Preparing students for a SPARK Presentation

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There are at least two people who need to prepare for a SPARK presentation, the mentor and the student. Let's start with what the mentor needs to know to prepare themselves.

1. **Be clear about the goal.** Keep always in mind that the goal is not a shiny product, but learning experience. It will likely be a first-of-its-kind effort for them, in scale if not in type, so the goal is not perfect output. The goal is the learning experience of going through the process. That doesn't mean their work won't be impressive, just that you can't think of that as an expectation or priority. It needs to be respectable.
2. **Set the presentation type.** There are 5 main presentation types for SPARK, Short-form talk (~10-20 minutes) Long-form talk (~45-60 minutes), Poster, Gallery, and Performance. It can be helpful if students are aware of the presentation target as they walk through their project.
3. **Step back.** This follows from the first—it doesn't work if it's not *their* work. You can guide, you can suggest, but they will often want so much more from you. They are on unfamiliar and uncertain ground, but that is how they develop their own judgement and expertise. They will at times want you to substitute your (already developed) expertise, and that will be tempting to both of you (because it is easier). Resist, and stay in your lane.
4. **Catch them, they're falling.** As noted above, what they are doing is uncertain and unfamiliar *to them*. They will need you to both remind them that it is normal to revise, to rethink, to not know immediately what the right answer/approach/perspective is—that this is not only okay, but necessary, and completely normal.

Now a second list, what a mentor can do to help students prepare.

5. **Regular meetings.** One obvious way to support students is through a course or courses, but it does not have to be so. You can also simply schedule regular meetings with students that you are mentoring outside of a class. They might just need to be prompted to progress and the default opportunity to discuss problems and puzzles that may (read *will*) arise. Depending on the type of project, you, and the student, consider weekly or bi-weekly meetings. More than weekly doesn't give them time to think or produce, less often than bi-weekly gives too much room for procrastination. (Though again, your mileage may vary.)
6. **Planning.** They've never planned a project before, and this is structure you can help with that makes things less scary. For both prospectus and thesis projects, it could help to set milestone deadlines to submit progress updates. This gives them time to revise and retrench as necessary. (They may struggle with the difference between *appropriate progress* and *perfectly complete*.)
7. **Workshop.** Get peer-review involved; sometimes, helping students see things in others' work can help them recognize directions or alterations they want to make before they see it in their own. This also acclimates them to receiving and responding to (well-intentioned) criticism.
8. **Reflection.** The silent thread running through all of this is reflection—prompting them to learn to evaluate their work (and others') fairly. In workshops, criticism should be in the form of honest questions, requests to resolve ambiguities or gaps. In individual conversations, ask them to explain what they're doing. If they present a problem, ask a question that leads them to the root of it.
9. **Dissemination.** Provide opportunities for students to practice their presentation, ideally in front of each other. This will provide you an opportunities to gauge where their work is at, as well as allow them to elevate their presentation from a typical classroom experience.