



Distance Education Support Services: Sensemaking Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the notion of sensemaking during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring sensemaking in periods of disruption and uncertainty can provide a deeper understanding of how distance education institutions can navigate future disruptions. We focus on support staff employed at one institution and their experience during remote work as a result of lockdown measures. Support staff are essential for the effective functioning and success of distance institutions. We use sensemaking as a conceptual and theoretical framework to understand staff experience of how their roles changed because of lockdown measures. Four participants were interviewed on digital platforms. All were involved in sensemaking by exploring the wider system, creating a map of their new work environment, acting to change their work system, and subsequently learning from it. It was also found that their sensemaking includes both affective and cognitive elements. We recommend that sensemaking theories and conceptual frameworks be used to further understand sensemaking in distance education support services during times of change.

Keywords: sensemaking; support staff; distance education; lockdown; change

Introduction and background

Almost every aspect of life changed when the global pandemic, COVID-19, spread throughout the world in early 2020 as countries navigated lockdowns, sanitising, social distancing, and using masks. Few parts of our lives were left unscathed (Stephens et al., 2020). Although many countries announced an initial lockdown, expecting it to last only a few weeks, lockdowns and remote work were still in place in various forms when this article was conceptualised in mid-2021. In the education sector, schools and universities were forced to take their teaching and learning onto online platforms in what can be best described as an emergency mode of teaching (Hodges et al., 2020). It could be assumed that distance and fully online institutions were unscathed by the pandemic. However, distance institutions also faced uncertainty and had to change some of their operations. In the case of the institution in this study, education is offered at a distance for students, while academic and support services were campus-based. Due to lockdown regulations, personnel were working from home.

Because this disruption had a global impact, the research is relevant to all distance and face-to-face universities. This article explores how the pandemic affected support services at a distance education institution during 2020. The focus is on how support service staff (now working remotely) had to change to support academic and administrative staff (also working remotely). Kumtepe et al.'s (2018) definition of support services is accepted for this article; that is, "the whole set of services provided to assist all stakeholders in the system (learners, instructors, administrative and technical staff, etc.) to use the resources of the institution effectively and

thereby create quality learning”. As far back as 2000, Padgett and Conceição (2000) set out the importance of support services for academic staff in distance education. Because support services were being offered to academic staff working remotely during the lockdown levels, there may have been extra physical, technical, psychological, social, interaction, cultural, or contextual barriers (Berge, 2013).

The context for this study is an open distance learning (ODL) university. Before the pandemic, courses were offered in a blended mode with paper-based tutorial resources posted to students, or available in an online learning management system. Some courses were offered fully online, with all study material and assessments taking place online. Students in the blended courses submitted assignments in hard copy (at postal collection points across the country) or via the online system. Examinations were portfolio-based (submitted in hard copy or online) or held as venue-based examinations.

Staff at this university are based on several campuses across the country and have offices on these campuses. As a result of growing COVID-19 cases, staff vacated their offices from the middle of March 2020, and started working remotely from home. Shortly afterwards, the country moved to a national lockdown. There were other changes within a few weeks of the initial lockdown; for example, students were no longer allowed to submit hard-copy assignments but had to upload all assignments onto an online system. Furthermore, the mid-year examinations and end-of-year examinations migrated to online systems.

All communication, meetings, and workshops for staff that were usually held on campus also migrated online, with the university using Microsoft Teams for digital meetings. The move of academic, professional, and administrative support staff to working remotely may lead to an intensification of emotional and psychological distance between staff who were usually in closer physical proximity. In light of the uncertainty of working remotely, support staff would have to employ new and different ways of providing support. For Ungvarsky (2019, 1) “making sense of a new, changed version of the world by those who have little or no information on how to proceed” is the crux of how and when sensemaking occurs. The uncertainty brought by the pandemic is felt across many areas of our lives and our ability to make sense of the situation is important. In an uncertain world, sensemaking is all we have (Tsoukas & Knusden, 2003). We therefore propose a sensemaking framework to help us understand how support staff migrated to their new working roles and contexts. We agree with Scott and Macaulay (2020) that research can assist in unpacking “collective wisdom” in sensemaking. Additionally, using a framework for sensemaking helped us to flesh out a variety of perspectives “that form the lived understanding of the term” (Scott and Macaulay, p. 580).

