

Reflective practice as a resource in the management of outsourced university restaurants

A prática reflexiva como recurso na gestão dos restaurantes universitários terceirizados

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Abstract

Objective: The general objective of this study was to investigate how the reflective practice may influence the organizational learning of food services from the identification of professional experiences of managers and contract inspectors, in the context of outsourced university restaurants of public higher education institutions. *Methods:* The strategy adopted to achieve the objectives used a qualitative approach based on the case study technique. The research subjects were managers and contract inspectors of two university restaurants belonging to two public higher education institutions, located in the Brazilian Northeast, with outsourced food services. Data collection was developed through semi-structured face-to-face interviews and documental analysis, assessing internal documents. The categories of analysis were previously defined, based on the dimensions proposed by Schön for analysis of reflective practice: the process of knowing-in-action, the difficulties in the scope of professional practice and the reflective practical articulation for the professional practice. Data treatment was conducted through the pragmatic analysis of language according to Mattos, centered on the semantic-pragmatic meaning of conversation. *Results and Discussion:* The management of outsourced university restaurants takes place in the professional practice during the process of knowing-in-action, especially of nutritionists, in which difficulties, mainly in the management of people and infrastructure, directly influence the management of contracts. It is through reflection that they build the meanings of the theory on their own practice, favoring the decision-making process. *Conclusion:* The reflective practice

emerges as a driving force for development of managerial and political skills in the implementation of decisions, providing organizational learning.

Keywords: Learning. Professional Practice. Food Service. Organization and Administration.

Resumo

Objetivo: O objetivo geral desta pesquisa foi investigar como a prática reflexiva pode influenciar na aprendizagem organizacional de serviços de alimentação, a partir da identificação das experiências profissionais de gestores e fiscais de contrato, no contexto dos restaurantes universitários terceirizados de instituições públicas de ensino superior. *Metodologia:* A estratégia adotada para atingir os objetivos seguiu uma abordagem qualitativa, a partir da técnica do estudo de caso. Os sujeitos de pesquisa foram gestores e fiscais de dois restaurantes universitários pertencentes a duas instituições públicas de ensino superior, localizadas no Nordeste brasileiro, com serviços de alimentação terceirizados. A coleta de dados foi desenvolvida por meio de entrevistas com abordagem direta e roteiro semiestruturado e análise documental, com consulta a documentos internos. As categorias de análise foram definidas *a priori*, baseadas nas dimensões propostas por Schön para análise da prática reflexiva: o processo de conhecer-na-ação, as dificuldades no âmbito da prática profissional e a articulação prática reflexiva à prática profissional. O tratamento dos dados se deu através da análise pragmática da linguagem de acordo com Mattos, centrado no significado semântico-pragmático da conversação. *Resultados e Discussão:* A gestão dos RUs terceirizados ocorre na prática profissional durante o processo de conhecer-na-ação, especialmente dos nutricionistas, em que as dificuldades, sobretudo na gestão da infraestrutura e de pessoas, influenciam diretamente na gestão dos contratos. É através da reflexão que eles constroem os significados da teoria acerca de sua própria prática, favorecendo a tomada de decisão mais satisfatória. *Conclusão:* A prática reflexiva desponta como propulsor do desenvolvimento de habilidades gerenciais e políticas na implementação de decisões, propiciando a aprendizagem organizacional.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem. Prática Profissional. Alimentação Coletiva. Organização e Administração.

Introduction

The management of food services is complex, practiced under time pressure and it presents a series of risks - occupational, environmental and hygienic-sanitary - that may affect both the worker's health, as well as the quality of ingredients and processes, affecting the consumer's health. Therefore, it is essential to control the specific technical processes of the work, such as the achievement of nutritional goals, as well as an effective administration, in order to reconcile the economic and social aspects of the service. The social aspect is emphasized due to the focus on the subject, both the one that is involved with the production and distribution of the meal and the final consumer.¹

There are also factors that directly interfere with the management of food services, such as organizational and process difficulties, high costs, quality control, compliance with laws and regulations, and insufficient preparation of managers for the administrative function.² In the dynamic process on the various aspects of food service management, there are limitations in the professional action of managers,³ who end up not only having to execute, but acting with skill in unforeseen situations. Thus, the need for instrumentalization in knowledge and skills and the development of managerial skills are highlighted.²³

