



ADMINISTRAÇÃO  
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# SHARING EXPERIENCES AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING: COMPARING AN AMERICAN WITH A BRAZILIAN EXECUTIVE MBA PROGRAM

O COMPARTILHAMENTO DE EXPERIÊNCIAS COMO FONTE DE APRENDIZADO:  
COMPARANDO UM PROGRAMA DE MBA EXECUTIVO BRASILEIRO COM UM  
AMERICANO

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## RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar influências do processo de compartilhar experiências para o desenvolvimento da prática reflexiva dos executivos e comparar o uso dessa estratégia de ensino-aprendizagem em dois Programas de MBA Executivo. O conceito de prática reflexiva, apresentado por Schön (1983), pode ser considerado uma opção valiosa para o aumento da efetividade do processo decisório dos executivos. A aprendizagem baseada no compartilhamento de experiências estimula o desenvolvimento da prática reflexiva. A pesquisa de campo foi aplicada em duas escolas de negócios, uma nos EUA e outra no Brasil. Os resultados indicaram que o processo de compartilhar experiências é essencial para o desenvolvimento da prática reflexiva nesses programas. Entretanto, foram identificadas diferenças no uso dessa estratégia de ensino-aprendizagem e apresentadas alternativas para aprimorar os resultados da aprendizagem baseada no compartilhamento de experiências no Programa de MBA Executivo no Brasil.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Prática Reflexiva. Experiências Compartilhadas. Educação Executiva.

## ABSTRACT

*This paper has the purpose to analyze the influences of sharing experiences to the development of executives' reflective practice and to compare the use of this instructional strategy in two Executive MBA Programs. The reflective practice concept, presented by Schön (1983), can be considered as a worthy option to increase the effectiveness of executives'*

*decision-making process. Learning by sharing experiences encourages the development of the reflective practice. The empirical research was applied at two Business Schools, one in USA and the other in Brazil. Results indicated that the process of learning by sharing experiences is essential to a successful development of reflective practice in both Executive MBA Programs investigated. However, we identified several differences in the use of this learning strategy and presented some alternatives to enhance the results of learning by sharing experiences in the Executive MBA Program in Brazil.*

#### KEYWORDS

*Reflective Practice. Sharing Experiences. Executive Education.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the organizational context, executives are challenged to make effective decisions that overcome the ambiguity and instability in both internal and external environments. The reflective practice concept, proposed by Schön (1983), is an alternative to enhance the effectiveness of executives' decisions. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the importance of sharing experiences to the development of executives' reflective practice and to compare the use of this instructional strategy in two Executive MBA Programs.

The choice of investigating Executive MBA Programs was based on some specific characteristics of these programs: (1) they are designed for executives, and tailored to their professionals' needs; (2) the exercise of reflective practice can be encouraged during the length of the program; (3) along the program, executives share a common experience of professional and personal development.

In the following, we first present a short review of the reflective practice concept and its relevance on executives' decision-making process. Then we review the literature about the development of the reflective practice in Executive Education Programs.

After that the methodology is described. In the subsequent section, we summarize the results and, in the final section, we present conclusions.

## THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

According to Schön (1983), the reflective practice is based on the ideas of knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action. *Knowing-in-action* is a spontaneous and usual action that happens in daily practices. It can be identified when practitioners learn how to do something and become capable of executing it in smooth sequences of activity, recognition, decision, and adjustment without having to think about it. 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 in attending to the signals that produce it; (2) respond to it by reflection. This reflection, continues the author, 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.

- People may *reflect-in-action* in the midst of an action, without suspending it. They reshape what they are doing while doing it.

Schön (1983, p. 243) stated 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 warned 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 to learn how to do what they can do.

The relevance of developing reflective practice in decision-making processes is related to executives’ role in making organizational strategic decisions and leading changes. This role was showed in several studies, introduced by Argyris (2002), Drucker (2003), Ghoshal, Arnzen, and Brownfield (1992), Gosling and Mintzberg (2003), Mintzberg (1989), Senge (2003), Schön (1975). According to Mintzberg (1989, p. 24), managers work is vital in the society, as they define how organizations serve the society and how its talents and resources are managed. Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) found that many organizations face key problems: (1) they are focused on action, but they are not so adept at stepping back to reflect on their situations; (2) others face the opposite: they are so involved in the reflective process on their

problems that they cannot get things done fast enough. And, indeed, there are those afflicted by both problems. These two aspects establish the bounds of management: action and reflection. In this context, managers need to stop, think and reflect profoundly on their experiences, as it is important to appreciate the past before using the present to obtain a better future. The ideas presented by these authors indicate the importance of developing the reflective practice in executives’ decision-making processes.

### THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Dewey (1933) is considered the precursor of the reflective thinking concept as an essential element of learning and education. According to him, all real learning occurs over time, as people move between the world of thinking and the world of action. 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.

Regarding the development of reflective thinking in Higher Education, Light and Cox (2001, p. 63) proposed 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”.

In his analysis of Higher Education, Schön (1987) mentioned the 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 in order to prepare the students to become reflective practitioners, capable to cope with complex and multi-faceted problems.

In accordance with this idea, Bennis and O’Toole (2005) affirmed that the educational crisis in business administration is a consequence, among other things, of the dilemma between rigor and relevance. These authors criticized the academic excellence model used in MBA schools that consider the rigor of scientific research as the principal indicator of performance. The problem, according to these authors, is not related to the scientific rigor, but to the fact that they have disregarded other forms of knowledge. Thus, it is necessary for Business Schools to seek a balance between scientific rigor and practical relevance.

A number of authors, such as Grey (2004); Gosling and Mintzberg (2003); G. Smith (2003); P. Smith (2001); Reynolds and Vince (2004); Roglio (2006); Schön (1987), have examined alternatives to these critiques, and analyzed different possibilities for restructuring management education programs. These investigations presented a reflective approach to management education, and given the characteristics of students enrolled in these programs, draw on experiential learning theory and adult education as useful theoretical reference points.

The focus on experience, proposed by the Experiential Learning Theory, is 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, p. 38) defined learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”. This author added 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.

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. 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. Regarding executive education, this author argued 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 process of adult learning has been extensively investigated by Knowles (1984). Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (2005) presented a conceptual framework for adult education based on six basic premises which they argued differentiates adult learners from children as learners. Adult learners were distinguished as having: a need to know, a self-concept, life experience as a resource for learning, a readiness to learn, immediate knowledge application, and

internal motivation to learn. Executive Education Programs are particularly well served by adult-learner principles, since executives are usually experienced practitioners with opportunities to apply their knowledge in practice, have responsibility for their own learning, and demonstrate readiness and motivation to learn. These features are critical conditions for facilitating the development of reflective practice, which can be intentionally applied and tested in the executives' decision-making process, facilitating an understanding of its fundamentals, applicability, and consequences.

From the andragogical perspective, the notion of *teaching adults* is replaced by the idea of *helping them to learn*. Dewey (1933), addressing this issue, stated that learning is the students' responsibility: only they can learn, for themselves; therefore it is up to them to take the initiative. But the instructor should be their guide, facilitating their learning. He/she needs to draw upon the students' past experiences, expectations, desires, and interests as these will strongly influence their process of reflection and learning.

Actually, the interactions between instructor 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; ROSS, 1999; MEYERS, 1991; SCHÖN, 1983). Lissack and Ross (1999) affirmed 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 emphasized by Brookfield (1987), Dewey (1933), Raelin (2002), and Rodgers (2002). In accordance with

these authors, the process of recognizing and exploring mental models, identifying alternative forms of thinking and action, and self-knowing is more effective 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. In this respect, Raelin (2002, p. 66) stated that "In its public form, reflective practice is associated with learning dialogues. These types of discussions, rather than constituting an exchange of statements of viewpoints, bring to the surface - in the safe presence of trusting peers - the social, political, and emotional data that arise from direct experience with one another. Often these data are precisely those that might be blocking operating effectiveness."

As a consequence of the issues presented so far, some schools of management are attempting to incorporate more reflective experiences in their formal education programs. As research reported above showed, these schools have a worthy resource to do it: students' experiences as a source of learning. 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.

## METHODOLOGY

The empirical research was organized in two distinct phases. In the phase 1 - that lasted from

April to June 2004 - data were collected through 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 15<sup>th</sup> October 2001, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2003 and 24<sup>th</sup> October 2005), *Financial Times* (rankings published in 15<sup>th</sup> October 2001, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2002, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2003, and 11<sup>th</sup> November 2004), and the *Wall Street Journal* (published in 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2008). In the phase 2 - that lasted from August 2007 to October 2008 - we made 20 interviews with executives enrolled in an Executive MBA Program in Brazil. In addition to the interviews, we 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 EMBA Programs investigated. 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.

