Velocity in Research

CS 197 | Stanford University | Alex Tamkin
Today’s Class

We are doing ~small discussions~ throughout today, so get into a group with ≤ 3 people total.

Try to find a group with people in your section but outside your project!
Administrativa

Class feedback

Experiment: Moving deadline back to midnights
Wed for this week + next week

Anyone opposed?
Bernstein theory of faculty success

To be a Stanford-tier faculty member, you need to master two skills that operate in a tight loop with one another.

**Vectoring**: identifying the biggest dimension of risk in your project right now.

**Velocity**: rapid reduction of risk in the chosen dimension today!
What problem does vectoring solve?

“But how do we start?”

“I thought of an important reason that this won’t work.”

“I’m feeling so lost.”

“It’s not working yet. I’m not sure that we’re making progress.”
What problem does velocity solve?

“Research is so much slower than industry.”

“I feel like we’re just not getting anywhere.”

“This keeps dragging on and it’s not working. I’m losing motivation.”

“I missed another submission deadline. I think my advisor is starting to lose faith.”
Today’s big idea: velocity

What is research velocity?
How do we achieve high velocity?
What other signals do people mistake for velocity?
What Is Velocity?
Problematic point of view

“Research is so much slower than industry.”

“I feel like we’re just not getting anywhere.”

“I missed another submission deadline.”

We’re not making enough progress.
What research is not

1. Figure out what to do.
2. Do it.
3. Publish.

What research is

Research is an iterative process of exploration, not a linear path from idea to result [Gowers 2000]
The Swamp

With 99.999% certainty, nearly every project has a swamp.

**The Swamp**: challenges that get the project stuck for an extended length of time

- Model not performing well
- Design not having intended effect
- Engineering challenges keep cropping up
- etc.
Swamps make progress a poor measure

Swamps can make a project appear to have no or little progress for an extended period of time.

However, swamps are when you need to be at your most creative. You need to try many different ideas, and rapidly, to orienteer your way out of a swamp.

The difference between an amazing and a merely good researcher: how effectively and rapidly you explore ways to escape the swamp.
Enter velocity

Drawn from theory and practice of rapid prototyping

Buxton, Sketching User Experiences

Schön, The Reflective Practitioner

Houde and Hill, What Do Prototypes Prototype?

CS 247 (cs247.stanford.edu)

“Enlightened trial and error succeeds over the planning of the lone genius.” - Tom Kelley
Velocity vs. progress

Progress is an absolute delta of your position from the last time we met. How far have you gotten?

Velocity is a measure of the distance traveled in that time.

If you tried a ton of creative different ideas and they all failed…

that’s low progress but high velocity

I will be thrilled with you. You rock.
Why is velocity a better measure?

Because we have likely learned a ton from the failures along the way.

Because we likely needed to experience those failures to eventually get to a success: you’re learning the landscape.

**Because the worst outcome is not failure, but tunneling unproductively.**

That’s low progress and low velocity.

this is when I will feel sad.
How do I achieve high velocity?
Restating our goal, precisely

Each week’s effort — a draft paper introduction, a user interface, an engineered feature, an evaluation design — is on the path toward understanding the research question.

We have a question to answer this week: Will our hunch work in a simple case? Is assumption X valid? Will this revised model overcome the problematic issue? Can we write a proof for the simple case? We’ve chosen this week’s question that we’re trying to answer carefully.

Velocity is the process of answering that question as rapidly as possible.
Approach: core vs. periphery

Achieving high velocity means sprinting to answer this week’s question, while minimizing all other questions for now. This means being clear with yourself on what you can ignore:

**Core**: the goal that needs to be achieved in order to answer the question

**Periphery**: the goals that can be faked, or assumed, or subsetted, or mocked in, so we can focus on the core.
Core-periphery mindset

The week’s goal is **not a demo**.

It’s tempting to try to build out a version of the “final system”

But this means working on everything both in the core and in the periphery.

The week’s goal is instead **an answer to a question**.

To answer a question, you don’t need to address all the issues in the periphery. Just focus on what’s in the core.

Make strong assumptions about everything that’s in the periphery: use an easy or smaller subset of the data, make simplifying assumptions while working on your proof, ignore other nagging questions for the moment.
Core-periphery mindset

I’m dedicating a second slide to this concept because it’s the key.

Your approach should be, necessarily, incomplete. Do not create a mockup or a scale model. Instead, derive everything from your current question:

- Will this approach retain all users?
- Will this measure correlate with my gut observations?
- Will this engineering approach be satisfactory?

Be rapid. Be ruthless. Strip out or fake everything not required to answer the question.
Core-periphery mindset

Seriously: I’m dedicating a third slide to this.

Answer questions, don’t engineer. Yes, this is in conflict with essentially every facet of your undergraduate training.

Too often, people pursue perfection in the first pass: perfect drafts, perfectly engineered software, perfect interaction design.

Remember: the goal is to answer the question, not to build that part of your system permanently (yet).
What question were they asking?
What did they trade off?
All together now

Each week, we engage in vectoring to identify the biggest unanswered question. This should be the focus of your velocity sprint for the week.

To hit high velocity, be strategic about stripping out all other dependencies, faking what you need to, etc., in order to answer the question.

