Communication Sciences and its many areas: Development of an evaluation tool to favor students’ decision-making process

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Abstract. This paper aims to present the development of an assessment instrument that favors the decision-making process about the areas of the 2nd cycle of studies of the Communication Sciences, of the Catholic University of Portugal. Initially, interviews were conducted and some official documents were analyzed related to each of the different areas. Based on this, we constructed items that focus on interests (what the person knows/wants to learn), skills (what the person does/wants to learn how to do), and in future professional contexts (where the person intends to integrate his/herself into the labor market). A pilot study was carried out to verify the calibration of the instrument in the identification of the respective area. The final version of the assessment instrument was administered to a new sample of students, confronting their options of choice. Implications will be drawn on the importance of developing assessment tools that respond to the specific needs of people and contexts.

Keywords: assessment instruments; interests; skills; professional contexts; communication sciences.

1 Introduction

Throughout the life span, the human being is constantly being called upon to make decisions, from the most trivial decisions of everyday life (what to wear, what to eat) to more complex decisions (marrying, having children, changing jobs, moving to retirement). The decision-making process concerns how people act at a particular moment in time when they are required to make a decision (Silva, Oliveira, Bedin & Rover, 2011). According to Schultz, Bridges, Mitchell and Harper (2010), the decision-making process results from the choice of an individual or group of an alternative among the various available. According to Silva, Oliveira, Bedin and Rover (2011) decision-making should occur only when the people involved in the process have access to as much information as possible, in order to make a conscious and informed decision regarding personal and professionals goals to be achieved. Nonohay (2012) points out that most authors highlight six steps in the decision-making process: define the problem, identify criteria, weigh the criteria, generate the alternatives, classify each alternative according to each criterion and, finally, identify the ideal solution. Moogan, Baron and Harris (1999) emphasize that due to the time spent and the complexity and variety of choices, the decision-making process for education is classified as difficult and needs extensive problem-solving skills.

As an example, we focus on the diversity of strands in the area of Communication Sciences, which makes it difficult for students to make decisions about their academic and/or professional future. The Faculty of Human Sciences of the Portuguese Catholic University (Lisbon) offers the Degree in Social and Cultural Communication, in which students can choose to engage in one of the following: (i) Social/Journalism, (ii) Organizational, (iii) Visual or (iv) Cultural. In addition, it offers the Master in Communication Sciences in which students can choose from six areas: (i) Communication, Marketing and Advertising (CMA), (ii) Communication, Organization and Leadership (COL), (iii) Media and
Journalism (MJ), (iv) Internet and New Media (INM), (v) Communication, Television and Cinema (CTC) and, (vi) Political Communication (PC). With this wide range of possibilities, the students’ decision-making process when they enter university, and during their academic experience, becomes quite complex.

With the purpose of favoring the students’ planning and personal decision-making capacity in this field, we proposed to enroll on the construction of an assessment tool, based on John Holland’s Vocational Personality Theory (1973). It is one of the most important theories in vocational psychology, being quite simple and comprehensive, and sustaining instruments such as the “Self Directed Search”, which is easy to apply and interpret. It is a theory that, although it emerged in the 70’s, still remains quite contemporary, considering that the vocational choice is an expressive individual act determined by the combination of internal (personality) and external (environment) factors. In this way, Holland has highlighted a link between personality characteristics and certain occupations, organizing information about people and occupations, and assuming that vocational behavior results from the interaction of people and environments. Individuals are able to empirically relate personal characteristics to occupational characteristics, which reduces situations in which the process of choosing a career is done at random and without exploring alternatives and, consequently, it reduces the ineffectiveness in vocational decision-making.

In this paper we present the preliminary development and evaluation process of an assessment instrument, called “Questionnaire of Interests, Competencies and Contexts: Support for the Selection of a Strand of Studies in Communication Sciences” (QICC-CS), built to respond specifically to the need of students applying for a Bachelor’s degree in Social and Cultural Communication, or a Master’s Degree in Communication Sciences at the Faculty of Human Sciences, of the Catholic University of Portugal.

