

AFTER BOLOGNA: DOES THE SHIFT IN STRUCTURE BRING FORTH A SHIFT IN ATTITUDE?

Contribution of a Portuguese case-study

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Abstract

With this case-study, we (i) intend to show how a semester project on creating a Multimedia CV could, to some extent, help Portuguese final-year students develop some generic competences, change their attitude towards the challenge of "How to Apply for a Job" and increase their self-marketing strategies, creativity and entrepreneurship; (ii) cannot answer the question of the paper, but (ii) intend only to raise it for further and better studies now that the Bologna design is implemented in almost all HEIs in Europe.

Keywords

Bologna Declaration, generic competences, self-marketing strategies, entrepreneurship

Biography

Alexandra Albuquerque has been teaching at the Institute of Accounting and Administration of the Polytechnic Institute of Oporto for 10 years. She is a language and translation lecturer and has been the head of the International Office since 2004. She graduated in Language and Literature in 1999 and holds a master's degree in German Studies. She is carrying out her PhD research in Linguistics at the moment.

1. Introduction

Ten years after the signature of the Bologna Declaration, 98% of all degrees offered in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Portugal are already structured according to its principles.

Therefore, these last 4/5 years have been really demanding for Portuguese HEIs, namely ISCAP – Institute of Accounting and Administration of Oporto, where all 5 Bachelor Programmes and 5 Master Programmes have been (re)designed, as far curricula, workloads, ECTS and other structural Bologna requirements are concerned.

One of the many objectives of the Bologna process was to "prepare students for their future careers and for life as active citizens in democratic societies, and support their

personal development” (in *The official Bologna Process website 2007-2010*). Therefore, new curricula and new approaches were developed in order to switch from a teacher-centred teaching process into a student-centred learning process, focusing on acquiring competences instead of achieving learning outcomes, that would prepare graduates well for their future role in society in terms of employability and citizenship. This society is, as we know, global and in constant change, and therefore students need to develop both generic and specific competences which allow them to succeed in the labour market, as recent graduates, and allow them to go on adapting in a life-long-learning process.

2. Case-Study

2.1 Introduction

This case-study refers to a project carried out by final-year students of the Business Communication programme in ISCAP. Having been adapted after the Bologna declaration, this is a 3-year Programme and students are to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to work in various communication and marketing fields.

Since three years now, we teach them Translation and New Technologies I and II, in English, in the 5th and 6th semesters, where they are presented to and use several language and translation tools and acquire intercultural knowledge, in order to improve their communication skills and proficiency.

Although they are final-year communication students, one of the main issues we often encounter when addressing them and presenting the syllabus and the goals they must achieve is lack of motivation and self-confidence and fear of the “difficulties” of the “unknown”. Moreover, maybe the fact that the language of instruction is English, a foreign language, although they are already advanced students, creates also an extra strangeness factor, apart from being more demanding for them as well, both to process, understand and produce messages.

Being last-year students, one of the questions that we inevitably ask them is: “What do you expect to be/find after you graduate?”. And the answer is generally revealing fear of not being hired for a job, of not being prepared for the labour market (always perceived at a regional and national level), e.g, they still seem to be expecting to being offered a proposal they would like to accept but that they fear not to be possible also due to the national and international economic crisis.

This is, actually, not to be considered a fear, since it is a fact. According to the last statistics concerning the unemployment rate in Portugal we had access to before writing this paper, the percentage of unemployed graduates had increased 27,6% between July and September 2009. Apart from the high unemployment rate amongst young graduates there is another sociological phenomenon, which was first identified in Spain, but that is also to be found in Portugal: the “milleuristas” - the thousand-euro generation: highly educated (graduates, masters, foreign languages diplomas), in their thirties, who struggle to accomplish their high expectations with low wages. Low salaries, an oversupply of graduates and social changes have forced them into low-paid jobs. In Spain, they share apartments, don’t own a car or a home, and have realised their future is not going to be as bright as they thought. In Portugal, this is

happening too, with a highly qualified generation earning less than 1000€ and living at their parents', most of the times.

2.2 The Problem

These facts can understandably raise some lack of hope and despair in this generation, who is now finishing their graduate studies and will probably invest in a post-graduated programme, because they also don't know what else to do, apart from graduating, in order to have an independent life and a career.

