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**SENSEMAKING FOR WRITING PROGRAMS
AND WRITING CENTERS**

INTRODUCTION

Rita Malenczyk

Over the last two decades, writing studies has been preoccupied with scholarship and research on writing program and center ecologies, the relationship of individual programs and centers to the larger structures—social, institutional, global—in which they function (see, for instance, Reiff et al. 2015). The implication of that scholarship for writing program and center administrators is that centers and programs are not the only means available for writerly development and that the academic structures we create are not the sole means by which students learn to write. Of these extracurricular literacies, Kevin Roozen claims, “coming to terms with the complexity of undergraduates’ growth as writers—not just in terms of improving their ability to produce academic prose but also in the kinds of literate activities in which they will participate and for how long and to what extent—has increasingly meant attending to the writing that goes on beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the classroom” (2009, 543). Writing program administrators (WPAs) and writing center directors (WCDs) need to be aware, then, that much goes on in peoples’ lives and environments that influences their writing and is beyond our control as teachers and administrators—yet, if attended to, might influence how we administer our programs and centers.

In keeping with this awareness, WPAs and WCDs also need to acknowledge that much goes on in the working lives of our tutors and faculty that is also beyond our control yet may affect how writing is taught and delivered. This collection turns from the outside influences contributing to student literacies to the often-unseen interactions within centers and programs that define or make sense of program and center work. Sensemaking, a concept from organizational theory, is used in this collection to explore how to harness those unseen interactions for more effective administration. What might looking inward—“attending,” in Roozen’s (2009) words, to the microinteractions of faculty, tutors, and others—show us about attitudes and orientations toward program and center work and ultimately about how that work is done? What other

sensemaking cultures exist within our programs and centers too? How, for example, are institutional documents constructed in order to help others make sense of WPA and WCD work?

WHAT IS SENSEMAKING?

Sensemaking, a term native to organizational theory, is a process used to make meaning within groups; the term is most frequently applied to organizations and their processes of understanding events that take place within them. Arguably the best-known theorist of sensemaking is Karl Weick, whose 1995 book *Sensemaking in Organizations* stands as one of the most frequently cited works in the field. Like other sensemaking theorists, Weick believes that sensemaking in organizations is “driven by plausibility rather than accuracy” (55); it is inherently social; it is “grounded in identity construction” (17), which takes place through interaction with others and is not a static but an ongoing process; and “the sensemaker is himself or herself an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate” (18). Changes in how people make sense of events within organizations—in other words, changes in how they view the organization—may result in “redefining the organizational identity” (18). Sensemaking is, according to Weick, also “retrospective” (24), “enactive of sensible environments” (30), and “focused on and by extracted cues” (29). In other words, sensemaking focuses on things that happened in the past; affects particular places, times, and events; and is based on observation coupled with experience.

Many organizational theorists focus on narrative, on storytelling as a form of sensemaking. Yiannis Gabriel (2000) likens storytelling in organizations to folklore; Brown et al. (2005) attribute storytelling to the fact that “organizations have a lot of people in them” (20) and that people naturally use stories to make sense of their experience. Those stories serve to explain events in organizations; whether or not such explanations are objectively true makes little or no difference for the sense made by them—they must, rather, be true to the storyteller’s sense of events (Brown et al. 2005, 43–44). Stories can explain why one person got promoted and one didn’t (Brown et al. 2005, 43–44), why a company seems to be in danger of going bankrupt, and why certain people get along and others don’t. Some theorists also explore elements of talk—for example, metaphor—that help explain why and how stories told within conversation shape organizational life (see, for instance, Jordan and Mitterhofer 2010; see also Rosso Efthymiou, this volume).

Often these conversations are informal; they are no less influential for that. Narratives, according to these theorists, are also “carriers of behavioral norms. . . . The continuity and endurance of behavioral norms have a great deal to do with stories” (Brown et al. 2005, 2). They can also be used as “tools for change”—stories told about one organization can be applied to another to solve problems (Brown et al. 2005, 97–135).

Other theorists, however, focus on aspects of sensemaking that are either distinct from narrative or emphasize certain aspects of narrative central to how people interpret, or want others to interpret, experience. As mentioned earlier, the use of metaphor (which is, admittedly, often an element of narrative) has been studied by theorists such as Jordan and Mitterhofer (2010, 244–245) as well as others to show how the kind of figurative language used by promoters of organizational change can affect the character of the change itself. Similarly, organizational theorists have employed actor-network theory to understand how organizations function (Hernes 2010; see also Hendrickson, this volume). Others—like Giaimo and Cheatele, as well as Nicolas, both in this volume—have explored how documents function within a network of other documents to create a sense of organizational identity (see also Buckland 2013).