For Klein, Moon, and Hoffman (2006), “sensemaking” is stimulated when decisions need to be made during complex or uncertain situations. Ancona (2012) reiterates that “sensemaking is most often needed when our understanding of the world becomes unintelligible in some way”. The concept of sensemaking from the field of organisational management may shed light on how support service staff enacted their roles while steering the workplace changes during COVID-19. Weick (1995) sets out that sensemaking enables us to navigate our way through unknown situations so we can act. Although sensemaking originated in organisational sciences, it has been useful for understanding educational environments (Biccard, 2020; Odden & Russ, 2018).

Although much has already been written about how academics and students navigated the emergency systems (Hodges et al., 2020), the focus on support services for higher education is not prevalent in the current literature.

Against this background, the research question is:

How did support service professionals at a distance university make sense of remote work during COVID-19?

The remainder of the article will present a literature review with sensemaking as a theoretical basis, the research design will be presented, and findings and conclusions are set out afterwards.

Literature review

In a quasi-industrialised manner, especially at institutions with large cohorts of students, support services are distributed across siloed units and departments. Industrialised distribution helps to scale at mega-distance institutions (Zawacki-Richter, 2019), especially if it is well mapped. In the pre-COVID-19 era, systems were well organised and helped to make sense of the distance environment. However, the COVID-19 environment has created disturbances and ambiguities that can cause challenges in “sensemaking”. The term “sensemaking” is derived from the field of organisational management but may serve well to understand the experiences of support service staff at distance institutions. For Ancona (2012, p. 6), “the importance of sensemaking is that it enables us to act when the world as we knew it seems to have shifted (Weick et al., 2005). It gives us something to hold onto to keep fear at a distance”.

The COVID-19 disruptions were widespread, affecting both routines and interactions (Christiansen & Barton, 2021) and causing organisational “shocks” (Weick, 1995, p. 84). Disruption triggers people to make sense of the shocks, changes, or disturbances. As the impact of COVID-19 became more embedded, the term “new normal” emerged, to indicate that perhaps the organisational shocks would need to be assimilated as part of the usual way of working. Understanding sensemaking under extreme circumstances such as pandemics is a necessary area of research (Christianson & Barton, 2021).

For Weick (1995) there are seven elements of sensemaking in organisations (i.e., sensemaking is grounded in identity construction; sensemaking is retrospective; sensemaking involves enactment; sensemaking is a social process; sensemaking is ongoing; sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues; and sensemaking is about plausibility more than accuracy). However, these seven elements do not always fully explain sensemaking; nor is sensemaking a linear process (Mills et al., 2010). In Christofaro’s (2022) systemic review of the development of organisational sensemaking, four further terms were added to Weick’s original seven properties. The four new properties are that sensemaking is context dependent, depends on affective factors; is influenced by power, and is “emotionally and cognitively contagious” (p. 5).

Most importantly, because sensemaking helps an individual structure during times of disorder, studying individual sensemaking during these times may help us understand the sensemaking process (Mills et al., 2010) better. Although scholars have suggested different ways and forms of sensemaking (see Tan et al., 2020), the sensemaking that we focus on in this article is discrete (based on individual sensemaking) and fragmented (individual experience as an intense flow of information).

Although these above-mentioned characteristics are all important in the act of sensemaking, they specify the inherent characteristics of sensemaking data. Ancona’s (2012) three core elements of sensemaking provide a guide to how people (such as distance support staff) enact sensemaking in unknown situations, such as during the pandemic. Ancona’s (2012) three elements comprise eight typical actions as set out in Table 1. These three elements provide a more practical approach to data coding.

Table 1 Ancona’s (2012) sensemaking elements

Explore the wider system	Seeking more information
	Involving others
	Moving beyond stereotypes
	Being sensitive to operations
Create a map	Allowing a new framework to emerge from the new situation
	Using images, metaphors, and stories to capture the key elements of the new situation
Act to change the system to learn from it	Learning from small experiments
	Being aware and realising the impact of your own behaviour on creating the environment in which you are working.

Sensemaking involves putting the unknown into words, and action remains central (Khanyle & Cluett, 2018). For Mills et al. (2010), “change within organisations may cause individuals to ask questions such as ‘who are we?’ or ‘how do we do things?’” (p. 188). For Weick et al. (2005), the first consideration is finding out “what is going on”, and the second is “what we do next”.

For Christiansen and Barton (2021), it is critical that sensemaking researchers use the opportunity to study sensemaking in groups of people not usually involved in sensemaking (e.g., teachers and healthcare workers). This study aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on sensemaking during the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on support departments in a distance learning university. The multidimensional nature of sensemaking has more recently been highlighted (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) and can be understood through noticing, meaning-making, and action-taking (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Sensemaking during a pandemic is further complicated by social distancing and reliance on digital communication.

