LEARNING BY SHARING EXPERIENCES: THE DEVELOPMENT OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN EXECUTIVE MBA PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Executives in command of organizations are looking for new references to increase the effectiveness of decision-making in an increasingly complex environment. In order to point out an alternative to guide the executives' decision making processes, this paper presents a reflective practice concept and how it relates to executive's decisions; investigates the development of reflective practice in executive education programs; and analyses the importance of shared experiences to the development of executives' reflective practice. The reflective practice concept, presented by Schön (1983), is applied to executives' decision-making processes. The executive education analysis is based on the experiential learning theory presented by Kolb (1984). The empirical research was applied at a Business School whose Executive MBA Program is ranked among the top five in the world. Data was collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with executives enrolled in this program and the analysis was based on a phenomenological approach for qualitative research. Results indicated that the process of sharing experiences is essential to a successful development of reflective executives in Executive MBA Programs. The elements presented in this paper may enhance the effectiveness of executive education and should be considered by programs that want to encourage the process of learning by sharing experiences.

Key words: executive MBA programs, reflective executive, shared experiences, reflective practice concept, executive education programs.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential theorists regarding the reflective practice concept is Donald Schön (1983). This author presents the reflective practice as the core concept to the development of what he defines as *professional artistry*: the ability to make sense of

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uncertain, unique, or conflicted situations of professional practice (Schön, 1983). According to him, the reflective practice is based on the ideas of knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action.

The *knowing-in-action* is a spontaneous and usual action that gets through daily practices. It can be identified when people learn how to do something and then are able to execute smooth sequences of activity, recognition, decision, and adjustment without having to think about it. Schön (1983, p. viii) observes that "competent practitioners usually know more than they can say. They exhibit a kind of knowing-in-practice, most of which is tacit".

However, people are usually surprised by unexpected experiences that occur when something fails to meet their expectations. In an attempt to preserve the constancy of their usual patterns of knowing-in-action, they may (1) respond to a surprise by brushing it aside, selectively inattending to the signals that produce it; (2) respond to it by reflection. According to Schön (1983), this reflection occurs in one of two ways:

▪ People may *reflect-on-action*, thinking back on what they have done in order to discover how their knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome or they may pause in the midst of an action to reflect. In either case, the reflection has no direct connection to present action. Raelin (2002, p. 66) define this process as "thinking about thinking".

▪ People may *reflect-in-action* in the midst of an action, without suspending it. They reshape what they are doing while doing it. In this case, "we respond to the unexpected or anomalous by restructuring some of our strategies of action, theories of phenomena, or ways of framing the problem; and we invent on-the-spot experiments to put our new understandings to the test" (SCHÖN, 1987, p. 26).

In both cases, the reflective practice is influenced by practitioner's *repertoire*: past experiences, examples, images, perceptions, and actions that are used as references to understand and deal with unexpected events. Schön (1983) describes the relationships between the reflective practice and the repertoire as the capacity to see unfamiliar situations as familiar ones and to do in the former as have done in the latter. It is the capacity to *see-as* and *do-as* that allows practitioners to have a feel for problems that do not fit existing rules.

Dewey (1933) refers to this process as a spiral: known material transformed, by reflection, in familiar possession; familiar possession turned to resources to judge and

understand another unknown material. Then the repertoire is not *on what* people pay attention, but *with what* they pay attention to a specific event.

The development of the reflective practice concept is a challenge to the society as it faces the increasing complexity of physical, economic, environmental and social demands on practitioners in general. In the organizational context, executives are challenged to find effective ways to recognize and overcome the ambiguity and instability present in both internal and external organization environment. This paper has the purpose to investigate the development of reflective practice in executive education programs and analyze the importance of shared experiences to the development of executives' reflective practice.

2 EXECUTIVE'S REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The relevance of developing executives' reflective practice is related to their functions in leading organizational strategic changes. Several researchers (Argyris, 2002; Drucker, 2003; Ghoshal, Arnzen, and Brownfield, 1992; Mintzberg, 1989; Senge, 2003; Schön, 1975) observe that (1) changes in organizations are grounded on people changes; (2) executives are responsible for leading people in organizational changing processes; (3) executives are references not only to organization changing processes but also to social changing processes, as a consequence of a substantial influence of organizations on the twenty first century society.

