

**SUSTAINING SENSEMAKING PRACTICES: A CASE STUDY OF A HIGHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

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Introduction

Ever since the concept of 'sensemaking' has been emerged and adopted as a key lexicon by the organization scholars (Weick, 1979) to describe the behavioral response engaged by people when encountering the uncertain and complex organizational events, a plethora of studies has been conducted to clarify the meanings and explore the key processes of sensemaking in organizations (Weick and Daft, 1983; Gioia, 1986; Gephart, 1993, 1997; Geppert, 2003; Louis, 1980; Weick, 1993).

However, among those studies that adopt sensemaking as a core analytical framework, they are often associated with the occurrence of major organizational events, such as crisis (Gephart, 1993), natural disasters (Weick, 1993) or organizational restructurings (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). The nature of those events may make their behavioral responses atypical and non-referential, which are only subject to the exceptional circumstances and conditions. As organizations are not expected to encounter those dramatic events on a recurrent basis, the question of whether the sensemaking practices can be *sustained* remains in doubt.

Moreover, there is a strong stereotypical image of associating the top management team (Gioia and Citterpeddi, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Pye, 2005) with the principal architects and drivers of sensemaking activities, who are often portrayed as a great saviour of the organizations during crisis. Although their roles for helping steer clear the future growth direction of the organizations are significant, the contributions of other individuals from the 'lower echelon' should not be neglected (Rouleau, 2005; Balogun and Johnson, 2004).

In lieu of the essential argument that sensemaking activities represent a social and on-going accomplishment of all organizational members (Weick, 1995; Brown, 2005), the current study attempts to fill in the gaps in literatures by investigating the sustainability of sensemaking activities in organizations. The objectives of the study are to (1) explore the practice of sensemaking in organizations and (2) find out how those

sensemaking practices can be sustained based on the viewpoints of individuals from different hierarchical levels in the organization.

A case study research (Yin, 1994; Eisenhart, 1989) approach was adopted and the subject of analysis was a tertiary education institution in Macau, a special administrative region in the People's Republic of China. The findings of study indicated sensemaking is a circular process involving three core activities which included enactment, selection and retention. However, the sustainability of it depended on whether the institution could construct an amicable organizational context that helped reduce staff resistance to change and improve transparency, so as to create mutual understanding among different parties and individuals.

The study contributed to the literatures of organizational learning and knowledge by drawing attention to the importance of background environmental conditions in organizations to help promote and sustain the organizational sensemaking processes. It is suggested that without a proper organizational climate that values individuals' contributions and reduces the perceived uncertainties and ambiguities, it is difficult to engage and align all members in the shared knowing process.

The paper is divided into five parts. Followed by a brief review of the concept of sense-making and its sustainability, the overall design of research is explained. Then the findings about the core processes of sense-making and the supporting factors are discussed. Finally, some theoretical as well as practical implications are highlighted at the conclusion.

Sensemaking in organizations

Members in organizations often face uncertainties and ambiguities in daily life. Those unexpected situations generate surprises (Louis, 1980), or cognitive tensions (Watson and Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998), which arouse the need for sensemaking in organizations. Broadly defined as the activities and actions that 'people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations' (Weick, 1995: 15), the scope of sensemaking activities includes the use of scripts and symbols (Gioia, 1986), textual manipulation (Brown, 2005), schemas (Daft and Weick,

1984) and storytelling techniques (Berry, 2001) as various mechanisms for making sense of the confusing and ambiguous issues from the environment.

According to Weick (1995), the stimulus of sensemaking is from the occurrence of interruption in organizations, be it major ecological or strategic changes, and subsequent to this, organization members have to restore normal order and resume normalcy through three interdependent activities, namely enactment, selection and retention. The process of *enactment* entails the search for meaningful cues from the ongoing experience and gives a retrospective account of the incident they collectively encountered. Then a shared interpretation and understanding is generated to enable the members to come to terms with the socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

During the *selection* process, individuals and groups try to sort through the multiple images of realities generated by previous enactment activities and reach a common understanding that seems to portray the situation in the most plausible manner. The process itself is contestable, which is subject to the influence of different stakeholders' interests and multiple interpretations (Brown, 2003) existing in organizational life.

The products of enactment and selection exist in various forms of organizational memory (Walsh and Ungson, 1991) and are retained by the members as shared meanings to guide future actions. But for the *retention* process to take place, the shared meanings must fit into the prevailing norms of interpretation. Otherwise, they can not filter through the cognitive framework and be stored in the 'collective mind' of the organizations (Sandelands and Stablein, 1987; Weick and Roberts, 1993). The chain of activities that link enactment-selection-retention together occurs under a sequential and recurrent fashion. People first engage in enacting the social and material world they are situated, selecting the portions of enactment they deem appropriate, and retaining them as a plausible explanation and reference for future actions.

