

**Learning Documentary Film Production by Doing**  
Edible Learning: Promoting Better Nutrition in Schools

A Senior Project  
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by

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The California Department of Education passed the California Universal Meals Policy in July 2021, which requires all K-12 schools in California to provide free lunch to all of their students. The program was fully implemented with the 2022-2023 academic year and posed many questions about the quality of school lunches and the education around eating healthy and sustainably. Kristina Grasty, an Education and Administration doctoral student at San Jose State University and my mom, based her dissertation on the principles behind “students’ nutritional well-being,” and “their understanding of the ecological systems needed to support good nutrition.” Her research surveyed and observed different school nutritional programs and cafeterias through documentary exploration and film.

My role was to be the technical consultant for her dissertation by producing, filming, and editing the documentary. Using the skills I’ve accumulated from my years in the Cal Poly Journalism major, this project encapsulated my college education and culminated in the documentary film *Edible Learning: Promoting Better Nutrition in Schools*. This paper describes the production timeline, filming process, and challenges of the film while reflecting on my personal experience producing a long-form documentary.

## Chapter 2: Method

### Schools & Interviews

For the film, we surveyed three different schools: Los Gatos High School, Lowell High School, and Cambria Grammar Elementary School. Each school established unique garden learning programs embedded in their respective schools. The intent of including these schools was to showcase the varying ways that outdoor education can be implemented in K-12 schools. Los Gatos High School (LGHS) was selected for its advanced cafeteria model and the agroecology class that educates students on sustainable practices and how to grow produce. Specifically, at LGHS the cafeteria functions like a restaurant where food is made fresh every day, rather than having a traditional model that uses frozen, prepackaged meals. Lowell High School was highlighted because it incorporates garden learning in the AP Environmental Studies class and utilizes a community-based agricultural program to sell food to the public. Lastly, we showcased Cambria Grammar Elementary School which works with One Cool Earth, a Central Coast environmental group that partners with schools to facilitate garden education and local farmers to teach children about food, gardening, and commerce. All of the schools had something different to offer, creating a variety of strengths that could be displayed in the film.

We interviewed 43 subjects for the film ranging from students to administration, some being interviewed multiple times. Our intent was to cover a wide variety of perspectives and relationships to nutritional education. At Los Gatos High School, we interviewed multiple students, including the Co-Presidents of the Environmental Outreach Club, a cafeteria volunteer, a student in the Advanced Science Research Program, agroecology students, a student-athlete, and students waiting in the cafeteria line. As for the staff, administration, and parents at LGHS, we interviewed chef consultant Paul Boundas, menu planner and consultant Colleen Malone, AP

Environmental Science teacher Amelia DeLaPaz, AP Biology teacher and Science Department Chair Cathy Messenger, Agroecology teacher Philip Rosenblum, cafeteria manager Pam Carlino, Superintendent Bill Sanderson, Principal Kevin Buchanan, parents Tina Lau and Sandy Gordon, and cafeteria workers Orfa Escalante, Maria Ramirez, and John Juarez. At Lowell High School, we interviewed the AP Environmental Science teachers Kathy Melvin and Shawn Lawryns. Lastly, for Cambria Grammar Elementary School, we interviewed Principal and Assistant Superintendent Jill Southern and One Cool Earth garden educator Valen Lambert.

### **Production Plan**

The goal was to document the various garden education programs of each school and also the cafeteria program at LGHS. With these topics, we wanted to show the importance of not only teaching kids about healthy eating and environmental consciousness, but also showing and providing kids with the resources to enforce these ideals.

The plan for production was to begin by filming each school and conducting a collection of interviews to accumulate footage and sound bites that could be used for scripting and b-roll. As we filmed each interview, we transcribed them in Otter.io, a commonly used transcription service, and stored all of the video files on various SD cards, a 1TB external hard drive, my personal laptop, and the Adobe Creative Cloud through Adobe Premiere Pro. I used Canon DSLR cameras for planned visits and iPhones for on-the-go footage and interviews.

