

Personal Branding and storytelling: tales from the Tourism ESP classroom

Marketing Pessoal e Storytelling nas aulas de Inglês Aplicado ao Turismo: relatos da sala de aula

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Abstract | Today, the pervasiveness of technology in everyday interactions is mirrored by the pressing need to establish strong personal brands, that can be customized and projected across multiple digital platforms. As recruiters canvass social networks looking for prospective candidates, having a distinct and consistent personal brand is decisive in standing out, particularly in highly competitive global industries, such as tourism.

As part of a high-in-demand, service-centred industry that relies heavily on multinational and adaptable teams, tourism professionals are increasingly required to be effective and creative communicators, who can not only interact with guests and stakeholders but also project a positive image of their employer. Based on these premises, this paper describes a strategy designed to develop tourism students' personal branding skills through the use of digital storytelling techniques and the production of video-based personal pitches. Framed by a theoretical rationale and an entry questionnaire, this strategy is currently being implemented in an English for Specific Purposes course, involving multiple workshops and a critical viewing session that will ultimately help tourism and hospitality students create professional pitches that are aligned with the industry's current recruitment trends.

Keywords | Personal branding, Storytelling, Tourism education, Teaching/learning strategies, ESP

Resumo | Atualmente, a mediação digital que permeia o quotidiano torna indispensável a gestão eficaz da nossa presença online, designadamente através da afirmação de uma marca pessoal, projetada em diferentes plataformas. Esta marca, enquanto expressão diferenciadora, constitui um factor determinante nos processos de recrutamento e procura de emprego, cada vez mais baseados em plataformas digitais e na análise de perfis online. Tratando-se de um sector de atividade altamente competitivo, em que os trabalhadores são essenciais para a gestão e projeção da imagem das organizações, no turismo, esta

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realidade é particularmente importante, esperando-se, cada vez mais, que estes profissionais sejam bons comunicadores, capazes interagir de forma eficaz, não só na esfera organizacional, mas também pessoal. Partindo destes pressupostos, neste artigo descreve-se uma estratégia de ensino/aprendizagem, implementada na disciplina de Inglês Aplicado ao Turismo, que visa desenvolver as competências comunicativas dos alunos, apoiando-os na criação de uma marca pessoal. Baseada no conceito de *personal branding*, na utilização de narrativas digitais e em práticas de recrutamento atuais, esta estratégia pressupõe a criação de *personal pitches* e a dinamização de oficinas de formação e sessões de avaliação, constituindo um exemplo de inovação e interdisciplinaridade no âmbito da educação em turismo.

Palavras-chave | Personal branding, Storytelling, Educação em turismo, Estratégias de ensino/aprendizagem, Inglês para Fins Específicos

1. Introduction

With the prominence of digital technologies in people's everyday life, digital interaction can potentially have a direct effect on the way individual profiles are built and perceived; and, thereof, it has become more and more relevant to raise awareness, especially among young adults, as to the need of adjusting behaviours in digital environments, so that they reflect what they actually want to convey (Jaakkola & Jonkman, 2018). In fact, having a strong personal presence within the digital sphere is an important asset, but standing out from the crowd has become a great challenge, with many people currently developing strategies in order to have unique profiles (Johnson, 2017).

Authors as Johnson (2017) emphasise that job-seekers' online presence is impacting the perceptions of potential future employers. Considering this, young adults need to fully apprehend, as well as consciously and purposefully cultivate, the manifold dimensions of their digital presence, especially because it has to be assumed as an ongoing process that has to be regularly updated and adjusted. Thus, it is critical that educators contribute towards students' understanding of the social processes and artefacts that influence the external perception of the self, so that they can better, and more effectively, maintain and manage their per-

sonal brand (Khedher, 2015; Johnson, 2017).

Important for tourism students, not only because of the industry's economic significance, but also and foremost for its co-dependency with young workers, the concepts of personal and employee branding have become "commonplace in tourism" (Robinson, Baum, Golubovskaya, Solnet, & Callan, 2019, p. 7). In addition, because they work in a service-centered industry that relies heavily on personal interaction and image, tourism professionals are increasingly being required to be effective and creative communicators, who possess both linguistic proficiency and advanced marketing skills (Balula & Vasconcelos, 2019, Enticknap-Seppänen 2017; Herrera 2018; Wimontham 2018).