However, these higher education qualifications should not be hindering students' perspectives but helping them achieving what the Bologna declaration has stated:

"In the decade up to 2020 European higher education has a vital contribution to make in realising a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative... Europe can only succeed in this endeavour if it maximises the talents and capacities of all its citizens and fully engages in lifelong learning as well as in widening participation in higher education." (Ministers responsible for Higher Education in the countries participating in the Bologna Process, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, April 2009).

Also, in the Bologna work plan 2009-2012, one of the education priorities for the next decade is, precisely, employability, here defined as *the ability to gain initial employment, to maintain employment, and to be able to move around within the labour market*.

Employability was of course not a new concept in the Bologna-related discussions. Nevertheless, it was not before 2007 that the Communiqué has prioritized this issue, making seven references to the concept of employability and dedicating a whole section to the subject-matter.

Before, in 2004, during the Bologna Seminar on Employability, held in Bled/Slovenia, official debates have defined the concept as *"A set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy."*

In order to achieve this goal, the role of higher education is considered *to equip students with skills and attributes (knowledge, attitudes and behaviours) that individuals need in the workplace and that employers require, and to ensure that people have the opportunities to maintain or renew those skills and attributes throughout their working lives. At the end of a course, students will thus have an in-depth knowledge of their subject as well as generic employability skills.*

Although employability seems to be one of the main concerns of Europe and HEIs seen as one of the vehicles to achieve it, providing students with the necessary generic skills, the last unemployment rates and sociological studies on this issue, concerning young graduates, show that there seems still to be a long way to go to accomplish the goals, namely, we would say, as far as *attitudes and behaviours* are concerned. In fact, the Bologna process has brought a shift in the learning structure, with a more student-

centred and life-long approach. Nevertheless, and if the structure was hard to change and to implement, it seems not to be so easy to change students' attitude and behaviour, namely before the labour market, albeit all the goals and efforts of the Bologna process in creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

2.3. The Project

Aware of this and of the role of the HEI as a "test tube" for life, we realised that these students, always so concerned about and trained in developing effective communication and marketing plans and strategies for corporations, were lacking plans and strategies for themselves. They were absolutely not concerned about working out self-marketing strategies (to apply for a job, for instance) and were relying on a standard job application and résumé to find the first job.

Although the EHEA intends to create a common background and *easily readable and comparable degrees* and *fair recognition of foreign degrees and other higher education qualifications* and, therefore, has developed common tools and forms to achieve this goal, like, for instance, the Europass Curriculum Vitae, this should not be seen as a standardisation of everything. These tools and forms can and should be used (as it is said in the Europass website), but customisation, creativity and innovation are never to be overseen.

Bearing this in mind, and aware that this would only be a small contribution to help them succeeding, we decided to challenge their self-marketing strategies, creativity and above all their attitude before the application for the first job, as a training for other situations in their future life. With this purpose, they were assigned an Individual Semester Project which consisted in the creation of a Multimedia CV in Portuguese and English (see Appendice no 1). They could develop it almost completely freely, being the only requirements to be:

- a. a video file
- b. audio in Portuguese and subtitling in English (or vice-versa)
- c. no longer than 3/4 min.

All the contents and design were to be decided freely by the students, according to their preferences and target employers. Moreover, the Multimedia CV should be delivered in a CD, together with a brief report (2 A4 pages max.) explaining their options, selection of contents, formats, etc.

The day the assignment was presented in class, the first day of classes in the Summer Semester 2008-2009, most of the students showed lack of enthusiasm and, above all, some alarm because they didn't know what exactly they should do and how, since the instructions were very few. They were, nevertheless, given a link with some examples of multimedia CVs so that they could have some idea of what they could do, but every format was allowed, as long as it respected the requisites above and could really be used in a job application.