According to Senge (2003, p. 48), a lot of organizational changing efforts are doomed from the start as a consequence of the illusion that "somehow organizations can change without personal change and especially without change on the part of people in leadership positions". Therefore, it is essential that executives acknowledge the importance of the reflective practice to face the complexity presented by these changing processes.

Schön (1983, p. 243) states that, despite the hegemony of the idea that managers are technicians, some of them remain conscious of their professional artistry. This artistry is used in uncertain situations that require decisions under stress and limited time that do not allow a rational decision making process. In these situations, managers reflect in action. Nevertheless, this author warns that "managers do reflect-in-action, but they seldom reflect on their reflection-in-action. Hence this crucially important dimension of their art tends to remain private and inaccessible to others. Moreover, because awareness of one's intuitive thinking usually grows out of practice in articulating it to others, managers often have little access to their own reflection-in-action". As a consequence, the art of management remains obscure,

preventing the development of reflective executives, as they cannot help others in their organization to learn to do what they can do.

These ideas show the importance of understanding executives' reflective practice in order to improve their professional artistry. This artistry can be developed by different and interdependent ways: formal education, semi-formal education, informal education, personal development, or a combination of them all. In this paper, we analyze how it can be developed in the context of an Executive MBA Program.

3 EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In his analysis of higher education, Schön (1987) refers to a crisis of confidence in professional knowledge that is based in the *rigor-or-relevance dilemma*. This dilemma lies between the prevailing idea of rigorous professional knowledge (based on technical rationality) and the awareness of indeterminate zones of practice (characterized by uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict). According to the author, this crisis corresponds to a similar crisis in professional education and prompts discussions on the existing "gap between the schools' prevailing conception of professional knowledge and the actual competencies required of practitioners in the field" (SCHÖN, 1987, p. 10). In this context, a more appropriate model for professional education is necessary for stimulating students to become reflective practitioners and, as a consequence, able to cope with complex and multi-faceted problems.

Regarding the development of reflective thinking in higher education, Light and Cox (2001, p. 63) propose a more constructivist concept of learning. According to these authors, "Learning is not concerned with decoding and recalling information but rather with the process of social and practical understanding. It is an active and meaningful construction of facts, ideas, concepts, theories and experiences in order to work and manage successfully in a changing world of multiple and synchronous contexts".

Dewey (1933) is referred as a precursor of the reflective thinking concept as an aspect of learning and education. In fact, Dewey magnified the fact that all real learning occurs over time, as people move between the world of thinking and the world of action. According to this author, learning is never simply an intellectual exercise, nor is it a matter of changing behavior. It is an interactive process linking the two in a spiral to continually expand capabilities. This action-reflection relationship favors the development of reflective

practitioners.

In management education, many researchers (G. Smith, 2003; Gosling and Mintzberg, 2003; P. Smith, 2001; Schön, 1987; Tompkins, 2001) deem the reflective practice as a worthy method to prepare managers to face the complex and changeable managerial practice. They propose different approaches to the reflective practice development in management education programs:

- G. Smith (2003) criticizes the critical-thinking and decision-making approaches to managerial thinking and develops a broader perspective for *Thinking Skills Instruction*;

- Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) present five managerial mind-sets as a new way to structure management education and development;

- P. Smith (2001) proposes the *Action Learning* concept;

- Schön (1987) proposes the *Reflective Practicum* as a tool to education for artistry;

- Tompkins (2001) indicates the use of advocacy and inquiry to improve the managers' thinking process.

In common, these investigations present a more reflective approach to management education, grounded mostly on the experiential learning theory. They consider the focus on experience proposed by this theory an essential component to the reflective practice development. Indeed, there is an underlying unity in the nature of learning as a dialectic process integrating experience and concepts, observations and action.

