Student comments and reflections on business contexts – A teaching tool

Fernando Miguel Seabra

Graduate in Business Organisation and Management, Master in Business Administration, currently preparing a doctorate in Management Member of the CICE – *Centro de Investigação em Ciências Empresariais* [Business Research Centre] at the ESCE, *Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal*, Portugal

Jorge José Martins Rodrigues

Graduate in Business Organisation and Management, Master in Business Administration, PhD in Management

Member of the CISCAL — ISCAL Research Centre (Higher Institute of Accounting and Administration), Lisbon, Portugal

Maria Teresa Costa

Graduate in Tourist Company Management, Master in management, currently preparing a doctorate in Management.

Member of the CITIS – Research Centre for Tourism, Innovation and Services, Universidade Lusíada, Portugal

SUMMARY

Students of business administration in polytechnic higher education are faced with management content that can present specific difficulties when it refers to organisational contexts with which they are generally unfamiliar. This paper examines the way in which a learning and assessment methodology aimed at promoting 'proximity' to subjects and course content can be put into practice through the use of a context that is 'familiar to students': business and economics news in the media. By performing a critical analysis of a news item in the media, students select and apply the content of the course they are studying to a real event. In parallel to presenting the results obtained using the methodology concerned (student performance and mark obtained), student perception of this active methodology will also be analysed. The conclusion will focus on ways of adapting the teaching of management to students' particular interests and knowledge.

Keywords

Educational practices, evaluation, higher education, teaching management

Introduction

The teaching of structural aspects of global management as part of business administration courses in higher education provided by Polytechnic institutes in Portugal faces a significant obstacle: the relative unpreparedness of students to reflect upon an area with which they are unfamiliar. Most students on such courses have not yet had any first-hand experience of organisational situations which allow them to interpret the course content in the light of professional experience (1).

This difficulty naturally encourages active teaching methodologies which are designed to overcome such obstacles. This is the backdrop to a variety of different teaching experiences, such as:

- work in a real setting, such as student placements in host organisations, through which students put into practice a learning methodology involving analyses, either of documents or through direct observation (Seabra et al, 2006; Seabra and Costa, 2006);
- public seminars and classes at which the participating organisations recount their experiences in certain fields or areas of activity (Seabra et al., 2005) (2).

This paper will focus on a teaching experience conducted to help students to make a 'personal reading' of the course content they had been taught, based on their own research carried out in work groups.

Using the media in a classroom setting is a strategy which is implemented at many different levels of teaching in several different fields. This paper seeks to analyse how this strategy was put into practice in the teaching of Management Principles in a Portuguese higher education establishment, and the respective consequences in terms of performance and results obtained. Student perceptions of this teaching experience will also be examined.

The aim was to get students to comment critically on a news item published in the media and bring together the content taught on the course and the content of the news item. Students were given

⁽¹) In this context different ways should be found to allow students to experience new situations (Castling, 1996).

⁽²⁾ A number of different proposals help to overcome specific learning problems faced by students who have recently entered polytechnic higher education in Portugal. In the field of business, for example, these include the use of the 'portfolio' teaching tool (Carrasco et al., 2005).

the opportunity to decode the course content as it is structured within the curriculum and re-encode it in such a way as to reflect their perception of the relevant areas, focusing on real cases, both Portuguese and international.

This paper aims to test the validity of the teaching methodology involved in studying management topics in a higher education establishment, placing the 'learner' at the centre (European Commission, 2001), its validity in terms of developing students' critical faculties (fundamental to the ability to 'learn to learn') and the results achieved in terms of marks obtained.

The following hypotheses will be examined:

- H1: A critical commentary on a media news item is a valid exercise in studying management topics in polytechnic higher education:
- H2: A critical commentary on a media news item helps to develop students' critical faculties.

This paper consists of seven sections. The introduction is followed by the theoretical framework (section 2) and the learning context into which this experience fits (section 3). Section 4 presents the assignment and its aims, while section 5 describes student perception. The conclusions of the study and proposed applications are given under section 6, and avenues for future research are suggested in section 7.