As we conducted the interviews, I instructed Kristi to go through the transcriptions, pull out the best quotes, and construct a script for the movie. Once she completed the script, I would edit the audio and video in Adobe Premiere. We planned to solidify the narration portion of the film before putting in any b-roll to limit the amount of editing in the long run, in case things needed to be drastically changed. Once the script was finalized, then we used the b-roll that we

collected to string together a story that was engaging and captured the various educational programs while incorporating shots that showcased the beauty of nature.

The whole process was anticipated to take around ten months, starting in May 2022 and wrapping up production in February 2023. We interviewed teachers, administration, students, and industry experts at the respective filming sites with the goal of incorporating a wide variety of subjects and relationships to the topic. There were anticipated progress checks with Kristi's doctoral advisor Bob Gliner, an experienced documentary director who has multiple films published on PBS, who advised the process of creating our film and offered professional guidance. We hoped to work with Gliner to publish *Edible Learning* on PBS once the film was completed.

## Chapter 3: Findings

### Location and Teaching

Location was one of the most significant hindrances when producing *Edible Learning* as I was living in San Luis Obispo and Kristi in the south Bay Area. When we first began filming in April 2022, my job was to teach Kristi all of the pieces that went into framing a shot, setting up the equipment, and conducting an effective on-camera interview so that she could film when I wasn't in the Bay Area. Having over four years of journalistic experience, I realized the procedures that came second nature to me were quickly overlooked when putting the responsibility in someone else's hands. Depth of field, acoustics, background, lighting, headspace, rule of thirds, white balance, and other detail-oriented film skills that came with years of camera and audio expertise were things I had to teach Kristi so that she could replicate them when I wasn't around to film.

Other than Kristi's technological deficits, it was difficult to find time to teach her these skills and habits while also being respectful of the subjects we were interviewing and their time. For example, when we only had a couple of hours in a location and a few minutes to film someone, it was easy and sometimes necessary for me to take the lead in filming because we wouldn't have the time for Kristi to practice the skills I was teaching her.

Having this opportunity to teach someone else my journalistic skills was a prime way for me to utilize my college education and practice different teaching techniques. I plan on becoming a high school or middle school teacher so having this opportunity was a humbling way to practice approaching people who don't have any previous experience with a subject. I practiced gentle guidance as a teaching technique, allowing Kristi to set up a shot on her own while

coaching her by asking questions about the procedure such as, “What do you need to look out for with audio levels?” or “How do you think the framing of this shot can be improved?”

### **Footage Collection**

One of the difficulties with filming is having many different aspects to worry about at once. As I explained, teaching these skills is very difficult, but remembering to do them myself is challenging on its own. The biggest issue I had during editing was having endless amounts of unusable footage; each clip was missing something that would make it perfect. Whether the shot was a little wobbly, not long enough, or had poor audio or painful lighting, there was always at least one thing wrong with the shot. The most common issue with b-roll was not having a still shot held for long enough. Even if I came out of a filming session feeling confident about how the footage turned out, there would always be only a fraction that was usable due to these flaws.

Specifically, with filming outside and in the cafeteria, the acoustics were never optimal. The garden environment would lend itself to lots of wind which made the audio in those clips very difficult to work with. In the cafeteria, the sounds of students, cooking, air conditioning fans, and even the humming from the fluorescent lights would interfere with the usability of clips. The conditions were never perfect, which was very frustrating and often discouraging during the production process.

These issues forced us to revisit filming locations to shoot b-roll multiple times. Now, even with the film being done, there are still multiple clips that could be improved. Because I wasn't in the Bay Area, Kristi was doing a lot of b-roll collection after I taught her some skills. I think this lent to worse footage simply because she didn't have as much experience working with the equipment and practicing the skills. Having finished the film, I would say the most important thing for a professional-looking film is proper video and audio. If your storyline is perfect, it



won't matter if the clips look and sound bad. Poor footage distracts the viewer from the content which ultimately will make or break the movie.

My advice to someone creating a film would be to hold shots still for 20 seconds each. In school, they teach us to count to ten when filming, but even then the audio could pick up something you don't want in the background. It is important to use a tripod and record the shot for as long as needed to ensure the clip is usable. Another piece of advice I would give is to film a two-minute still shot in each location to capture natural sounds that you can use to supplement throughout the film. There is so much to think about at once when you are filming, and audio usually gets put on the back burner. Having usable natural sound available makes the editing process a lot easier.