In universities, food services are represented by university restaurants, in which feeding is the strategic focus of student assistance through the PNAES (National Student Assistance Program).⁴ The university restaurant stands out as one of the most important instruments for students to stay on campuses. University restaurants present a great variation in the supply of food and in aspects related to organization and management, reflecting the physical and financial resources of each institution. Regarding the type of management, they follow a national tendency, in which they experience a moment of transition between internal servicing and outsourcing, in view of the public policies of the federal government. In the context of the restaurants of Brazilian universities, most of these managers are nutritionists, who were invested with this competence, especially after the implementation of Law No. 8,234 of September 17, 1991, when the "planejamento, organização, direção, supervisão e avaliação de serviços de alimentação e nutrição" (planning, organization, direction, supervision and evaluation of food and nutrition services) became a private activity of the nutritionist.⁵

Nevertheless, the training of the nutritionist, usually focused on the biomedical model, does not sufficiently prepare him or her for the challenge of management and presents gaps in managerial competencies. Management is considered a complex task, with its own methods and techniques, thus, there is a clear difficulty to associate the contents of administrative theories with its professional practice.⁶ A food service aims at elaborating and serving adequate meals under various technical aspects, such as nutritional and health issues without, however, exceeding the financial resources previously established by the company for this purpose. Both the management of costs and the allocation of financial resources in a UAN (Food and Nutrition Unit) are influenced by the goals and the origin of these resources: private organizations seek to reduce costs, and public ones, their optimization.^{1,2,7,8}

The manager nutritionist requires adaptive capacity and continuous education through the ability to know how to learn, thus, contemplating the complexity and the interrelationship between knowledge and practice.⁹ However, faced with the contemporary scenario of rapid and intense changes, managers also need to adapt their practice, which requires new skills to better meet the demands of management. In this sense, these professionals have been acquiring learning that allows going beyond the positivist paradigm and the “technical rationality”, from the professional experience.¹⁰ This makes the revision of already established assumptions possible and expands the possibilities of the continuous learning.

Reflective practice - largely widespread in education - has recently gained interest in the organizational environment,^{11,12} which involves learning from reflection (experience-action) before, during and after action - in fields which involves uncertainties, surprises, constant changes and complex cause-and-effect relationships –such as an improvement in professional practice.¹⁰

There is no robust and consistent debate in the literature about managers’ reflective practices in food service management or university restaurant management. The literature addresses the food service as an organization, however, in a restricted perspective of the organizational model based on hierarchical structure and on division of labor; little attention has been paid to the reflective questions of the managers’ professional practices. In recent years, authors have been emphasizing the management of people within food services, suggesting the development of skills and competencies required for management.¹³

It is possible to observe the action as a main process; nevertheless, action is frequent throughout the process of reflection, and reflection on reflection in action results in deeper meanings, allowing the reorientation of the process during action, as well as its reinterpretation in future actions.^{9,10}

Hence, what differentiates reflection-in-action from other methods of reflection is its immediate ignition for action. Knowing-in-action refers to the types of knowledge that are expressed in the so-called intelligent, publicly observable actions - the act of knowing is in action (sequence of operations and procedures that compose the “theory”).

The dialectical form of reflection, from Schön’s proposal,¹⁰ for the training and development of professionals, begins from the importance of adopting a new posture for the reflective practice (based on the premise of learning in action or learning by doing). Professionals will develop the competencies and skills in order to identify and to intervene in the undetermined areas of the practice when unexpected elements arise in their professional activities.¹⁴

This is the learning from experience, having as a main tool the reflection during the daily performance of the professional. The process of reflection involves intentionality, and the conscientious professional examines his or her performance, looking for improvement actions.

Thus, considering that the experience in the organizational environment is one of the main forms of learning and that the reflective practice maximizes learning from experience, giving relevance to the “reflective professional”, this study proposes to discuss how this practice, in its various forms, may contribute in order that the difficulties that exist in the practice of the professional, as manager, are fulfilled, using as scenario the management of federal public university restaurants in the context of outsourcing.

