The Organizational Meaning of Research

Marco Adria, University of Alberta
Patricia Boechler, University of Alberta

Abstract

Practitioners and theorists have given attention recently to the role and status of research activities in Canadian university continuing education units. For individuals in units that are increasing the proportion of their organizational activities devoted to research, there will be an ongoing process of cognitive change and development as a new organizational culture emerges. Sensemaking is used in this article as a heuristic for exploring the process of incorporating and developing research activities in university continuing education units. Sensemaking is the cognitive process of justifying or legitimating a decision or outcome after the decision or outcome is already known. It is associated with organizational models that reject an exclusively rational decision-making paradigm of organizational action. Sensemaking recognizes the centrality of the following elements in the

Résumé

Tout récemment, les praticiens et les théoriciens ont porté leur attention au rôle et au statut des activités de recherche dans les unités universitaires d'éducation permanente. Pour les individus faisant partie des unités où la proportion d'activités organisationnelles consacrées à la recherche augmente, il y aura un processus permanent de changement et de développement cognitifs pendant que se déclare la nouvelle culture organisationnelle.

Dans cet article, la 'logi-fabrication' est utilisée comme heuristique pour explorer les façons d'intégrer et de développer des activités de recherches à l'intérieur des unités universitaires d'éducation permanente. La 'logi-fabrication' existe lorsque le processus cognitif pour justifier et légitimer une décision ou un résultat se fait après que la décision ou le résultat sont connus. Ce processus est associé aux modèles organisationnels où il y a un rejet

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interpretation of research activities and their relationship to organizational life: time, identity construction, and the ongoing creation of context. The authors provide an extended reflection on the process of meaning-making that may be experienced by individuals as conventional research becomes a more important part of organizational life. Such a reflection may support and inform the change process as it occurs in university continuing education units.

du modèle décisionnaire rationnel des actions organisationnelles. La 'logi-fabrication' reconnaît la centralité des éléments suivants quant à l'interprétation des activités de recherche et quant à leur relation à la longévité organisationnelle, à la construction d'identité ainsi qu'à la création continuelle du contexte.

Les auteurs offrent une réflexion approfondie sur le processus de 'logi-fabrication' que peuvent reconnaître certains individus comme étant de la recherche classique devenant une partie de plus en plus importante de la vie organisationnelle. Une telle réflexion peut appuyer et informer le processus de changement comme il existe dans les unités universitaires d'éducation permanente.

Life can only be understood backwards. But it must be lived forwards.

Sören Kierkegard

Introduction

Research in university continuing education in Canada has an ambiguous status. Continuing education practitioners in Canadian universities generally plan their academic programs with little or no base funding. As a consequence, efforts and resources of time and money are directed to identifying and capturing a student market and then providing a high-quality learning experience. Research into such areas as the effective use of instructional technology, the changing characteristics and demands of adult learners, and best practices for promoting lifelong learning must find a place in an increasingly crowded organizational agenda (Peterson, 2001).

Percival and Kops (1999) argued that adult education as a field of study in Canada "has a long history of practice and a relatively short history of

scholarship" (p. 46). Borrowing a phrase from another author, they refer to the area as a "mess" (p. 46). Problems they cite include confusion between practice and theory, the lack of graduate training for practitioners, and inadequate funding for research activities. Despite these problems, many university continuing education practitioners do attempt to incorporate research into their unit plans and to contribute to discussions in the wider university about the value of research (see, for example, McLean, 2002). Furthermore, even those who take a less-supportive approach to integrating research in university continuing education units into the university mainstream recognize that to be part of a university is to participate in the primary mission of scholarship. Blaney (1996), for example, provided a rationale for including research in the requirements of university continuing education practitioners while recognizing that the outcomes may be difficult to measure. Examining the records of 30 subjects, he failed to find a statistical correlation between research activity by university continuing education practitioners and the programs they developed. However, he argued that some of the reasons research should be carried out in any case were to facilitate the professional development of practitioners, to support an inclusive view of faculty members as teacher-learners engaged with the community, and to contribute to the university's mission of scholarship.

