Lessons learnt from founding a journal: planning and iteration

Matthew Byrne\textsuperscript{1,α}

\textsuperscript{1}National Student Association of Medical Research, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: byrnem@nsamr.ac.uk

Keywords: medical education leadership publishing

Earlier this year I went on holiday to Romania, which might seem like an unusual place to go but one of my close friends had taken a year out and with money he had saved he bought himself a classic Mercedes car and was midway through his ‘Grand Tour’ of Europe.

In Romania, there is a famous driving route called the Transfăgărășan route, which was built by the Romanian Government to provide a route to the east of the country to allow rapid military deployment in case of invasion by Russia. This was the main reason we went to Romania, to drive on this road, Figure 1.

Our journey started out well planned. We had packed plenty of water and food. The weather was good and the route was spectacular. As we started the climb, it started to get colder and the fog set in. At the submit it was snowing, progressed slowed, and at one point we thought we might have to get out and push — thankfully not! On the descent the weather improved, it got warmer, and we could take off our winter jackets. But then the ferry was cancelled because it was too windy, and we had to take a four hour detour to the nearest bridge. Begrudgingly, we drove as the sun set and arrived at our destination at two o’clock in the morning, after a total of 14 hours driving. But would we do it again? Definitely. Without a doubt.

Why am I talking about driving in Romania? I think it sums up the journey of JSAMR has taken perfectly. Even though we set out with the best of plans, when we started tackling the project we realised there were many things we had not accounted for, and even when we got through these rough patches other problems appeared, yet despite this we still reached our destination and enjoyed the process nonetheless. Our journey with JSAMR demonstrates that by having a balanced...
planning process and taking an iterative approach to problem solving a project can be completed despite the occasional ‘hiccup’.

At the start of every project there is at least a semblance of planning, and one of the phrases commonly attributed to Benjamin Franklin, “if we fail to prepare, we prepare to fail” (Agustin-Israel, 1996), largely holds true.

Broadly speaking people’s approach to planning can be broken down into two types: ‘doers’ and ‘thinkers’. The doers like to jump straight in, whereas the thinkers like to ponder all the possibilities before they decide on the best approach. There are pros and cons to each approach: if you do not spend anytime planning your project, you may end up going down completely the wrong route and waste time; conversely, if you spend all your time planning, you might make the perfect plan only for it to fail when it is implemented. For example, every medical student should know the theory behind venepuncture: wash hands; apply tourniquet; palpate vein; clean area; insert needle; obtain blood. But not every medical student can obtain blood on their first attempt. Why? Because they have not tested their theoretical plan in a ‘real world’ situation. They may know the perfect theory, but they do not know what to do when the situation is not perfect: where you cannot find a good vein; where the vein moves as the needle is inserted; where the blood stops flowing on the second vacutainer bottle.

Many entrepreneurs adopt an approach of “fail fast” when undertaking a new project (Giles, 2018). They accept that it is inevitable that something will fail because there are many things that cannot be anticipated when they are planning and “trying to predict, control, and eliminate variances is a losing game” (Giles, 2018). Instead, when undertaking a project one may as well accept that it will fail at some point and aim to get to that point as quickly as possible, so that time, energy, and money is not wasted. This approach proposes that the plan should be put into action in a real world situation as soon as is possible, so that it can fail. But failure’s bad, right? Throughout our educational lives we’ve been taught that failure is the the worst thing that could possibly happen. This has resulted in an overemphasised fear of failure, which can lead to spending too much time planning and failure anyway. Instead, we should embrace failure, and this is where an iterative approach to failure is important: a plan is put into a real world situation as soon as possible; areas of weakness are identified; a solution is suggested and subsequently tested; and the process repeats. The solution will either work, fail, or demonstrate a new area of weakness in the project that was not predicted. Through this iterative approach of trial and error, the best solution to the real world problem can be arrived at as quickly as possible.

An example from our experience with JSAMR, were Section Editors. We initially thought that having Section Editors for each specialty would be the best way to oversee the Peer Review process for articles within that specialty. Our reasoning was that the Section Editors were selected from medical students with a specific interest in that specialty and so should be more familiar with those articles, which would help facilitate the peer review process. In theory, it sounded like a good solution as it could improve the quality of the review process, and so we interviewed and recruited 29 Section Editors to cover all the specialties. However, in reality we found that it simply did not work. There were too many people to communicate with and rely on for the Editorial team to ensure prompt progress of the Peer Review process. Reflecting on this, we should have tested our plan earlier and we would have seen that it failed earlier. Instead, we wasted time recruiting all the Section Editors before we realised.

When undertaking a new project, a careful balance must be struck between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ during planning. Once a plan is in place it should be tested as early as possible without a fear of failure and an iterative approach should be taken so that the best solution to the real world problem can be arrived at as quickly as possible.

**Author statements**

**Conflicts of interest statement**

Matthew Byrne is the Founding Editor in Chief of the Journal of the National Student Association of Medical Students. He has held a role as Trustee of the National Student Association of Medical Students. He has received reimbursement for travel expenses, but no other monetary benefit.

**Authorship statement**

All authors fulfill ICMJE authorship criteria, which can be accessed at http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/browse/roles-and-responsibilities/defining-the-role-of-authors-and-contributors.html. All authors have read and approved the final version, and accept responsibility for information published in this article.

**Ethics statement**

Authors declare that no ethical approval was required for this article.

**Editorial and peer review statement**

This article was submitted as an editorial and it did not pass through the peer review process.

**Open access and distribution statement**

Authors agree to open access and distribution by CC BY Attribution 4.0, which can be accessed at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.ast

**References**