Theoretical background

The Bologna Declaration generated a quantum leap in cooperation between the various national higher education systems, giving rise to a dynamic process that has prompted a series of reforms (Santos, 2002) to help young people to access the job market. This process requires teaching/learning methodologies that can provide crosscutting capabilities and skills, such as intellectual development, learning to learn, problem-solving, intercommunication, leadership, innovation, teamwork and adapting to change, among others (Santos, 2002), either through self-learning or experience-based learning. It acknowledges that learning goals can be reached in alternative ways, with the student at the centre. Stress must therefore be placed on active, cooperative and participatory learning methodologies which are geared towards problem-solving (Chin and Chia, 2004), and which create a learning environment conducive to the development

of cross-cutting capabilities and skills (European Commission, 2001). The aim is to equip students with proactive attitudes to allow them to live and work in a changing society, helping them to build new knowledge and skills throughout their professional career (Pires, 2007). The development of this problem-solving attitude helps to promote a proactive and positive outlook, since most people are born with a tendency for enterprise (albeit not in business processes), and these are skills which must be developed by training and education (Davies, 2006), using innovative pedagogy (European Commission, 2001).

The aim of the teaching methodology set out in the Management Principles course is therefore to enable future graduates to solve problems within their training field, to gather, select and interpret the relevant information and to develop skills allowing them to learn throughout their lives with a high degree of autonomy, as laid down in the requirements for classification as a graduate of a particular area of education (Decree-Law 74/06 of 24 March 2006).

In addition to vocational training, higher education in general and polytechnic education in particular must foster the capacity to reflect, providing students with the initiative to criticise the complex circumstances of the many facets of contemporary life:

'The emergence of a public opinion linking the workings of the political, economic, regional and scientific spheres is vital to safeguarding the general interest. Citizens must not merely be informed but must be enlightened, so that they have the capacity to act, to participate actively in the policy agenda.' (Ambrósio, 2006, p. 80).

The aim is thus to foster a concern among students to be constantly aware of prevailing local, national and global realities by means of training not only in technical areas but also in citizenship, or in other words, higher education should produce '... Portuguese people capable of acting with confidence and creativity in a constantly changing world' (Quesado, 2006, p.107).

The purpose of a critical commentary on media news items related in some way to the content of their courses is to develop a proactive approach and cross-cutting skills in resolving real problems in accordance with a student-centred learning approach. Analysing different news items covering a broad spectrum of subjects and business, economic and contextual situations will prepare students for the many different informal learning situations that occur in a variety of social settings (Nyhan et al., 2004), and will motivate

them to take an interest in situations which, though possibly farremoved from their everyday lives, may nonetheless correspond to contexts they must be aware of as citizens if they are to reflect on and engage with them.

Using the media as a source of news for comment offers students an endless supply of subjects for analysis, covering a plethora of social, environmental, political, cultural and other aspects that cut across economic and business issues.

Learning context

The Escola Superior de Ciências Empresariais (ESCE) (³) is one of the five schools making up the Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal in Portugal. The Management Principles course (or, more recently, Introduction to Management) is taught in the odd semester of the first year on all six ESCE undergraduate courses. The subject aims to teach students to understand the fundamental principles of managing organisations. The course provides an overview of the organisation as an entity related to the various 'stakeholders'. Students must therefore take on certain views of responsibility founded on the ethics of the entrepreneur and the manager. The assessment system was based on three tools: a) an individual written exam; b) group work; c) a critical commentary on a media news item. The two continuous assessment assignments, (b) and (c), were structured to allow the process to favour active learning methodologies (⁴).

Assignment and aims

This paper examines how the critical commentary on a media news item (section c - part 3) is put into practice. This assignment requires students to make a critical commentary on a syllabus-

⁽³⁾ Set up in December 1994 with the following aims: to teach, research and develop Business Studies, ennobling mankind, and promoting the development of the Setúbal region and the country as a whole by means of business courses. It is located in the Setúbal peninsula and is a focal point for students from the surrounding area who wish to study business.

⁽⁴⁾ This therefore meets the need to contemplate a broad range of teaching methodologies: 'no teaching/learning method is, in itself, better than any other. As everyone learns in a different way (and at a different rate), the main rule is to use alternative and above all varied teaching methods' (Belbute, 2006, p.41).

related business or economics media news item related to the course content and the issues associated with it, and was carried out during the odd semester of the 2006/2007 academic year.

Students were allowed to choose any aspect of what they were taught in the practical or theoretical classes as the topic associated to the news item (5), and thus had to look for an item that referred to an event related directly to the topic chosen.

The aim was for students to comment on the news item from a critical perspective, making use of their knowledge of the respective course content. The critical approach is justified by the fact that any document, irrespective of its content, is never neutral and never portrays the issue it aims to address in an impartial fashion. It will always have been produced by someone who had a purpose in mind, who was guided by certain criteria, and who must have had to select the information they considered to be relevant from a wide variety of items (Pinto, 1995).

