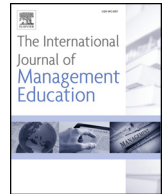




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## Inside the borders but outside the box: An immersion program aligned with the PRME and the SDG to foster reflexivity

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### ABSTRACT

How can reflexivity be fostered among future managers? This article presents the dynamics and impacts of an immersion program used by a business management and public administration school based in São Paulo, Brazil, for 13 years. Every year, students conduct research for 20–30 days on public, social, and private organizations, coordinating projects focused on economic and social development and promoting citizenship. These projects occur in poor regions far from the largest urban centers in Brazil. After visiting areas and situations within the country's borders that are unknown to them, the students bring their experiences back to the classroom to be analyzed, recorded, and shared. We evaluated the impact of this program on the participants and observed the following: prejudices and stereotypes were reconsidered; a richer and more complex view of reality was achieved; and new ways of acting in the world were adopted. We argue that immersion in social projects fosters reflexivity, and we encourage fellow educators to consider adopting transdisciplinary programs of this type as a teaching strategy to educate reflexive managers and to prepare them for work and life.

### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to show how an immersive, transdisciplinary program may develop reflexivity among future managers. We hope to share this experience with fellow educators interested in Responsible Management Education (RME). As the world faces urgent matters concerning its future, addressing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) is an opportunity to take sustainability seriously (Weybrecht, 2017). Managers (and future managers) need to cross mental borders (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002) and to change epistemological beliefs (Hardy & Tolhurst, 2014). To achieve these objectives, new forms of experiential education must be implemented to bridge theory and practice and to foster new forms of thinking and acting (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013; Parkes et al., 2017).

We present and assess the impacts of the Immersive Study and Research Program (ISRP) offered for 13 years by a Brazilian business management and public administration school that has been a signatory of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) since 2009. This program identifies successful social management cases implemented by public, social, and private organizations (Moulaert, Martinelli, Swyngedouw, & Gonzalez, 2005; Tandler, 1998) and then sends undergraduate students to study, interact with, and learn from them (see Bresler, Spink, dos Santos, & Alves, 2008). Our field inquiry was guided by the following research question: what impact does an immersive program, based on social projects, have on its participants?

We were initially motivated by the passionate statements the students shared with us and on social media after participating in the program. However, once we began our inquiry, we realized that certain characteristics of the program – for instance, the

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immersion in different realities, the contact with troublesome social problems, and the perspective of the (rather young) researchers as humble learners – made this program, if not unique, at least a very rich experiment to be shared with colleagues from the Responsible Management Education community.

The ISRP was established in the mid-2000s and has been transdisciplinary since the beginning, including students from both business management and public administration courses. The program is aligned with the situational learning concept of [Lave and Wenger \(1991\)](#), a teaching strategy based on the work of Alexei Leontiev, John Dewey, and Lev Vygotsky. These psycho-educators suggested that learning and development result from the interaction between individuals and social, historical, and cultural settings. In the learning process, students must immerse themselves in procedural and “authentic activities,” becoming part of “communities of practice.” Rather than receiving formal and ready knowledge, students must observe and build understanding ([Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989](#)) based on local activities and knowledge ([Geertz, 1983](#)). The territory itself is an opportunity for experiential learning ([Kolb, 1984](#)).

In management teaching, situational learning has been employed to fill the gap between theory and practice using ethnographic activities ([Zhu & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013](#)), tasks that reproduce dynamic and complex work environments ([Lovelace, Eggers & Dick, 2016](#)), and experiences in which students study outside their countries of origin ([Sroufe, Sivasubramaniam, Ramos, & Saiia, 2015](#)).

The professors who developed the ISRP were inspired by two prior experiences. One was the international exchange programs in which students of the school participated, an initiative that significantly enriched students’ cultural repertoire. The other was the principles of the pedagogy of alternation, in which students alternate classroom time with periods of everyday professional work ([Clemet & Demol, 2002](#)). Another relevant source of inspiration was a program organized by the school and sponsored by the Ford FoundationFord Foundation, which consisted of assessing, recognizing, awarding, and publicizing notable social innovation cases. The program was not originally intended to be aligned with the PRME, although the institution responsible for it was an early signatory of the principles. However, throughout the years, the program developed to be highly aligned with both the PRME and the SDG. Over its 13 annual cycles, this initiative unveiled dozens of social projects throughout Brazil that had a substantial impact.