2 Study 1 - Development of the assessment instrument

In the first place, interviews were organized for the students attending the Degree in Social and Cultural Communication (DSCC), for the students attending the Master in Communication Sciences (MCS), former DSCC and MCS students, and the Coordinators of these same study cycles. With the interviews it was intended to collect information related to the objectives, interests, necessary competencies and working contexts of each academic strand. The interview were developed with four students of the undergraduate degree, one of each strand (Social/Journalistic, Organizational, Cultural and Visual), five Master’s students, one from each strand (Communication, Marketing and Advertising, Communication, Organization and Leadership, Media and Journalism, Internet and New Media, and Communication, Television and Cinema), as well as to the coordinators of the two study cycles. It was not possible to interview a student of the Political Communication component, since the course has not opened for the last two consecutive years.

Then, in order to deepen the knowledge about the area, a detailed documental study on the DSCC and the MCS was done. The general and specific objectives of the courses, the curricular plans, the programs of the curricular units of specialization of each strand, and the possible working contexts were studied.

After collecting all the necessary information to proceed with the project, the items of the questionnaire were elaborated. Items were thought of for three distinct sections: Interests (what the person knows or wants to learn), Competencies (what the person does or wants to learn how to do), and future professional contexts (where the person intends to integrate into the job market). When the items were elaborated for each of the three parts, according to six different strands, a quotation system was considered, based on the model that Holland used in the creation of the SDS that worked easily and quickly. In the questionnaire, only the six areas of Master’s (Communication, Marketing
3 Study 2 - Reflective conversation

3.1 Participants
The study was carried out with six people, three students of the Master in Communication Sciences, and three students of the third year of the Degree in Social and Cultural Communication who already know which strand they will choose in the master’s degree. As for the three master’s students, they are all in different strands, being “Internet and New Media” (INM), “Communication, Marketing and Advertising” (CMA) and “Media and Journalism” (MJ). As for the undergraduate students, two of them will choose the “Internet and New Media” (INM) strand and the other will choose the “Communication, Marketing and Advertising” strand (CMA).

3.2 Procedures
The main purpose of this study was to verify the calibration of the assessment instrument in the identification of the respective area/strand. Thus, the method of reflective conversation was used, that is, while some students who had already made their choice regarding the field of Communication Sciences proceeded to complete the questionnaire, they commented on its instructions, as well as the items that constitute it, to see if it was necessary introduce any changes in order to make it more understandable. As no change was suggested, we proceeded to the pilot study.

3.3. Results
After completing the six questionnaires, the results were analyzed and it was possible to conclude that, in four of the six questionnaires, the results obtained by the participants were congruent with their personal preferences in terms of pursuing studies by certain strands of Communication Sciences. The other two results did not coincide with what the participants were studying, but rather with the result that they had indicated in second place in their preferences by the different strands. One of these participants is currently in the “Internet and New Media” strand and had as first result “Media and Journalism” and in second “Internet and New Media”. It was possible to notice, when speaking with the participant, that he always liked and was connected to journalism and that what he wanted for his future was online journalism in the area of digital games. The other participant, whose result did not coincide with the strand that the participant had chosen, is enrolled in “Media and Journalism” and as first result obtained “Political Communication”. This is justified by the fact that this participant in the future wants to take a PhD in the area of political journalism.

4 Study 3 - Pilot study

4.1 Participants
Participants in this study were students who answered the questionnaire online. We used a convenience sample. In the study conducted online through the GoogleDocs platform, were recorded 47 participants, being 36 females (76.6%) and 11 males (23.4%), aged between 18 and 35 years (M=21.11; SD=3.115). Of these 47 participants, 17 attended the first year of Degree in Social and Cultural Communication (36.2%), 8 attended the second year (17%), 9 attended the third year (19.1%), 8 attended the first year of Master’s degree in Communication Sciences (17%) and 5 attended the second year of this Master’s program (10.6%).
4.2 Procedures

As no change was suggested to the questionnaire in the previous study, the questionnaire was placed on the GoogleDocs platform, so that it could be answered online by current students of the *Degree in Social and Cultural Communication*. In this online questionnaire, it was mentioned that the data collected would be used only for this scientific study and that they would be eliminated soon after the conclusion of the research.

