

**Growing and Maintaining a Portuguese Language Program in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:  
Notes from an Old New England School**

Clémence Jouët-Pastré  
*Harvard University*

**Introduction:**

“Is ‘my’ program going in the right direction?” was the first question that came to my mind when I saw the call for papers for this special issue of the *Portuguese Language Journal*. “Building, Growing, and Maintaining Portuguese Programs” is a simple and straightforward title that also serves as a provocative invitation for directors of language programs (DLPs) to reflect on their work. Writing about the development of a program at a university that has one of the oldest traditions of Portuguese language instruction in the United States is no easy task. Madaline Nichols (1945) traces the first Portuguese courses at Harvard back to 1831, while Harvey Johnson (1959: 478) claims that Portuguese was first taught at Harvard College sometime between 1826-1830. Nevertheless, despite this slight discrepancy, both authors agree that the first Harvard instructor was Pietro Bachi, an exiled Sicilian.

Since its inception, the Harvard Portuguese Program (PLP) has gone through its share of ups and downs, just like other programs throughout the country (Ellis, 1967; Tesser, 2005). However, if we trace enrollment figures from the last ten years, steady growth — at least from an empirical standpoint — is immediately apparent in Table 1:

<b>YEAR</b>	<b>FALL</b>	<b>SPRING</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
2000 - 01	59	68	127
2001 - 02	50	71	121
2002 - 03	77	62	129
2003 - 04	98	88	186
2004 - 05	111	119	230
2005 - 06	106	105	211
2006 - 07	136	106	242
2007 - 08	116	126	242
2008 - 09	97	119	216
2009 - 10	114	104	218

Table 1 – Enrollments in the Portuguese Language Program at Harvard University

This article seeks to understand the correlation between this upward trend in enrollment and an increase in the program's overall quality by examining the impact of new faculty, courses, events, and supporting programs.

### **Building a Community**

In July 2002, I was appointed Director of the Portuguese Language Program at Harvard. My first action was to identify opportunities and strategies to strengthen the Portuguese program both in enrollment and quality. Based on data collected about the university structure, resources available, past enrollment, students' profiles, and the surrounding communities, I put together an academic and administrative plan. One of the main theoretical premises underpinning this plan was that speaking a language is always a contextual phenomenon (De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg, 2006). Thus, it became clear that there was a need to build a community, a cultural "imagined" space, to borrow a term from Benedict Anderson (1983), so students could practice their Portuguese in context. This community would encompass not only students of Portuguese, but the whole Harvard community and the large Portuguese-speaking community in the Boston area (Jouët-Pastré and Liander, 2007).

Having this idea in mind, a series of tools were built to enhance the program visibility and to congregate individuals including a list-serve, an attractive web site, and a placement test. The list-serve and the web site make the program more visible and boost the feeling of belonging to a community by connecting people who share common interests. Students find on the web site a large amount of information including past and new events organized by the program and useful links to resources aimed at developing their language skills and knowledge of the Portuguese-speaking world. The main role of the list-serve is to share information about events related to our program in the Boston area and to serve as a venue for students who are seeking a variety of opportunities ranging from finding a conversational pair to making arrangements for housing in Portuguese-speaking countries.

Creating a placement test in Portuguese, in line with those offered in other languages at Harvard, helped dispel the image of improvisation sometimes associated with Portuguese Language Programs. As all freshmen have to take a language placement test at Harvard to check if s/he is exempt of the language requirement, the very fact of having Portuguese as a choice is good publicity for the program not only for visibility reasons, but perhaps more importantly, to

make it clear that Harvard has a community interested in the Lusophone world. Last, but not least, grouping all the students to take a standardized test in a single day makes more sense from a logistic viewpoint.

Another strategy is to have tables for each departmental and university wide open houses and advising days. Some ideas include using flags of the Portuguese-speaking world, and brochures and catalogues about the Portuguese program, study abroad, majors and minors, etc. Ideally, at least two well-trained instructors should be available for highlighting the program's features and answering students' questions. It is also useful to have a banner, souvenirs from Lusophone countries, a photo display, and a photo album with pictures of previous students doing all kinds of interesting cultural activities. Many students report that they approached the table because of the pictures and ended up in one of our classes.