The media used were essentially newspapers and magazines, on paper or online. The news item had to be topical, corresponding to the teaching period, and had to be covered exclusively by each work group, which means that once a group had commented on it, it could not be used by other groups. The aim of the group work is twofold: in addition to learning per se, task or problem-based group work requires students to work with other people, play a social role and assume responsibilities (Postic, 1995).

As students are free to choose both the course topic and the news item on which to comment, it goes without saying that the topic and the news item may indicate the work group's area of greatest interest within the course content. The justification for the freedom to choose the news item and topic lies in the fact that this task, rather than just another academic assessment exercise, is also intended to be an opportunity to question deep-rooted attitudes, behaviour and ideas and to create the conditions for a possible change in such attitudes, linking the analysis to the students' experience (Pinto, 1995). In the light of the above, undertaking an assignment with these characteristics in teaching an introduction to business will

⁽⁵⁾ This involves conjugating the expository method, traditionally used in theoretical classes, and autonomous research practices developed by students. The aim is to exploit the advantages of the expository method whilst overcoming its disadvantages, opening the way towards research prepared beforehand in the classroom through a structured presentation of the course content. Teachers will thus be responsible for '...presenting students with a prior overview of the topics, simultaneously saving them time in their search for aspects on which to focus'. (Carvalho, 1995, p. 570).

help students to reinforce the 'key qualifications/key competences' set out by Nyhan (2002):

- This kind of research work, leading students to establish the necessary link between information published in the media and the course content, is considered to enable them to develop their capacity to understand how certain actions or events fit into a broader context: 'This person therefore needs to have a helicopter view of the organisation and have a mental model of how the different parts of the system interrelate' (Nyhan, 2002, p. 244).
- The work constitutes a challenge that will stimulate the process of collecting information additional to that in the news and foster contact between students and teaching staff as the former seek further clarification on the information provided in the classroom. In other words, it will oblige students to bring the elements required to perform new tasks together: 'People who are personally effective in their working lives have the ability to organise themselves to respond to any task they are called upon to do. They bring all their skills and resources together and apply them to meet a specific situation' (Nyhan, 2002, p. 245).
- Analysing a real situation that has occurred in a specific context will enable students to bring both 'formal knowledge' and 'practical knowledge' together. Theoretical knowledge will underpin an analysis of the situation described in the news item and the formulation of a critical judgement on that specific context: 'The holistic nature of key competences entails an integration of formal and practical knowledge in responding to specific contexts' (Nyhan, 2002, p. 245).

The results set out in this paper are based on an analysis of 39 critical commentaries on media news items, produced by 145 students (section 4), and an analysis of the survey conducted with 369 students who participated in the assignment (section 5). The 39 pieces analysed for this paper represent a sample from all the student assignments carried out.

Reference will be made to the topics on which students commented, the results considered and the analysis of the success of the assignments.

Topics commented on by students

The assignments carried out cover a wide variety of basic subject points. In some cases students focused on one particular point,

while in others they analysed several. The assignments can be classified into the following areas: Managers; Relations between companies and society; Social Responsibility and Ethics(6); Planning; General Management; General Issues. An exhaustive analysis of the assignments examined is given in Seabra et al. (2007).

Results observed

The 39 assignments analysed as part of this study, produced by a total of 145 students, were examined according to the following assessment criteria(7):

- 1. Match between the news item (and associated issues) and the topic chosen—matching of the news item (AN)
- 2. Conceptual framework of the information collected, bearing in mind what is taught in the classroom (EC)
- Structured reasoning (RE)
- Critical faculties (CC)

The matching of the news item to the subject chosen was taken to mean the students' ability to choose an item allowing them to contextualise the content of the Management Principles course and, at the same time, enabling them to make an interesting observation on the information collected. As far as the conceptual framework of the information collected was concerned, students were expected to develop a theoretical framework in line with the topic chosen, respecting the concepts presented in the classroom. Structured reasoning was taken to mean the students' capacity to receive, analyse and process the information in the news item they had chosen in an analytical, logical and summary way. The assessment therefore focused on how they broke the news item down into parts to enable it to be analysed, relating the parts to make it easier to understand their logic and subsequently to summarise and assimilate the topics examined. Critical faculties were assessed according to whether students presented a personal view allowing them to propose action concerning the grounds of the observations they had made.