At the time that the ISRP was established, students attending the school were mostly white, affluent, and raised in the city of São Paulo and other large Brazilian urban centers. The program’s original objective was to foster citizenship, encourage more collaborative attitudes, and expand its participants’ vision of the world by taking them to places where life was quite different from what they had experienced. Another goal was that students would develop the skills necessary for empirical scientific research and that when coming into contact with the social technologies developed on the front line of social problems, they would be able to recognize the importance of local knowledge ([Geertz, 1983](#)).

The program benefited from the fact that the institution had an ample structure of applied research centers and faculty who researched transdisciplinary topics such as sustainability, gender issues, and financial inclusion. This structure was supported by an extensive network of contacts nationwide, which from the beginning provided access to relevant cases.

Between 2005 and 2017, a total of 220 undergraduate students (participants) and 103 graduate students (supervisors) in business management and public administration attended 20- and 30-day immersions during July. From 2008 to 2014, the program also involved students from public universities far from São Paulo. These students worked jointly with those of the organizing school, enriching the experience with new perspectives and knowledge.

We believe this program to be of interest for the RME community for the following reasons: first, it presents the case of a program implemented in an emerging country setting, where social issues are especially acute; second, it advances extant discussions about the impact of immersive programs as one of many alternatives to foster the PRME; third, it reveals reflexivity as a core competence to be developed among future managers; and fourth, it presents a blueprint for fellow educators interested in the implementation of immersive programs aligned with the PRME and the SDG. Ultimately, it shows how reflexivity emerges from a field experience, stimulating students to question their beliefs and world views and eventually to look for new career paths aligned with the SDG.

Following this introduction, the remainder of this article is organized into five sections. Section 2 presents the theoretical background of the theme. Section 3 describes the research methods employed. Section 4 describes the program’s dynamics. Section 5 presents the impacts and analyzes the program. In that section, we argue that the impacts of the program include improving participants’ reflexivity ([Cunliffe, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2016; Hibbert, 2012; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013](#)). Section 6 conveys our concluding remarks, including the spin-offs of the original program and caveats for educators interested in implementing similar programs.

## 2. PRME: learning by doing ... differently

Elite business schools are commonly celebrated for their excellence in research and education. Rankings such as those provided by the University of Texas at Dallas (for publications in selected journals) and the Financial Times (for MBAs) signal top achievers. However, business schools are also engines for societal change through their activities in knowledge generation (conducting research) and dissemination (teaching and learning).

Indeed, business and management institutions’ influence on companies and society is beyond dispute. They play a key role in educating leaders and shaping their mindsets. Students are potentially the future influencers of corporate agendas and providers of solutions for complex problems.

As stated in the call for papers for this special issue, business and management institutions need to incorporate values and concepts related to sustainability, ethics, and social responsibility into their processes and practices. In fact, as proposed by Angel Cabrera: “Let’s not waste a good crisis!” ([Rasche & Escudero, 2009, p. 244](#)).

Business schools have been increasingly encouraged to promote transdisciplinary learning and to include in their teaching programs subjects related to social issues (e.g., [Alcaraz & Thiruvattal, 2017; Neal, 2017; Anderson, Mason, Hibbert, & Rivers, 2017;](#)

2018). In fact, social issues are frequently associated with grand challenges (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016) and are inherently transdisciplinary. They demand knowledge and skills from different fields. The frontline of issues such as poverty, hunger, quality education, gender equality, and inequality, to name a few, has no silos. The challenge is of even greater importance in emerging nations, in which problems involving poverty, social inequality, gender issues, and the poor quality of healthcare, education, transportation, and public security services are even more severe than in developed countries.