Methods

The scope of this study is in identifying the difficulties of management of food services expressed through the professional practice of managers and inspectors, having as a parameter of analysis the reflective practice in the management of outsourced university restaurants. The university restaurants of public higher education institutions (HEIs) of Pernambuco were selected for the research for being convenient regarding access and authorization for the study, the inclusion criteria being: having the same organizational characteristics (meals production and distribution service, outsourced - it is assumed outsourcing as an element that imposes management complexity) and being large-sized (producing and distributing more than 2,000 meals) - indicating the presence of nutritionists at different management levels (strategic, tactical and operational), which increases the credibility and the degree of confidence of the results. For the purpose of the study, they were called Unit A and Unit B. Subsequently, interviews with the managers of these university restaurants were conducted.

In order to collect the data, two stages were performed: the first one consisted of in-depth interviews with the managers of the university restaurants, opting for face-to-face contact with the interviewee, seeking an extensive and detailed communication. The interviews were conducted individually and recorded. In order to select the interviewees, there was an intentionality due to the inclusion criteria used to select the managers participating in the research: to develop management and/or inspection activities of the food production and distribution contracts (directors, managers and contract inspectors and technical directors within the scope of the university restaurants of the study at the different management levels) and to be an employee of the contractor (IFES) or of the contracted company (a private outsourced service provider to the university restaurants). Considering the potential contribution of their practices to the study, two former managers of the university restaurants were invited to participate in the study, who recently left their positions and were responsible for elaborating the terms of reference^a (document that generated the contract^b) - when outsourcing - and implementation of current services, having contributed with their experiences also in relation to those realities. Thus, 11 managers participated in the study: two (current) contract managers (representatives of each HEI), a contract inspector, two assistant inspectors, two former managers (01 from each HEI) and four technical director nutritionists from the contracted.

The interview script was based on the Categorization Mandala (figure 1), which was elaborated in view of the theoretical reference and the research objectives. For each objective, derived from the dimensions that involve the reflective practice integrated to the management in collective feeding - area in which the research is inserted in the context of the management of the university restaurants -, the research variables were defined, which when subdivided into themes originated the categories of analysis. Each category originated a question from the interview script. Thus, the mandala represents the group of questions with their respective themes and variables, i.e., in the field of objectives there is information about the relationship with other categories to achieve the integrative nature of the research.

a Federal Public Service. Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco. Pro-Rectorcy of Administration. Term of contract of provision of services no. 15/2014. Retrieved on June 6, 2016.

b Federal Public Service. Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Pro-Rectorcy of Administrative Management. Directorate of Public Procurements and Contracts. Contract no. 32/2014. Retrieved on June 6, 2016.

- Phase 1: Recovery - in the broad sense of the moment of speech, included the complete transcription of the interviews adding relevant notes;
- Phase 2: Analysis of the pragmatic meaning of the conversation - consisting of the basic analysis (in two text reading and hearing “layers”) with extraction of the “nuclear meaning of the response”, the “incidental meanings” and “the implicit assumptions about the context”;
- Phase 3: Validation - for securing the report in its semantic aspect; mentioning events reported by the interviewee and ratifying the information through the records and documents;
- Phase 4: Assembly of the consolidation of the statements, gathering reports, opinions and attitudes of the interviewees, with emphasis on the nuclear meanings of the responses;
- Phase 5: Analysis of sets - observing the emergence of “conclusive observations”, which are nothing more than the general results of the analysis.

The second stage consisted of the analysis of the contracts, especially their attached terms of reference –where the aspects that must be fulfilled by the parties and the resulting actions are detailed -, the records of notifications and processes, with the purpose of describing the types and the contents of the problems and, mainly, to analyze if there are implicit characteristics of the reflective practice during and/or after the action of the managers, using the same dimensions described in the Categorization Mandala.

After analyzing the interviews and the analysis of the contracts, we identified the difficulties of managing the university restaurants and how they may be minimized through the reflective practice of the managers incorporated in their professional practice, with the purpose of improving the management of the university restaurants.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (Federal University of Pernambuco - UFPE) through opinion no. 1,571,608 and CAAE: 55561416.6.0000.5208. The interviews took place in the respective university restaurants of the HEI, in a reserved environment. The permission for the interviews with the managers was consubstantiated with the previous signing of the TCLE (Free and Informed Consent Term).

Results and discussion

The process of knowing-in-action

The process of knowing-and-acting, related to the professional practice of the managers of the university restaurants, begins when they arrived at the food services and, later, by the developed activities, permeated by the learning in practice.