It is assumed that not only the top management should bear the task of spearheading the sensemaking activities in organizations. It is everyone's responsibility to make sense of the environment in and through the interactions with others and act

collectively. People from different hierarchies bring along their diverse frames of reference to participate in the sensemaking processes (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). By going through the activities mentioned above, a shared understanding among members can be developed to sustain relationships and enable collective actions.

Sustainability of sensemaking

The notions that sensemaking is a social activity (Brown, 2005) taken place in a circular pattern give rise to the question of sustainability. We define sustainability as the ability for the organization to carry out the sensemaking activity over a long period of time. This issue is important as most studies about sensemaking approach the phenomenon under various extreme settings, such as crisis, natural disaster or major organizational change events, which are supposed to be non-repetitive in nature. Very few of them have paid attention to the social interpretive processes in daily work, with the exception of a recent study by Maitlis (2005).

The focus on the sustainability of sensemaking practices bring out two somehow overlooked issues. First, by framing sensemaking as ‘a pattern of interrelated activities among many people’ (Weick and Roberts, 1993), the major assumption is that the occurrence of those activities will emerge naturally without an explicit chain of command commonly seen in organization hierarchies. For example, Weick’s (1993) analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster provided an excellent account of how a new social order and structure was emerged *naturally* through the members’ discursive accounts, which in turn shaped the subsequent phase of sensemaking. On the other hand, the co-participation between leader and various stakeholders as a cornerstone of sensemaking behavior was highlighted in Maitlis’ (2005) study of British symphony orchestra, thus suggesting that the phenomenon occurred mainly on a voluntary basis. It would be interesting to see whether it is possible to institutionalize the collectively sensemaking behavior, so as to make it as ‘an ongoing accomplishment’ (Weick, 1995: 15).

Second, subsequent to the idea that sensemaking can be institutionalized in organizations, it is yet to determine the relevant mechanisms and structure that help shape the overall process. Pye (2005) argued the significant role of leadership as a useful tool for extracting and providing crucial cues throughout the enactment process (p.45). An effective leadership, as it was argued, could generate key sensemaking

reference points as well as be a key referent point itself. On the other hand, another study pointed to the importance of routines and conversations as ‘units of meaning’ in which the members’ practical experiences are expressed in their daily work (Rouleau, 2005). Through various discourse devices, the dominant organizational ideology can be legitimized and the decision premise can be established in organizations (Geppert, 2003).

Therefore, a more in-depth investigation of various contextual dimensions of the sensemaking process is warranted. The present study intend to address two broad research questions; (1) how the sensemaking behavior is practiced and sustained in organizations and (2) what are the different enabling factors.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to address these two research questions. Qualitative methods are considered to be appropriate for its ability to study the process-based phenomena as they unfold (Pettigrew, 1992), such as sensemaking behavior, and its sensitivity to contextual conditions in organizations. It would enable the investigator to approach the issue from the viewpoints of the participant, and understand the social and cultural dynamics involved. In brief, the qualitative method allows the researcher to gain a rich and contextualized understanding of participants’ experiences of their sensemaking processes in a complicated organizational setting. So it is often employed in previous studies of sensemaking.

In particular, this study employed the case study research method (Yin, 1994) to explore the sensemaking processes in one organization, which is a higher educational institution located in Macau, one of the two special administrative regions of PR China. The choice of this particular higher educational institution as the subject under study was due to the fact that it had been undergoing significant shifts in recent years. During the time of this study (2003-2005), the university was experiencing some major changes due to the increasing pressure from both the society and government for better quality education. As a response, the university needed to embark on a series of new administrative reform to cope with the changing environments, such as ISO9001 certification programs, workflow optimization and internal process improvement, thus

creating a high degree of uncertainties and ambiguities. Then it provided a suitable context for researching sensemaking in organization. Moreover, the use of tertiary education as a sample organization was not uncommon in previous sensemaking studies (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Gioia and Cittipedi, 1991).