They were given 11 weeks to develop the project, since some of the skills (namely in subtitling) had yet to be acquired. During more than half of that time anxiety and lack of enthusiasm were still in the air and they kept on trying to get more guidance on the way

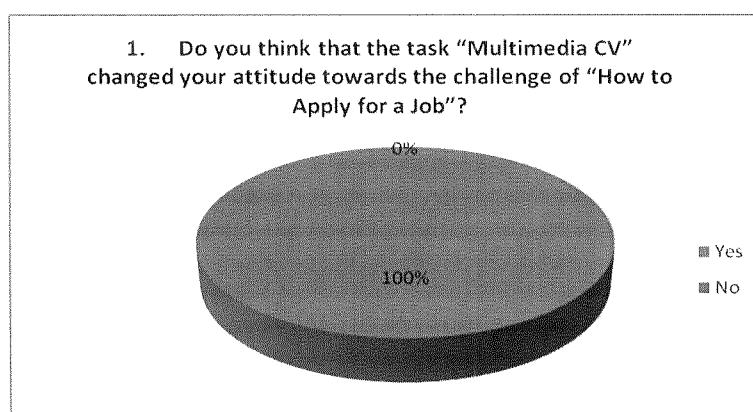
they should present themselves in a multimedia CV. Nevertheless, it was also always repeatedly said to them that one of the points of the assignment was exactly leading them to reflect and find the best way to advertise themselves, according to everything they had learned, trained and that could now be shown as a product to sell to future employers. But, honestly, it seemed to us that this was exactly what frightened them most at this stage: no to be able to see themselves as a “product” that needed to be advertised as an added value to a company.

So, 15 students carried out the project and presented it in class. Some really good projects have come up and overall everyone showed to have invested a lot of time in developing it and some enthusiasm and self-confidence could finally be perceived in the classroom. Every student was paying attention to their classmates’ CVs and expressing their opinion on the projects.

In order to assess if this task could help them developing new skills and change their attitude towards life and the job market, students were asked to answer a small survey, 5 months after their graduation. Ten students have answered it and results can be in some way confusing...

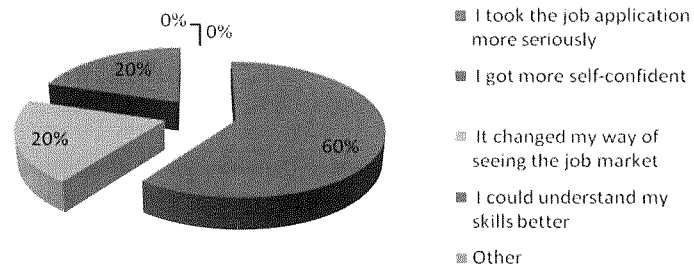
5. Data Analysis

All students seemed to recognise that this assignment had made them face the job search and application in a different way, which was actually the main purpose of the task, aiming at a shift in attitude.



This was also confirmed by their answers justifying this result, since 60% declared to have increased their self-confidence and changed their perspective about the job market.

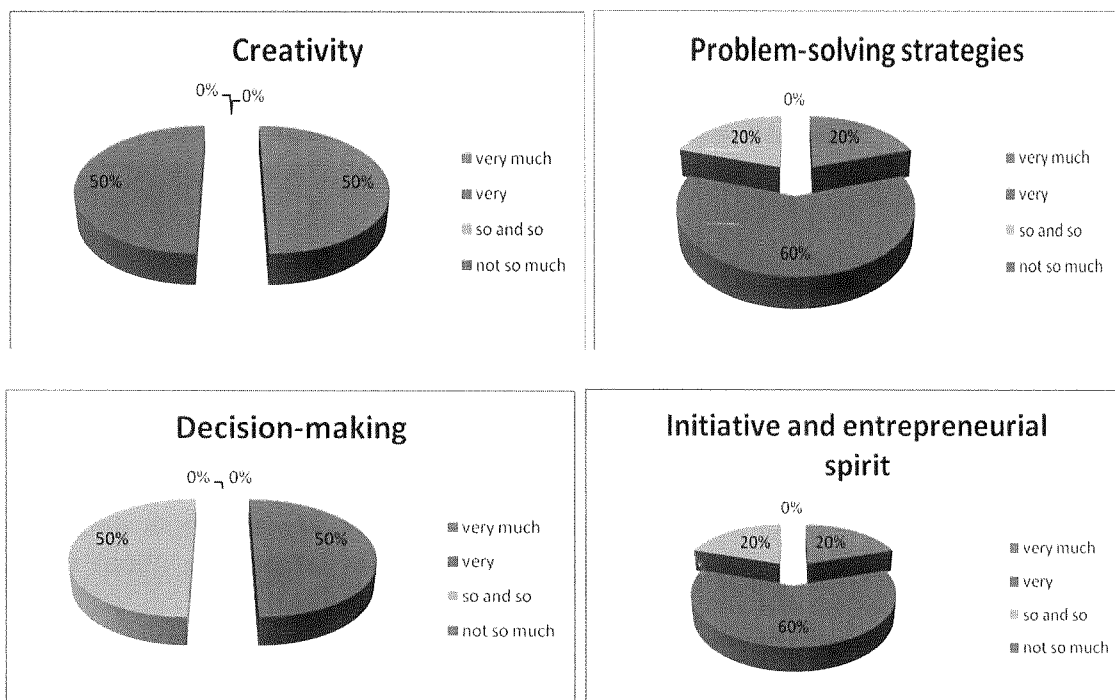
1.2 If you answered YES: To what extent?