Most university restaurant managers did not choose their positions, they were chosen, either by “invitation” or by necessity (first job opportunity) and because of affinity they remain in this position. In addition to this issue, it is evident that coordination functions and directorates have been occupied by professionals with a teaching position.^{16,17} In universities, managers have a peculiar characteristic that distinguishes them from managers of private organizations and some public ones. In the former, managers are the professors themselves, besides acting as researchers, they also perform managerial functions.¹⁷

Another characteristic is that these professionals, in general, continue to act as professors and researchers, even if devoting less time to these activities. In those positions where there is a need for greater commitment, it may happen, provisionally, that the manager is exclusively dedicated to management¹⁷. This is more common in senior management positions, i.e., in the pro-rectories, in the chief of staff office, in the vice-rectory and in the rectory.

In the case of university restaurants, in bodies that function as a medium-level activity in the university, there is usually no training for the management position, and learning happens “in practice”. Professors (not necessarily nutritionists), nutritionists or professor nutritionists - who, given the general training of the professional, could come from any area of activity, not always from the area of collective feeding - in the first months of management are still learning their functions and learning about university management procedures and practices. In the case of outsourcing of services, they must also be sure of the laws and procedures for conducting a public administrative contract.

Hence, the “*professional artistic talent*” emerges, which is the skillful performance that these professionals demonstrate in uncertain and conflicting situations.¹⁰ It is also important to note the tacit knowledge that each one carries in knowing how to do their work in practice, according to their previous experiences, which translates into safety during professional practice. This security, according to the university restaurants managers, solidifies with practice and experience, in which theoretical knowledge is evidenced, while remaining important.

On the other hand, some managers stated that only with the application of theory, technical rationality, systematic knowledge, preferably scientific knowledge, the professional achieves success, and this is more related to what professionals want for their career. In other words, their motivation/ambition is what drives them to solve problems through technical rationality. We emphasize that these managers have a high level of mastery of theory due to their many years of teaching.

Another point of relevance in the study was that managers defended the difference they observe after they are in professional practice, referred mainly to the acquisition of experiences and knowledge related to people management and financial management. Studies carried out with this public of food service managers identified that they are looking for an exchange of

experiences in the area of people management to transpose literary knowledge, which confirms that this knowledge is theoretical and distant from the reality of what is practiced.⁷

As for learning-in-action, it is possible to observe that the learning acquired in practice overlaps the administrative theories applied to food services. Although managers consider it important to know the administrative theories and highlight the Classical Theory, which exposes the administrative principles, they are “run over” by the heavy routine of operations, and during the professional practice, they bow to some moments of frustration for not achieving the goals. The learning in practice manifests itself in the complexity of the services and in the routine of operations that integrate the functionality as a whole of a company of the food segment.^{16,18} Finally, the managers, in a forceful way, admitted that it is the experience that teaches.

This learning, notably, occurs in the area of people management, especially in the valuation of human resources. This becomes a great challenge, because work depends directly on people - if the team does not feel valued, if they do not commit to the result, conceiving themselves as part of it, the final product is not satisfactory.

In the management of the contract, there is also learning in action, whilst inspection of the outsourced service by the contract managers, bringing together characteristics of tangibility, which are meals, but also of intangibility, in view of the concern to satisfy the client, which involves, besides quality service, a comfortable environment, courtesy, promptness and safety.² The inspection also brings with it the full compliance with legal, contractual requirements and auditing charges. These are concepts and laws with which managers become familiar during the contractual period.

Finally, however also important, managers learned in practice that the university restaurant has a singularity, which is not previously known to managers and is only uncovered in the course of management. It is about the political and participative management, coming from both the students, who require the participation of their representatives in the decision-making, and the superior representation of the university, that interferes directly in the decisions of the managers.

This experience of managers demands efforts and maneuvers for service in both spheres, and requires the manager to politically act as a change agent, communicator, manager of conflicts and diversity, and as a constructor of relations with society.^{16,17} The university restaurant is a place of social inclusion, where many students are socioeconomically vulnerable and are said to be “owner of the business”, a term used by one of the interviewed managers, as well as being part of a student assistance policy.

With the above in mind, the management of problems related to price, quality of the service provided, in addition to those related to infrastructure, often becomes an objection to the management of the university restaurant, considering the difficulties of relationship, communication and decision-making power of managers among all these actors.