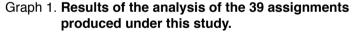
⁽e) A detailed analysis of the ethical perceptions of students who recently entered higher education and their interest in the social responsibility of organisations is given in Jorge et al. (2007).

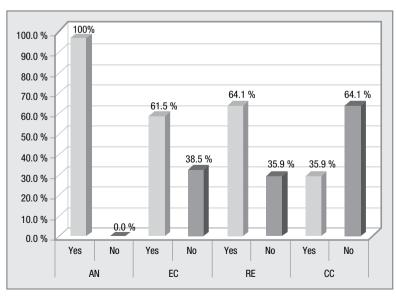
⁽⁷⁾ This assessment was made after students had been awarded marks for their work. Rather than being discretionary, the assessment of whether the news item did or did not match the course content was based on the formal programme of the Management Principles course, which had been handed out to students.

Students experienced no difficulty in matching the news item to the topic chosen (100 %). Better results were expected in terms of the conceptual framework of the information, however (61.5 % were considered favourable). Certain difficulties were observed in the theoretical approach to the concepts taught in the classroom. The groups that did not demonstrate structured reasoning through a capacity to analyse, apply logic and summarise represented 35.9 % of the total. The authors feel that this shortcoming can be overcome throughout students' academic life by encouraging the use of active and innovative methodologies. A total of 35.9 % of students showed some difficulty in terms of critical faculties. The authors feel that teaching staff face a challenge in developing active and innovative methodologies to foster the development of this faculty.

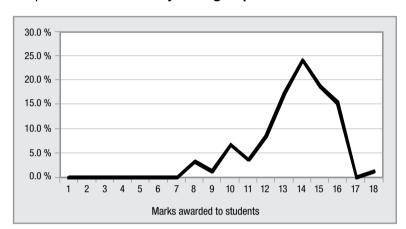
Analysis of student success

It was felt to be pertinent to analyse student success in the light of the teachers' assessment of their critical commentary on news items. Success was taken to mean whether students achieved a pass mark in this particular assignment, which was assessed by the teachers of the practical classes and marked on a scale of 0 to 20. Of the





39 group assignments under observation in this paper (covering 145 students), the success rate in this assessment tool was 95.4 % (8). An analysis of Graph 2 shows that the modal class among these 39 assignments was 14 (for 25 % of the assignments) (9).



Graph 2. Classification by work groups.

Student perception

In order to understand student perception of the application of the teaching tool concerned, 369 students who carried out the corresponding assignment were surveyed (10). The survey provided individual responses, as work groups were not asked to respond (11).

- (8) To achieve a pass in the subject, students also had to obtain positive results in the other assessment criteria mentioned above, the analysis of which is beyond the scope of this article.
- (9) The 'base' classification reflected in this graph, awarded by the teacher of the practical class to which the group belonged, was common to all group members, though when different members performed differently, the teacher was able to award different marks to students in the same group.
- (¹º) The survey was carried out in February 2007 among students assessed by means of this tool as part of the continuous assessment of the Management Principles course. Responses were treated confidentially and could not be traced to the respondent in any way.
- (¹¹) The application of the survey at individual level was justified by the need to determine how this active teaching method is interpreted by each student surveyed. Active methods may favour students who are better prepared for carrying out searches or for working in groups, whilst 'marginalising' students who are less well prepared. The risk of applying a methodology that includes some and excludes others – an elitist methodology according to Perrenoud (2001) – necessitates an individual assessment of the tool itself.

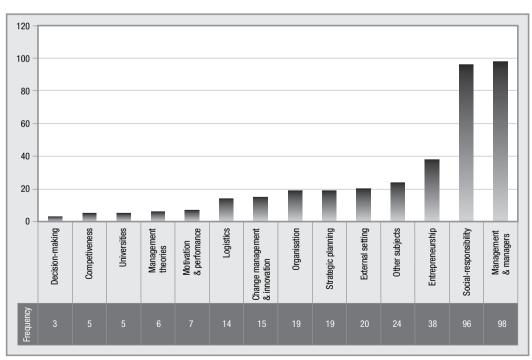
The survey consisted of three parts: i) topic chosen and source of the news item; ii) choice of the news item; iii) the commentary on the news item.

Part one confirmed that many basic principles of the subject were covered (already mentioned under section 4.1). Part two asked students how much difficulty they had in finding news items to comment on and the main causes of the difficulty, and the reasons why they chose the topic. Part three asked students about the difficulties they encountered in performing the assignment, and how appropriate it was to assessing knowledge and learning. Students were also asked about the satisfaction provided by performing this work.