At the end of each semester, the DLP visits advanced Spanish classes to publicize the PLP courses, particularly the ones for Spanish speakers. Speaking in Portuguese, and articulating each word clearly and slowly, the DLP makes students aware that Portuguese and Spanish are quite similar languages. Flyers with a short text about the advantages of taking Portuguese, course offerings, and contact information are distributed. Our internal surveys and informal conversations indicate that this activity is very successful at attracting new students.

Finally, the DLP has launched a film series and a weekly bate-papo (Portuguese table). Both events are open to the public and well attended by Harvard students, faculty, staff, and members of the Boston community including Brazilians and non-Brazilians. Whenever possible, the community-based associations are involved in all activities. For example, we collaborated with the Brazilian Women's Group to put together the film series entitled "Contemporary Women Directors."

Perhaps the endeavors above explain why the PLP at Harvard grew even more than others in the nation. The last MLA report on foreign languages indicates that Portuguese enrollment grew 22.4% from 2002-2006 in institutions of higher education in the United States. In the same time span, the Harvard program grew 87.6 %.

The combination of new technological tools, such as the list-serve, with traditional approaches such as visits to Spanish classes (Milleret, 1990), make the program visible and show that its members form a vibrant community. In addition, the relatively new Brazilian immigrants and the quite old group of Portuguese and Cape Verdean immigrants in New England provide

numerous opportunities for students to get to know the language and the cultures of the Portuguese-speaking world.

### **Teacher Training**

The quality of the Portuguese language program is assured by a thorough teacher training program. It starts at General Orientation Week organized each year by the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures and continues over the academic year through weekly meetings, class observations, collaborative writing, and exposure to international professional interaction at the Harvard Summer School in Rio.

Weekly meetings include pedagogical and linguistic debates, methodological reflections, detailed lesson plan discussions, teaching techniques exploration, and critical thinking on language evaluation. A series of guidelines, lesson plans, and theoretical materials were developed and compiled in the “Manual do Instrutor de Português” that intends to facilitate staff meetings and, more specifically, language instruction.

Class observations are a crucial part of teaching training. Each semester the DLP in Portuguese visits classes to assess language instruction in general and, more importantly, TFs/TAs pedagogical, linguistic, and methodological advancements. After each observation, the DLP has private meetings with the TA/TF to discuss strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Finally, the implementation of the Harvard Summer School in Rio provides Teaching Fellows and Teaching Assistants with the opportunity of enhancing their professional experience insofar as they can teach abroad and interact with faculty and researchers from Brazilian universities and research centers.

Not surprisingly, every year virtually all TAs and TFs received different prizes for excellence in teaching. For example, six out of our eight TAs and TFs were eligible for the 2010 *Derek C. Bok Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Undergraduates*. Also worth mention is the fact that out of the six eligible for the award, four achieved the highest ratings in student evaluations (5.0/5.0).

### **New Courses at Harvard and Abroad**

In the past eight years, the DLP in Portuguese created, developed, and re-structured several courses. Describing each of these courses would be beyond the scope of this article. One

of them, however, merits further discussion. “Portuguese and the Community” is a course that combines advanced language instruction with the study of the Luso-African-Brazilian experience in the United States. Readings, films, and class discussions focus on these three immigrant groups. Boston, which has received large contingents of immigrants from Portugal, Cape Verde and Brazil, offers the perfect setting for the course. Students are placed with Boston-area community organizations and agencies, to perform 4 hours of community service per week, furthering their language skills and their cultural understanding of these groups, as well as of the larger issues of immigration. Their community work experiences have included assisting in citizenship classes, human rights workshops and after school programs. The students also elaborate publicity materials to raise funds for associations, serve as medical and legal interpreters and translators and work in HIV prevention programs. This course has achieved very high ratings in the student evaluations (4.9/5.0) and has inspired a number of honor theses and published articles by students.