Thus, the “Questionnaire of Interests, Competences and Contexts: Support to the Selection of a Strand of Studies in Communication Sciences” (QICC-CS), based on John Holland’s Self-Directed Search Interests Inventory (SDS) (1979) was used. The QICC-CS is organized into four sections, these being: *Preferences, Interests, Skills and Professional Contexts*. In the *Preferences*, the participants are asked to place in order of preference the following variants of the area of Communication Sciences: Communication, Marketing and Advertising (CMA); Communication, Organization and Leadership (COL); Media and Journalism (MJ); Internet and New Media (INM); Communication, Television and Cinema (CTC); and Political Communication (PC), where “1” should indicate the strand that reflects his/her preference and “6” the strand that reflects his/her lower preference in relation to the continuation of studies. In *Interests*, participants respond to 29 items, assigning the score of “2” to the statements that are very true to themselves, “1” to statements that are relatively true to themselves, and “0” to statements that do not describe them. In the *Skills* section, using the same scale, where “2” means that they consider the competencies crucial to the strand they want to follow; “1” if they are not sure if skills will be needed; and “0” if they consider the competences irrelevant for the strand that intend to follow, the participants respond to 35 items. As for the *Contexts*, in order to respond to the 24 items, the same scale was used, where “2” means that the contexts are of interest; “1” that contexts may be of interest; and “0” that contexts do not interest for professional future.

After having answered the total of 88 items, the quotation is made, thus generating the three areas in which the participants obtained the highest scores. The results obtained with this questionnaire can then be compared to the first part related to the *Preferences*, in order to determine if what they had placed as preferences really corresponds to the areas that the questionnaire suggests.

4.3 Results

After the students of the Faculty of Human Sciences answered the online questionnaire, it was possible to evaluate the results found and compare them with their *Preferences*.

The number of times each aspect appeared as 1st, 2nd and 3rd results of the questionnaires is shown in table 1, and it can be verified that CMA (Communication, Marketing and Advertising) was the most frequent result and PC (Political Communication) the less frequent one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1º Result</th>
<th>2º Result</th>
<th>3º Result</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CMA</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COL</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MJ</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INM</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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It was also possible to conclude from the analysis of the results that, of the 47 participants, there were 20 participants whose first result is the first preference they pointed out at the beginning of the
questionnaire. In addition, five participants obtained the first three results equal to their preferences, that is, the three strands that they had placed as first, second and third preferences were the same as those given in the questionnaire results, for the same sequence. It should also be noted that 13 participants already attend the master’s degree, of which seven obtained as the first result the one they had indicated as the first Preference, that is to say, the master’s strand they attend now.

5. Conclusion

This study had as main objective the development of an assessment instrument that favored the decision-making process about the areas/strands of study of the students attending the 1st or 2nd cycle of studies of the course of Communication Sciences, of the Catholic University of Portugal. After this study, it is possible to conclude that most of the participants obtained, in the results, the strands indicated in their Preferences, even if not in the order they indicated or in their entirety (the three highest results). This allows us to verify that the instrument developed for the accomplishment of this study really measures what we intend to measure, and so it can become very useful for the decision-making process of the students of Degree in Social and Cultural Communication of the Faculty of Human Sciences of the Catholic University of Portugal. Even if students already know what strand they want to pursue in the Master of Communication Sciences, this instrument can help them to confirm their choice. By following Holland’s model as inspiration, we ensure that the instrument provides a schematic classification of the different strands of the Communication Sciences, which is relatively simple and easy to understand, which provides in functional categories the complex and confusing information about this academic/professional area. Students can relate their interests, attitudes, and personality traits to these functional categories. In this way, they can establish relationships between their own knowledge of themselves and the knowledge about the strands when making their vocational decisions (Holland, 1973).

It is possible to highlight as a limitation of this study the fact that the number of participants in this study is not the most adequate, since we were only able to obtain six participants in the study of reflective conversation, and 47 participants in the online pilot study. This small number of participants is due to the fact that the data collection was done at the end of the last semester, at a moment were curricular evaluations take place (study two), and even when college students were already on vacation (study three). In addition, another limitation of this study was that we were unable to put the study on an online platform that immediately gave the results to the participants, being that they received their individual results by email, within a period of 24 hours after completing the questionnaire.

As recommendations for future studies, we consider that it would be pertinent to proceed with the data collection process, in order to progress to the psychometric study of the instrument. In addition, it would be important to continue this work by developing new assessment tools for different areas of study such as Psychology or Social Work. The aim is to enable the use of these instruments in the process of vocational guidance and career management. Usually these processes are aimed at stimulating the improvement of personal planning and decision making on career, through the development of short, medium, and long-term goals in a clear, precise and realistic way, as well as, to promote the development of competences in the resolution of dilemmas and vocational transitions (Pinto, 2010).

References