Topic chosen and source of news item

The topics on which students worked were categorised into fourteen groups. The most common were 'Management and Managers' (26.5 %), 'Social Responsibility' (26 %) and 'Entrepreneurship' (10.3 %). The remaining 34.5 % were divided among different topics, as shown in Graph 3.





Newspapers (44.4 %) and the Internet (37.4 %) were the most common sources of the news items supporting the assessment tool under analysis. The other sources represented 18.2 %, as shown in Graph 4.

180
160
140
120
100
80
60
40
20
Interview Other sources Magazines Internet Newspaper
33
11
27
29
138
164

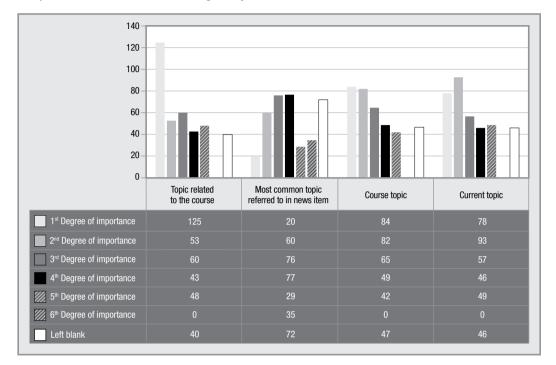
Graph 4. Number of responses per source

Choice of news item and commentary

The questions in Table 1 (Annex) were used in relation to 'Choice of news item'.

The 368 [sic] respondents considered the average difficulty encountered in finding a news item for comment to be 'reasonable' (3.1). As regards the degree of importance attributed to the reasons for choosing the topic, a number of factors came into play. The most common reason was its relevance to the course (328 students), with an average score of 2.5 (between 'important' and 'reasonably important'). The least common was ease in finding the news item due to its frequency in the media (296 students).

Graph 5 analyses the number of responses obtained for each degree of importance, for each reason indicated. It should be noted here that a high number of students (125) mentioned 'topic related to the course' as the main reason for their choice, attributing a classification of 1 (most important).



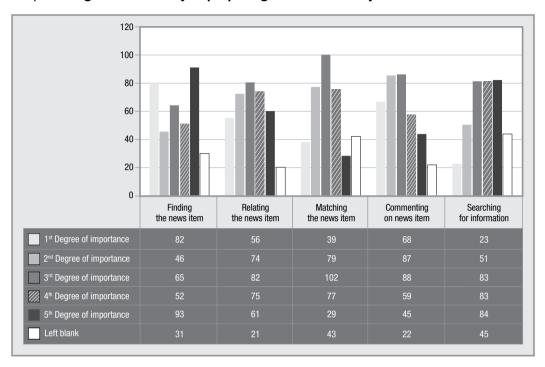
Graph 5. Reasons for choosing a topic

The 'Commentary on the news item' questions are listed in Table 2 (annex).

On average, students spent 8.8 hours preparing the critical commentary.

The average degree of difficulty perceived in performing the assignment was 'reasonable' (2.8).

On average, the greatest difficulties encountered in performing the assignment were: commenting on the news item in a critical way (2.8) and relating it to the subject-matter taught (2.9). For this question, the number of responses obtained in each degree of difficulty experienced in preparing the commentary was analysed (Graph 6). Although 'Finding the news item' scored second most difficult on average (3.1), it did in fact obtain the most responses (82) classifying it as the most difficult aspect (1, the highest).

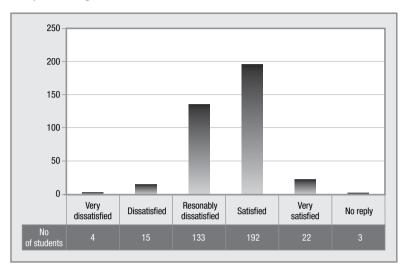


Graph 6. Degree of difficulty in preparing the commentary

When asked to what extent the assignment was appropriate to the system for assessing knowledge and learning (questions 4 and 5), most students considered that it was very appropriate (average of 3.7 and 3.8 respectively).

When asked whether the critical commentary should be replaced by another assessment tool, 9.6 % of students (35 in all) felt that it should. The remainder (90.4 %) felt that it should not. This group felt that the weight of this assignment in the overall continuous assessment classification (20 %) was appropriate (average response of 2.3).