Bearing this in mind, Tourism students enrolled in a course of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at the Polytechnic Institute of Porto (IPP) in Portugal, were challenged to produce an individual job pitch in video format (in English), which they could later upload to their individual LinkedIn profile. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to put forward the teaching/learning strategy used, as well as the results of an entry questionnaire focusing on the students' personal branding awareness and their perceptions as to the role of digital technology and storytelling in language learning and use.

2. Personal branding & storytelling

The concept of *personal brand* and its development (*personal branding*) may be considered marketing concepts; but they are not easy to date or define, since they are integrated and cross-cut several areas (Rampersad, 2017; Brems, Temmerman, Graham, & Broersma, 2017; Zabojsnik, 2018). Authors such as Potgieter and Doubell (2018), Lake (2018), and McCord (2018) also underline that there is not much academic research on the topic and the existing tends to focus on social media sites and advice to be individually well-succeeded.

In the scope of this work, the definition of *personal branding* is drawn from Gorbatov, Khapova and Lysova (2018, p.6), i.e. it is the “strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery”. Thus, *personal brand* can be defined as “a set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into the differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience”, which result from what individuals do and how they do it (Jaakkola, & Jonkman, 2018; Potgieter, & Doubell, 2018). Moreover, it is also important to underline Rampersad’s (2008) authenticity layer (*authentic personal brand*), since it is to be built upon the true character, values, strengths, uniqueness, and genius of the individual.

Based on Rampersad (2008) *Authentic Personal Branding Model* and on a literature review, Potgieter and Doubell (2018, p.4) present different criteria to build an authentic personal brand, namely:

- Consistency – the behavioural component of an individual should be consistent in all situations;

Relevance – the individual’s value system must be relevant to the target audience;

- Visibility – an individual’s brand should be visible (identity and image), clearly defined, and expressed in a unique way to distinguish it from other individuals (competitors); On-line and offline visibility is necessary;
- Authority – individuals should be able to speak with authority about their expertise and be recognised as a leader in the field;
- Specialization/ Distinctiveness – in order to create distinctiveness, individuals should specialise in one area. Being a generalist will negatively affect the uniqueness of their own brand;
- Integrity – the individual should adhere to his/her own moral and behavioural code, which includes their values;
- Goodwill – people will do business with individuals whom they identify with and like. Be friendly, helpful, and co-operative whilst acting with good intentions.
- Persistence – it takes time and continual effort to build a strong personal brand;
- personality – the personality traits of the individual needs to be clearly identified in their personal brand.

In the empirical study developed by Potgieter and Doubell (2018), from the criteria depicted above, only the latter – *personality* – was not proven as necessary to establish an authentic personal brand.

Throughout time, stories have been a primary method of conveying information and storytelling is a technique has been widely used in several business-relates contexts. In personal branding, the use *digital storytelling* to draw a professional

storyline is increasingly being valued, since it entails immersing job seekers and recruiters into experiences through differentiated narratives (Hansen, 2007; Gorbato, Khapova, & Lysova, 2018; Robson, 2019). In this study, the definition of *digital storytelling*, is drawn from the work of Jones and Leverenz (2017, p. 69), namely:

[even though it] typically refers to a brief, emotionally compelling, video-based narrative, created through an assemblage of still images, video clips, music, and voice-over narration, we use the term here to refer to the more conceptual elements of a digital story, namely, that it engages an audience through an intentionally arranged description of events over time and that it does so digitally, using multiple modes of expression.

The construction of a personal brand encompasses self-marketing and self-branding, thus, placing a strong focus on the promotion of the individuals in the process of creating a professional image to apply for a job or to progress in a specific professional area (Potgieter, & Doubell, 2018). The intrinsic value of digital self-storytelling in this context is strongly grounded in the possibilities it opens for people to identify with sets of experiences, recognise shared goals, and connect through story (Hansen, 2007) in online context. It “connect[s] the dots and give[s] meaning to isolated events” (Roxo, 2020), therefore allowing for meaning-making in context (Johnson, 2017), enabling a more comprehensive presentation (from job-seekers) and/or a deeper understanding (from recruiters/head-hunters) of an individual’s potential. Studies like the one developed by Jones and Leverenz (2017) underline that the use of social networks (and media) for digital storytelling/personal branding can help boost an

individual’s social capital¹. Nevertheless, Johnson (2017) underlines that the external perception of an individual’s social capital can be boosted up or hindered through interactions in a social network.