Methodology

Four participants were invited for one-on-one online interviews with the researchers. The participants were selected because they were part of a variety of support service professionals (e.g., library, ICT, assignments department, administrative and student support) at the institution. Participants worked for the institution before the pandemic and were working remotely at the time of the interview. Two of the participants offered support only to staff, while the other two offered support to staff and students.

In terms of support offered by the departments when all staff were on campus, academics expected ICT departments to help with any of the ICT challenges (repair laptops, install software, or help with learning management system functionality). For library services, staff usually sent email requests to the subject librarian or visited the library in person. The subject librarian would offer face-to-face workshops or visit academics in their offices. Most academics visited colleagues from support staff in their offices to solve problems or discuss issues.

Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with the participants for 45 to 60 minutes. The questions asked ranged from “how did your work change since lockdown?”, “were there any benefits to working remotely?” and “were there any challenges to working remotely?” to “what support do you need to effectively conduct your work digitally?”. At the end of the interview, participants were asked for any other comments they wanted to add on how their work experience and their ability to offer support had changed.

The recorded interviews were transcribed by the first author and analysed by both authors. The two authors corroborated the analysis and agreed on the themes raised in the data. Ancona's (2012) framework was the protocol used for coding the data. The institution gave ethical clearance for the study. Participation was voluntary and participants were assured confidentiality.

Findings

All four interviews reflected Ancona's sensemaking elements (Table 1). We set out the findings in terms of Ancona's sensemaking elements and briefly highlight the sensemaking narratives of support staff.

Exploring the wider system

All four participants commented about exploring the wider system; however, these comments were not as plentiful as the comments about creating a map. The interviews were held at the end of 2020 when staff had already been working remotely for about 8 months. Participants may have spent more time exploring the wider system earlier in the year and moved beyond this to creating a map and taking action.

In exploring the wider system, participants focused on exploring their own limitations (being sensitive to operations) within the new work order.

For example, this participant, who provides ICT technical support, states:

The whole transition, changing from working with people face to face to working with people virtually, it was just voice calls. Trying to work with somebody that you do not know. Meanwhile in the process, there was a lot of patience required from my side. It was a big challenge. I tried to adjust to be very patient person; meanwhile I am not a patient person. (Laughs).

The statement also includes moving beyond stereotypes; that is, that an ICT support person should be very patient, and that the disruption required him to be more patient with the users he was supporting.

In another example of being sensitive to operations, all four participants mentioned that the key to making sense of the wider system was to have reliable and inexpensive access to the internet. Participants understood that their work-related roles and making sense of the new working environment required connectivity. The entire functionality of the university system was based on online communication.

Data at the beginning was the biggest problem. I did not have unlimited data; my trainers did not have unlimited data. Whilst I am running short of data, buying extra data, I have to buy for them. It was chaos. Then I called the executive and explained that this was really eating from my pocket now. She [line manager] was supportive and organised to provide us with data. But, from my side, I was very quick to go and apply for unlimited data.

In this example, the participant involves others in her sensemaking of her new work environment by contacting her line manager. Highlighted here also is an "emotional underpinning to sensemaking ("It was chaos"), not only in the individual emotions of those involved (whether positive or negative), but also in mediating the likelihood of sensemaking being a solitary or collective endeavour" (Scott & Macaulay, 2020, p. 581). Sensemaking and adjusting to new challenges require an integrated approach, and the organisation's sensemaking responses affect individual sensemaking responses (Stephens et al., 2020). The example above was mirrored by the other participants. In their narratives, they spoke about their experiences right at the

beginning of lockdown, then reflected across to their present situation at their decision reflecting future-orientated sensemaking (e.g., securing a permanent internet and data provision solution). It follows their attempt to “plot [a] narrative coherence across time” (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012, p. 83).

The participant working in ICT indicated that she decided to include Microsoft in the training that staff needed for their new work situation. Because academics and support staff needed to work remotely, a wider range of tools and platforms were necessary (e.g., Teams meetings and Live events).

Now I am working very closely with Microsoft, even next week we are having [a] session with Microsoft for planning next year. There will be more training next year.

She identified early that involving others would enable staff to work more effectively in their new remote working situation.

One participant indicated that, to solve his data problems, multiple providers were necessary to ensure connectivity and work productivity.

Where I stay, we do not have a strong internet connection, so I am switching over; I have like 3 service providers. When X network acts up on me, I switch to Y network, so the data that the university gives me is not always useful.

Another participant created her own way of dealing with the high demand of data.

We started getting data allocation [from the institution], which was very helpful, but according to my staff, not everyone was allocated, some were struggling to connect. Most of us ended up buying wi-fi and devices and paying subscription fees.