Kolb (1984) defines learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This author adds that the concept of experiential learning implies that all learning is relearning: nobody enters a learning situation without some articulated ideas about the topic in hand. This is why it is essential for educators to relate these ideas to the learning process. "If the education process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas into the person's belief systems, the learning process will be facilitated" (Kolb, 1984, p. 28).

The process of experiential learning proposed by Kolb (1984) is represented in a cycle composed by four "adaptive learning modes": concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualization; and active experimentation (figure 1). In fact, the experiential learning cycle contains the same elements of the reflective thinking spiral proposed by Dewey (1933): the occurrence of a difficulty, its location and definition; occurrence of a suggested explanation or possible solution; the rational elaboration of an idea; and further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection.

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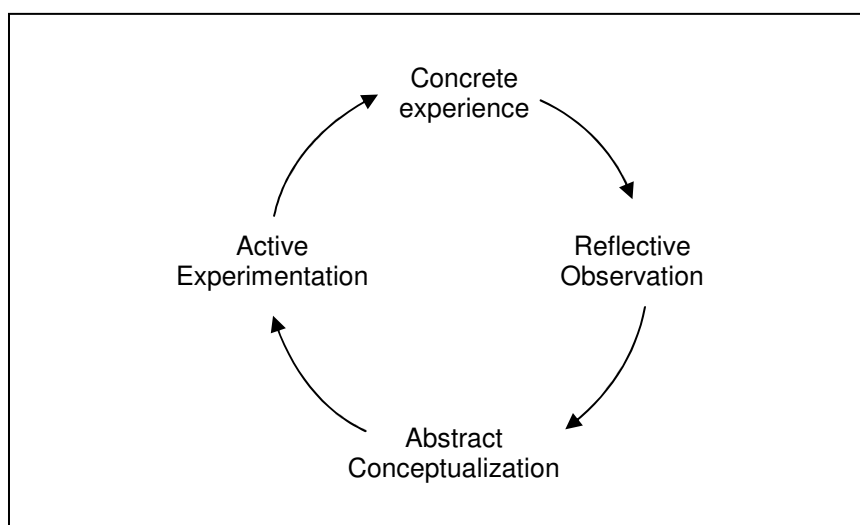PRACTICE IN EXECUTIVE MBA PROGRAMS

FIGURE 1: Experiencial learning cycle.

Source: Kolb, 1984, p. 42.

Regarding executive education, this author argues that there is no sense to think of executive education disconnected from the experiential learning, because "Adults' learning interests are embedded in their personal histories, in their visions of who they are in the world and in what they can do and want to do. For them, learning methods that combine work and study, theory and practice provide a more familiar and therefore more productive arena for learning" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

The spiral movement of action and reflection encouraged by experiential learning can develop executives' ability to question the assumptions behind their thoughts, decisions, and actions, which is the main purpose of the reflective practice.

In his research on adult education, Knowles (1984, p. 10) emphasizes that adults enter into an educational activity with a great repertoire of lived experiences. According to him, "For many kinds of learning, adults are themselves the richest resources for one another; hence the greater emphasis in adult education on such techniques – group discussion, simulation exercises, laboratory experiences, field experiences, problem-solving projects, and the like – that make use of the experiences of learners".

Actually, the interactions between teacher and students and among students themselves play an essential role in the reflective practice development as interactions foster the students' capability to review mental models and professional practices through inquiry and reflection (Lissak and Ross, 1999; Meyers, 1991; Schön, 1983).

In his analysis of the students' relationships in class, Meyers (1991, p. 31) observes that "confronting questions and conclusions of fellow students, often different from one's own, adds to the disequilibrium that helps to shake students from their egocentric perceptions of the world".

Lissack and Ross (1999) observe that to learn from others' experiences is to learn from stories. Stories are able to face people with the huge challenges presented by the real world. As a result, storytelling allows others to benefit from shared experiences, as they relate to fact, context and emotion and bring their own interpretation to what they hear or read. Actually, learning happens from interaction.