This article adopts the properties of sensemaking, as described by Weick (1995), as a heuristic for exploring the process of incorporating and developing research activities in university continuing education units. Sensemaking assumes that the way we describe and understand our action is different from the way we actually experience and engage in action. Sensemaking recognizes the centrality of the following elements in our interpretation of organizational life: time, identity construction, and the ongoing creation of context. These are interwoven into individuals' perceptions about the meaning of their own actions in the organization and those of others.

The sensemaking approach to organizational life may be contrasted with the decision-making approach. Sensemaking assumes that the organization is continually changing as a result of the shifting perceptions and actions of individuals. The rational decision-making approach posits an ideal organizational structure, thereby providing a measure of predictability to organizational action. Individuals respond to this ideal structure by acting rationally, according to the agreed goals of the organization. Decisions in the rational model are made following the identification of a problem, the analysis of potential solutions, and the selection of an optimal solution.

For the purpose of this article, research refers to curiosity-driven inquiry that generally qualifies for funding by external agencies and bodies and that results in peer-reviewed publications. Selman (1999) pointed to the university's perspective on the student as a learner within the walls of the university

as a different perspective from that of university continuing education units, a difference that separates the research that should take place in each sphere. He asserted that research in university continuing education units "should be more narrowly focused on how people in organizations learn in relation to the particular contexts they are in and the challenges they face" (p. 91). Furthermore, there are other activities of inquiry that take place in a university, such as reflective practice, evaluation, and consulting. Although these may be defined under the broader category of research, this article takes the more narrow conception (or the broader one, depending on your perspective), because it underlies the missions and mandates of Canada's medium-sized and large universities, in which much of university continuing education takes place.

The definition adopted here refers to the kind of research activity that can be disruptive in university continuing education units because, as will be discussed, its time frame, contributions to identity formation, and context-constituting nature are different from other kinds of organizational activities. It seems clear that a shift to conventional approaches to research in Canadian universities is likely to change the organizational culture in university continuing education units for some time. The Canadian Research Chair program—to say nothing of the rapidly expanding funding for research in science, engineering, and medicine—will continue to have its effects.

Two Views of Organizational Action

The fly and the spider provide contrasting images of the organizational perspective according to the rational decision-making and sensemaking approaches. The image of the fly (rational decision-making) and of the spider (sensemaking) can illustrate the difference between two quite distinctive views of organizational action and help to set the stage for our exploratory comments.

The fly can move quickly around and about the spider's web (or organization). The web's structure is relatively stable from the point of view of the fly as it goes about its activities. It can take a close-up view of the web or an aerial view. Time has relatively little influence on the fly's view, as no sooner is an impression gained from one perspective than it can be confirmed by an immediate return. The fly can be in many places within a short period of time. In contrast, the spider does not have the luxury of the simultaneous view. The spider must move much more slowly than the fly. In fact, it can't fly at all. Its view is always a close-up, gained from crawling from one strand of the web to another. The spider's view is always changing because of its position in the web. Because the spider is continuously adding to and chang-

ing the web, the view taken just a short while ago may be quite different now. The perspective has changed, but the web itself will now be different.

The sensemaking approach is the spider's view. It is a rich perspective on organizational action. It gives less attention to ideal, formal organizational structures than to the actions taken by individuals based on their perceptions of these structures. Organizational features such as hierarchy and span of control are important in the sensemaking approach for their influence and constraint on action, but not for their representation of action.

Research is conceived of differently at each university, and each university continuing education unit has its own research culture that may differ from that of other faculties. Furthermore, the meaning of research changes in history. The way in which sensemaking is reflected in time, identity construction, and authoritative acts is reflected in the example of the university itself. North American society is biased to space (Innis, 1951). In North America, it is the reach, locally and beyond the local, that signifies power. Consider the dramatic decline of the financial power of Nortel Networks. Like other modern corporate organizations, the company is biased to space. Its loss of economic power is not really considered a failure of its history, an inability to maintain its historic authority as a manufacturer of fibre-optic cables, but rather a failure to dominate space, to control the international markets for its hardware products. Universities, however, are biased to time. The coherence and reach of the university are seen as being extended in history, rather than over geographical space. Considered as an institution, the university in Western society has a long history that supports this bias to time. Canadian universities, too, have relatively long histories, although not when compared with universities in the United States and the United Kingdom. In many instances, Canadian provincial universities were established at about the same time that the powers of their home provinces were established.