In further instances of being sensitive to operations, participant D noticed that working with colleagues via digital means affected his productivity, because he had to wait for email responses.

The only challenge, that I could say is when I had to refer or escalate an urgent matter, I was disadvantaged, because when I was on campus, if there was any need for me to walk across to X department or Y department or drive down to Z campus, it was easy . . . I was now affected in terms of turnaround time [waiting for emails].

This participant also perceived that the students were struggling to make sense of the situation.

Also, you could see that it was not sort of something that they [students] were aware of. They would say, “Can I make an appointment?”, “Can I come to the campus?”—even though it was a lockdown. You could see that they were finding it difficult to accept and understand. I would say that they were seriously affected.

It is evident that sensemaking is triggered by a disruption (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) and that the disruption (i.e., COVID-19 lockdown levels) spurred a need to understand the wider system in which the participants were working. Because participants were exploring the wider system, they were involved in enactment (Weick, 1995). They were dealing with unfamiliar circumstances and trying to make sense of them. Engaging in the unfamiliar work environment enabled the participants to create a few plausible solutions to respond to the situation, in what Ancona (2012) termed “creating a map” or Weick (1995) termed a process of “selection”. Creating a map of their situation implies that participants were beginning to understand their evolving new work environment and were becoming more responsive to supporting others.

Creating a map

When navigating a new way of working, participant A indicated that he tried to ensure that normal university policies were adhered to. He was now helping academics to record an official call with ICT that would create a service request (SR) number.

I am not supposed to be helping them [without an SR number]. If there is no SR number, it is supposed to go to the helpdesk. The helpdesk must assign the number to me. So, I had to assist them with the SR numbers just to avoid the politics [of going against policy] and all that.

This comment also reflects Stephens et al.'s (2020) idea that organisational response affects individual responses. Individual responses seem to be more flexible and faster than organisational responses. Being able to respond with agility appears to help people to work towards sensemaking.

Another participant also had to create a new framework for how to organise her work, so she could make sense of the new situation and continue her role in ICT support. In many ways, this participant is taking part in “enactment” of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) by generating data directly to help her to interpret the confusion. She also simplifies her environment to deal with the situation flexibly.

Then I thought to myself, “What do I do?”

Then I thought—ok—let me categorise the requests that are coming to me. I categorised them into training requests (I put them [on] one side), event requests (I put them [on] one side). Other requests (not training or events) and I put them [on] one side. Then I started identifying people who were doing these things before lockdown.

This is an instance of the participant “reinterpret[ing] [her] surroundings and craft[ing] new understandings of and solutions to a new set of problems” (Stephens et al., 2020, p. 427) while Vlaar et al.'s (2008) “sense-demanding” is also relevant here since the participant is trying to make decisions by improving the quality of information that she can access.

In some ways, sensemaking spurs the decision-making process. Decision-making is a trade-off between the three interrelated elements of resources (intellectual and material), orientations (beliefs and values), and goals (Schoenfeld, 2010). During remote work, resources such as access to data as well as how to use communication platforms were highlighted while goals would be to provide the level of support necessary for the smooth functioning of the academic programme. When the context of the support staff work changed, their resources, orientations, and goals were affected, and their usual decision-making practices may have been altered.

Searching for new information or new knowledge resources or ways of working to better understand the new world of work is evidence of sensemaking (Stephens et al., 2020). One participant conceptualised a framework for involving others, thereby further creating her map, and possibly enhancing decision-making resources.

And in supporting the academics, seeing the demand, I ended up quickly arranging a big training session with Microsoft. Microsoft had to come on board.

By taking the initiative, the participant was fully involved in creating a map that would help to make sense of the new working context.

The next step in Ancona's (2012) sensemaking framework is to act to change the system.

Acting to change the system

Acting to change a system is to be aware of the impact of their own behaviour on creating the environment in which they work. Scott and Macaulay (2020, p. 585) remind us that sensemaking is a “dynamic activity”.

This participant identified a communication challenge during this time and took the initiative to change the communication from ICT.

. . . [the] responsibility that I had to take up was communication. To say that everything that is happening with ICT, I am taking responsibility, I will communicate it on the daily staff newsfeed.

This participant highlighted a new sense of responsibility by taking on the communication of support that the ICT department was rolling out. She felt that this new communication method would help academics to fulfil their roles in the fully digital space more effectively.

Another participant indicated that new ways of organising and strategising would be important in creating an environment in which sensemaking and productivity could succeed. It’s generally understood that “people act their way into knowing” (Christianson & Barton, 2021, p. 575). This participant shows that she is acting her way into knowing even though action during the pandemic is limited.