The Harvard Summer School in Rio de Janeiro started as a four-week long program in 2004 and gradually increased to eight weeks by 2009. The program is a second-year level course in Portuguese language and Brazilian culture; the students are expected to attain an advanced linguistic level by the end of the course. It combines language instruction, lectures by invited speakers, screening of films and instructional excursions of all kinds in and around Rio, to museums, samba and capoeira schools, and old coffee plantations. Many of these excursions, like visits to NGOs, are to sites normally unavailable to tourists. The students live with families in Rio and take courses jointly taught by the DLP and by two teaching fellows/teaching assistants. In the last two weeks of the program, all students are required to do community service and write reflection papers about their experience.

Students return able to pursue advanced language courses in the program, and courses in Brazilian and Portuguese literature or Brazilian studies throughout Harvard. Actually, after this experience abroad, students often decide to concentrate either in Brazilian or Latin American Studies and end up writing honor theses about Brazil.

## **Bridges Linking Academia and Communities**

As stated in the beginning of this article, our program is based on the premise that languages are bound to contexts. More specifically, the program subscribes to the definition of “context” advanced by Frederick Erickson and Jeffrey Schultz (2001: 22):

“Contexts are not simply *given* in the physical setting (kitchen, living room, sidewalk in front of drug store) nor in combinations of personnel (two brothers, husband and wife, firemen). Rather, contexts are constituted by what people are doing and where and when they are doing it. As McDermott puts it succinctly (1976), people in interaction become environments for each other.”

Opportunely, the greater Boston area offers a unique atmosphere for students of Portuguese. They can immerse themselves into one of the Lusophone communities and be part of a number of “contexts.” Therefore, the Portuguese Language Program has worked to strengthen ties with the surrounding Portuguese-speaking communities. We strive to find ways to be a resource for the communities as much as they are for us.

In addition to regularly organizing film festivals and “bate-papos” open to the public and in cooperation with community-based organizations, the program has implemented a yearly Brazil Week since 2003. A main theme of the event has been the idea of displacement at both national and transnational levels. For example, previous editions included the Brazilian *diaspora* and Brazilian women’s movements (both in Brazil and in the United States). It is also worth mentioning that two important events directly targeting communities - “Roundtable on Brazilian Immigration: “Studying the Brazilian Community in New England” (fall 2003) and the “National Conference on Brazilian Immigration to the United States” (spring 2005) - led to the publication of a book *Becoming Brazuca: Brazilian Immigration to the United States* jointly edited by the DLP and a teaching fellow.

Finally, the DLP along with teaching fellows and teaching assistants regularly collaborate with the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies and the General Consulate of Brazil in Boston to offer a series of workshops to high school teachers. This initiative provides extra training for TAs and TFs, professional development for teachers, and a great opportunity to create multiple bridges both inside and outside the university.

## The Portuguese Language Program as a Springboard for Lusophone Studies

One of the utmost goals of the PLP is to prepare students to take more advanced courses about Lusophone cultures and literatures. Enrollments in literature courses have also considerably increased over the past ten years in the Portuguese section of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures (RLL). It is worth mentioning that all the courses taught by the entirely Portuguese section of RLL are conducted exclusively in the target language. Therefore, students have to attain a considerable knowledge of academic Portuguese to be able to participate in complex discussions and to write long and sophisticated papers.

YEAR	FALL	SPRING	TOTAL
2000 - 01	11	9	20
2001 - 02	5	10	15
2002 - 03	13	19	32
2003 - 04	6	18	24
2004 - 05	8	5	14
2005 - 06	10	36	46
2006 - 07	9	14	23
2007 - 08	8	9	17
2008 - 09	12	42	54
2009 - 10	25	33	58

Table 2 – Enrollments in Literature Courses at Harvard University

In addition to having more students linguistically prepared to take advanced courses, there is no doubt that hiring a full Professor in Brazilian Studies has also contributed to the exceptional growth shown in Table 2. It is also important to mention that the number of graduate students doing minors in Portuguese has increased dramatically over the years. These students are in large part from the Spanish section of the Department of RLL and from the Department of Comparative Literatures and quite a few have started learning Portuguese at Harvard.