On average, students were satisfied (3.6) with the work handed in to the teacher. Some 52 % of respondents (192 students) were satisfied with the work they carried out while 36 % were reasonably satisfied (133 students), as shown in Graph 7.



Graph 7. Degree of satisfaction with work

Conclusions and proposals for application

The analysis of the 39 critical commentary assignments on media news items concerning economics/business and associated issues, taking into account the survey responses of the 369 students who carried out the assignment, identifies the following characteristics of this teaching tool:

- students covered a wide variety of relevant points of the course programme with the news items selected and commentaries made;
- some groups analysed news items that were directly related to their members' particular interests (e.g. organisational leaders in sport);
- according to the news item selected, some groups covered topics related to the course programme, supporting them with others that were not directly involved;
- this tool is applied to good effect by students;
- greater attention should be paid to students' critical faculties in future assignments;
- the profile of students' interests shows a concentration on various topics and course content, which could represent an interest in working on a wide range of such content, or may reveal a certain difficulty in analysing a specific topic in depth.

It follows from these characteristics that this teaching tool makes it possible to:

- reconcile the interests and experiences of students with the course content;
- · cover a wide variety of course content.

It should also be added that the very nature of this teaching tool leads some students to read media with which they are not very familiar.

The conclusions outlined suggest that a media-based research tool should be used in the following situations:

- i) Students who are not very familiar with the course content. It should not be forgotten that students are more familiar with certain subjects because of their previous education. In the case of Management Principles, many students had never come into contact either with the business world or with management-related subjects. This is confirmed by the number who supported the use of this active teaching tool for assessment purposes.
- ii) When students' autonomous research is an important element for learning.

Online information and search engines are useful tools that help students to identify practical examples concerning the subject-matter taught. Students find it relatively easy to carry out their own research thanks to their familiarity with the new information technologies.

The link between the information collected by students and its analysis in the light of the theoretical knowledge taught in the class-room may encourage them to overcome the 'barrier' of not having any previous 'real' contact with the contexts taught in theoretical classes using the expository method. Information collected as part of a group and other tasks performed by students in the course of their assignment will foster proactiveness and an ability to search for the information required to respond to the specific circumstances of each new challenge.

In terms of confirming the research hypotheses set out, it follows that:

H1: A critical commentary on a media news item is a valid exercise in studying management topics in polytechnic higher education. The hypothesis is confirmed;

H2: A critical commentary on a media news item helps to develop students' critical faculties. The hypothesis is not confirmed.

To achieve hypothesis 2, the development of a critical outlook among students may be supported by different teaching approaches through which learners are exposed to a broader range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activity (European Commission, 2001). Certain difficulties in transferring knowledge between various contexts may therefore be overcome as avenues for future research are explored.

Despite the limitations highlighted, a critical commentary on a news item as a formal learning mechanism represents something of an interface between the teaching aims and learners' particular expectations and interests. This will be a preferred teaching/learning/evaluation method when working with a large heterogeneous group. This characteristic is especially important when initiatives such as training courses, field work or projects shared between teaching establishments and organisations/companies become very difficult to put into practice due to the number of students involved.

Avenues for future research

In connection with using teaching tools with the characteristics of the one analysed in this paper, it will be important to study mechanisms that foster students' critical faculties in greater depth. It must be stressed that one of the greatest difficulties encountered by students was to comment on the news items in a critical way.

It is a fundamental principle that the presenting of students' assignments in the classroom and the resulting discussion open to the whole class will help to hone their critical faculties.

Other teaching tools may be used to value the informal learning that students experience in activities related to work, family or leisure (European Commission, 2001). Students can embark upon a formal learning process based on problems identified in other contexts, such as work (working students), family (economic and social dimensions) and in associations (participation in groups, sports clubs or cultural associations). The examination of problems identified beforehand in these contexts and their link with the course content could help to improve students' key competences.