The importance of developing reflective practice based on social interactions is referred by Brookfield (1987), Dewey (1933), Raelin (2002) and Rodgers (2002). These authors affirm that the process of recognizing and exploring mental models, identifying alternative forms of thinking and action, and developing self-knowledge is more effective when accomplished in the company of others. The main reason for this, according to Brookfield (1987, p. 25), is that "when we realize that what were perceived as unique tragedies and difficulties are, in fact, shared by many others, there is an immediate reduction of self-doubt". They also understand that solutions found in similar situations may also be appropriate to their problems; in other words, they can bring other perspectives that they had not considered before.

Schön (1983, p. 236) apply these ideas to the field of management and states that "The field of management has long been marked by a conflict between two competing views of professional knowledge. On the first view, the manager is a technician, whose practice consists in applying to the everyday problems of his organization the principles and methods derived from management science. On the second, the manager is a craftsman, a practitioner of an art of managing that cannot be reduced to explicit rules and theories".

The beginning to heal this split is, according to this author, the recognition that the art of management includes something like science in action. Thus a more comprehensive, useful, and reflective management science could be built by extending and elaborating on what skillful managers actually do. In other words, their artistry will be developed based on their experiences and how they share them with other managers, in order to enrich the repertoire used in the reflective practice.

Aware of the complex environment executives face in their decision-making and attempting to incorporate more reflective experiences in their formal education programs, many schools of management are revamping their curriculum and courses design. As research

reported above show, these schools have a worthy resource to do it: students' experiences that can be shared to stimulate the reflective practice. To point out options to enhance the process of sharing experiences in Executive MBA Programs, this paper focused on executives' perceptions of learning by sharing experiences; how opportunities for sharing experiences emerge from teamwork; how these opportunities are created by instructors; and structural features that facilitate and instigate students to learn by sharing experiences.

4 METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This research is based on the subjectivist approach in social sciences, as classified by Morgan and Smircich (1980). It is part of a doctoral dissertation that has the purpose to investigate how Executive MBA Programs contribute to executives' reflective practice development.

The theoretical framework of executives' reflective practice is based on a composition of theories, as it was not possible to find studies that investigate specifically this theme. The empirical evidences are based on 20 semi-structured interviews with executives enrolled in an American Executive MBA Program ranked among the top five in the world in at least three of the studies carried out by Business Week (rankings published in 15th October 2001, 20th October 2003 and 24th October 2005) and Financial Times (rankings published in 15th October 2001, 11th October 2002, 20th October 2003, and 11th November 2004). In addition to the interviews, the researcher observed some classes, study groups meetings, and informal relationships among executives.

The selection of interviewed executives was based on the purposeful random sampling, described by Patton (2002), as they were chosen randomly among all executives enrolled in the Executive MBA Program investigated. As proposed by Triviños (1995), executives were selected considering the following elements: those whose experiences are considered important to comprehend and discuss the subject investigated, and availability to be interviewed.

Interviews were recorded preserving the identification of the subjects. Each interview lasted 1 hour in average. Some of the executives' statements are quoted in section 5. In these cases, each executive will be referred to by coded letters to maintain a high level of confidentiality, in accordance to the University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

All data were registered in a research diary that as well as the transcribed interviews, included field notes (data collected from observations, conversations with MBA instructors, administrators and practitioners), and researcher notes (the researcher reflections on the interviews, observations, and related conversations).

Data analysis was based on a phenomenological approach for qualitative data proposed by Minayo (1998). Analysis of the interviews meant checking and cross-checking utterances from different areas of the transcripts against one another to ensure consistency of meaning and categorisation. Each individual interview was analyzed using categories stemming from the literature and the original research interest, but added to these as new categories emerged from the data. Categories that had emerged from individual interviews were then tested against the rest of data. In this way categories common across the interviews, and those which were not, were identified and analyzed. The subjectivism, inevitably involved in this kind of qualitative analysis, was attenuated through the use of different data sources (data triangulation) and a careful process of confirmation and re-confirmation of the categories that emerged from data analysis.