Identification of difficulties in university restaurant management sub-areas within the scope of professional practice

It was evidenced in the research that the biggest obstacles in the scope of professional practice of managers in the university restaurants are: in the management of infrastructure, people management and contract management, from the highlights in the reports.

Regarding the physical structure, managers argued that it is deficient in several respects (size, old structure, etc.) and this compromises all other sub-areas of university restaurant management, among which are people management (worker health, staff dimensioning and ergonomics); production management (logistics and supply, compliance with the menu); management of the quality of the meals (it favors the crossing of the flows of the processes) and management of the contract (the contracted cannot fulfill all the legal requirements). Another problem is in the absence and/or insufficiency in the maintenance of the infrastructure as a whole, physical and functional (equipment)parts.

The problem of the physical structure of the university restaurants is not a punctual problem of the Recife-PE university restaurants, however, it goes beyond almost entirely in the Brazilian university restaurants, and it has worsened after the Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (REUNI) program in 2008/ as discussed in the National Forum of Pro-Rectors for Community and Student Affairs (FONAPRACE).¹⁹ It occurs both the under-dimensioning of the structure in the areas of reception, production, food storage and dining hall (where the problem is most often found in the large lines of users), and the age of construction of the buildings (as one of the university restaurants in this study, which one manager said it was built in 1950) and absence of building maintenance.

As a solution to this problem, university restaurant managers cited, in addition to sensitizing senior university management, the development of a long-term strategic planning for university restaurants restructuring and expansion, including the decentralization (creation of several university restaurants in one campus) the intersectoralization between student assistance and the planning and execution bodies of HEIs, mainly related to the campus infrastructure, with the objective of building a unified budget and meeting users' demands and expectations.^{20,21}

Once again, the subject of people management becomes known as a management difficulty, a limiting factor for the development of work in university restaurants. The managers' questions revolve around how to lead a team, how to behave in situations of interpersonal conflict, how to guide employees in technical and behavioral procedures and how to act to ensure better results.

Moreover, they complain about the low level of employee training; high turnover; that (outsourced) companies do not invest in adequate training; insufficient number of employees; lack of recognition of the employee by the company, including issues related to the compliance

with labor laws. This evidence allows us to reflect on the precariousness of work as a productive restructuring of capital, which, according to proponents, is a tool of unquestionable results to reduce costs and increase productivity.^{2,22} Excepting the gains on the legal obstacles that guide and, in a certain way, protect the worker in this jurisprudence, we see the exploitation of man's work by man himself, through the precariousness of working conditions.²²

It is also worth reminding that the public office of cooks and kitchen helpers has been extinguished, with a replacement for unskilled service workers and a consequent decrease in the qualification of the staff in this operational sector. This became more evident with the retirement of public servants and the absence of public contests for these positions.

When we consult the specific literature of the area, it is verified that there is no ready formula for managing people, however, there are management styles that allow the team to be involved with the work.⁶ Proper behavior will depend on the circumstances and on the subjectivity of the environment; the manager may assume various roles that the situation requires, mild or energetic, participative or distant, sharing at times and convincing at others, at certain times delegating and determining at others.

Concerning the management of contracts, the difficulties were mainly referred to by the managers of contractors, regarding the insufficient detail of the composition of the menu in terms of quality and quantity, and the lack of standardization of services. They attribute these to the term of reference (TR) –a technical document that serves as the basis for the elaboration of the contract -, which they claim to be incomplete. As most of them have already taken over the role of inspectors during the term of the contract, they note several gaps that could be corrected at the time of the composition of the TR. All of them spoke of contract adjustments, with the exception of those that were part of the elaboration of the terms. Although they do not have the full knowledge for their elaboration, they emphasize that it is essential the participation of the manager who will act in this process, in its composition.

However, the elaboration of a TR is not a simple task; on the contrary, it is a valuable planning exercise, its conception is complex, time consuming and it must be the result of a multidisciplinary effort, including expert technicians who master the specificities of the contracted object.² The TR will be the reference for the notice and, consequently, for the public procurement process. A detailed worksheet that considers the cost and the formation of the price of the service, as well as the quality of the desired product, is an indispensable and relevant factor. During this hiring process, companies end up worrying more about cost than quality, in order to win the procurement.

