

Zero 2 Infinity: Integrating a communication plan for a partner company in the syllabus



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SUMMARY

Business schools act as bridge between academia and professional organisations, preparing students for the professional world, and detecting trends in the markets through research (Kupriyanova et al., 2018: 616-617). The current study focused on the learning outcomes of the integration of a communication plan for an aerospace company for a group of International Business students. The activity linked, thus, academic content with students' lives and their future careers (OECD, 2019: 79). The project was a semi-controlled scenario, so that students could feel guided by the teacher and the company throughout the process, but with enough liberty to see their own progress and make their own decisions on how to approach the task. The working environment encouraged students to develop positive "academic emotions" (Lonka and Ketonen, 2012) and at the same time kept close attention to the digital competence framework established by the EU (Vuorikari et al., 2016).

The project was a collaboration between ESIC Business & Marketing School (Valencia campus) and Zero 2 Infinity, a Spanish aerospace company providing access to near space using high-altitude balloons (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

- There were **62 International Business undergraduate students**, 24 of them being international exchange students. They were **divided in 14 groups, representing communication agencies**.
- Each *agency* was responsible: a) to identify and assess countries with no space programme or in early stages; b) to identify public institutions or governments interested in preparing a "national astronaut"; and c) to broaden the network of contacts.
- Students were instructed not to contact any prospective stakeholder, unless authorised to do so. The reason was to prevent misunderstandings or major blunders with prospective real-life target publics.
- **Students answered both a pre-activity as well as a post-activity questionnaire**. The final questionnaire allowed them to include qualitative information. The questionnaires included a Likert scale ranging from 1-5.
- Students attended a **videoconference with the founder and CEO of the company, José Mariano López-Urdiales**, to ask him questions. Subsequently they prepared a press release of the event as if it was a collaboration of their fictional communication agency with a client.
- At the end of the project, **students had to give a presentation on their findings and prepare a report** where they could include additional in-depth information.
- **All the material was shared with the company so that they could obtain fresh ideas to implement**. Students learnt new skills and experienced several of the requirement involved when developing a communication plan.

FINDINGS

We conducted statistical analysis for the students' answers to our questionnaires. We decided to calculate the main quartiles to show the distribution of the answers and their variability around the median.

The questionnaire before the activity concluded that most of the students had no prior experience preparing a communication plan (75% mentioned that it was their first contact with such a task). At the same time, half of the students showed interest on working on an activity like this, a positive result that increased after the activity. In the post-activity questionnaire, 75% of students considered that they had learnt, feeling likewise that this was a useful and exciting way of learning (Fig. 3 (a)).

Around 50% of the group manifested some disappointment with not having fully learnt how to build successful media relations and public institutions (Fig. 3 (b)). The reason for that, as explained above, is that they were instructed not to contact any third party. Groups had to do the research and justify their decisions at the end of the project. The collaborating company and the instructor agreed on not allowing the students to discuss the project with others to avoid blunders with prospective target publics. Students may have felt the projects lacked realism like that.

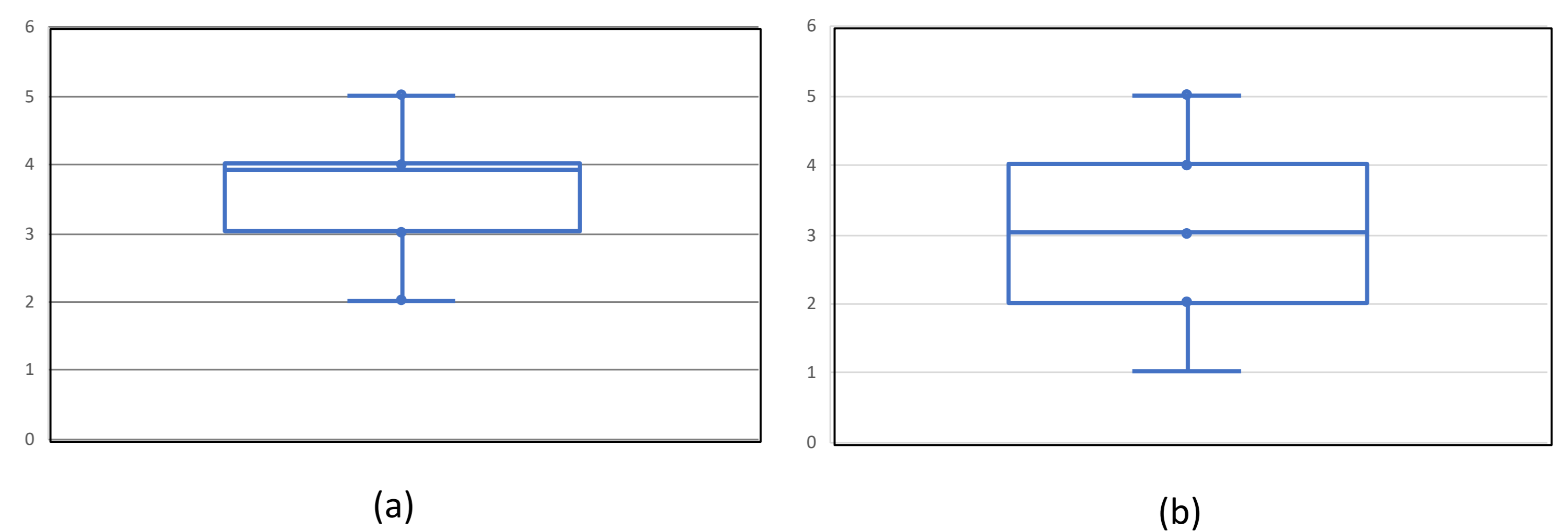


Figure 3. Box and whiskers plots showing the answers of the students on (a) their agreement on considering the activity as a useful and exiting way of learning (Q1=3 and Q2=Q3=4), and (b) having learnt how to build successful media relations and public institutions (Q1=2, Q2=3 and Q3=4)

CONCLUSIONS

The activity was integrated within the learning outcomes of the course and combined the acquisition of disciplinary and epistemic knowledge whilst simultaneously carrying out skills (OECD, 2019: 74). Students were able to develop the main aspects involved in a communication plan which had been previously discussed in classes and put them into practice.

The shortcoming of not being able to contact prospective target publics slightly hindered the outcome for some students. However, the overall assessment by the students demonstrate that their interest and increased throughout the project and they felt valuable skills at the end of the activity. One student stated the following: "The project was great, especially since it was a real one and it took a lot of research".

Likewise, the collaborating company was impressed by the "hard work students put into the projects" (López-Urdiales, personal communication, 2021).

This mutually beneficial collaboration provided conclusions on the need to establish real collaborations between organisations and higher education institutions for a better preparation in the students' careers. Likewise, companies may receive a series of novel ideas that can be implemented in their businesses when attempting to access a new market or explore new areas. Higher Education institutions perform in this way a crucial role connecting key stakeholders while standing on top of the demands of the business world.

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