### **Editing Process**

Once we had a script written, I began by editing the interviews to create a narration track in Adobe Premiere Pro. I organized the b-roll footage by location and the interviews by name in folders within Premiere. The script was organized thematically so the story could flow from one topic to another, beginning with a call to action, information about the California Universal Meals Program, then presenting the LGHS cafeteria model, Lowell High School's garden education program, LGHS's agroecology class, and lastly Cambria Grammar Elementary's garden program, ending with an emphasis on why it is important for people to turn their words into actions.

I edited the film incrementally according to those themes, adding b-roll where appropriate and leaving gaps where we would have to collect more footage to accompany the narrative track. While editing, I found that there were many moments for which we would need more footage – something I would try to avoid if I were to attempt this project again. Another tip

of advice for one attempting to produce a film would be to allot enough time at each filming location to be intentional with every shot. For example, if you are filming in a school cafeteria, book multiple days in a row to film because every day has the same schedule allowing you to have multiple attempts at filming the lunch rush or different meals. Secondly, I would emphasize the importance of shooting a diversity of shot types. It is important to ensure you are getting multiple wide, medium, and close-up shots, rather than just filming a bunch of medium shots. Working with movement and zoom is important, too, in diversifying your footage repertoire. It is easy to forget about this and end up with a ton of similar-looking shots, which in practice are less engaging to the viewer when strung together in a final product.

### **Collaboration**

The biggest takeaway from this experience of producing a documentary film from start to finish was the skills I learned in collaborating with my mom and her advisor. I'd been working on this project with my mom as a way to collaborate academically – this project satisfies her doctorate requirements and, simultaneously, my senior project – as her research skills and my journalistic skills complement one another perfectly. As I near the end of this endeavor, I can see that I've learned a lot about the collaborative process, setting boundaries, having healthy work habits, setting intermediate goals, and celebrating little successes.

The most challenging aspect of this project has been working with my mom and navigating our personal relationship in conjunction with our work relationship. My mom and I have drastically different work habits; she is very type A, whereas I am more type B. In my mom's urgency and anxiously-motivated need to get things done early, I had to learn how to separate her anxiety from my progress and communicate that she might feel better about our work by helping me set micro-deadlines that are tangibly met.

I also had to set boundaries with my mom to help protect our relationship and my stress levels. For example, creating specific times to sit and talk about the documentary, and ensuring that we stick to those limits, was a boundary I had to hold my mom to. Without this separation, my mom would talk about the documentary in moments when I needed rest or space, leading me to feelings of frustration toward her.

In terms of measuring success, I did this by focusing on short-term deadlines and reflecting on the skills I learned along the way. In completing large projects with long timelines, I find that this is crucial to not feeling discouraged. It is hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel when you start these projects, so having these micro-deadlines and reflecting along the way is helpful to staying positive.

Not only was it difficult working with my mom, but it was also challenging working with her advisor at SJSU, Bob Gliner. His experience working in documentary film was expansive, having multiple films published through PBS, but dated. He offered valuable advice and guidance; however, there were many times when I had differing opinions about little edits or the direction of the film. One of these differences was the need for additional scripted narration that would supplement the film and guide the storyline. The goal was to avoid recording any scripted narration as a way to allow the film to speak for itself. As my mom and I wrapped up the film, Gliner requested that we add narration to better connect to the audience, something I didn't want to do. At the end of the day, we ended up embedding a few recordings for the narrative track which, now that it is complete, I believe were a helpful addition to the film. Learning how to compromise and not be the leading creative mind on a project was valuable in this experience and taught me a lot about the importance of incorporating others' ideas.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

Reflecting on this experience, I am very pleased with how *Edible Learning* turned out. After a year of filming and editing, this film effectively captures the issues that school cafeterias face and the importance of providing nutritional education to kids in K-12 education. I am confident that if I were to attempt the production of a documentary film again that I would have the skills to improve and bypass some of the issues we had regarding film collection and quality. Going forward, Kristi and I are working on publishing the film on PBS and plan to submit this project to various film festivals with the intent of raising awareness about school cafeteria systems and garden education. The goal is for parents, students, and schools to recognize the importance of this education and make efforts in their own communities that uplift these same values.

## References

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