

REFLECTIVE PIECE

From a Little Idea to a Project: Establishing a Student-Staff Partnership Program to Support International Students in Their MA Programme

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In March 2018, at University College London (UCL), the Support and Preparation for International Researchers in Education (SPIRE) was launched. SPIRE was a student-led project initiated by two of the authors, Sophia and Sergio who were international PhD students at the time. The aim of the project was to support international students during their Master of Arts (MA) programmes and to help them prepare for their dissertations. In addition, it aimed to establish a mutual research community between PhD and MA students.

Even though this initiative was launched in 2018, its beginnings can be traced to early 2016, when we noticed there was a need for supporting the international MA community.

The purpose of SPIRE was mainly in helping international students in conducting and writing the the MA dissertation. This narrowed focus presented challenges and opportunities during the development of the initiative. The dissertation is a core component of the MA curriculum, with specific requirements, deadlines, format, etc. The aforementioned elements are assessed and marked by the academic staff, from which initially we had little contact. We designed and conducted all the workshops in SPIRE and had extensive contact with the MA students, having privileged access to information that in many cases escaped the reach of the academic staff. Living in the fringe between students and academics facilitate a deeper understanding of the learning experience, having also little agency on formal pedagogical decision making. The interactions with the students provided valuable insights that inspired us to build a partnership between university staff and ourselves, which created great benefits to all the stakeholders, especially the MA students.

Since we implemented the initiative in 2016, we have experienced different levels of association with university staff in an attempt to establish some form of partnership between them and us. These efforts were not always purposeful, especially at the beginning. Instead, they were driven by various administrative issues. However, as time went by and the ideas of building a student-staff partnership were growing constantly, the relationship between us as international PhD students and the university staff developed as well. In the following sections, we describe the developmental changes of SPIRE, including

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key contextual events to illustrate our experiences in developing this student-staff partnership.

This reflective piece focuses on how a partnership between students and university staff evolved over the past two years and how we anticipate SPIRE could move forward. Our analysis is based on the “4-I” organizational learning framework (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999), which shows how an individual idea can become part of an organization, moving from an individual point of origin to a shared, collective process. Although this reflection is strongly connected with the evolution of SPIRE in this particular university, we believe that it might inform other student-led initiatives that involve student-staff partnership. In the next section, we describe some of the key characteristics of the project, analysing three key stages of development of the student-staff partnership. We conclude this essay with some comments and thoughts regarding the potential of student-led initiatives to tackle issues from a bottom-up perspective.

THE “4-I” FRAMEWORK

Originally proposed by Crossan et al. (1999) almost two decades ago, the 4-I framework was developed to understand how organizations integrate innovations into their core practices, transforming their work and practices. The 4-I stands for four key concepts that frame organizational learning: intuition, interpretation, integration, and institutionalization. The model has been advocated for its recognition of how an idea moves from an individual to a collective position (see Figure 1) (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011; Wayman, Jimerson & Cho, 2012). Even though this framework has not been used to analyze the development of a partnership in a higher education context, we believe that a model that combines the evolution of an idea and the movement between individual and collective not only fits the building of student-staff partnership and the SPIRE experience but also allows for making greater connections with previous research and experiences. Accordingly, we believe that analyzing the SPIRE experience using this model will allow readers to connect this initiative with their own potential student-staff partnership experiences.

Figure 1: Organizational Learning Process

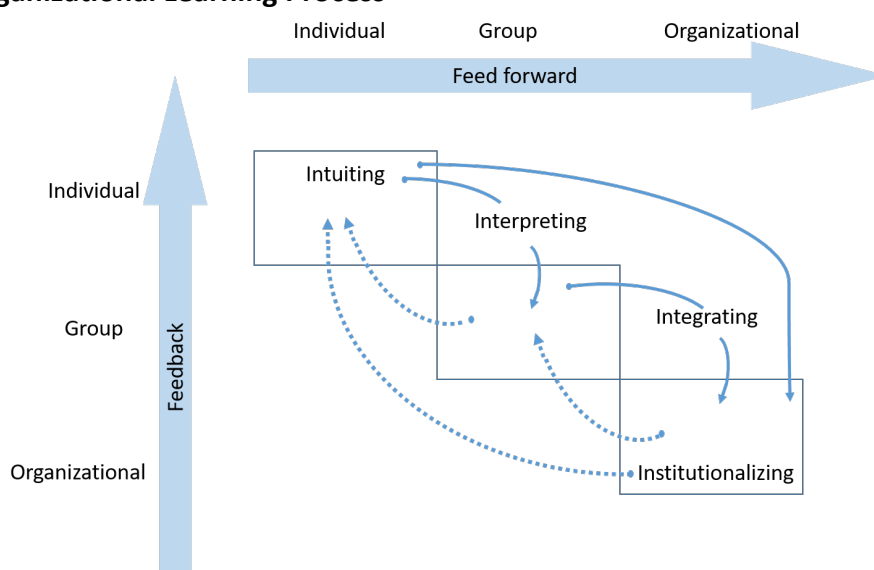


Figure 1: Source: Crossan et al. (1999)

Stage 1: Intuition

Intuiting is the preconscious recognition of the pattern and/or possibilities inherent in a personal stream of experience. This process can affect the intuitive individual's behavior, but it only affects others as they attempt to (inter)act with that individual. (Crossan et al., p. 525)

In our first year of PhD studies in early 2016, we encountered many international MA students. Throughout the year of our study, MA students discussed their essays and dissertations with us, seeking help and asking about our experiences in doing research. These requests varied between questions about basic knowledge and definitions (e.g., How many participants should I interview?) to complex queries (e.g., What is my epistemological stance?). This pattern of experience led us to reflect on the relevance of the formal curriculum and the teaching strategies offered in the MA programmes. We were specifically interested in the alignment between the pedagogical approach and the learning needs of the students.