The SDG set a common agenda for transformation. By the same token, the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) play a key role in this endeavor because they comprehend a set of principles to guide changes. As explained by Rasche and Escudero (2009), the PRME grew partially from the challenge placed by business leaders committed to the United Nations Global Compact (Global Compact, 2018) on educational institutions to assist future business leaders in understanding the challenges of responsible management. The answer was developed between 2006 and 2007 by a task force of 60 deans, university presidents, and scholars and took the form of six principles, which may be broadly categorized as purpose, values, methods, research, partnership, and dialog (Sroufe, Sivasubramaniam, Ramos, & Saiia, 2014). Since then, more than 700 institutions have become signatories (see PRME, 2018).

According to Sroufe et al. (2014), schools may use a plethora of methods to incorporate the PRME principles, ranging from the creation of new electives to the remodeling of entire programs. Accordingly, in 2015, the Academy of Management Learning & Education published the “Special Section Cluster on Responsible Management Education: Nurturing an Emerging PRME Ethos,” in which it offers a “set of reviews of resources in the PRME domain, including four new books and an overview of two on-line repositories of PRME-related teaching resources” (see Forray, Leigh, & Kenworthy, 2015, p. 293). Outside of the classroom, experiential programs are especially praised by the PRME agenda. In 2017, the International Journal of Management Education published a PRME 10th Anniversary Special Issue (see Parkes, Buono, & Howaisy, 2017), in which original contributions were organized into four sections, as follows: “The state of the world and the role of business schools,” with seven papers; “How business schools do responsible management education,” with 16 papers; “Reflection and call to action,” with two papers; and book reviews, with two reviews.

Despite the progress, Hibbert and Cunliffe (2013) warn us about the danger of disconnecting practice and theory. To take personal responsibility for their actions, students must each day be deeply affected and impacted by their learning. In other words, far from passive or merely cognitive, knowledge must be felt and embodied to allow the creation of new, ethical attitudes—which is what students will take away for life after the course is finished. We believe the program analyzed in this paper is aligned with this principle.

### 3. Methods

To better describe the ISRP and assess its impact on participants, thus answering our research question, we organized a qualitative survey. This survey followed the principle of data triangulation (Eisenhardt, 1995) and involved interviews, monitoring an entire cycle of the program, reviewing documents, and collecting the perceptions of participants using questionnaires.

First, we held in-depth interviews with four professors who had been in charge of the program. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. This material formed the basis for building a narrative on the establishment and development of the program. Additionally, we studied two articles and one report written by three of these professors. The articles and reports focused on the genesis of the program and analyzed some program cycles.

Second, one of the coauthors of this article followed an entire cycle of the program in 2017, from the selection of a case to the presentation of the final project, and acted as a student supervisor during an experience. This coauthor maintained a daily journal (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), recording all activities carried out and how the participants perceived the impacts. During the entire cycle, contact was maintained with the program manager, an administrative assistant with ample experience in managing educational activities. The objective was to resolve questions and exchange impressions on the impacts and learnings.

Third, a document analysis was performed on the 103 reports produced by the individuals who participated in the experiences from 2005 to 2017. The experiences occurred in all regions of Brazil and were classified into 13 themes: cooperativism, education, agriculture, financial and digital inclusion, gender, health, land title, local development, security, social work, sustainability, public policies, and social politics and citizenship. These themes are directly related to the challenges of sustainable development defined by the United Nations (2015). In these reports, we sought the specific knowledge acquired by the students in each type of experience.

Fourth, an online questionnaire was sent to the 220 program participants. This questionnaire contained two closed questions and two open questions. The questionnaire was designed to capture the participants' perceptions of how the program affected them in terms of their vision of the context, the problem addressed during the experience, and their learning. The 40 replies returned and covered approximately 40 percent of the experiences, which we believe is a satisfactory rate. The answers were compiled and analyzed together with the interviews and the journal.

For data analysis, we adopted a reflexive approach (Cunliffe, 2004; 2016) that followed approximately the multiple levels of interpretation proposed by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000), adapted to fit our research design. First, we used the perspective of reflexivity to analyze the empirical material we had collected. Second, we interpreted the data from the viewpoint of the students, as expressed in the questionnaires and interviews we carried out. Third, we conducted a critical self-reflection, considering our relationship with the study object. From this process, the three types of impact presented below in section five were identified.