When we consider the construction of identity that takes place within a university, we must keep in view this bias to time. Universities, and those who work in them, build their identity primarily based on, not the capacity to dominate a geographic market, but the power to continually renew their historic authority. How does this renewal take place? It is accomplished primarily through demonstrating the ability to carry out systematic inquiry. Teaching is an important part of how this systematic inquiry takes place, but we have seen in the rise of executive MBA programs (and other educational programs previously regarded as operating under a university monopoly) that teaching can be carried out by learning organizations other than universities.

Working in a university continuing education unit as an instructor, program developer, and researcher, then, is associated with identity construction through reference to time. Authoritative acts in such a unit arise out of an orientation to time and identity construction. As the university seeks

to become more accountable to its constituencies (government, the public, funding bodies), this emphasis on systematic inquiry, or research, is likely to intensify. Research is what has historically set the university apart from other educational institutions, and it is likely to do so for some time to come.

Sensemaking and Organizational Life

The sensemaking perspective has been associated with the work of social psychologist Karl Weick. Since the publication of his *The Social Psychology of Organizing* in 1969, Weick has directed our attention to individuals' actions in an organization as an outcome of how they understand that organization. Weick argued that decision-making or other rational approaches to organizational life do not fully explain what actually goes on in organizations. Managers, for example, do not and cannot know everything that goes on in their organization, or even within their span of control. There is much uncertainty, or *equivocality*, to use Weick's term, in the organization. Managers spend much of their time addressing that uncertainty.

Weick's conception of sensemaking has been taken up by many theorists and practitioners in professional areas, including business, education, and government administration. An example of the kind of qualitative research to which his theoretical development of sensemaking has given rise is in relation to varying patterns of sensemaking that occur at different levels of the organizational hierarchy. Weber and Manning (2001) demonstrated that, when faced with a significant change, front-line workers in an organization tend to spend more time and energy considering the implications of the change for their own position and work. Those at higher levels of the organization tend to move more quickly to consider the implications of the change for strategic and organizational issues.

Weick's key insight is that we should try to understand *organizing* rather than *organizations*—the spider's view, rather than the fly's. Actions in the organization are interlocked. An individual's actions are always contingent on the actions of others. Organizing activities are designed to reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity of information, especially information coming from outside of the organization. This insight is specified in the *double-interact*. One person acts, followed by the response of another, followed then by an adjusted action: *act-response-adjustment.* According to Weick, all organizing activities are in the nature of double-interacts and the more equivocal or uncertain the information, the larger the number of double-interacts (ongoing discussion) that may be expected to be associated with that information.

Applying Weick's Seven Properties

Weick (1995) described seven properties that are characteristic of sensemaking. These properties are used in this article to explore the organizational meaning of research in a university continuing education unit. For each of the seven properties discussed below, the following is provided: (a) a statement of the property; (b) an imaginative example of a thought or statement that might characterize an individual's perceptions about research in a university continuing education unit; (c) a discussion of how the property can be applied in context; and (d) two reflective questions related to the property, which may be used by practitioners to extend their exploration of the property in their own university continuing education units.

Property 1

Research in a university continuing education unit is grounded in identity construction

Am I a researcher? If I'm not doing research, I'm not a researcher. Perhaps I should do research. Why would I want to do research? Researchers are autonomous, manage their own time, and often don't report directly on their work to anyone. I see myself as capable and well trained—autonomous.

We don't ever arrive at a final construction of our identity. It is continually changing, based on our understanding of the organizational context and our orientation to it. Weick outlined three aspects of self-identity that motivate individuals to engage in sensemaking:

1) the need for self-enhancement

2) the self-efficacy motive

3) the need for self-consistency

These three motivations apply to both the individual's and the organization's self-concept.

First, part of the continuing education unit's self-concept, and that of individuals, is the learned appreciation of its differences from other university units. The unit functions as an intermediary between the community at large and the traditional delivery of university education. Practitioners take pride in this distinction, this position of difference. They defend it against those who might question its value and purpose. However, by instituting research practices as part of our organizational self-identity, we may move closer to the practices of conventional university faculties or departments. This may be perceived as a step toward self-enhancement, but it may also be perceived as a step toward the dissolution of our difference, which some perceive as

our reason for being. For members of a continuing education unit, engaging in conventionally defined research activities may create cognitive dissonance. Actions will conflict with underlying beliefs.