Fieldwork was carried out between January 2003 to August 2005 and the second author had been involved as the active participant since the launching and subsequent implementation of the new administrative reform carried out the university. Since the focus of this research was to discover how the organization carried out and sustained the sensemaking activities, members' opinions and feedback toward the actual change process and the facilitating mechanisms were broadly collected. Qualitative data were collected from their experiences of engaging in two different types of ongoing administrative reform programs, namely 'routine' and 'special' projects. Participants who were come from all levels in the organization hierarchy, including project leaders, project facilitators, administrative support staff, academic staff and students were contacted. A rich data source would broaden our analytical perspective and improve the

The most important data source of the study was the 10 in-depth qualitative interviews, each lasting from one to two hours (Table 1). All the interviews were recorded before being transcribed verbatim, and finally codified for data analysis. Amongst the 10 interviews, 4 of them were with the administrative staff (one top management and three middle-level management), 3 with academics and the other 3 with students. The interview questions focused initially on how the participants made a retrospective sense of the events that they experienced and the relevant supporting mechanisms of sensemaking. The researchers then kept fine-tuning the interview questions from time to time, so as to engage the participants in more in-dept discussions.

= Insert Table 1 =

Secondary data was mainly derived from both the publicly available information and official documents, including university annual reports, official newsletter and university websites, bulletin news, emails, memoranda and project plans. According to Hammersley & Atkinson (1995), the secondary data provide "a rich vein of analytic topics, as well as a valuable source of information" which helped contextualized and

refined the data collection process. For example, the upcoming work tasks identified in the university annual report could help the researcher identify the future direction and strategies contemplated by the university's top management, thus narrowing down the analytical scope.

The three-step analytical approach proposed by Gioia and Thomas (1996) was adopted to process the qualitative data. Based on their advice, the entire analysis began with the categorical analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1984) by identifying the emerging themes and building up a clear categorization system to analyze the raw data. As a result, a basic pattern of data was developed. The second step was to employ Van Maanen's (1988) first- and second-order analysis to generate the first-order informant terms and concepts, and the second-order themes. The researchers then assembled the second-order themes into aggregate analytical dimensions in order to provide a framework for organizing the emerging findings. By using this analytical approach (first-order and second-order analysis), a set of coded data was structured and the interrelationship among themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was identified. The final step was to perform a narrative analysis to elaborate each of the identified themes in detail, such as different organizational sensemaking process, and the key mechanisms and factors that helped sustain them. This narrative analysis technique enabled the researcher to illustrate the contextual issues critical to organizational sensemaking.

Findings

The findings of study indicated sensemaking is a circular process involving three core activities which included enactment, selection and retention. However, the sustainability of it depended on whether the institution could construct an amicable organizational context that helped reduce staff resistance to change and improve transparency, so as to create mutual understanding among different parties and individuals.

As indicated by the respondents, the overall sensemaking process started with *enactment*, or the activity of 'noticing some change or discrepancies in the flow of experience' (Choo, 1998: 72). Thus, any changes could be regarded as the beginning of a sensemaking process. Most of them could realize the impact of changes through the

implementation of various routine and special projects and the environmental shifts occurred upon launching those projects. A project leader reflected on his previous difficulties when undergoing the turbulent period to establish the standard working procedures in his unit. Since it was a totally new experience for his team, it was a major struggle for them to cope with the uncertainties and focus on the important issues.

“My team initially encountered many problems as we have been accustomed to previous work practices. Since we started to move from the “non-standard” procedures to establish some standardized ones, nobody had the idea of what was going on. But once those procedures have been in place, all of us were required strictly to follow them.”

Differences in the previous experiences affected the way that the enactment process was conducted. Weick (1979) argues that experience is the key element which enables “the surroundings get sorted into variables and linkages and appear more orderly” (p.148). Experience is the outcome of what people gain after going through an activity or a series of processes, no matter it is a good or bad result. Based on this understanding, the participant literally wades into the swarm of ‘events’ that surround him and actively tries to unrandomize them and impose some order. Experience enables organizational members to

Our interview findings indicated that experience enabled them to make sense to a new project. They listed out several sources of experience accordingly, such as those given by department heads, project consultants, previous project participants, users or classmates. Effective sharing of these experiences provided a good reference point to take a retrospect review on the past activities and results, and then preview for the ongoing processes and actions being taken place. An administrative staff C said that sharing others’ experience might allow her to assess the feasibility of implementing some similar projects, and this would certainly benefit the upcoming projects before they were actually carried out.

“I think that all things should be done in a practical and realistic manner. Sometimes we may ask the people who have experienced the processes and see if the projects are feasible for carrying out.”