#### 4. The Immersive Study and Research Program (ISRP)

The ISRP follows an annual cycle that starts in February; it is coordinated by a professor with the support of an administrative assistant. The first step involves the selection of cases to be visited and the selection of participants and supervisors.

The cases are selected based on suggestions solicited from researchers in the applied research centers of the school organizing the ISRP. The main criteria for selection are the relevance of the theme or social problem addressed and the availability of those responsible for hosting the participants. Generally, priority is given to well-advanced projects and initiatives that can provide participants with a strong level of learning. However, at times, cases still in the survey or diagnostic phase are selected because of their impact on the community. Once the cases are selected, the school and those responsible for the cases enter into a formal commitment.

Participants are selected through an open process announced to all undergraduate students enrolled in the business management and public administration programs in the school. The number of applicants usually exceeds the number of available opportunities, which depends on the number of cases selected. The selection process includes a review of the students' academic curriculum and their motivation letter, in addition to individual interviews. An ideal candidate will have outstanding academic performance, initiative, self-sufficiency, and motivation to carry out investigative projects outside their usual environment. The students are expected to be able to organize their ideas, arguments, and evidence into a report.

Once selected, two participants are assigned to each experience. Supervisors—one for each experience—are selected at the same time as the participants. The supervisors are students attending the master's and doctoral programs and are pursuing research in subjects close to those of the cases selected. The selection process is led by the program's administrative assistant under the coordination of the professor in charge of the program. Selection is an informal process that relies on individual communication with graduate students with support from professors in the applied research centers.

These preliminary steps—the selection of cases, participants, and supervisors—take place between February and April. Logistic support work takes place in May, which includes travel arrangements such as buying airline tickets and booking hotels. Simultaneously, the core cycle of the program begins, with four sequential activities subsequently described.

The first activity is preparing to go out into the field. This activity comprises four 2-h meetings led by a professor experienced in research methods. During these meetings, the participants are taught field research methods, methods of finding scientific articles, and research ethics. The participants are introduced to the cases, and the participants and supervisors are assigned to the cases. The participants are free to choose the focus of their field investigation with the support of the supervisor and the professor. The participants also attend lectures by students who participated in the program in prior years; these students share their experiences and offer practical advice on the work. As the last step of preparation, the participants hand in a preliminary research project to the professor, which must be refined and used in the following phase.

The second activity is field immersion. During July, the participant pairs (more common) or trios (less common) go out into the field; in the first week, they are accompanied by their supervisor. The supervisors provide logistic support, facilitate the first contact with those responsible for the project, and help explore the new environment and prepare a preliminary research agenda that must be validated in the field. In addition to the agenda, the participants must also validate the research problem that was previously defined. These validations are relevant and often represent challenging choices regarding the focus of attention, with whom to interact and dialog, and how to improve the understanding of the key questions. The supervisors also guide the participants in observing the cultural and behavioral aspects of the environment under research and, possibly, in reconsidering and changing their attitudes and actions. After the first week, the supervisors return to the São Paulo base to give the participants more freedom to continue their activities. In the weeks that follow, the participants are supervised remotely and on demand. During that period, the students are integrated into the experience and participate in all planning and operational activities. The students also attend meetings, hold interviews, and engage in conversations (Garfinkel, 1967) with the agents involved. This involvement is intense and often extends into evening meetings and dinners.

The third activity is preparing a field report. After the participants return to São Paulo, during August and September, they hold four more meetings facilitated by a professor. The objectives of these meetings are to evaluate the field experience retrospectively, compare planned activities with those actually carried out, and then prepare a research report. The final product follows approximately the structure of a scientific article based on a case study. The suggested length of the report is also similar to that of a full scientific article (8000 words); however, in some cases, reports have exceeded 20,000 words. The reports are prepared in pairs or trios with the support of the professor and the supervisor. This support focuses particularly on the theoretical references necessary to interpret the case, approaches for deepening observations, and scientific writing. The professor and the supervisor also encourage the participants to critically reflect on their experiences and identify key points learned.