5 LEARNING BY SHARING EXPERIENCES: EXECUTIVE'S EXPERIENCES

In the program studied, classes' schedule does not require participants to suspend their careers. This is an important feature to the learning process effectiveness as it allows students to apply new concepts immediately in their workplace, and bring to the classroom their daily experiences and problems to be discussed with other students. Another feature is the diversity of executives' experiences and skills, as they represent firms of different sizes, as well as private, public and nonprofit organizations.

All participants pondered that the opportunities for sharing experiences provided along the program are one of the most valuable learning experiences they have ever had. By sharing their experiences, they felt encouraged to reflect on their own thoughts, decisions, and actions. Listening to stories about different mental models and perspectives to face an issue or specific situation contributed to their reflective practice development. The Executive D statement illustrates executives' general perceptions on that: "I learned a lot based on their experiences. They have different experiences than you have, and they share them with you. Thus because of that, whether you're open or not, sometimes it just forces you to look at things in a different way" (Executive D, personal communication, May 15, 2004).

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According to Executive L, "the fact that here I am able to interact with people with different experiences from mine gives me a completely different way of looking at issues" (Executive L, personal communication, May 9, 2004).

Executive Ls agrees with these perceptions when she observes that "It is not only from what we learn from the material in class or what the instructor teaches, but what we learn from each other. You are amongst a group of very talented people and you discuss things with them and this creates an environment that makes you wonder why you did not think about this before? Or you get out of the class and decide to think about how you can do that better. I think that definitely, it creates the opportunity to do more reflective thinking" (Executive Ls, personal communication, April 16, 2004).

During the program, the opportunities for sharing experiences are created by interactive situations in classroom, team meetings, as well as in social situations out of the classroom. The Executive MBA Program structure promotes the interactions student-student and student-instructor, both in formal and informal ways. In these interactions, students are stimulated to expose and discuss their professional and personal experiences, bringing together theoretical concepts and their own practice.

In the classroom, instructors encourage the process of experiences' sharing with provocative questions that trigger the students' reflections on specific situations of their practice both in individual and in a collective way. In the interviews, participants observe that instructors assume the role of a coach and stimulate the process of (1) sharing experiences; (2) reflecting on their own decisions; (3) reflecting on others' experiences and decisions; (4) developing new mental models. By doing that, they use a combination of interactive methodologies that emphasize theory and practice relationships, such as cases, teamwork, discussions, role playing, and interactive lectures.

Concerning the teamwork, since the beginning of the program students are assigned to specific study teams. These teams are composed by students with diverse background, experience, skills, and culture. The team learning and the diversity of its members' profiles provide (1) the learning from different perspectives presented in discussions; (2) the increase of critical thinking skills; (3) an enhancement of their repertoire that will enrich their reflective practice; (4) a practical experience of the complex process of leading and following teams. According to executives, the emphasis on teamwork provides unique opportunities to learn from other executives' experiences: "We have a good mix of people. You learn in a

number of ways, you learn first of all by the fact that you go to a room with a five or six other people for a considerable amount of time, you learn how they deal with problems, you learn how they deal with challenges, you learn how they solve problems. You also learn from their background, they try to create groups where there are distinct areas of expertise, so you will probably learn also from their areas of expertise" (Executive An, personal communication, May 21, 2004).

Executive F opinion is that "the study group methodology that is used forces you to think differently, because everybody has different ideas, so you have to listen to the rational for those ideas, and you would be foolish if you are not learning something from that... I think that in an open, non-threatening environment you can disagree on a case, or a case write-up, or how a negotiation should be handled or how a crisis should be managed without worrying about any sort of repercussions. You know you're going to have a beer after class or whatever and just laugh about it. In a work environment you can't do that, because you're typically going back and forth with your superiors, or maybe your subordinates and you just don't have the flexibility and that freedom to be open to more different approaches" (Executive F, personal communication, April 29, 2004).

Executive L emphasizes the team building applied in the program: "I love that about his program: the team building aspect. They put you in a group with the people who you aren't familiar with and you are forced to work together and it is life in essence" (Executive L, personal communication, May 9, 2004).