Bibliography

- Ambrósio, Teresa. 'Da perspectiva económica à perspectiva política'.
 O Economista Anuário da economia portuguesa, Year XIX,
 Number 19, 2006. Lisbon: Polimeios e Ordem dos Economistas
 Portugueses.
- Belbute, José Manuel. *Processo de Bolonha. Uma alavanca para a mudança.* Cadernos de Economia, Year XIX, No 76, Jul/Sept 2006. Lisbon: Polimeios e Ordem dos Economistas Portugueses.
- Carrasco, Amparo; Sardinha, Boguslawa; Carvalho, Luísa. 'How to teach economics on student / Apprenticeship perspective?' *Livro de Comunicações das XV Jornadas Hispano-Lusas de Gestión científica 'Cities in Competition' Metodologias e Experiências Docentes*. University of Seville: Departamento de Administración de Empresas y Marketing, 2005, p. 201-213.
- Castling, Anne. *Competence-based teaching and training*. London: City & Guilds/Macmillan, 1996.
- Carvalho, Adalberto Dias. Para uma pedagogia do ensino universitário. In Carvalho, Adalberto Dias (org.). *Novas metodologias em educação*. Porto: Porto Editora, colecção educação, 1995.
- Chin, Christine; Chia, Li-Gek. Problem-based learning: using students' questions to drive knowledge construction. *Science Education*, 2004, 88 (5), p. 707-727.
- European Commission (2001). Communication from the Commission Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality (COM(2001) 678 final, Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs. Brussels.
- Davies, Adrian (2006). *Corporate Governance Boas Práticas de Governo das Sociedades*, Lisbon, Monitor.
- Decree-Law No 74/2006 Regime jurídico dos graus e diplomas do ensino superior, published in Diário da República, I Series-A, No 60 of 24 March 2006.
- Jorge, Fátima; Seabra, Fernando; Vázquez, Dollores (2007), 'Ética empresarial e responsabilidade social das organizações. A percepção e motivação dos alunos de ciências empresariais e de ciências económicas recém-chegados ao Ensino Superior. Um estudo exploratório a sul de Portugal e Espanha.' Livro de Comunicações das XVII Jornadas Hispano-Lusas de Gestión científica 'Conocimiento, Innovación y Emprendedores. Camino al Futuro' Metodologias e Experiências Docentes. ISBN 978

- 84-690-3573-3, p. 171-186. Publisher: Ayala Calvo, J.C. and Grupo de Investigación FEDRA, University of La Rioja.
- Nyhan, Barry (2002), 'Promoting learning in and for organisational contexts the development of key qualifications / key competences, *Transformation of learning in education and training key qualifications revisited. Pekka Kamarainen, Graham Attwell, Alan Brown (eds.)*, Cedefop, Cedefop Reference series 37, Luxembourg.
- Nyhan, Barry; Cressey, Peter; Tomassini, Massimo; Kelleher, Michael; Poell, Rob (2004), 'European perspectives on the learning organisation', *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 28 (1), p. 67-92.
- Perrenoud, Philippe (2001). La pédagogie à l'école des différences. Fragments d'une sociologie de l'échec. Paris: ESF, 1996. Portuguese translation by Cláudia Schilling: A Pedagogia na Escola das Diferenças Fragmentos de uma sociologia do fracasso, Artmed Editora, Porto Alegre.
- Pinto, Manuel (1995), 'O Currículo Escolar e os Media Educar para um uso crítico dos meios de comunicação social', *Novas Metodologias em Educação*, CARVALHO, Adalberto Dias (org.), Porto Editora, colecção educação, Porto.
- Pires, Ana Luísa Oliveira (2007), 'Reconhecimento e validação das aprendizagens experienciais. Uma problemática educativa', *Sísifo: Revista de Ciências da Educação*, 2, p. 5-20.
- Postic, Marcel (1995), 'Para uma Estratégia Pedagógica do Sucesso Escolar'. Translation by Maria Isabel Lopes. Porto Editora, colecção ciências da educação, Porto.
- Quesado, Francisco Jaime (2006), 'Por uma nova universidade em Portugal', Cadernos de Economia, Year XX, No 77, Oct/Dec 2006, Polimeios e Ordem dos Economistas Portugueses, Lisbon.
- Santos, Sérgio Machado (2002), 'As consequências profundas da Declaração de Bolonha', Seminário Contextos e Dinâmicas da Vida Académica, Guimarães.
- Seabra, Fernando; Costa, Teresa (2006), 'Aproximação entre empresas e ensino superior na aprendizagem de temáticas de gestão a percepção dos alunos e os resultados obtidos'. Sociedade e Trabalho, No 30, ed. Direcção Geral de Estudos, Estatística e Planeamento, Ministério do Trabalho e da Solidariedade Social, Lisbon.