The fourth activity is sharing the experiences. To close the cycle, an event called the research day is held in the first half of November. This event is open to all students and faculty and represents a venue for the participants to—with the support of a facilitator—meet and chat about, reflect on, and share their experiences. This activity lasts approximately 90 min. In addition to this event, the students are also encouraged to repay in some way the attention and dedication they received from those responsible for the projects and to share their findings with them. At times, when financial support is available, some of those responsible travel to São Paulo and participate in this final event to discuss the observations and findings presented by the participants.

All this work is made available on the school's website. Some participants take their reports further and write scientific articles and present them at local events. [Chart 1](#) presents the 10 cases selected and provides typical and important examples of the experiences covered by the program. In each case, based on the respective report, we identified the knowledge acquired by the participants.

Themes	Cases	Impacts perceived
Sustainability	A sustainable management plan for a tropical forest area.	Increase the awareness of the importance of the traditions and culture of the local people in building sustainable development solutions.
Small-scale farming	This project focused on irrigation in a region plagued by extended droughts.	Foster a critical reflection of economic indicators and the use of an augmented vision of development associated with political freedom and the possibility of social mobility.
Financial inclusion	A correspondent-banking program designed to improve access to credit.	An augmented vision of the economic and social impact of financial inclusion on low-income populations.
Gender	A women's community drive for producing goods from the <i>babaçu</i> coconut.	Awareness of the impact of economic activity on the identity and social strength of women in their communities; awareness of gender inequality as a result of the historical patriarchy in rural communities.
Health care	A program that encourages breastfeeding premature babies.	Awareness of the positive impact and social innovation brought by the program and of the importance of the engagement and commitment of social actors.
Agrarian reform	Land settlement movement.	Greater awareness of the political and civil role of youth in settlements in the pursuit of solutions.
Local development	Comparative study on an income-transfer program in cities with equivalent populations and general conditions but with vast differences in development and quality of life.	Awareness of the local factors that impact development and local public policies for jobs and income, such as the political will of the actors and the capacity for mobilization in civil society.
Public safety	A social organization for protecting and supporting convicts.	Awareness of the positive impact of an alternative prison system based on humanistic principles to reintegrate convicts into society.
Welfare	A social organization focused on providing food to homeless people.	Expanded awareness of the importance of the purpose of work for employees and volunteers of a social organization and of food waste and the possibility of reusing food.
Public policies	A citizenship program implemented in an area with a vulnerable population.	Expanded awareness of the importance of involvement and empowerment of community members in dealing with local problems.

Chart 1. Cases and impacts perceived.

## 5. Impact on participants: encouraging reflexivity

After analyzing the reports, the questionnaire, and interview responses, we identified three types of impact: review one's prejudice and stereotypes, acquire a complex vision of reality, and act in new ways in the world. [Chart 2](#) presents these three types of impacts and excerpts from participant statements collected through the questionnaires for each type of impact. The excerpts provide evidence of the three types of impact.

The first type of impact refers to participants reviewing their prejudices and stereotypes. When faced with different realities, students rethink prior ideas. Such questioning is important for future managers because when they deconstruct ideas collectively built as hegemonic truths and perceive other points of view, they become prepared to lead organizations with greater awareness and independence ([Cunliffe, 2004, 2016](#); [Cunliffe & Jun 2005](#); [Hibbert, 2012](#); [Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013](#)). According to [Heller \(1984\)](#), prejudice is a category of everyday life and the fruit of the judgment of values and should not be regarded only as individual expressions but as ideological assumptions that some people assimilated and from which they think and behave. A leader's prejudices may generate negative impacts if they ignore human rights, gender inclusion, racial affairs, equal justice, and so on.