Hence the relevance of the preparation of the TR for the contracting of food services. There are several details that are only observed during the service; however, there is a point in which literature and managers converge: the object of the contract for services in the collective feeding area must

be well detailed, especially in relation to the composition of the menu (frequency of preparations, quality of the raw material, etc.), besides considering the costs and types of control, duties of the contracted and contractor and information regarding the inspection and management of the contract, always based on the current legislation. It is also important to mention the request for documentation regarding the contracted’s technical qualification, with the purpose of presenting operational and professional requirements for the perfect execution of the service.²

The reflective practice articulated to the professional practice in the context of the management of the university restaurants

The reflective practice of managers was described conjunctly with the identification of the main management difficulties of the university restaurants, through reflection on reflection-in-action (table 1). As they were listing the difficulties, managers reflected on their own processes in professional practice and compared their actual learning experiences with formal theories.

Table 1. The reflective practice articulated to the professional practice in the context of management of university restaurants

Actions of managers in the face of difficulties	Skills/ Competencies	Reflection on reflection in action
Adaptation to reality	Nutritionist (Law no. 8,234)	Understanding the facts
Record of occurrences - opening of proceedings	Technical, administrative and legal knowledge	Correction of errors
Effective communication	Experience in practice	Results evaluation
Training of personnel; process definition	Leadership, dealing with human relations	Unpredictable situations: oscillation of numbers
Intersectoral work	Communication	Accidents at work
Appreciation of the team	Ability to plan, decide and manage crises	Diversion of products, labor rights, etc.
Relationship of partnerships	Negotiation	Political action

Source: Research data, 2016

In the context of university restaurant management, managers' actions in the face of difficulties are designed by their own practice, taking into account the adaptation to the reality of work, often a hostile environment, especially in terms of physical structure; and the consideration faced with some difficulties, since they do not compromise food security; and also on contractual requirements. Equally, the autonomy is limited, which often prevents the total resolution of certain problems.

The environment in the production of meals is hostile, with the following frequent characteristics: intense work rhythm, high number of different tasks, according to the needs of the moment; inadequate working conditions, undersized equipment, broken equipment, hot environments, etc.²³ Nevertheless, managers should not adapt to this situation, but seek to analyze and overcome the challenges. It is important for managers to react, develop creativity and know how to make decisions that meet the challenges of this scenario, intensified by the precariousness of outsourcing work, overcoming adversity situations and differentiating themselves with a positive reflection.

The managers' reflection-in-action regarding the management of contracts is related to the partial or total non-compliance with contractual clauses by the contracted party. There is a constant reflection on the nonconformities to the contract to define actions encompassing the corrections. It is the responsibility of the public administration to monitor and control the contracts, observing the rights, obligations and responsibility of the parties, under the legal dictates.²⁴ To this end, the managers stated they make efforts regarding intense and effective communication to solve flaws, prioritizing users' satisfaction.

Another example of situations that lead to the reflection-in-action of managers is the search for opinions and help of other colleagues, when individual reflection on unsuccessful attempts to eliminate nonconformities does not help to see what went wrong in their actions. This happens through administrative meetings and meetings with the staff.

When managers were led to reflect on the skills/ competencies that a manager of a university restaurant/ food service should master, they pointed out that it is of paramount importance to unite technical and managerial knowledge. However, the theory is perceived to be a support to professional practice, when it is stated that the practical actions of collective food service managers have theoretical components that occasionally emerge in administrative practices.⁶ Still according to the authors, the challenge of every manager is to incorporate theoretical elements, transforming the organizational environment and being able to produce new results.⁶

We return to the premises of Donald Schön: reflective practice is integrated in the reflection on reflection-in-action,¹⁰ represented in this study as understanding the facts, correcting errors and evaluating the results by the managers of the university restaurants during professional action. Therefore, managers were questioned about the "indeterminate zones" of management, i.e., how they act in unpredictable moments or new situations that escape planning and/or daily routine.

The unpredictable and obscure situations were reflected and cited by the managers as: failures during the production process of meals (e.g., problems in infrastructure, equipment, water supply and electricity); fluctuations in the quantity of meals (forecast of production impaired); accidents at work (lack of knowledge in the area of first aid and work safety); misuse of products by employees and labor rights (lack of knowledge of legal procedures); unforeseen events occurring when food spoils and has to be replaced at the last minute, or the supplier delivers the raw material under inadequate conditions, or even when failures occur by the manipulator during preparation.