Even though nowadays it is critical for job-seekers’ authentic personal branding to be online, it is very important to be aware that there are decisions to be made when putting it into practice, e.g. through cross-media storytelling or OSMU (one source, multiuse) or transmedia storytelling. Veglis (2012, p. 315) underlines that *cross-media* refers to “any content (news, music, text, and images) published in multiple media/channels” and this can be critical especially because social networks tend to target/encompass different audiences. On the other hand, *transmedia storytelling* is understood as a process, in which content is produced for different channels, “thus taking advantage of each channel’s specific qualities and abilities (...) engaging audience members individually, validating their involvement and positively reinforcing personal participation in the narrative” (Veglis, 2012, p. 315). Several authors consider the latter may be advantageous, since tends to embody the adaptation of content to the goals, user profiles, etc. of the platform’s community (Veglis, 2012; Rodrigues, 2019).

Furthermore, the non-stopping technological evolution and the possibilities it poses also stand as a great challenge for creating a sole packaging of the self (Arvidsson, Gandini, & Bandinelli, 2016). The (mis)use of diverse social networks/media – e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, Quora, Slideshare, or podcasts, wikis, and videocasts (Johnson, 2017) – can cause an external misinterpretation of the self because users tend to mould their behaviour according to their target audience and content is not always transversely relevant for different platforms – which can compromise consistency (Arvidsson, 2016; Brems, Temmerman, Graham, & Broersma, 2017).

¹Johnson (2017, p.22) defines social capital as “the ability to use resources and engage in mutually advantageous social cooperation through a social network”.

If you consider the tourism industry, consistency and relevance are particularly important, with researchers highlighting the impact of “negative information” (Chang & Madera, 2012, p.183). In 2012, in one of the first reviews to focus on the tourism industry’s use of social networks for recruiting, Chang and Madera, determined that “recruiters who use social network sites for selection purposes rated negative information more important than positive information” (Chang & Madera, 2012, p.183), having also established that online recruitment and social profiling is mostly relevant for “management level and front-stage applicants” (Chang & Madera, 2012, p.192). Though challenging, this new reality opens up an opportunity for tourism educators to develop innovative and integrated approaches that mobilize different areas of knowledge and expertise. Based on this premise and acknowledging the pivotal role of linguistic proficiency and communication in the tourism industry nature (Enticknap-Seppänen 2017; Herrera 2018; Vasconcelos & Balula, 2019; Wimontham 2018), ESP classes can be a common and fertile ground for collaborative and clustered activities that foster students’ technical and transversal skills.

3. Developing personal branding skills through storytelling – designing and implementing a strategy

One of the topics addressed in the syllabus of the ESP course integrated in the degree in Tourism offered at IPP is *applying for a job*. In fact, when seeking for a job, it is very important for students (future job-seekers) to be aware of the most recent tendencies to be competitive in the job-market. In this matter, it can be underlined

that: i) *Cisco’s Visual Networking Index: Forecast and Trends, 2017–2022 White Paper* refers that, by 2022, online videos will represent more than 82% of all consumer internet traffic, ii) Talent Works² underlines that 87% of recruiters use LinkedIn, and, iii) according to LinkedIn³, video is the fastest growing type of content.

Following these trends, which place the paper-based CV out of most recruitment circuits and require a strong digital online presence, the proposed teaching/learning strategy stemmed from the definition of two learning goals, namely: i) to endow students with language competence to put forward an effective technology-based personal pitch and ii) to raise the student’s awareness as to the importance of developing an authentic personal brand in online environment. As to the core activity, and given that LinkedIn is one of the “the top professional site for demonstrating ones professional knowledge and skills” (Johnson, 2017, p.23), the challenge posed to students translated into asking them to produce a video-based personal pitch, that would/could be included in their individual LinkedIn profile.

Prior to the implementation, considering the complexity of the topic and the possibility of students’ participation and commitment being affected by technical shortcomings, a questionnaire was devised as to collect data regarding participants’ openness to using digital devices and producing videos. Moreover, this initial questionnaire was used to determine students’ positioning towards the use of digital technology for learning ESP and their previous understanding of the concept of personal branding and digital storytelling. This information was instrumental in designing the teaching/learning strategy to be implemented.

²Data retrieved from <https://www.talent-works.com/2017/09/27/social-media-recruitment/>.

³Data retrieved from <https://business.linkedin.com/marketing-solutions/blog/linkedin-b2b-marketing/2019/10-surprising-stats-you-didn-t-know-about-content-on-linkedin>.