The authors in this collection consider sensemaking in writing programs and centers from a range of perspectives, some grounded in organizational theory, some exploring common and uncommon narratives, and some taking different theoretical approaches. In the first chapter of section 1, “Sensemaking with Tutors and Teachers,” Andrea Rosso Efthymiou analyzes the way writing center administrators and scholars have historically used metaphors to make sense of their work (for how this happens within organizations, see Hernes 2010). To disrupt those metaphors, which are particular to the writing center community of scholars, Rosso Efthymiou turns to tutor narratives that can deepen our understanding of the knowledge tutors—as members of discourse communities outside the writing center—can bring to their tutoring practice and thereby enrich the work of the center itself. In chapter 2, Courtney Adams Wooten analyzes the common stories graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) tell about their work—stories that might be easy to dismiss because they’re heard so often—in order to explore how those stories shape the GTAs’ development of a teacherly identity and how a WPA might assist in that shaping. Chapter 3, “Creating Sensemaking Cultures in the Writing Center,” by Jeanne Smith, Shannon McKeehen, Barbara George, and Yvonne Lee, explores how understanding the different types of sensemaking within a center community—sensemaking by tutor practitioners and sensemaking by administrators conducting tutor education

programs—can “influence, inform, or complicate” administrators’ work and perhaps lead to a more integrated theory and practice within the center. In chapter 4, Alba Newmann Holmes considers her own and tutors’ experiences within a culture of white privilege through the lens of scholarship on race and racism in writing centers. Newmann Holmes argues that teachers, WPAs, and WCDs must attend to their own positionality, as well as to what different tutors bring to their experiences of race and racism, in order to begin challenging those structures of privilege in which they and their centers are enmeshed. The section closes with Bronwyn Williams’s “Making Sense of How Things Feel: Attending to Emotional Experiences in Writing Programs.” In this chapter, Williams turns to theories of learning to consider emotion as a way of meaning-making for students, faculty, and administrators within writing programs.

The second section, “Sensemaking and Institutional Structures,” examines which administrative texts and intra-institutional relationships might inform WCD and WPA sensemaking and, possibly, extend its influence. In chapter 6, Genie Nicole Giaimo and Joseph Cheatle return to common writing center documents and practices that have been used over the years to make sense of writing center work. Given competition for resources and the increasing need to justify the importance of our writing centers to university administrators and other stakeholders, Giaimo and Cheatle suggest additional forms of sensemaking that may have more resonance for those administrators and stakeholders. In chapter 7, “Stories to Support and Sustain a Program,” Susanmarie Harrington and Sue Dinitz explore how collaborations between a writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) program, a writing center, and a library are maintained by narratives of those collaborations. Chapter 8, by Melissa Nicolas, uses institutional ethnography to understand how the hierarchy of relationships within a university structure that includes unionized labor is maintained. In chapter 9, Christy Wenger employs leadership studies and feminist ecological perspectives to theorize “a way of creating a framework for the unknown . . . and as a way of figuring out what can be.” Chapter 10, by Brian Hendrickson, brings together Weick’s theories of organizational sensemaking as well as activity theory and actor-network theory to discuss the possibilities and challenges of transforming racist organizational dispositions within universities. In her afterword, Karen Keaton Jackson speculates on the significance of sensemaking for the field of writing studies and calls for inclusion of all voices in our conversations about how we, and students, learn.

In the final analysis, this book aims to deepen and broaden the way writing program and center administrators think about the work they

do. Writing centers and programs do, after all, exist within organizations and within even larger structures, and recent scholarship has foregrounded the problems inherent in failing to attend to those organizations and structures. For instance, antiracist work in writing studies (see, for instance, Martinez 2020; Faison and Condon 2022) has shown that without the narratives of those who experience academic life outside the dominant stories told within our educational system, narratives that are not accounted for in the courses we offer and the documents we generate and promulgate, our field is incomplete and our work oppressive.

Finally, I would like to extend my profound and heartfelt thanks to all the contributors, as well as to Rachael Levay of Utah State University Press, for their patience and understanding as *Sensemaking for Writing Programs and Writing Centers* came to fruition. For personal reasons of my own, it was not an easy road, and the contributors' forbearance has meant more to me than they will ever know. The field of writing studies is full of remarkable and generous people, and it's my honor to have worked with those represented in this book.

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