Be prepared to iterate multiple times within the week!
Let’s Try It
We’ll try out…

A social debugging question
A design question
An engineering question
Talk with your group

What is core? What is periphery?
What assumptions/approximations can we sub in for the periphery?
We had a problem of online workers not being as good as their Upwork profile suggested. We wanted workers who were experts at Angular, Django, UI, UX, marketing, etc., but often in practice they were not as good as they advertised.

We had a hunch that giving workers ~1hr starter tasks would allow us to vet them. How do we test this hunch?
We picked a small number of domains and manually generated quick test tasks for them. We posted these as jobs, giving a time limit. We manually evaluated the results.

We didn't care about generalizability or software integration.

Afterwards, we asked ourselves: could this scale to hundreds of people and tens of domains?
This project used multi-armed bandits to identify over several rounds of interaction whether teams should be flat or hierarchical, supportive or critical, etc. But we didn’t know: could these multi-armed bandits actually converge fast enough to be useful?

We had a rough implementation of the multi-armed bandits, but it wasn’t production ready for interacting with teams.
We used a rough simulation! Assuming some roughly accurate numbers in how much each team benefited from each bandit setting, we generated teams and simulated the bandits over a few rounds.

The answer: they converged quickly enough that this might work!

(The next step: wizard of oz the interface, so we could test it “for real” without building integrating software.)

Design: Structured feed

We had a hunch that social media feeds could be much better if we had a little bit of metadata on what you’re talking about.

If it knew that you’re posting about an episode of Squid Game, or playing a game of basketball, or studying for a specific class…could it add structure to make you seem extra engaging?
We sketched out a few ideas and then hired Upwork designers to create some mocks of what they might look like. (We decided it wasn’t cool enough and dropped the project for the time being.)
Your turn

In your group of 3:

3min each person: describe your project’s current state, the current question you’re trying to answer. Brainstorm together how to increase velocity.

Keep track of time so everyone has a chance to speak.

Afterwards, we’ll share out.
A reminder: the algorithm

1. Articulate the question you’re answering.
2. Decide what’s absolutely core to answering that question.
3. Decide what’s peripheral.
4. Decide the level of fidelity that is absolutely necessary.
5. Go — but be open to reevaluating your assumptions as you go.
6. Loop with a new question.
Tips and tricks
“I’m being low velocity.”

Velocity = distance / time

So, if your velocity is low, you have two options:

1. **Cover more distance**: habits that can get you further in the same time (e.g., “try harder”, “be a better engineer”)
   
   You’re typically already maxed out on this.

2. **Decrease the time**: prototype more effectively

   WIN. Prototype more narrowly, lower your fidelity expectations (e.g., spit out any draft)
Feeling distracted or demotivated?

There’s a very good chance you’re in the middle of a swamp.

It means you’re prototyping too broadly: **you’re unfocused!**  
**Focus your goal.**

...Or you’re requiring too high a level of fidelity: **you have unreasonable standards!** Lower your expectations.

Develop an internal velocity sensor, and as soon as you recognize this, apply one of the two rules.
Lowering standards: parallelism

Too often, we suffer from what's known in the literature as **fixation**: being certain in an idea and pursuing it to the exclusion of all else. We cannot separate ego from artifact.

Instead, to answer the question, it’s often best to **explore multiple approaches in parallel**.

“While the quantity group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes—the quality group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.”

— Bayles and Orland, 2001
Corollary 1: pivoting

Velocity is why cutting yourself off short and pivoting to a new project can be so dangerous in research.

Typically people pivot after a week in the swamp (the “fatal flaw fallacy”), rather than iterating with high velocity out of the swamp.

I promise that the project you pivot to will have a swamp too. Learn to increase velocity and prototype your way out of the swamp faster, instead of seeking out a swampless project.
Corollary 2: technical debt

Obviously, at some point you need to make sure you’re not too deep in technical debt, design debt, or writing debt.

But luckily, most people can only run their processors hot for a few hours a day. Everything I’ve described takes a lot out of you.

When you’re out of creative cycles, spend time maturing other parts of your project that are no longer open questions. Or, sometimes we reach a phase where we pause prototyping and focus on refinement and execution for a bit.
Tips From Lisa Yan

Schedule **regular research productivity periods**. (~2 hours ea)

- Treat it like required attendance each week and avoid giving yourself excuses about other deadlines/commitments.
- Aim for 2x/week so you can keep tempo (e.g., the day before section + before or after weekend).
- You’ll naturally put in more time/week if you know what you’re doing.

**Minimize your mental research time** and Just Do It.

- Everything in research takes an unknown amount of time.
- **Stay humble**; you’ll get a better sense of how much you need to do once you start working.
Why is velocity so important?
Great research requires high velocity

Don’t let 6-12 month paper deadlines obscure the velocity at which research needs to move in order to succeed.

If you want to achieve a high impact idea, you need to try a lot of approaches and refine and fail a lot. You want to do that as quickly as possible.

If you can prototype and learn and fail 5x as quickly as the next person, you will be able to achieve far more risky and impactful research.
Takeaways, in brief
I) The swamp is real, and it slows visible progress.
2) Velocity is a far better measure of yourself than progress, and it’s something you actually have control over.
3) Achieve high velocity by being clear what question you’re answering, and focusing ruthlessly on the core of that question while stripping out the periphery.
4) If you’re low velocity, velocity = distance / time. Either increase distance (rarely possible) or decrease time (often possible: you’re too broad or too perfectionist).
And finally...

Mid-quarter feedback for CS197:

https://forms.gle/SRgh7nSpkU7jFxoX7
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