In this program, executives also have the opportunity to interact with international students by enrolling in a course that takes place in a foreign country or American Executive MBA Program classes where they interact with students from other countries. These initiatives provide opportunities for learning to "see differently out to reflect differently in" as proposed by Gosling and Mintzberg (2003). Executive W exemplifies how executives perceive this experience: "Here you have gotten an incredible diversity of experience, age, and nationality. In our international experience, I was in a room with a group of eight people and I was the only one that was born in the United States. And to me that was just a delightful experience. Spending a week sharing experiences on a daily basis with a person who was born in Mexico, China, Hong Kong, Germany, Switzerland, and Israel was just a really unique opportunity to share different experiences" (Executive W, personal communication, May 27, 2004).

Informal interactions happen during classes' breaks, meal time, leisure time, social events, and other activities. These interactions give executives the opportunity to network,

share personal and professional experiences, and develop a more systemic view of the corporate world. "The experiences we share in the classroom and outside of the classroom at dinner or having a beer downstairs that is where we learn". (Executive Fa, personal communication, May 1, 2004)

During the observations, it was possible to identify on the MBA program the presence of two basic conditions that, according to Dewey (1933), make an experience valuable for reflective thinking: the interaction with the real world and a continuity that promotes a connection among the various experiences lived and shared.

The spiral movement between action and reflection, analyzed in the experiential learning theory, was identified in the MBA program investigated when executives (1) apply the experiences and concepts addressed in class, study groups, and informal conversations at their professional practice; (2) share their personal and professional experiences; (3) experience the dynamic of learning in teams; (4) analyze real world situations portrayed in case studies; (5) dramatize situations from real life.

The fact that executives maintain their professional activities while going through the Executive MBA Program increases their chances of applying what they have learned. This is an important element for the effectiveness of the learning process, as it enables them to apply content and experiences shared in school to their daily activities, test them, and return to school with new alternatives to be reviewed. Therefore, an experiential learning cycle is created, as proposed by Kolb (1984).

Moreover, the ideas reported in interviews indicated that by sharing experiences, executives felt encouraged to reflect on their experiences from different perspectives provided by other executives' experiences. As a result, the program contributed not only to enhance their knowledge on management disciplines, but also to the development of a systemic thinking, new mental models, a creative and critical approach to solve organization problems and, most of all, the reflective practice.

6 CONCLUSION

Considering the idea that executives in command of organizations should develop their reflective practice in order to face challenges presented by the increasing complexity of the society, this study contributes to support the importance of shared experiences to the development of executives' reflective practice. By sharing experiences and hearing stories

about different mental models and perspectives for dealing with the same or similar questions, executives feel encouraged to reflect on their own thoughts, decisions and actions, contributing to the development of their reflective practice and, as a consequence, to the effectiveness of decision-making.

The Executive MBA Program investigated in this paper discloses and describes in some detail the architecture essential for the development of executives' reflective practice. This architecture was described in terms of the opportunities for sharing experiences created in teamwork (diversity of members, international initiatives, the experience of leading and following teams, collective learning); instructor performance in fostering these opportunities (assuming the role of a coach, using a combination of interactive methodologies); and structural features that facilitate and instigate students to learn by sharing experiences (interactions student-student and student-instructor in formal and informal ways, part-time schedule). These elements encourage the process of learning by sharing experiences, as well as a systematic and continuous exercise of reflective practice.

Moreover, many executives consider that a decision to enroll in the Executive MBA Program is a recognition that they need to reflect on their decision-making process. As a consequence, from the moment this decision is made, they are ready for changing, which is an open door to the reflective practice development. This is important because any proposal that aims to develop reflective practitioners needs to keep in mind that while changing beliefs and behaviors is important, it is even more critical to sustain and maintain them. This will depend on how deep is the transformation in mental models and the effective incorporation of reflection-action as a daily practice.

The executives perceptions reported in this paper should be seriously considered by management schools that want to be successful in providing organizations and the society with effective executives. The empirical research focus on an Executive MBA Program and does not limit its contributions to other kinds of management education programs; although it is important to take into account the specific characteristics of any program.

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