The second type of impact refers to acquiring a more complex vision of reality, that is, perceiving that reality is built socially through interactions, the sharing of meanings, and negotiation processes ([Cunliffe, 2004; 2009; 2016](#)). This perception allows future managers to act based on new epistemological bases ([Hardy & Tolhurst, 2014](#)) and to consider people, relationships, and contexts ([Dean & Forray, 2017](#)) rather than attempting to predict what is unpredictable. Understanding and evaluating the complexity of situations is relevant for both private and public sector managers who must investigate hidden dimensions, detect tensions and contradictions, dialog with different agents, and explore new possibilities for action ([Cunliffe, 2009](#); [Cunliffe & Jun 2005](#)) in scenarios



Review of prejudices and stereotypes	Acquisition of a complex vision of reality	New ways of acting in the world
<p>"I imagined I would go to a dry place [...] with people saddened by the local situation who produced for their subsistence and sold the surplus to the local economy. In the field, I was proven so wrong because I learned that the hinterland of the state of Bahia is nothing like that. People are indeed very happy and their lives are not that unpleasant, even if the drought is still a problem." (Participant 05)</p> <p>"I didn't have the slightest idea of what life was like for riverside dwellers in the Amazon [...] it was very enriching to know the project, the lives of extractive families, understand the conflicts, the difference between urban and rural poverty, and especially define the problem of development and prosperity." (Participant 37)</p> <p>"I now appreciate more the feminist movement because it is not just a matter of a struggle for ideals but a matter of protecting women from death." (Participant 105)</p> <p>"The perspective I had on the challenges of people living in prisons and their families was media-based and not realistic. It was hard to perceive how unfair the social and economic system is in which we live, one of the impacts of which is crime." (Participant 169)</p> <p>"I can no longer look at homeless people the way I looked at them before. There are human beings, just like us, many of them are educated and just a short while ago led normal lives." (Participant 207)</p>	<p>"The field experience was key to understanding how things in fact work. In theory, everything is beautiful and perfect. In practice, there's a shortage of money, workers, and government support, but the program survives thanks to the effort and willingness of those involved." (Participant 19)</p> <p>"Looking at the figures is one thing; going out and finding out who's behind the figures—the people, the children, the families—is another thing. The human side speaks louder, and we see the importance of these projects in Brazil, particularly at the time this was created, when the north and northeast regions were ignored by government authorities." (Participant 84)</p> <p>"The field enabled me to see up close how the program of an international NGO is in fact implemented, including all the difficulties of the engagement of employees and volunteers and the dialog with the community and the government." (Participant 157)</p> <p>"Before, I saw [social] movements as only movements. The program helped me realize that movements are formed by people, each with their own individual needs." (Participant 179)</p>	<p>"Today, I feel more empathy for others, I think before judging a reality. I learned how to put myself more in someone's shoes and understand the importance of small things in the lives of people." (Participant 24)</p> <p>"The experience had a big impact not only on my career but especially helped shape me as an individual. I was with amazing people who thought completely different from me, and I learned a lot from all of them." (Participant 42)</p> <p>"In spite of working in the corporate world today, I always try to analyze the impact of my actions on the community and how we can produce a positive influence by a large organization." (Participant 65)</p> <p>"Being a professor today, the experience not only brought me closer to a new theme, which became the object of research interest but also brought learning on how to advise students." (Participant 109)</p> <p>"[The experience] gave me the conviction that I wanted to work with social inclusion, and for this reason, this semester I decided to work in an NGO with this theme." (Participant 204)</p>

Chart 2. Categories of impacts and evidence.

that tend to become increasingly troubled (Anderson et al., 2017, 2018).

The third type of impact refers to new ways of acting in the world. Changes in attitudes and behaviors are nourished by stronger empathy for other individuals. When they perceive themselves as individuals in permanent interactions with other individuals and the environment, managers can expand their awareness of their own roles and of the responsibility of their roles by intervening in their organizations and society as a whole (Cunliffe, 2004, 2009, 2016; Cunliffe & Jun 2005; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013).

We argue that the impacts identified in the ISRP meet, reflect, and reinforce the arguments of Cunliffe (2004) and Hibbert and Cunliffe (2013) regarding the depth of knowledge needed to achieve sustainable changes: they lead to practical critical awareness, which derives from the incorporation of knowledge of everyday relations and their surroundings in which one acts.