The next step of sensemaking process involved selection in which members select schemes of interpretation for reducing the equivocality of all raw data gathered from the enactment stage. A good leader, as pointed out by our interviewees, was able to give accurate instructions to his/her staff for achieving a project more effectively, and make the right choice when several feasible alternatives were available. There was a high expectation existing especially among the frontline staff for the leader to realize the impact of change, identify any gap and minimize the influence on the followers.

“I think that clear guidelines or instructions should be given by the leader to his/her staff. Also, he/she should not always focus on some minor points/issues, but instead should oversee the overall development.” (Administrative Staff A)

“It depends on the guidance and leadership of a leader to handle the ambiguity. To be a middle management, we won't make any decision making and we should trust our leader since he/she will lead all staff to work in a correct way. Thus, a good leader is vital even though more difficulties are encountered and the good leader may help us to cope with the challenges” (Administrative Staff B)

Subsequent to the enactment and selection, the overall sensemaking process ends up with retention where the meaningful interpretations are retained and retrieved later on for the following sensemaking cycle in other occasions. Establishment of shared understanding is important to both organization and its members, because it enables organizational activities to become routinized and helps organizational members achieve a level of commonalty and continuity that facilitates organizational action. Throughout the interview process, most respondents agreed that building shared understanding through various channels (group meetings, informal conversations, etc...) in the organization was vital.

“For some people, certain projects may not be able to carry out because of insufficient preparation. In order to solve this problem, the first step to be taken is to understand about staff’s need and their capability for various projects. Then they have to consult others before the allocation of work assignment. This may require a shared understanding before figuring out a solid plan for any project.” (Student B)

However, the implementation of enactment-selection-retention cycle of sensemaking was not without difficulties. One critical issue emerged is the need to create an enterprise context (Hong *et al.*, 2006; Ciborra *et al.*, 1996) that promotes transparency and reduces resistance to change. The ways that people act and think are socially embedded and contingent upon the organizational environment in which learning occurs. For instance, Ciborra and Lanzara (1990) describe the notion of formative context as ‘the set of pre-existing institutional arrangements, cognitive frameworks, and imageries that actors bring and routinely enact in a situation of action’. This context-specific view suggests that it is necessary to consider how the sensemaking behaviors are constructed *in situ* (Thomas & Al-Maskati, 1997).

The need to create a transparent organizational environment where critical information would be freely circulated and abundant without restriction was mentioned by the respondents. It assisted in the establishment of the shared understanding amongst all members, and provided them with sufficient information to improve the communication between management and operational staff. As a result, a uniform direction would be able to develop. However, there was a pervasive feeling that the current level of transparency inside the university was not enough, which could hinder the effectiveness of building up a mutual understanding between various parties in the institution, thus making the process of reaching a census and making sensible decisions difficult.

“Among the various factors that facilitate the project implementation, ‘transparency’ is considered to be a key element. It can let all involved parties to

understand the meaning and motives for implementing the projects and this may result in a same direction amongst the participants. For launching a big project, in my viewpoint, having a common understanding and same direction between all groups and its members will be finally resulted in a good effect.” (Academic Staff B)

Another administrative staff B also shared the same idea that transparency was a necessary element in a project team as it determined the degree of cooperation of the team members. He mentioned that;

“The staff involved should be informed about the purpose, nature and requirement of the projects through various communication channels, e.g., briefing, survey results or some basic background documents. This may enable them to realize what’s happened and what to do next. Then, it is also necessary to provide the opportunity to all team members to know each other’s characters, their positions and also the departments they are from. All these background information can determine the staff’s concern and decide whether they will understand and then fully cooperate in the projects.”

A transparent organization environment regarding the nature of project and the members’ personal background is essential, because, ‘the sense of knowing their colleagues, of knowing their credibility in and commitment to specific issues, and of knowing how to collaborate with them to get things done’ (Orlikowski, 2002: 259) would lead to efficient cooperative work. But this would need the support of a communication system that provided timely information to the relevant parties. As mentioned by another administrative staff;

“In my opinion, certain messages should be conveyed to the public in a timely manner in order to arouse the public attention and encourage active participation. This is because whenever a staff contributes his suggestions or opinions to the authority or department head, he must expect a quick response

from the supervisor... Activities should be conducted on the basis of reciprocal interaction.” (Administrative Staff D)

Conclusions

The study set out to achieve two objectives: (1) What are the practices of sensemaking in organization? and (2) How are those practices being sustained in the organization from the participants’ viewpoint? We have demonstrated the experience sharing, leadership and shared understanding are the essential input for the enactment-selection-retention cycle of sensemaking process. We have also shown that a transparent organization environment where all relevant information is freely available was critical to the effectiveness for sustaining the sensemaking process (Figure 1).

