

Learning to climb

March 10, 2017

The winner of the 2017 ICT Days PhD Competition (whose prizes are offered by Vodafone Italia and Trentino Sviluppo), tells us about her intense mobility experience in Sheffield, UK.

SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY, YOU FOUND ME

I am a 4th year PhD student and have been working in the i3 Group since 2012. I spent my stay abroad as a visiting PhD student for three months, from August to November, last year at Sheffield Hallam University (UK). I have always had in mind to spend a period abroad, but then, due to the busy schedule at work here that I seemed to never end, I had to make last-minute arrangements and, instead of the 6 months provided by the DISI doctoral school, I was away for only 3 months.

I ended up at SHU almost by accident; I already knew an Italian professor there, [Daniela Petrelli](#), who has worked in FBK many years ago and is the European project coordinator of meSch, of which i3 is a partner, but I had not thought of staying at her lab since, although methodologically very similar, no one was engaged in my topics. My topic is “Haptic feedback for learning to climb”, in which I explore how we can use tactile feedback given through wearable devices in learning a sport, considering the case study of sport climbing, while the main topics of meSch are Cultural Heritage and Tangible Interaction. The decisive event that prompted me to spend my mobility period at SHU was meeting [Luigina Ciolfi](#) (A colleague of Daniela Petrelli’s), during the Doctoral Consortium of the COOP conference that was held in Trento in May 2016. During that Doctoral Consortium, chaired by Luigina, I had the chance to show her my PhD studies until then and since I had come to an important design phase, she offered me to spend some time at her lab with her group at SHU’s Cultural Communication and Computing Research Institute ([C3RI](#)).

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When I received the invitation I was very happy because I knew that, in that group, I would find strong design skills and what I needed at that time was to be accompanied during the transition from the preliminary studies with users to a technology design that focused on and was consistent with the previous results.

Moreover, I later found out that Sheffield is considered to be the UK outdoor capital and is a city with a big climbing culture (just think that in the city has 4 indoor climbing walls) and that the city lies just by the Peak District National Park, one of the most important climbing destinations in the UK. This made it the perfect destination.



THAT'S THE SPIRIT!

The environment that I found was extremely friendly at all levels, from the administration, to professors, graduate students and other researchers whom I shared the office with. The day I arrived, Luigina herself took me to the offices and showed me all the facilities of the building we were in. After some time, I realized that friendliness is a rather common value in Sheffield, where shop clerks call you “luv” when they serve you (“Do you want something else, luv?”) not to be taken as a declaration of love, but more like our Italian [editor’s note]”dear”). I almost always had lunch with my team colleagues and took a few beers on Fridays after work. I was very impressed with their ability not to talk about work when they met for lunch, helped also by common interests, like a passion for Harry Potter that united both advisors that PhD students.



THAT'S THE SPIRIT

RIGOR and CONSISTENCY

Being there towards the end of the third year of doctoral degree program, and since at that time no one at C3RI was engaged in topics related to mine, I took there my research project and tried to start a cooperation based on exchange of ideas. I often talked to the professors and their doctoral students, asking for their point of view on my work and offering my perspective on theirs. This exchange was very useful (it is difficult to summarize the work of three years and justify all the choices made) and productive.

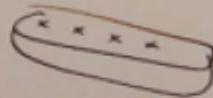
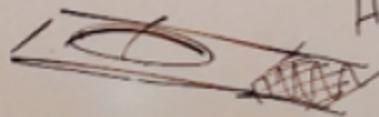
I would recommend this approach to all those who leave when they are at an advanced stage of their work. While if you are in the early stages of your research, you can go in search of inspiration and so it is worth getting involved in the research that other groups are conducting, if you are already ahead with your work you can bring it to another research group and show it to fresh eyes and minds that will surely give useful advice. What I strongly advise against doing (and that unfortunately I did) is to have other work commitments, especially if the stay abroad is short. In the three months that I spent in Sheffield, I wrote a paper with my Trento advisors, I attended a conference in Heidelberg (Germany) and one in Gothenburg (Sweden). Due to these absence periods, and to the busy schedule and travel of host professors, my work there was very fragmented.

However, despite my schedule and theirs, every time I knocked on the door of Luigina, Daniela, or [Nick Dulake](#)'s offices and I asked for a meeting, they were always there for me and helped me a lot by giving me their time and sharing their skills with me. My initial work plan was to complete the design and prototypization stage of the wearable devices on the basis of the results of the studies with users and the design workshop, and to conduct an assessment study of the prototype with a number of Sheffield climbers. In the end, I was not able to conduct the study, even though I found the contacts, as it was hard to coordinate the work with the developers who followed the design of prototypes at FBK, and it was deemed necessary to make a request for Ethical Approval prior to conducting the study, which took a long time.

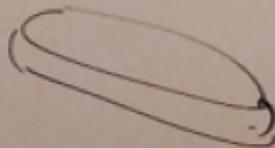
What I was able to take home from this experience were the processing design phase that would allow me to conduct the studies in a consistent fashion, the planning of the studies to be conducted in Italy, a comprehensive reassessment of my work in view of my thesis. It was a very positive experience for sure; the most important take-home lesson is to have an honest approach to research, without trying to hide any flaws or difficulties of the process, but keeping them in mind and giving them meaning and weight, to respect the principles of scientific rigor and maintain a certain coherence between the various research activities.



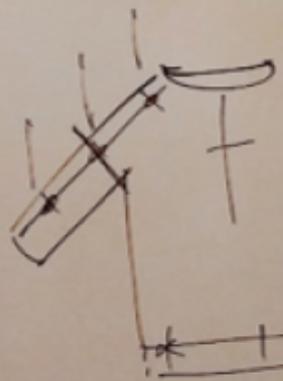
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Looking ahead

My short-term goal now is to finish my doctorate program. To do this, I still need to conduct the last studies and write my thesis. But thanks to EIT Digital funds (I am also part of the EIT Doctoral School), I can spend other three months abroad and can do a 6-month internship in the business sector. I would like to take advantage of these opportunities to further deepen design methods and approaches, both at SHU, and at other research groups specialized in sport technologies. In the long run, I would like to continue this exchange of competencies and further cooperate with those who have developed a significant expertise in the design of new technologies.



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