Contributions from the students' profile and perceptions

Having enquired 34 Tourist Activities Management students enrolled in the English Applied to Tourism V course, it was possible to determine that all have prompt access to digital devices particularly smartphones (94.1%) and laptops (73.5%), which they mostly use to access chats/messaging services (97.1% use them several times a day), social networks (94.1% log on at least once a day) and sharing or online streaming platforms/services (82.4%). In addition to owning and regularly using digital devices for personal and academic purposes, participants also recognize the affordances of using digital technology in formal learning environments, agreeing that it can be used to support classroom learning (100%), motivate students and help make meaningful connections to the learning material (94.1%). 82.4% also find that producing your own digital content is appealing. Referring specifically to English classes, videos are perceived as being notably relevant, with 97.1% of participants agreeing that they can be useful for learning English, more specifically when it comes to learning specific terminology and developing speaking/presentation skills (71.9%) and reinforcing knowledge (68.8%).

However, when asked to what extent they consider that technology used in their courses will adequately prepare them for their future careers, there is a slight drop, with 70.6% agreeing with this statement, while 23.5% of participants having no opinion on this particular subject.

As for their perceptions regarding personal branding, 67.6% are not familiar with the concept, and of those who are, more than half (54.5%) has problems assessing it, either not knowing or not answering when asked if they believe their personal brand is strong. On the other hand, even though 100% of these students agree that having a strong personal brand plays an important role in career management, with 81.8% stating that it influences what they publish online, only 54.5% define different profiles according to their target audience and keep them up to date. In fact, only 27.2% share new content frequently and consider that they make use of social media to practice personal branding. As for the audience of their brand, 36.4% identify their family and friends, placing them at the same level as employers and recruiters (also 36.4%), followed by other students and people with the same interests and hobbies (27.3% – the same percentage of participants who state they do not know who their target audience is).

This detachment between their perceptions regarding digital technology in general and its actual impact on their professional online *persona*, supported the initial premise that students can benefit from specific training in this specific area and was the basis for developing a teaching/learning strategy that would not only help students become familiar with the concept of personal branding, but actually assist them in creating a LinkedIn profile and a personal pitch that they could use when looking for and applying to a job.

The operationalization of the strategy encompassed the phases below (see Table 1).

Table 1 | Phases of teaching/learning strategy

Phase	Activity (A)	Time
1	A1 – Workshop on personal branding and how to create and maintain a LinkedIn Profile (face-to-face session)	2 hours
2	A2 – 2 Workshops on pitching and storytelling (2 face-to-face sessions)	4 hours
3	A3 – Development of the video (autonomous/individual work)	2 weeks
4	A4 – Presentation of a critical review of the videos by a Recruitment Specialist (face-to-face session)	4 hours

In Phase 1 (see Table 1), grounded on the students' profile and perceptions, it was clear that it was mandatory to have a workshop on personal branding and the importance of managing your online presence for professional purposes. Thereof, a Digital Marketing Strategist was invited to give students an overview of the importance of personal branding and to conduct a workshop on how to develop a successful LinkedIn Profile, as a means for stating their unique value proposition. In this first phase, emphasis was also given to language use specificities, namely as to writing style – i.e. vocabulary, abbreviations, sentence structure, etc. –, as well as to techniques to communicate information in a clear, accurate and engaging manner for a specific audience.

Phase 2 (see Table 1) encompasses the presentation of the concepts of *pitching* and *storytelling*, providing vivid examples of their use taken from the business context and focussing on the job/business-seeker's and recruiter's point of view. This was considered to be important, because even though the participants were familiar with the concept of storytelling, and would like to see digital stories incorporated into their English assignments (73.5%), namely as a way to develop their speaking skills (88.2% agree with this assertion), they are unsure about its potential in terms of fostering critical thinking (32.4% students have no opinion on this matter).

Hence, after discussing the different outlines of the *twitter pitch*, the *elevator pitch* and the *pixar pitch*, and how storytelling could be used in personal branding/pitching, several authentic videos were discussed and commented on – e.g. Levi Roots pitch in Dragons Den⁴, and the winning pitches of the 2019 Monfort College of Business Pitch Contest⁵. In fact, the use of materials taken from real contexts, which students can easily relate to or identify with, plays a very important role in the students' perceptions of the potential added-value

of the learning focus/content – in this case, the use of storytelling to enhance their personal branding.