We also argue that the ISRP presented in this article is an example of a program focused on developing reflexivity in future managers. Despite not having been designed with this purpose in mind, the program has grown based on principles that closely match reflexivity. Additionally, the impacts perceived are aligned with what is expected from the training of reflexive managers.

This theme gained evidence in social science research in the 1980s (Ashmore, 1989; Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012). In the field of organizational studies, the concept has been used by researchers following the critical studies line. These researchers question objective visions in the field of management and defend new, subjective ways of interpreting reality (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Maclean et al., 2012; Weick, 1995).

In *On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner*, Cunliffe (2004; 2016) brought the concept of reflexivity to the domain of manager education. The author believes that the concept of reflexivity is essentially practical and should be used to address the need for a formative response to frauds and catastrophes caused by management actions. Cunliffe defines a critically reflexive practice as one that assumes the adoption of "subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others" (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 407). According to Cunliffe, reflexivity works on two levels. The first is self-reflexivity, which focuses on the questioning of our own values and beliefs and the nature of our relationship with others. The second is reflexive practice, which focuses on questioning the policies, practices, structures, and knowledge base of organizations.

Cunliffe contends that manager education should aim to develop reflexive practitioners. This notion opposes the reflexivity practices defended by Schön (1983), which assume the existence of phenomena, processes, and objects that managers should analyze, categorize, and explain from an unbiased perspective. Reflexivity, in contrast, embraces subjectivity and is intrinsic to the emancipation of thought (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Cunliffe, 2009; Hibbert, 2012).

The proposal by Cunliffe (2004) responds to the need for organizations to adopt more collaborative and ethical practices. Indeed, since the 1990s, the criticism aimed at business schools has significantly increased (please refer to Reynolds, 1999; Cunliffe, Forray, & Knights, 2002; Maclean et al., 2012; Parker, 2018). At the same time, we have seen a significant number of proposals focused on more ethical and sustainable education (Alcaraz & Thiruvattal, 2017; Anderson et al., 2017; 2018).

Nonetheless, some observers state that the changes are still superficial and that adopting programs that are more consistently



1. Cooperativism	√	√						√	√	√				√	√		√
2. Education				√						√							√
3. Small-scale farming	√	√						√							√		√
4. Financial and digital inclusion	√			√						√							√
5. Gender					√					√							√
6. Health care			√														√
7. Local development	√	√					√	√	√	√	√	√					√
8. Public safety																√	√
9. Welfare	√	√	√													√	√
10. Social movements	√	√			√			√		√					√	√	√
11. Sustainability						√	√		√		√	√	√	√	√		√
12. Public policies	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

**Sustainable Development Goals:** 1. No Poverty; 2. Zero Hunger; 3. Good Health and Well Being for People; 4. Quality Education; 5. Gender Equality; 6. Clean Water and Sanitation; 7. Affordable and Clean Energy; 8. Decent Work & Economic Growth; 9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure; 10. Reduced Inequalities; 11. Sustainable Cities & Communities; 12. Responsible Consumption & Production; 13. Climate Action; 14. Life Below Water; 15. Life on Land; 16. Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions; 17. Partnership for the Goals.

Fig. 1. Confluence between themes dealt with in the immersive program and Sustainable Development Goals.

critical to achieve deep changes in the training and behavior of managers is necessary (Alcaraz & Thiruvattal, 2017; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013).

Educating for reflexivity means taking students out of their “comfort zone” (Ashmore, 1989: xxiii), and this notion extends beyond presenting and explaining concepts (Freire, 1972). Educating for reflexivity implies sensitizing and provoking students to arouse their own ethical and moral responsibilities (Jun, 1999; Cunliffe, 2004; 2009; 2016; Cunliffe & Jun 2005; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013).

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, we used the perspective of program participants to describe and assess a transdisciplinary immersion program offered for 13 years by a Brazilian business management and public administration school. The program is well established and is perceived positively by the academic community, especially among former participants. Indeed, our investigation revealed many highly emotional testimonials, including expressions such as “it changed my life,” “it changed the way I see the world,” and “it had a profound impact on my values and beliefs.” In this final section of the article, we briefly present other programs that were impacted by the program we reviewed here and list some caveats for the benefit of fellow educators interested in implementing similar programs. As mentioned in the introduction, the program was not originally based on the PRME. However, it developed in a manner consistently aligned with its principles and the SDG (see Fig. 1).