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 categorization. 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.

## **RESULTS: SHARING EXPERIENCES AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING**

In the Executive MBA Programs investigated, it was possible to identify 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 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 both programs 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.

Associated with the experiential approach, a key feature of these programs to the development of reflective practice was the students' profile: they were all adult-learners, as defined by Knowles (1984). They all had experience in executive positions, did not suspend their professional career during the program, and had made a personal commitment to obtain an MBA. The fact that executives sustained professional activities while participating in the Executive MBA Program increased opportunities to both put into practice what they had learned and to share concrete experiences of that practice. This is an important element for enhancing the learning process since it enables them to apply both the academic content and concrete experiences shared in the school to their daily activities and to test them out in an expert

community. Many times, they returned to school with new alternatives to be shared and analyzed.

The importance of sustaining professional activities during the Executive MBA was mentioned by all interviewees. Executive M and Executive Lf statements illustrate this position: "If I have had to suspend my career during the EMBA, I would not have the chance to apply theory to real examples or experiences [...] Many times I had a chance to discuss new concepts I've learned in the classes in my workplace" (Executive M, personal communication, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2007). According to Executive Lf, "the knowledge we develop during the EMBA has to be applied to our daily activities [...] it is very important to apply knowledge in practice" (Executive Lf, personal communication, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2007).

In the programs investigated, executives had a great diversity of experiences and skills, as they work in firms from diverse industries and sizes, as well as private, public and nonprofit organizations. This is important in the way that this diversity encouraged them to reflect on and understand different realities and mental models. Executive Mt reported that many times he draw a check list to analyze his way of doing things based on experiences shared with his classmates.

Regarding the learning process based on sharing experiences, we found significant differences between executives' perceptions and, in particular, the infrastructure provided by schools to support this practice. In the American Executive MBA Program, all participants pondered that the opportunities for sharing experiences along the program were 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. 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, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2004).

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, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2004). Executive Ls agreed with these perceptions when she observed 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, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2004).

During the American Executive MBA Program, opportunities for sharing experiences were created by interactive situations in classroom, team meetings, as well as in social situations out of the classroom. The way this program is organized and its infrastructure promote interactions student-student and student-instructor, both in formal and informal ways. In these interactions, students were motivated to expose and discuss their professional and personal experiences, bringing together theoretical concepts and their own practice.

Executives observed that instructors assumed the role of a coach and stimulated 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 instructional strategies that emphasized theory and practice relationships, such as cases, teamwork, discussions, role playing, and interactive lectures.

Concerning the instructional strategy of teamwork, since the beginning of the American Executive MBA Program students were assigned to specific study teams. These teams were composed by students with diverse backgrounds, experiences, skills, and cultures. Team learning and the diversity of its members provided (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 the executives, the emphasis on teamwork provided 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, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2004).

Executive F opinion was 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 rationale 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, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2004).

In the American Executive MBA Program, executives also had the opportunity to interact with international students by enrolling in (1) a course that takes place in a foreign country, or (2) American Executive MBA Program classes where they interact with students from other countries. These initiatives provided opportunities for learning to "see differently out to reflect differently in". Executive W exemplified how executives perceived 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, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2004).

Informal interactions happened during breaks, meals, leisure, social events, and other activities. These interactions gave 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, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2004).

In the Brazilian Executive MBA Program, most executives recognized that they learned a lot by sharing experiences with classmates and professors. Executive Sa reported that she had learned a lot about other industries and had a chance to identify opportunities to improve their job: "One thing I believe we will never forget is the experience we've shared with colleagues, specially those who were working in different industries from

ours" (Executive Sa, personal communication, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007).

Executive Mt utterance exemplified the prevailing perception about this subject among the executives: "Without question! The other classmates helped a lot in my learning process. They helped me to change the way I was looking at many situations" (Executive Mt, personal communication, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2007). Only one interviewee said that he did not learn a lot through this kind of experience: "I was hoping to learn more from my classmates' experiences [...] some of them did not want to share or did not have relevant experiences to present" (Executive M, personal communication, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2007).