= Insert Figure 1 =

This study makes three contributions to the prevalent sensemaking literature. First, it identifies the significant factors that appear to influence the sensemaking process. Instead of just providing a descriptive analysis of various social processes of sensemaking, we go a step further to identify the underlying mechanisms that support the ongoing practice of each major activity of sensemaking. Second, the opinions from a diverse pool of actors were sought. Having the opportunity to obtain the views from different participants helps broaden the top-management dominated perspective as seen in other previous studies (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Pye, 2005). Third, the importance of establishing an amicable organization context through high degree of transparency is highlighted. This proposition goes beyond previous sensemaking research that has only concentrated on the interpretive processes of sensemaking (Gephart, 1993; Brown, 2003, 2005) but somehow neglected the formative role that the background contextual conditions in organization can play.

However, two major limitations need to be addressed. One consideration is that the analytical scope was only confined to the interactions between actors within the higher education institution. It is possible that other external stakeholders, such as parents, government departments or general public, may have different kinds of influence on the sensemaking process (Maitlis, 2005). We may need to address their

concerns and expectations in order to develop a more complete understanding about the phenomenon. Besides, this study has made an assumption that the higher education sector shares many similarities with the private enterprises as both have goals, structures and strategies. However, there are still some differences in the governance structure and nature of operation that affect the generalizability of findings.

In order to solve these shortcomings, one possible area for future research can look into the interaction of both internal and external stakeholders' sensemaking behaviors and how it affects the sensemaking process. It is anticipated that by broadening the analytical scope to consider the dynamics of interaction between them, some more interesting results may emerge. Another potential area for development is to identify more contextual conditions in organization that might influence the overall sensemaking. In addition to transparency, there are other possible institutional elements, such as culture (Osland and Bird, 2000) or politics (Marshall and Rollinson, 2004), that should not be overlooked.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

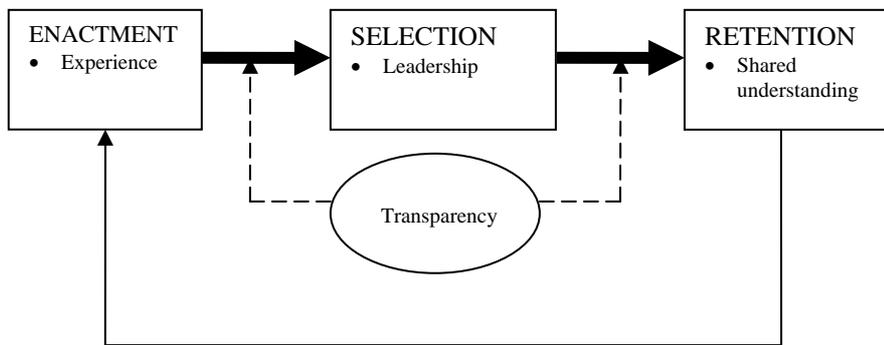


Table 1: Background of Interviewees

Participants	Position	Gender	Project Involved	
			Routine Projects	Special Projects
Administrative Staff A	Frontline Staff	F	❖ ISO 9000 Project ❖ Performance Pledge ❖ CQI Project ❖ Event organization	❖ Complaint mechanism monitoring
Administrative Staff B	Unit Head, Project Leader	M	❖ ISO 9000 Project ❖ Performance Pledge ❖ CQI Project ❖ On-line course enrollment	❖ Self-assessment Project
Administrative Staff C	Middle-level management	M	❖ Performance Pledge ❖ CQI Project	❖ E-Parking management ❖ Estate Facility management ❖ Regulations review
Administrative Staff D	Middle-level Management	F	❖ Performance Pledge ❖ ISO 9000 Project ❖ System Maintenance ❖ Cataloging	❖ CQI Project
Academic Staff A	Lecturer	M	❖ Survey Projects	❖ Performance Pledge
Academic Staff B	Assistant Professor	M	❖ Program Coordinator	❖ Performance Pledge ❖ ISO 9000 Project
Academic Staff C	Assistant Professor	M	❖ Book Edition and Publication	❖ Performance Pledge ❖ ISO 9000 Project
Student A	Year-One Student	M	❖ Interlibrary Loan Service ❖ Course Enrollment	❖ Performance Pledge
Student B	Year-Two Student	M	❖ Web CT Service ❖ Course Enrollment	❖ Performance Pledge
Student C	Year-Three Student	F	❖ Course Enrollment ❖ Course Add/Drop	❖ Performance Pledge ❖ ISO 9000 Project

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