The lack of political experience of the managers should be highlighted, because it is a hiatus in the management of university restaurants. It is a characteristic connected to power and authority; therefore, people do not feel comfortable speaking. However, in fact there is the retreat on the part of managers, who emphasize the technical side. For the purposes of clarification, it is worth mentioning the history of university management that began in 1968, in full authoritarian regime, when it was sought to integrate the university with the development process, with the modernization of universities. Later, with the country's redemocratization in the coming governments, there was an uncontrolled search for autonomy, and there were several conflicts of certain political lines among the members of the university community.⁸

This history converges to the difficulties of managers in the face of the political dimension of university management, in dealing with differentiated proposals from different segments (collegiate, managers, pro-rectors, administrative technicians, professors, students, student movements, unions, etc.). There are still bureaucratic restrictions, alerting to the existence of a political model in the context of university administration using theories of conflict, of power in academic communities and of interest groups.^{8,16}

In this context, despite the speech of one of the interviewees, the university restaurant is seen as “marketing” of the university. Regarding this point, some authors describe that marketing in non-profit food services, such as university restaurants, is equivalent to the profit of private companies and is evidenced through customer satisfaction and loyalty.²⁵ In this sense, it involves quality of the final product, brand and price. In food services, the product is the meal or the preparation sold; and this is always accompanied by a service - which in this case, is the way the meal or preparation is offered, adding attributes such as included dessert, coffee on the way out, etc., besides the sale objective.²⁵ The senior management of universities pressures university restaurant managers in this sense, to transform the local university restaurant in a “bargain”.

Regarding the evaluation of actions, it was possible to observe that most professionals heightens critical reflection, however, they often do not have time to stop, evaluate and reevaluate their actions. They find it necessary to accomplish it in order to know how to act and not repeat the same mistakes, or find where the failure happened, for its correction. The managers also said that they use it to support decision making and planning, as well as for growth, human and professional achievement.

In general, the reflection-in-action exposed the limitation of the autonomy of the managers, because they are linked to decisions of higher instances: pro-rectory and rectory (contractors) and management of the company and contractor (contracted). Since the university restaurant functions as an ancillary activity, there is no direct concern of senior management with problems; they become punctual in the midst of users' claims when they are dissatisfied; and from the intersect oral point of view; the decision-making and, consequently, the action are hindered by the bureaucracy.

Conclusions

The reflective practice of managers was conceived from the identification of the main difficulties of management of the university restaurants, using the particular and professional way of seeing reality and constructing it in the way they see it. When managers responded to the questions and pointed out obstacles, actions and the absence of actions, through a reflective conversation with practical situations, they revealed the tacit processes of constructing a worldview on which to base their practice.

Going beyond the considerations about the association of reflective practice with professional practice applied to the context of university restaurant management, actions are taken, faced with problems, unforeseen events and limits (reality of the organizational environment). Reflection-in-action is given on the skills/ competences needed and developed for these actions, including in the obscure and/or indeterminate situations of professional practice. Among these, besides the unforeseen occurrences in the production management, the political dimension inserted in the management of the university restaurants was identified, with inherent actions and conflicts.

The changes of paradigms in the management of food services are extremely relevant, mainly in the practices of the managers underlying the reflection of their habits and professional actions, i.e., in the perception, understanding and interpretation of the actions and results for a detailed understanding on those aspects that have not yet been built. In addition, it is worth mentioning the importance of a perspective based on practices, constituting a way of acquiring knowledge in action, building it from a context of interaction.

Therefore, reflective practice in the field of university restaurant management is intended to highlight its possible contributions to the context of institutional management. It is known that there is still much to be worked out from the theoretical and empirical point of view, however, the combination of these two themes presupposes a potential improvement and stimulation.

The reflective practice proposes to promote evolution and innovation from the action, through the awareness that involves a distance observation. It may present initial points for future studies and even for initiatives of practitioners in the scope of the use of reflective practice in contexts of management of outsourced food services inserted in institutions.

Contributors

Cardoso CIXS participated in all stages, from the conception of the study to the revision of the final version of the article; Calazans DLMS participated in the design of the study, the analysis and interpretation of data, the writing and the final version; Feitosa MGG guided all phases of the study - conception, analysis and interpretation of the data and final revision.

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