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The perspectives and analyses presented in this article reflect the research, fieldwork, and professional judgment of MIDA Learning Technologies' researchers and consultants.

Executive Summary

During Lindsay Unified School District's 2023 summer enrichment program, fourth- and fifth-grade learners became aspiring food truck entrepreneurs. Using a project-based learning experience from Defined Learning, teams researched the food truck industry, developed culturally inspired menus, created business and marketing strategies, designed three-dimensional models, and presented their ideas through mock pitches.

The experience integrated mathematics, science, art, technology, economics, and social studies while strengthening creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication. Students applied academic knowledge to an authentic challenge, made meaningful connections to their cultural identities and communities, and experienced the value of teamwork and shared problem-solving.

The project illustrates how relevant, hands-on learning can deepen engagement, make curriculum meaningful, and help young learners develop the knowledge, confidence, and transferable skills needed for future success.

A Learning Journey of Young Entrepreneurs

How Lindsay Learners Thrive in a Project-Based Learning Environment

Michael Speziale, Ed.D.

In the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley, a room awash with morning light buzzes with ideas and innovation. Three young visionaries—Carlos, Isabella, and Sofia—are in the midst of crafting their food truck dream. Inspired by the real-life story of food truck entrepreneurs, their passion for a unique culinary adventure takes shape around clusters of tables adorned with blueprints, Post-It Notes, and digital projections.

Carlos, with his restless enthusiasm, leads the way, his hands dancing over the plans for a one-of-a-kind food truck. Isabella, the culinary artist, ignites the room with her rebellious fusion dishes inspired by a video of a renowned chef's creation. Sofia, the steady strategist, wields maps, graphs, and data, ensuring their venture is grounded in real-world success.

Together, they weave their skills into a blueprint of creativity and determination, from a captivating truck design to a menu promising a gastronomic journey unlike any other. Technology plays its part too, as they strategically build their social media presence, connecting with potential customers and sharing their compelling story on platforms like Yelp. As the day unfolds, they run through a mock pitch, each word painting a vibrant image of their food truck enterprise. The California sun sets, leaving them bathed in a warm glow, their faces filled with the realization that their dream is more than just an idea—it's a testament to their shared passion, grit, and synergy.

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But here's the twist: our entrepreneurs are actually fourth and fifth graders from Lindsay Unified School District's summer enrichment program. Their food truck venture is more than child's play; it's a living, breathing example of project-based learning, where the real world becomes the classroom. Yet this story goes beyond the whimsical; it showcases the power of real-world learning, where young minds are not only engaged but empowered to turn dreams into reality. Are you ready to explore how project-based learning could transform education? Dive into their journey. The adventure is just getting started.

This story emanates from observations of several classes at the Lindsay Unified School District summer program in 2023. The summer program flourished with outward signs of creativity and innovation, with each group working on their unique version of the food truck project, each brewing a distinct blend of cultures, flavors, and marketing strategies. The classroom was buzzing with energy, a hub of young minds brimming with ideas, the air filled with spirited discussions, and the soft rustle of paper as 3-D food truck models took shape.

To begin, the learners watched an introductory video that explained what an entrepreneur is as it took them on a historical journey that detailed the evolution of food trucks. Using the Understanding by Design model made popular by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, the Defined Learning platform supports teachers in implementing relevant project-based learning tasks—the project of choice for this group of learners – Food Truck Entrepreneur. The Defined Learning environment contains all the ingredients necessary to introduce, launch and assess a project-based learning unit.

The food truck project, as are all the projects on the platform, is based on the GRASPS model in which students are given the goal of the exercise, the role they play, the audience they will cater to, the situation, the expectations for the product they are to create and the standards for how success is measured. (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)

Each group leveraged the resources provided by the Defined Learning software suite, engaging in hands-on activities that created tangible 3-D models of food trucks and vibrant clay models of potential dishes. This integration of technology and tactile creativity is supported by research indicating that such multi-modal learning can improve comprehension and information retention (Mayer, 2020).

The project was not merely a creative endeavor but a practical application of various curricular facets. For instance, the design of the truck model involved artistic skills, geometric thinking, and spatial awareness, linking back to their arts and mathematics curriculum. The culinary exploration was a real-world reflection of their science lessons, engaging them in understanding chemical reactions in cooking, nutritional content, and even the geographical origins of different food ingredients (Kingston, 2018).

Learners also used a myriad of research skills to help them frame their projects. Some resources were provided as links in the Defined Learning unit, and others were found using online research strategies. The information gathered provided the basis for the products that were the application component of the PBL unit.

The entrepreneurial aspect of their project involved understanding basic principles of economics, marketing, and social studies, allowing learners to connect their academic knowledge to a tangible outcome. Learners also cultivated essential 21st Century Skills, namely the 5 Cs – Creativity, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, Communication, and Citizenship. These soft skills are increasingly recognized as crucial for success in the future workforce, and PBL is noted for its effectiveness in fostering these skills (Holm, 2011).

The richness of the learning experiences in the summer enrichment program echoes the principles of project-based learning. Research indicates that PBL, by engaging learners in real-world challenges and encouraging them to create tangible solutions, results in a deeper understanding of content, improved problem-solving and collaboration skills, and increased student engagement (Condliffe et al., 2017).

In essence, the food truck venture became a vehicle for driving curricular targets and key skills such as creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and effective communication. These authentic, project-based learning experiences hold immense potential to equip learners with the requisite knowledge and skills for their future personal and professional endeavors (Larmer et al., 2015).

This was not merely a school project but an exercise in developing critical skills needed to succeed both professionally and personally. Their food truck, which celebrated their Latino heritage, was a testament to their understanding of community and cultural identity. The summer enrichment program went beyond theoretical knowledge, creating an authentic learning experience. It facilitated a space where learners could apply their academic knowledge practically, reinforcing the connections between their lessons and the world beyond the classroom.

As the day drew to a close, these young, engaged learners looked at their meticulously designed food truck model, the flavorful clay food models, and their compelling presentation board with a sense of accomplishment. They were part of a greater endeavor alongside their peers, learning not just from their own journey but from observing the journey of others. Their food truck venture was part of a larger symphony of learning, each group contributing its unique melody. This was a testament to the power of such authentic experiences, shaping these young minds and equipping them with skills for their future success in both personal and professional realms.

The story does not end with the submission of completed work and presentations of plans. This group of young entrepreneurs and their learning facilitators (Lindsay Unified School District terminology- AKA teachers) planned a 4-hour journey to San Francisco to experience a food truck festival. The school's enriched learning experiences and meaningful field trips were a hallmark of the summer enrichment program. In fact, the story never ends for these learners. Their curriculum builds one authentic learning experience upon another throughout their educational journey. Learning in the PBL environment is made real through the authenticity of the projects. It is made meaningful through the application of a wide array of skills and knowledge to solve complex problems. As educators, perhaps it is time for us to all become learning entrepreneurs and embrace a teaching/learning environment with so much to offer our learners.

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www.midalearning.com

mspeziale@midalearning.com