Second is the desire to perceive ourselves as competent. University continuing education units have varying measures of efficacy, one important measure being how well we serve our students. If we judge our self-efficacy based on internal performance from one time frame to another, we may well be convinced of our own efficacy. However, when we compare our performance to traditional university units, it becomes more difficult to establish and maintain a sense of self-efficacy because of the varying repertoire of activities. A meaningful comparison may be untenable. Adopting a research agenda may be perceived as developing common ground for establishing comparative competency. At the same time, it may be perceived as a threatening move toward being evaluated by the university at large, by others outside of our unit who may not share our basis for perceiving competency.

Third, sensemaking is motivated by a need for self-consistency. A research identity may not be part of our organizational self-concept as a university continuing education unit. Yet, the unit's identity is also associated with the traits of adaptability and responsiveness. We may see ourselves as capable of adopting new identities as the environment demands it. But again, there is the potential for a crisis of identity because the two notions of consistency may be incompatible.

Research requires freedom of action, discretion, and judgment, which are the distinguishing features of professional activity. In our university continuing education units, we may therefore use research to define professional identities.

- If there is cognitive dissonance about research, how may we reduce it?
- How do we reduce possible threats to our sense of competency?

Property 2

Research in a university continuing education unit is retrospective

Let me see if I can remember. There have been three professors hired in the last two years. At the time each was hired, there was a lot of talk about research. We keep running lists of people's publications. I wonder if anyone will ever do anything with that list. Weren't there some interesting studies written in this unit some years ago?

We develop our conception of the meaning of research for our organization by attending to the past. We observe who has been appointed to new positions in the organization. We interpret the organization's history and

social trajectory. We build and process the dossiers and records of individuals and groups.

Attention to what the future may hold, although part of much of organizational rhetoric, is a rare occurrence. It is possible to overestimate the degree to which we attend to the future of the organization. Planning is an important part of organizational life. However, while we may occasionally spend time in the organization talking about and planning for what the organization will become, this constitutes only a small proportion of our resources of time and attention. The vast proportion of attention in the organization is given to an analysis of what has already happened. Even in such apparently future-oriented activities as forecasting, strategizing, and budgeting, much effort is devoted to comparing what happened last year with what seems to be happening this year, last month with the month before, and so on. Weick outlined four aspects of sensemaking that make it retrospective: 1) attention; 2) current filters; 3) influences on memory; and 4) the sequence of response-stimulus.

Let's consider the attentional process first. How is attention to research initiated? It may be through linking activities to the mandate of the larger university, or it may be initiated by an individual seeking out collaborative opportunities. In the latter case, a retrospective look at the individual's research career might be compared to our own retrospective look at our own research activities. The point in time at which attention is initiated is the same point at which retrospection begins. Our attention is continually drawn back to a review of events that occurred up until that initiating event.

Next, the current moment serves as a filter for what is perceived of the past. Some variables that may affect that filter are: the scope and type of research projects in progress; the proportion of faculty members who identify themselves as researchers; organizational incentives for research activities; and obstacles, both internal (such as negative attitudes, lack of resources, and lack of skills) and external (such as a reluctance to recognize research as a valid activity for university continuing education units), that stand in the way of increasing research activities.

Third, anything that influences memory will also influence the interpretation of past memories. The form in which memories are encoded, or stored, is also the form in which they are retrieved. Hence, we only have information available to us in the form that previous stakeholders chose to record it. In trying to make sense of our current context, one influencing factor is the level of prior attention given to documentation of research activities and history within the unit. Another is the form of organizational memories within the unit. For example, organizational memories may be embedded in the personal recollection of long-term key members of the unit.

Finally, the stimulus that elicits a certain response can only be identified after the response has occurred. We attend to a particular object, action, or mechanism only after it has brought about a salient, significant outcome. In the midst of the multiple activities occurring on a given day, it is difficult to look back and ascertain which prior action initiated the current outcome of interest. Many possible meanings may be derived from retrospective examination, and these alternate meanings must be integrated into one cohesive meaning. Thus, a renewed organizational focus on research may have been incremental, a collection of small, not particularly memorable events. Or it may have followed a salient pronouncement of intent: an internally developed statement (a strategic plan for the unit, for example), an externally driven one (such as a university-wide research initiative), or a combination of both.