We detected, though, that Brazilian executives were not as excited about learning by sharing experiences as Americans. One of the reasons is the variation in the infrastructure provided by the schools. In USA almost all executives lived in other cities. As a consequence, the American Program offered all facilities at the same place: accommodations, restaurant, classrooms, meeting rooms, leisure spaces so that all executives had the chance to stay together from Friday (starting at 2 p.m.) to Sunday (at 11 a.m.) or Saturday (at 6 p.m.), depending on the classes' schedule. In Brazil, all executives lived in the same place where the program took place and just were in the school during classes' time (from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. on Fridays and from 8 a.m. to 12 a.m. on Saturdays). As a consequence, informal interactions (during breaks, meals, leisure, social events, and other activities) for sharing experiences were unusual at the Brazilian school investigated.

Another consequence was that teamwork meetings at the American school also happened during the weekend while students are in the school, and they had special private rooms with a layout and technological devices appropriate to this kind of meeting. In Brazil, executives did not have meeting rooms specially designed for teamwork meetings. Teams worked together at the same

classroom during classes' time, without privacy or any technological support. Also the teamwork's members were defined by students themselves and they were allowed to change teams as they want, which is a totally different process from that used in the USA school, where there was a concern about defining teams composed by students with diverse backgrounds, experiences, skills, and cultures.

Concerning the instructors' role in the classroom, Brazilian executives were not so positive about their ability to instigate the development of reflective practice as the Americans. Most of the interviewed executives observed that instructors with academic as well as professional experiences were those more effective in motivating the development of the reflective practice during the classes. These statements illustrate some opinions about this subject: "One instructors' strength is the practical experience when he/she works. We've had bad theoretical classes with instructors without practical experience" (Executive M, personal communication, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2007). "Not all instructors had practical experiences, so I believe that having a PhD is not enough, the instructor has to know the real life in organizations" (Executive Sa, personal communication, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2007).

Another difference between the programs is that in Brazil executives do not have international experiences. As mentioned before by Executive W, the international experience was just a unique opportunity to see the world through different eyes. The ideas reported in interviews indicated that by sharing experiences with students from all over the world, executives felt encouraged to reflect on their experiences from totally different perspectives. 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 the reflective practice. The lack of an international experience is then a significant

weakness of the Brazilian Executive MBA Program investigated.

All differences between the programs identified in this research have an influence in the significance imputed by the interviewees to the process of learning by sharing experiences. They also suggest that Brazilian executives did not have the chance to take a full advantage of this valuable source of learning.

## CONCLUSIONS

In order to analyze the influences of sharing experiences to the development of executives' reflective practice, we compared the use of this instructional strategy in two Executive MBA Programs. Considering 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 contributed to support the importance of shared experiences to the development of executives' reflective practice.

We recognize that there are significant differences between Executive MBA Programs in USA and Executive MBA Programs in Brazil. One reason of these differences is the consistent experience in designing, organizing, and managing this type of program in USA: the first Executive MBA Program was created at the University of Chicago in 1943, based on the Full-time MBA Program instituted in 1881 by the University of Wharton. At the same time, research carried out regularly by specialized journals repeatedly classifies the American programs at the highest positions in the rankings of world's best Executive MBA Programs. Another reason is the value organizations give to executive education in USA. Most of the executives enrolled in the Executive MBA Program investigated were supported by their companies.

In spite of the differences, we firmly believe that the results presented in this paper can contribute to enhance the effectiveness of Executive MBA Programs in Brazil. The first recommendation is the improvement of the infrastructure, including private spaces specially designed to teamwork and areas planned to encourage informal interactions for sharing experiences. We believe it would be also important to extend the time executives are in the school in order to enhance opportunities for learning by sharing experiences. Concerning the instructors, directors should have the concern to choose instructors with a consistent practical experience associated to a solid academic background. Another recommendation is to give executives the opportunity of having an international experience, so that they could experience the reality of individuals and organizations in other cultures, and create an international network.

The comparison between the Executive MBA Programs investigated in this paper discloses and describes in some detail a design for the development of executives' reflective practice. This design was described in terms of the opportunities for sharing experiences created in teamwork (diversity of members, international initiatives, collective learning); and infrastructure that facilitates and instigates students to learn by sharing experiences (interactions student-student and student-instructor in formal and informal ways). These elements encourage the process of learning by sharing experiences, as well as a systematic and continuous exercise of reflective practice. They should be seriously considered by Management Schools that want to be successful in providing organizations and the society with effective executives. ➔

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