Furthermore, as the modules on research in the MA programmes were sometimes optional or misaligned with other parts of the curriculum, some students felt challenged and unprepared to do the dissertation. Through these initial informal conversations and requests, we progressively noticed (or intuited) the complexity of the problem, moving away from an individual to a systemic perspective.

Stage 2: Interpretation

Interpreting is the explaining of an insight, or idea to one's self and to others. This process goes from the preverbal to the verbal and requires the development of language. (Crossan et al., p. 525)

When discussing this issue almost two years ago, we noticed that a potential problem was affecting a significant population of international students. While the university was offering support to MA students through the formal curriculum and some other complementary modules, some international students felt ill equipped and a lack of confidence in working on their dissertations. As Sergio, looking back on that phase, wrote:

The responses (from the staff) were not very positive and encouraging. Most of the staff whom we spoke to are native-English speakers and are from the UK. They may not necessarily understand the struggle faced by international students. In addition, they thought that the existing support was enough and a new initiative would be unnecessary.

At the beginning of SPIRE, we started trying to address this state of confusion. Even though the staff and MA students shared the same goal—the completion of a dissertation—the perspectives of the staff and the voices of the MA students were radically different. It was based on this confusion that we thought there was a need to connect these different voices and to bridge the differences. We also felt that it was necessary to build some form of support for the MA students.

Stage 3: Integration

Integrating is the process of developing shared understanding amongst individuals

and the taking of coordinated action through mutual adjustment. Dialogue and joint action are crucial to the development of shared understanding. This process will initially be ad hoc and informal, but if the coordinated action taking is recurring and significant, it will be institutionalized. (Crossan et al., p. 525)

Leaving the previous stage, we decided to build a pedagogical space that concentrated on our individual efforts and practices through a workshop. At that time, the challenge was huge, mostly because nothing like SPIRE had existed before. Our doubts related to both technical and practical issues. We were used to working with one student at a time following a very personal approach led by their individual needs. In order to cater to the larger MA student body, we needed to shift from an individual and question-led approach to a collective and curriculum-centred approach. Furthermore, we had to consider some basic questions when starting any professional development initiative, such as regarding venue, duration, and frequency of the support.

In an unexpected way, it was the combination of curricular and administrative issues that pushed the partnership forward. Solving the administrative problems required us to contact university staff. At that time, we contacted a senior academic staff from UCL, who taught us in our first term (in 2015) and usually encouraged students to engage in student-led academic activities. We thought she would be supportive of offering support to international MA students. She immediately solved the administrative tasks and moved our thinking forward. We learned much from the staff, and Sergio recalled the conversations we had with her:

I remembered that this academic was very generous and approachable, even though she hardly knew us. She saw the potential of our project. At that time, she was concerned about the distance between the doctoral and master's school. We did not know it at that moment but her concern greatly influenced one of SPIRE's current main components: the collaboration between PhD and MA students.

A key lesson from this stage lay in the benefits of reaching out to other stakeholders within the university. Our contacts with the staff not only allowed us to solve some relevant administrative issues but also expanded the boundaries of our initial considerations with regard to the goals of our project. As previous research has established, although it might be difficult to achieve, a partnership should result in a win-win situation (Lefever-Davis, Johnson, & Pearman, 2007). We believed that at this stage, the difficulty was to find the right partner, but it was also important not to give up. After experiencing "closed-doors" during the interpretation stage, we did find a person who believed in the value of the project. This was truly a game-changing moment for the project, even though we did not realize it at the time.

Stage 4: Institutionalization

Institutionalizing is the process of ensuring that routinized actions occur. Tasks are defined, actions specified and organizational mechanisms put in place to ensure that certain actions occur. Institutionalizing is the process of embedding learning that has occurred by individuals and groups into the institutions of the organization including systems, structures, procedures, and strategy. (Crossan et al., p. 525)

With the successful experiences we have described above and positive feedback

received from the students, we started to recognize the importance of SPIRE to the students and started to explore the sustainability of the project. We reflected at the time on searching for funding within the university:

Sophia: We explored several funding schemes in UCL and finally found the ChangeMakers scheme, which supports initiatives that aim to improve the learning experiences of students. Most importantly, the funding helped to upscale the whole project and formalized the initiative.

Sergio: We were able to rerun the workshops, and to include nine PhD students as mentors for the master's students. Building a mutual research community between postgraduates became one of the main elements of SPIRE. These would not have happened without the funding.