- What is your context filter?
- How have organizational memories been maintained in your unit, and who has access to such memories?

Property 3

Research in a university continuing education unit is enactive of a sensible environment

Great! I got my research grant! Now what do I do? I would like to ask my colleagues in another department about collaboration, but they really don't understand how my unit runs or what is important here. What can I tell them so they can give me some good advice?

Research is enactive of sensible environments in that we produce the environment that we then "face." We create research committees and obtain funding or make occasion to discuss such things. A central insight of studies of interpersonal communication is that individuals seek coherence in their conversations (Craig & Tracy, 1983). We frame our contributions to conversations by anticipating what the other person is likely to regard as relevant. Each time someone from a university continuing education unit is in conversation with someone from another unit in the same university, each partner in the dialogue strives, often to a considerable extent, to render that conversation sensible, coherent, and grounded in the social context. The defining difference between our organizational culture and theirs, although we work in the same university, is bound to be a subject, not just of the research committee, but of *each interaction*.

As groups of individuals search out and create coherence within and among themselves, they also create subtle changes in their shared environment. The organizational environment is not a static, separate entity to

which people either respond or react. Rather, influence in the organization is bidirectional and continuous. Any causal relationship only exists in a moment within the ongoing process of change, wherein the environment is influenced by the individual and the individual is influenced by the environment in a rapid cycle. "Action is crucial for sensemaking," wrote Weick (1995, p. 32). By defining something that previously was ill-defined, authoritative acts create environments that further constrain or direct action. When people enact research activities or events, they create new features that did not exist before, such as research funding and research assistants. They may be uncertain of how to manage these new features.

- What is important about research in a university continuing education unit that we may want to convey in our interactions with other units?
- How do we ensure that individuals have the knowledge to respond in productive ways to new environmental features?

Property 4

Research in a university continuing education unit is social

If I were to call to mind all the ways that other people have helped me do "my" research, it would be a long list. Although my research is something I am accountable for, it is the product of many, many conversations.

Weick stated that "[s]ensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others" (p. 40). We rely on others' observable actions and reactions to help us understand a novel event, but our expectations of others' responses and intentions are also part of the social nature of sensemaking. As Weick reminded us, we should not limit our conception of sensemaking to two-way interactions. We engage in sensemaking when we imagine how others will respond to us if we say or do certain things: "Even monologues and one-way communications presume an audience" (p. 40). Uncovering misconceptions about others' perceptions early in the process will facilitate sensemaking attempts.

University continuing education units often involve themselves in collaborative research. This can be explained in part by the interdisciplinary nature of the academic areas that are of interest to academic staff members in university continuing education units. Another reason is the relatively small size of these units in relation to larger faculties or departments in the university. Collaboration is more likely in smaller units because of the synergies of working together on projects, proposals, requests for funding, and so on. Yet another reason is that university continuing education units may have as a priority the establishment of formal and informal links with academic groups within the university. The exchanges involved in these collaborative

projects are therefore likely to reflect many types and kinds of social groups. Research is a social activity, and research activities in a university continuing education unit represent diverse social interactions.

Socialization practices within university continuing education units are an important formative influence on new staff members. They shape the sensemaking that new staff members engage in, because they establish the patterns for communication and interaction. New staff members must interpret what others are saying and doing, but they must also learn how to use the in-house language. For example, a culture of informal collegial exchange (people actually like each other and see each other outside of work hours) will encourage new staff members to attempt to become part of the culture or, if they wish, to mark the boundaries of their social interactions.

Finally, we should recognize that there is a difference between shared action and shared intent, between understanding and pragmatics. Colleagues may agree on a set of actions to initiate, support, and execute a collaborative research project or event, even though they may have different incentives or motivations for doing so.

- How might expectations of others' reactions be enhancing or hampering the initiation of authoritative acts?
- Do we have a process of research socialization within our university continuing education unit?

