

Chapter 15

Authentic Assessment Contribution to Competence Based Education: Questions and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The new adopted pedagogical model (Pereira et al., 2007) at a European distance teaching university called for the use of new assessment strategies aligned with the most recent paradigm for assessment design in online learning. This new scenario supported the introduction of new authentic assessment strategies (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004) that allow learners to attain deeper levels of knowledge, professional development skills and thinking processes. In this case, the authors' explored a tool (the Learning Contract) to facilitate assessment authenticity as a way to promote student learning. They explored the use of the Learning Contract to increase student's responsibility and commitment for their own learning, while at the same time facilitating its alignment with their professional practice, and contributing to the development of their life-long learning competencies.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Pioneer in distance education in Europe, our university was founded in the mid 1980's and has been promoting formal actions related to higher

education and continuous training, as well as actions concerning life-long learning aiming different sectors of population. It has also contributed to the active dissemination of the national language and culture. With its legal entity recently adapted to Higher Education National Law, it is currently

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managed by a structure composed by Rector, General Council (teachers and researchers, students, technical staff, Rector and external experts) and Management Council, and funded through a governmental budget, direct sales and student fees. The university is organized in four departments: Education and Distance Teaching; Humanities; Science and Technology; and Social Sciences and Management.

It is the main national centre of expertise, in the area of distance education, having developed the know-how that allows it to be the largest provider of on-line higher education degrees in the country. During the last three years, significant changes took place in the institution due to external causes – namely the Bologna Process –, but also due to an internal process of re-identification.

The current reorientation of the educational and training activities of the university implied the migration from an industrial distance education model, to a model focused on the development of competencies fully supported by information and communication tools. This transition resulted, not only from the current technological developments, but also from the construction of a European higher education space (Pereira, Quintas-Mendes, Morgado, Amante & Bidarra, 2007).

The university, being a distance teaching university, is particularly suited to tackle some of the recommendations, concerning the assurance of accessibility to education, expressed in the “Education and Training 2010” goals (European Commission, 2008a). The university decided to implement a fully virtual innovative teaching and learning methodology as envisaged in the Strategic Plan for 2006-2010 having four strategic priorities:

1. Institutional re-identification – it was recognized the need to adjust pedagogical offerings to the scale and demands of university level distance education, as it ought to be practice by a public university, leading to the redefinition of the university’s pedagogical model.
2. Development and Innovation – this two independent notions in the same priority are justified by the fact that distance education has undergone (and continues to undergo) a refinement and a diversification of its methods and instruments which are largely a direct consequence of the rapid evolution of the information and communication technologies.
3. Openness – to develop the university on the principle and practice of openness in reaffirming its specific mission, namely, investing in the promotion of education as a mean to affirming citizenship. Another distinct dimension of openness concerns the process of internationalization.
4. Cooperation – the geo-cultural and linguistic area of the African countries in which Portuguese is the official language is a factor of strategic relevance. Cooperation must also be thought in terms of the existing or future expectations of civil society and its different social and professional groups. Distance education can and must play a decisive role in the processes of life-long learning and professional re-qualification.

Following this Strategic Plan, some actions have been developed:

- The establishment and application of a pedagogical model which intends to serve as an indispensable point of reference for a distance education university, paying particular attention to the increasing relevance of on-line education.
- The development of a continuing plan for the professor professional development in the area of e-learning.
- The development of the Virtual Student Kit.
- The attempt to promote the electronic inclusion of students, leading to the carrying out of administrative processes (applications,

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