In order to develop an in-depth understanding of the challenges that international students in the MA program encountered, we conducted ten individual interviews and two focus group interviews with them in 2016. These provided a good foundation of evidence for building our workshops. The gathered data provided rich and precise information about the students' challenges and allowed us to build an evidence-based approach to move the conversations with the staff forward. Additionally, since we were part of the ChangeMakers scheme, we approached different MA programme leaders to build a formal partnership with members of staff in the faculty. Sophia recalled her meeting with one of the staff: "We presented the project to the MA dissertation coordinator. Her open-minded attitude towards student-led initiatives has helped us recognize the wide range of possibilities of our project."

This meeting was one of the cornerstones of the project as it allowed us to identify and share similar goals. The Dissertation Handbook developed by the dissertation coordinator was aligned with the objectives of our workshops. She explained her rationale in creating the document, and she shared her experiences with us of being an MA dissertation supervisor and her plan to support the students in the programme. Looking back on that phase, Sergio said:

We attended the programme meetings, which enabled us to understand the staff's perspectives on master's students' supervision. At the same time, we shared our findings from our interviews with the master's students, which helped them understand the challenges of international students.

In the process of developing SPIRE, the important milestone was when we established a partnership with the staff working in the MA programme. We became more aware of the importance of understanding different perspectives and building links with different communities. As international PhD students, we became more aware of the challenges experienced by the international MA students. As novice researchers, we were able to understand the higher education setting better and how to conduct research more effectively. We attempted to bridge the two discourses as students and as educators, and embed our new understanding in the development of SPIRE. It was a rewarding experience. Most importantly, all of the stakeholders benefited from it at different stages of this project.

SPIRE is still a growing project, as more MA programme leaders of the university

have approached us to explore collaborations between postgraduate students and staff teaching in different MA programmes. We noticed that establishing a student-staff partnership is significant in formalising SPIRE in UCL. In other words, SPIRE is unlikely to be a success in terms of the scale of the project without building trust between the students and the staff. It is a two-way process where staff and students can synchronize two perspectives. We hope that SPIRE will eventually become one of the modules in MA programmes at UCL, or contribute to the current research modules in terms of curriculum and content design. If it does, first-time researchers and international students will be key components in designing the support for doing a dissertation in the university's MA programmes.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis based on the 4-I organizational framework links the process of launching SPIRE with the establishment of student-staff partnership in a higher education setting. Moving from an initial moment when you have a "half-idea" to a moment when you have a full project takes a considerable amount of time and requires perseverance on the part of the students. As the 4-I framework proposes, one of the key components of this journey is moving from an individual to a collective stance. At the beginning, we were two individuals thinking about a problem and a solution; as we were writing this reflective piece, we were three people discussing the student-staff partnership collectively who wanted to share this experience with a wider audience.

Even though the future of the project is unclear, we have started more in-depth conversations with the MA staff and the leadership team of UCL. Almost three years ago, we were dreaming and sketching the project; however, raising awareness at the top level of the university and contributing to the goals of third parties was something unexpected. The steps that we moved forward with in building the student-staff partnership were much more significant than we understood at the beginning.

Being students in this university for years, we now have noticed a degree of fragmentation not only between the students but also between the students and the staff. In this situation, time plays a critical role, in particular for international MA students who have a very intense year that partly precludes their engagement in activities beyond their academic duties. As PhD students, we approach time differently. Studying in the university for three to four years, and being involved in research activities, we are in a privileged position of being outsider and insider, able to reflect on the teaching and learning of the students across the years. We have been able to identify consistent patterns and difficulties encountered by the students and the research training needed, and we can act as a third party in creating a bridge between MA students and staff.

Reflecting on our experiences, we would like to address the significant elements that might provide references for other student-led initiatives elsewhere. First, it is important to find partners who believe that the involvement of students can improve the teaching and learning of the university. Without support and trust from academics, our preliminary ideas would not have been turned into a project.

Second, establishing a student-staff partnership takes time, and interaction and communication are the most crucial factors. Through back-and-forth conversations with staff, we not only started to understand their perspectives but also became able to articulate the challenges encountered by international students more clearly to the academics. Working in a university with people who have diverse cultural backgrounds is no

doubt an opportunity for all university members to develop an inclusive learning community.

Third, it is important to recognize the existence of “blind-spots” and to promote student-led initiatives to tackle the issues. It is impossible to tackle all issues from everyone’s perspective, but it is possible to understand the differences. Being open-minded to different perspectives can help partners identify problems as well as work out a suitable solution.

Our project aimed to make a change to the international students’ learning experience. As international students ourselves, we care for our peers and we hope that they have the best learning experience possible. Nonetheless, we never anticipated how much we would learn and grow, not only in terms of developing SPIRE but also in establishing a relationship with inspirational people. We hope this essay can encourage readers to establish a partnership that helps students turn their small ideas into a rewarding adventure involving student-staff partnerships.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Sophia Lam is a language teacher and researcher completing a doctorate in Education at UCL Institute of Education. Her research focuses on motivation of foreign language learners and language teacher education.

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