- Seabra, Fernando; Rodrigues, Jorge; Costa, Teresa (2007), 'Conteúdos Programáticos e Realidade Observada Perspectiva dos Discentes'. Livro de Comunicações das XVII Jornadas Hispano-Lusas de Gestión científica 'Conocimiento, Innovación y Emprendedores. Camino al Futuro' Metodologias e Experiências Docentes. ISBN 978-84-690-3573-3, p. 142-155. Edição: Ayala Calvo, J.C. and Grupo de Investigación FEDRA, University of La Rioja.
- Seabra, Fernando; Rodrigues, Jorge; Costa, Teresa (2006), 'Trabalhos de grupo em contexto real a perspectiva dos stakeholders' Livro de Comunicações das XVI Jornadas Luso-Espanholas de Gestão Científica 'Inovação e Empreendedorismo para o Séc. XXI' Metodologias e Experiências Docentes. ISBN 972 99959-2-3, p. 129-140. Publisher: Fundação Luís de Molina.
- Seabra, Fernando; Rodrigues, Jorge; Trayner, Beverly; Simões, José. (2005) 'O ensino e o debate da responsabilidade social das organizações: um caso português'. Documento de 'Ponencias' da 'XIII Conferencia Anual de Ética, Economía y Dirección Ética, Empresa Farmacéutica y Responsabilidad Social', p. 187-197. Publisher: Eben España, Madrid.

Annex

Table 1. Choosing the news item

	N	Mode	Mean	Pattern Deflection
How difficult is it to find the news item on which to write the commentary? Scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very difficult, 2 difficult, 3 reasonable, 4 easy and 5 very easy	368	3	3.1	0.7
2 - What importance is attributed by students to the following reasons for choosing the topic: Scale from 1 to 5 where 1 means most important and 5 means least important				
2.1 - Topic related to the course;	328	1	2.5	1.5
2.2 - Topic most frequently referred to in the media and easiest to find;	296	4	3.5	1.4
2.3 - Topic related to the point in the curriculum that aroused the most interest;	321	1	2.6	1.4
2.4 - Current nature of the topic.	322	2	2.7	1.4

Table 2. Commentary

	N	Mode	Mean	Pattern Deflection
1 - On average, how many hours did you work?	359	6	8.8	8.8
2 - How difficult did you find the assignment? Scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very difficult, 2 difficult, 3 reasonable, 4 easy and 5 very easy.	368	3	2.8	0.6
3 - What difficulties did you encounter in the commentary on the news item under the following points: Scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very difficult, 2 difficult, 3 reasonable, 4 easy and very easy				
3.1 - Finding the news item;	337	5	3.1	1.5
3.2 - Relating the news item to the subject-matter taught in the classroom;	347	3	3.0	1.3
3.3 - Fitting the news item into the subject taught;	325	3	2.9	1.1
3.4 - Commenting on the news item in a critical way;	346	3	2.8	1.3
3.5 - Researching information related to the news item.	323	3	3.5	1.2
4 - To what extent is this tool appropriate to assessing knowledge? Scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very inappropriate, 2 inappropriate, 3 appropriate, 4 fairly appropriate and 5 very appropriate.	368	4	3.7	0.7
5 - To what extent is this tool appropriate to learning? Scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means very inappropriate, 2 inappropriate, 3 appropriate, 4 fairly appropriate and 5 very appropriate.	368	4	3.8	0.6

	N	Mode	Mean	Pattern Deflection
6 - Should the critical commentary be replaced by some other element of assessment?	Yes: 9.6 %	No: 90.4 %		
6.1 - If you replied no, is the 20 % assigned to continuous assessment in your mark appropriate? Scale from 1 to 3, where 1 means 'should have less weight', 2 is appropriate and 3 'should have greater weight'.	330	2	2.3	0.5
7 - How satisfied are you with the work you handed in to your teacher? Scale from 1 to 5 where 1 means very dissatisfied, 2 dissatisfied, 3 reasonably satisfied, 4 satisfied and 5 very satisfied.	365	4	3.6	0.7

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the Department of Economics and Management of the Escola Superior de Ciências Empresariais (ESCE) [Business School]. They would also like to thank the ESCE and the Instituto Politécnico de Setúbal [Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal].

A special word of thanks is extended to all the students who responded to the survey conducted as part of this study.

Finally, the authors would like to thank the anonymous referees for their comments, criticism and suggestions.

Note

When this paper was submitted to the European journal of vocational training, the authors were teaching the curricular unit on 'Management Principles' at the ESCE. The co-author Jorge Rodrigues was in charge of that subject at the time.