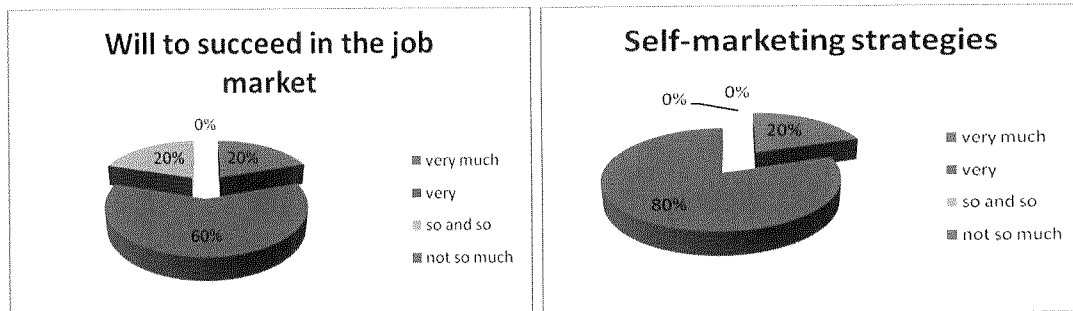


Because no perspective or attitude can be in fact changed if you don't acquire the right skills to put it into practice, we wanted to know if the task had helped the students to get general transversal skills, such as creativity or entrepreneurship, for example. So, to the question:

2. Did the development of the Assignment "Multimedia CV" help you improve some of the following skills? To what extent?

We got the following results:

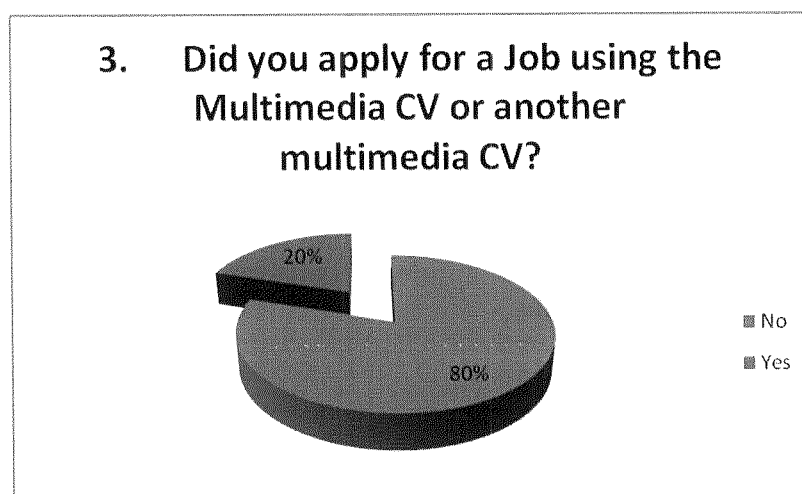




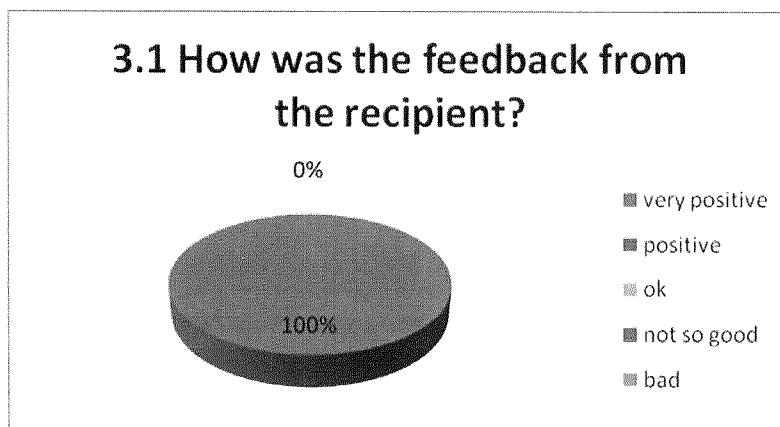
As we can see by the results, more than 50% of the students admitted to have increased their generic skills, at least the ones mentioned. When they state the reasons why they thought so, we understand that the main reason was the need to “think” of the best strategy of promoting themselves in a serious, innovative and effective way. In fact, their answers show that after they had overcome the barrier of the format (multimedia), it was in fact the demand of reflexivity and selection of the contents and information about themselves that turned the assignment in a challenging experience.

According to this data, we could conclude that the assignment had in fact accomplished its goals and that the shift in structure had, in fact, brought forth a shift in attitude, since the respondent students admitted to have changed their perspective towards a job application and the need for self-marketing and generic transversal skills, when elaborating the Multimedia CV. This CV was moreover even considered “a great help to search work in marketing and publicity”, that “could make a difference”, “a good way of distinguishing and affirming me in the labour market” and a “different way to distinguish ourselves from others and stand out in the middle of millions of CV’s”, only to give some examples.

However, when we analyse the results of the last question of the survey – “Did you apply for a job using the Multimedia CV or another multimedia CV?”-, since the survey was sent to the students 5 months after their graduation, we can conclude exactly the contrary, since only 20% were confident and entrepreneur enough to search for a job using a different form of CV, as we can see below.



However, and also maybe because the target labour market is in the communication and marketing fields, the ones who dared to be different got a very good feedback and actually managed to find a job in the communication field.



Conclusions

This was only a trial experience - a Semester Project - which, has stated before, aimed at stimulating final-year students of communication to face the job market with a more self-assured and positive feeling.

After the presentation of the case-study, we can conclude that what at the moment of the project presentation by the lecturer caused some stress and anxiety in the students, turned out to be, in some cases, a surprisingly way of how creative and innovative students can be and brought some self-confidence and motivation to most students. Moreover, some of these students (although very few) used, as suggested, the Multimedia CVs in their job applications with success, which will certainly be a motivating element for the lecturer to go on proposing such kind of assignment.

In fact, it is our conviction that although universities role is mainly providing students a formal education, our role as educators and learning facilitating mentors is also to aid students understand the need of acquiring non-formal skills (the so-called *soft skills*), which, together with the knowledge acquired (*hard-skills*) can enhance an applicant's or employee's profile.

Thus, the *in Bologna* HEIs and the different courses of the various Programmes need also to stimulate in students generic transversal skills – such as creativity, problem solving, decision-making, initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, and will to succeed, amongst others - that can be useful in finding the first or ideal job or in being a better European citizen and professional.

In other words, the shift in structure brought in by the Bologna Declaration, together with the particular economic and sociological moment we are now facing, must be followed by a shift in attitude and bring forth more creative and entrepreneur students able to apply for the labour market with the attitude of a negotiator, showing what s/he has to offer, rather than of a claimant, requesting and hoping for an answer.

Nevertheless, as the results of the survey have showed, even though when students admit to have changed their attitude and acquired these skills, they tend to be cautious and less entrepreneur than they state to be. Therefore, we believe we can conclude that if the shift in structure towards the Bologna model was a hard task to do, the shift in attitude seems to be equally (or even more) difficult to accomplish, specially because it depends entirely on people...

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Appendices

1. Assignment description
2. Survey

ⁱ This verb can be found in 70% of the statements.