Property 5

Research in a university continuing education unit is ongoing

I've talked about research with people at work and even my partner at home. I'm thinking of how to present a research proposal to the dean. Another year has gone by. I wonder if I'm going to finish this article before my annual evaluation. Before I can do that I need to finish my course preparation, that draft proposal for the policy committee, and finish some paperwork I've been putting off.

The texts of our organizations are regarded as the base on which we establish our actions. When we hire a new person, we give them a job description and perhaps a copy of the strategic organizational plan. By drawing attention to the social nature of organizational life, we can better understand that conversations are in a continual state of interaction with organizational texts. By talking with an individual or with a group, we decide how a policy should be operationalized. By asking questions daily, a subordinate decides how to ensure that the job description is to be acted on.

"Tacking" from text to conversation and from conversation to text is characteristic of organizational life (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). We draft

documents by talking them into existence, either through silent self-talk or through interaction with others. When a text is "complete," it influences what we say and how we say it. An illustration is a legislature's life cycle of great stretches of debate and discussion punctuated by the codification of laws. Text-making, followed by conversation, followed by more text-making is an endless cycle in the legislature. Law-making is a continuous process (as it is in our organizations), with the proclamation of a new text only a beginning for another stage of conversation.

The process of deciding on the role of research in the university continuing education unit never ends, though we may pause to write and read policy statements on it. Interruptions of ongoing work flows induce sensemaking. Interruption creates arousal, which in turn instigates attention to and vigilance over new stimuli. Arousal also induces emotion. Integrating research activities into the flow of other continuing education activities means people must manage not only their actions and decisions about research but also their feelings about research. Interruptions may be more apparent and pressing in some faculty members' work flow than in others.

- Who is most affected by interruption?
- How might "retrospective emotions" (such as anger at prior similar interruptions) affect sensemaking of current interruptions?

Property 6

Research in a university continuing education unit is focused on and by extracted cues

Whose idea was it to have a committee, anyway?

Some extracted cues in an organization would be newspaper reports, actions of leaders, new hires and fires, rewards given, retirements taken, opportunities pursued. These cues not only stimulate action, but also take on symbolic value for individuals. Weick suggested several points to consider when reflecting on extracted cues.

The extracted cue depends on context for its effect. Context affects what is selected as an extracted cue, and context affects how the extracted cue is interpreted. Extracted cues provide reference points for the interpretation and integration of ambiguous elements. Moreover, Weick stated that "control over which cues serve as reference points is an important source of power" (p. 50). An extracted cue that is relevant to research in a university would be the history of how individual performance is formally evaluated. The implementation of strategies for promoting research in a university continuing education unit is inextricably tied to how research activities are valued and evaluated.

- In your university continuing education unit, what are possible extracted cues for promoting and focusing research activities?
- What evaluative weight is given to specific research activities, and who decides?

Property 7

Research in a university continuing education unit is driven by plausibility, rather than accuracy

We might just be able to do this. I think people might be expecting this from me. Research seems to be an antecedent for rewards here.

We spend endless hours devising our view of what seems reasonable under the circumstances and then acting upon that view. We can never know enough about what's going on in the university, or even in our own circle of colleagues. We devise maps of the organizational context that are driven by plausibility, not accuracy. We are continually asking ourselves and others, "What makes sense?" Weick put it this way: "A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking" (p. 61).

Plausibility induces motivation in others by providing coherence, something reasonable and memorable. Weick outlined several reasons for why sensemaking is not focused on accuracy (pp. 55–61).

First, he noted that individuals discern important information about their current situation, not about some unknown point in the future. This discernment will differ from person to person based on the "filter" of the current situation and on memory.

Second, sensemaking involves the elaboration of an extracted cue. Attention may be focused on these very salient extracted cues, which are further explored and developed. Other cues may be ignored or dismissed as inconsequential, and the salient cue may be linked to a similar interpreted cue from the past. Thus, accuracy at the beginning of a sensemaking episode is not achievable. Waiting for accuracy is counterproductive, because prolonging a period of ambiguity or abstraction can induce negative emotions about the adjustment. An initial elaboration or interpretation prompts action, which then prompts further elaboration and action. Moving forward enacts an environment that can be altered or adjusted to more easily. For example, if an individual establishes a research committee within the unit and it is the experience of the unit members that once committees are formed they are relatively durable and result in long-term changes in the activities of the

unit, then the creation of such a committee suggests that research is a plausible undertaking.