In general, emphasis was placed on reflexive practices and personal branding techniques, rather than in the actual tools, i.e., video-capturing devices and editing software. Even though students expressed their over video production (in the initial questionnaire 64.7% anticipated having problems making or editing videos, specially when it came to identifying and using editing software – respectively 81.0% and 90.5%), it was made clear for them from the start that their videos would not be assessed (in the scope of the ESP course) as to its technical/technological particular merits, no specific workshop was designed for this effect. However, the professors involved made themselves available to support students, also providing them with online tutorials and step-by-step guides.

Concerning Phase 3 (see table 1), the guidelines provided to students included information as to the use of English, as well as to the length, content, quality and format of the video, as presented in Table 2.

It is important to underline that students were informed from the start that the output of this activity was used to formally assess their presentation and communication skills, in the scope of the ESL course they were enrolled in. Nonetheless, and even though the main focus of the assessment activity is clearly language use with reference to a specific purpose, audience, etc., there are other more transversal skills being worked concomitantly. In fact, the strategy also addresses the development of soft skills to enhance their personal branding, namely: autonomous work (being it individual work project), creativity (with storytelling), digital competence (through video design and creation) and authentic personal branding skills in online environment, among others. This more holistic, comprehensive perspective over the tea-

⁴See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00b3zk4>.

⁵See <https://mcb.unco.edu/students/networking-night/examples-MCB-Pitch-Contest.aspx>.

ching/learning strategy justifies the pertinence of including Phase 4, i.e. to invite a Recruitment Specialist to present a critical review of the videos created by the students (see Table 1); thus, ena-

bling students to improve their pitches according their future-job characteristics/requirements, based on the comments of a specialised professional.

Table 2 | Creating a video-based personal pitch (students' guidelines)

Language	English (add subtitles in English)
Length	30–60 seconds
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification • Qualifications (explain and/or provide contacts) • What you can offer a potential employer • Description of interests • Desired work/career opportunity • Close out (your “ask”, i.e. what you want, and closure to your pitch)
Quality	Make sure the video has a high standard of quality – high definition, colour balance (image); clarity, volume and natural pace (sound);
File format	Your video must be submitted in one of the following file formats: <i>.mov</i> , <i>.mv4</i> , <i>mp4</i> , <i>.wmv</i>

4. Final considerations

The growing need to prepare future tourism graduates to face the current globalized, technology-laden job market, is reshaping the way tourism educators are approaching their teaching strategies and classroom activities, becoming more focused on transversal and transferrable skills. As tourism workers, particularly those who are starting their careers, become “inimitably bound up in tourism’s self- and market image and significantly are often at the heart of its brands” (Robinson, 2019, p. 2), raising tourism and hospitality student’s awareness of the impact of their personal brand is essential. Furthermore, these students need to understand that: 1) face-to-face and online interactions impact other peoples perceptions of their brand; and 2) their online presence and behaviour can have a serious impact on their future (Johnson, 2017), and are, therefore, worth reflecting about.

In addition to demonstrating expertise in one’s

field, having strong written and oral communication skills and understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses is key to developing a strong personal brand. This is particularly important at a time when networking and social media have become essential for recruiting and human resources. As a result, tourism educators should be prepared to come up with integrated strategies and assignments that can assist students with these skills, thus supporting the development of their personal brand. In addition, as there are currently many tools available for students to use to reinforce and monitor their online presence, it is important to help them navigate these platforms, providing them with reliable information, so they can take full advantage of them to effectively communicate their personal brand.

Realising that this is a complex process that relies on individual perceptions, researchers set out to design and implement a strategy that would combine their area of interest – ESP – and the

need to develop students' language and communication skills, with other transversal skills, specifically, their digital competences and critical-thinking. Based on students' previous knowledge and drawing from their perceptions, they devised and are currently implementing a wide range of hands-on activities based on the concepts of personal branding and digital storytelling. Resorting to workshops and video production, tourism students were involved in making videos in which they applied storytelling techniques to produce a personal pitch that would not only enhance, but also help disseminate their brand.

Overall, this strategy, though still being implemented, has been proving itself effective in engaging students and raising their awareness of the importance of their online behaviours and profiles. Moreover, by relying on technology and following an open, integrated approach, in which experts from other areas are asked to take active part in, the activities have managed to attract the attention of other tourist educators and stakeholders, with further initiatives already at work.

Considering this is an ongoing project, further data, namely regarding students' opinions on the strategy and the final outputs, will be available in the near future. Overall, however, this is already a noteworthy contribution towards integrating different knowledge areas and updating tourism curricula, helping them become more focused on today's knowledge, technology-based economy and the skills it demands.

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