection, just because they do what you do, and when you see them it's like you can be friends instantly, just because you both do that one thing.*

~Kickflip skater, Cerebral\*

*Skateboarders have always had a certain eye for things. We see things that most people would take for granted. Like handrails or ledges and benches. You look at it is as something to sit on, we look at it as something to conquer. And we are always trying to adapt, we are always seeing it from a completely different perspective.*

~Skater and youth mentor, Rodney Torres

Kickflip channels teen skateboarders' passionate interest and talents into digital learning. This interest-driven, connected learning program benefits teen skateboarders for whom school is often not a safe or constructive learning environment. Co-sponsored by [City Lore](#) and the [Harold Hunter Foundation](#), based in New York City, the program is carefully planned to link skateboarders'

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\* Cerebral is a pseudonym selected by the Kickflip skater/student.



Kickflip skater/student Bilal Ndongo instructs Harold Hunter Day skaters in the rules of the game his group designed with the Arduino board.  
Photo by Abby Ronner.

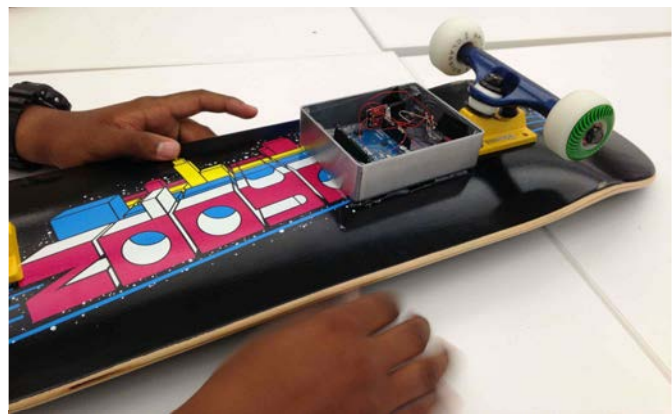
identities and interests to support their development and expand their skill sets. The skills endemic to this population are not often supported in a conventional classroom setting. We seek to empower these teens by helping them to understand and value what they learn as they pursue their passions and how those skills can serve them in the 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.

Taking place in an intensive summer workshop, as well as during the school year on weekends and after school, 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 used this technology.

In addition to a rigorous, 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 several studies to measure youth trajectories, interest-driven learning models, and youth engagement with connected learning and technology. Two teen skateboarders from the program subsequently applied and were accepted into the computer programming undergraduate program at Parsons.



An Arduino circuit board fastened to a skateboard. Student teams designed games that used sensors connected to the Arduino and programmed to measure the physics of skateboard tricks. Photo by Jessica Forsyth.



Kickflip project partners are members of Mozilla's [HIVE NYC Learning Network](#), a growing constellation of communities around the globe that champion digital skills and web literacy through connected learning. Funded by Hive Digital Media Learning Fund in The New York Community Trust, Kickflip has conducted a series of workshops on [filmmaking](#) with Reel Works and on [physical computing and game design](#), and [game app design](#)<sup>2</sup> with Parsons The New School for Design.



### **About the Youth**

Our target demographic for Kickflip is youth between the ages of 14 and 24 in New York City who struggle academically or behaviorally but are already engaged in skateboarding activities during afterschool hours and the summer. Many of our students 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, 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 (youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not in school and are not employed), particularly in Brownsville, East New York, and the South Bronx.

As a group, teen skateboarders in New York City are often an underserved and misunderstood population who do not consider themselves college-bound prospects. However, their commitment to learning in 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.

About 95 percent of the youth Kickflip serves 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 conventional 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.

## **KICKFLIP Best Practices for Connected Teaching/Learning and Youth Engagement**

Use professional-caliber training and professional equipment.

Ensure 360-degree transparency among students, group leaders, teachers, and guests.

Group work and teamwork, both among students and between/with instructors, administrators/staff, and students is critical.

Working within a subculture and harnessing existing social networks improves learning.

Students need to feel that their needs and 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 students' expertise is valued.

Learning must be engaging so that it is simultaneously challenging and fun.

Learning and knowledge that develop through experiences outside 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 do not have to be demoralizing if the process is transparent and the learning applies to what is relevant to students' lives.

Through Kickflip we sought to fill the void left by more conventional 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 may face in academic settings. Although often perceived as a disaffected group who disrespect authority, skateboarders have inherent strengths: tenacity, passion, flexibility, creativity, and patience. These strengths can serve them well, not only in their sport, but also 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.

Skateboarding is as much an art form as a sport, with the personal style of the skateboarder as valued as the technical execution of tricks. Most skaters are drawn to skating because of the opportunity for creative expression both through skateboarding itself and the various visual art forms that are integral to the culture of skateboarding, from filmmaking to graphic design.

### **Program Model and Best Practices**

How does an interest-driven, connected learning program such as Kickflip influence 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 connect with opportunities to cultivate 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 Kickflip over the course of three iterations, we developed best practices that will be made accessible in an online toolkit providing resources 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. We developed a set of guiding principles that can be used by other practitioners to design programs. These principles are based on basic assumptions about the population, the nature of conventional learning spaces, and the best practices for creating an optimal interest-driven connected learning environment.<sup>1</sup>

### What Is Connected Learning?

Ito, M., et al. 2013. *Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design*. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.

Kumpulainen, K. and J. Sefton-Green. 2012. What Is Connected Learning and How to Research It? *International Journal of Learning and Media* 4(2)7-18.

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-recorded one-on-one interviews with program participants, and a focus group conducted with a student advisory group made up of program participants.

These practices and guiding principles will continue to guide and inform HHF's programs with teen skateboarders and City Lore's Out-of-School Time Programs. Our next steps are to publish online Kickflip documentation and guiding principles and disseminate them to community-based educators interested in using digital technology and connected learning experiences to engage hard-to-reach teens by drawing on their existing skills, strengths, and passions. Our hope is that Kickflip will provide strong evidence of the strengths and skills of these youth to the world outside the skateboard community, a hope articulated by Cerebral, one of the Kickflip skaters: "The program just gives us an opportunity to show the perseverance that we learned in skateboarding in a more positive light and show it to the world."



**Tal Bar-Zemer**, MEd, an independent consultant, served as City Lore's Education Associate and Manager of Out-of-School Time Programs for three years and was the Project Co-Director of Kickflip. **Jessica Forsyth**, PhD, is Co-Founder and Executive Director of Harold Hunter Foundation and co-directed the Kickflip Project.

HHF Director Jessica Forsyth consults with judges Peter Pabon (skate photographer and journalist) and Reid van Renesse (skater and video producer/filmmaker) as they tally points following a screening of Kickflip 1.0 student videos at Harold Hunter Day. Photo by Amanda Dargan.

### URLS

<http://www.citylore.org>

<http://www.haroldhunter.org>

### Notes

1. A toolkit will be available online via the City Lore, HHF, and Hive NYC websites in December 2015.
2. <https://hivelearningnetworks.org>  
<https://vimeo.com/57074557>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8bElRocBiQ&index=4&list=PL4slyQodoIv3QkeF15ipPWRi-UYbvWZY7>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKD8F-6CHWc&index=2&list=PL4slyQodoIv3QkeF15ipPWRi-UYbvWZY7>