### 6.1. ISRP spin-offs

The success of ISRP triggered new initiatives. In 2010, the business management program created a course on sustainability that is also open to students in the public administration, economics, and law programs. The course is offered every semester to 16 students. For four months, the participants study real problems involving sustainability, and activities include travel and field immersions. At the end of the cycle, the participants must present recommendations to address the identified problems. For example, in 2010, students assessed the impacts of building a hydroelectric power dam in the Amazon region. The students engaged with different stakeholders, including representatives of the indigenous communities, government officials, and company managers. In 2013, the participants visited solid residue treatment facilities in three Brazilian states and produced a documentary on this topic.

In 2013, the business management program joined with the Applied Research Center on Entrepreneurship and, with the support of a social organization, created a course on designing and developing businesses with a social impact. For example, in the 2018 course, participants worked in partnership with a solid residue recycling organization to create a business and increase the benefits generated for society as a whole and for the community in which the organization is located. The course is offered once a year to

approximately 20 students.

In 2014, the public administration program created an ISRP variant that includes international immersions focused on public management, public policy, and social issues in Latin American and southern hemisphere countries. Since the program started, all countries in South America have been visited, except Venezuela. Outside this region, students visited Mexico, Cuba, Costa Rica, Panama, and South Africa. The program is mandatory for all students in the sixth semester. In its last iteration, approximately 50 students participated in immersions in 13 cities in six Latin American countries.

As of 2017, the business management program set aside two weeks in April and September for immersion experiences in the city of São Paulo and its surroundings. In 2017, more than 40 experiences took place, involving approximately 500 students each semester. The experiences range widely and include themes such as diversity, innovation, digital technologies, entrepreneurship, ethics and social responsibility, and risk analysis. For example, a group helped a large Brazilian chemical group find communication solutions for crises, taking into consideration the perspective of different stakeholders.

## 6.2. Recommendations

We believe that listing some caveats and suggestions for educators interested in replicating the presented program at their institutions is suitable. First, we believe that the selection of themes and cases is critical. Over the years, we have noticed that some themes were very relevant. However, the conditions of the case were not sufficiently mature to offer learning opportunities for the participants. Accordingly, two conditions must be met: the relevance of the theme and the general conditions of the case.

Second, we believe that considerable attention must be paid to participant logistics and support. In our case, some trips demanded multiple means of transportation, some of them quite precarious. Lodging and meals were not always adequate. We believe that being exposed to such situations is part of the experience. However, each situation must be monitored to avoid exposing the participants to risk.

Third, with time, we learned that preparing for the trip is critical, even when faced with situations in which demand changes in plans and improvisation. When preparing participants, we believe that warning them of the potential shock of being immersed in other cultures and traditions is especially relevant. Even considering that all projects happen in Brazil, we must remember that the country has considerable cultural diversity and that each region has its own traditions and habits.

Fourth, we recommend close monitoring of participants after they return. Given the emotional impact of immersion, some participants can perceive subsequent activities as anticlimactic. However, we believe that activities involving reflection and writing the report are key to deepening and consolidating learning.

Business and management institutions face the challenge of implementing new processes and practices toward sustainable management education (see Kolb, Fröhlich, & Schimdpeter, 2017). We hope that the case presented here acts as a supplement for developing new programs by educators interested in challenging the status quo in management teaching and learning. We also hope that this study will encourage them to use the concept of reflexivity as the basis for such changes. As observed by Cunliffe (2016: 742), "As academics, managers, and students, we spend a lot of time focusing on what to do, the techniques, theories, models we can apply to be more effective and efficient. However, what if we begin to think about who to be?" Immersion programs permeated by reflexivity can help stimulate this question and, if carried out properly, help answer it. Doing so is no small matter!

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2019.100306>.

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