Third, Weick pointed out that accuracy is only relevant for short periods of time. Intense and expansive coverage of all possible influential variables can only be achieved in the short term with respect to specific questions. As the need to address those questions passes or as the context evolves, the accuracy of that information becomes less relevant or even entirely obsolete. In the meantime, resources (such as time, effort, and commitment) have been spent that may have allowed for more progressive action toward resolution or toward implementation of new activities.

Fourth, interpersonal phenomena typically do not demonstrate stimulus constancy but rather involve shifting, interactive stimuli. Sensemaking occurs dynamically: organizational and personal self-concepts undergo constant modifications. Insisting on accuracy stalls activities that may themselves be potential aids to sensemaking. For example, striking a research committee may be an important cue to unit members that the organizational self-concept has been altered, prompting individuals to re-evaluate their own self-concept as it relates to research.

Fifth, bold action is adaptive, whereas deliberation is not. Bold action shapes what is emerging toward the capacities of the bold actor, providing a match between personal resources and outcome. This can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If an individual initiates an event, the event will be constrained by the resources, knowledge, and capabilities of the initiator. Given the scope created by these constraints, the event is likely to be successful. For example, if an individual decides to create a research event to promote a continuing educations unit's research profile, the scope of the event will be limited by the available budget, the availability of facilities, the extent of that person's contacts across the campus and in other institutions and experience with coordinating similar events, the willingness of colleagues to assist, and so on. However, if that person waits until there are elevated levels in all of these areas, the event may never actually happen.

Finally, Weick reminded us that it is difficult to predict if current perceptions will result in hypothesized outcomes. Only in retrospect do we detect perceptual errors. At any given moment, we can only proceed with decision-making based on the information and resources available to us in that moment.

- In the process of integrating research into your university continuing education unit, have there been instances of poor trade-offs, in which progress has been sacrificed for short-term accuracy?
- What is most plausible about research in your unit?

Conclusion

If change in research activities in university continuing education units is to be understood, time, identity construction, and the ongoing creation of context must be observed for their influence on action. Individuals regard the past as an important source of their sensemaking efforts. Memory, both individual and organizational, functions as a form of organizational infrastructure. Individuals compare their identity with that of others and with the organization's identity. Action constitutes the touchstone for organizational context.

The organizational context for research in university continuing education units will continue to change. In particular, there is likely to continue to be discussion and debate on the role and status of research in university continuing education units. For those individuals seeking integration of their research activities within the larger university's mission of scholarship, attention to the sensemaking process may be useful and productive.

We have described many of the antecedents and potential consequences of this change for individuals and, ultimately, for the meaning that these activities will hold for them. What will remain the same is that academic and professional staff in university continuing education units will continue to use their perceptions and observations, as well as their knowledge and expertise, as a means of understanding this change. We have applied the concept of sensemaking to the phenomenon of research in university continuing education. We have emphasized the centrality of time, identity construction, and the ongoing creation of context in our perspective on the organizational meaning of research.

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Biographies

Marco Adria is Associate Professor of Communications and Director of the Master of Arts in Communications and Technology program in the Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta. Marco teaches communications theory and the management of communications technologies. He is the author or co-author of three books and several journal articles in the areas of organizational communication, popular culture, and nationalism.

Marco Adria est professeur agrégé de communications et est directeur du programme de maîtrise ès arts en communications et technologies à la faculté de formation permanente à The University of Alberta. Marco enseigne la théorie de la communication ainsi que la gestion des technologies de communications. Il est auteur et co-auteur de trois livres et de plusieurs articles de revues, tous dans les domaines de communication organisationnelle, de culture populaire et de nationalisme.

Patricia Boechler is Assistant Professor of Communications and Technology with a background in cognitive psychology. Her research focuses on human-computer interaction, specifically the cognitive processes involved in navigation and learning in hypermedia environments.

Patricia Boechler est professeur adjoint au département des études des politiques éducatives avec une formation en psychologie cognitive. Elle fait de la recherche sur l'interaction personne-machine, et plus particulièrement sur les processus cognitifs impliqués pour naviguer et apprendre dans un environnement hypermédia.