University wide, the impact of the PLP is measured, for example, through the growth of senior theses written about Brazil or Brazilians in the United States. This led the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies to establish a Prize in Brazilian Studies to recognize the best Harvard College senior thesis on a subject related to Brazil.

## Conclusion

The PLP at Harvard has strived to grow in numbers and in quality. Several strategies have been deployed to attain this goal including new ways of publicizing the program such as a combination of new technologies and traditional approaches. All these strategies help to create a community interested in Portuguese. Given that the Program subscribes to the theory that speaking a language is a contextual phenomenon, several bridges linking Harvard students with the local Lusophone communities were built. As a result, students can learn Portuguese in different contexts beyond the classroom setting. For example, they have the possibility of immersing themselves in one of the Portuguese-speaking communities by taking the service-learning course “Portuguese and the Community.” In addition to earning credits and professional and personal experience, students have the chance of developing their language skills in a contextualized manner. Graduate students also benefit from these bridges with the community by, for example, gaining extra teaching experience in the workshops for teachers’ professional development. These efforts were, at least in part, responsible for the growth in enrollments over the past ten years.

Assessing quality is obviously much harder than measuring number of enrollments. Yet, it is possible to have some objective quality indicators such as prizes awarded to our students and teaching assistants/fellows. At least 80% of our language instructors have top-notch evaluations and have been awarded different types of prizes for excellence in teaching. The same happens to our concentrators who have won some of the most prestigious prizes awarded outside of the Department of RLL. Last, but not least, external reviewers have praised the excellence of the Harvard Program.

Undoubtedly, a vibrant Portuguese Language Program is crucial for increasing both enrollments in advanced courses and the number of concentrators. It is also beneficial to the development of the graduate program, as students have the opportunity to teach a variety of courses ranging from the basic to the advanced ones. In sum, my experience of eight years directing Harvard’s PLP makes me conclude that there are three main pre-requisites to achieve these goals: it is imperative to make the program visible; to create a community interested in Portuguese language and in Portuguese-speaking cultures; and to build bridges with the surrounding Lusophone communities. All these measures create an attractive and meaningful learning environment that naturally leads to growth in enrollments and in quality.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, B. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 1983.
- De Fina, A., Schiffrin, D., & Bamberg, M. (Eds.). *Discourse and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Ellis, F. "Portuguese in the First Fifty Years of the AASTP." *Hispania*. (1967): 860-871.
- Erickson, F. and Schultz, J. "When is a context? Some issues and methods in the analysis of social competence." *Mind, Culture, and Activity: Seminal Papers from the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition*. Ed. by Michael Cole, Yrjö Engeström, and Olga Vazquez. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Furrman, N., Goldberg, D., Lusin, N. *Enrollments in Languages Other Than English in the United States Institutions of Higher Education*. Modern Language Association, 2007.
- Johnson, H. "A Backward Glance at Portuguese and Brazilian Studies in the United States." *Journal of Inter-American Studies*. (1959): 477-488.
- Jouët-Pastré, C. and Braga, L. *Becoming Brazuca: Brazilian Immigration to the US*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Jouët-Pastré, C. and Liander, J. "Dialogue entre communautés et universités dans le cadre d'un service de soutien à l'apprentissage." *Montréal: Haute École Pédagogique BEJUNE - Presses universitaires de Montréal*. (2005) : 153-172.
- Milleret, M. "Portuguese Program Development: Past, Present, and Future." *Hispania* 73 (1990): 513-517.
- Nichols, M. "The History of Spanish and Portuguese Teaching in the United States." *A Handbook on the Teaching of Spanish and Portuguese*. Ed. Henry Grattan Doyle. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1945.
- Tesser, C. "Brazilian Portuguese Language and Linguistics." *Envisioning Brazil: A Guide to Brazilian Studies in the United States*. Ed. Marshall C. Eakin and Paulo Roberto de Almeida. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.