I now said—you know what? Let me come up with a strategy, so I said—let me pick a day, whereby every week we are going to have a meeting. I called that platform a visual events meeting. It was sitting every week, every Tuesday. I started sitting with the supporting departments. We had meetings, we redefined the roles and then we followed that up with training. We were also mapping out the processes and clarifying the processes, what needs to go where. Then the workload started to improve.

She also thought of ways to change the way trainers were allocated—instead of all trainers servicing the whole institution, she made sense of the situation by suggesting:

My thinking is that each and every college was supposed to [should] have one trainer to support academics in using the platforms and tools in developing whatever needs to be developed. I think it would work much easier this way.

This participant’s reflection of how she made sense of the change in her work environment reflects a co-evolutionary view of sensemaking (Cristofaro, 2022). The circular relationship between her and her social environment (creating online meeting spaces or allocating one trainer per college), reflect the “interdependence and reciprocal feedback between the different entities” (p. 3) as well as the multi-level logic between members, the organisation’s resources and capabilities. (We were also mapping out the processes and clarifying the processes, what needed to go where.)

Participants also indicated that teamwork is an essential element for navigating new ways of working during periods of intense uncertainty. In this instance, teamwork is an example of changing one’s own behaviour to affect and change the system.

I have seen my team growing and maturing. I saw my team learning more than before and being effective, more than before. They also told me that “Thank you, for allowing us to run and learn, we are now experts, we are sure of ourselves, we are proud of ourselves.”

Cristofaro (2021) identified emotional states that affect both individual and team sensemaking efforts, with positive emotions enabling deeper sensemaking (Vuori et al., 2018). What is also evident is the emotional and cognitive contagion of sensemaking (Cristofaro, 2021), that the

participant is an enabler and was able to enable sensemaking of her team through emotional and cognitive support.

Another participant highlighted how he started working on his own digital skills, empowering himself to change the system.

Yes, definitely, I would say that since May, I received brief training from colleagues. I started attending meetings on Zoom and was able to use Teams.

By putting more effective working hours into place, and redistributing the time spent travelling to work, this participant changed conventional office hours, often spending many more hours working than before.

I think it was more beneficial to work from home because travelling to work I would spend anywhere from 2 and a half to 3 hours on the road. Now, when working from home, I would be up between 5:30am and 6am, working in my study. Then I would work until about 10, then take a break, maybe half an hour and then come back at 11, work until 3, then come back after 5 and work until 9. It was a routine. Even on Saturdays, I would have to do the same thing. I saw an opportunity of expanding my work time.

Productivity was emphasised by the following participant who, by recognising the effect of her own behaviour, was able to enhance the productivity of others.

I enabled many people through ICT, by advising them to log a call, and people started to become productive. So, you can see that working from home, for me, productivity is everything.

In another example of recognising the effect of their own behaviour on the environment, one of the participants said (relating to attitude of people in stressful situations):

I think it is about attitude. When we are rushing, let us all rush. Let us not have other people under pressure, rushing, and you, the person who is supposed to enable these people, you are just relaxed.

Another participant raised the issue that the availability and response time of other colleagues can be stressful, highlighting sensemaking as having both affective and cognitive functions (Cristofaro, 2022).

And every day, there are those urgent queries, like it is the last day for registration, and we need to clear a matter so that the student can register. You are just as frustrated. You are supposed to render a service, but you do not know what to do. At some stage, I felt like that [frustrated].

In the efforts of the participants to act on a changing system and simultaneously change the environment to make sense of the new working conditions, affective responses such as stress, frustration, and attitude emanated from their responses, reiterating Scott and Macaulay's (2020) conclusion that emotions are the "fuel" that feeds the sensemaking process. It is an implicit component of Ancona's (2012) sensemaking elements, although other scholars have raised the significant effect emotions have on sensemaking. When considering sensemaking in times of uncertainty and disruption, emotions are typically at the forefront.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore support staff's sensemaking at a distance institution, and provided vignettes of support staff experiences of moving to remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants displayed Ancona's (2012) sensemaking elements. In many cases,

sensemaking is a cognitive, affective, and reflective intertwinement. New situations that require new (and often radical) solutions create uncertainty and stress. For Ancona (2012 p. 4) “sensemaking calls for courage, because while there is a deep human need to understand and know what is going on in a changing world, illuminating the change is often a lonely and unpopular task”.

The voices of the participants are reflective and retrospective. Weick (1995) refers to the process of retention that takes place after enactment. The retention process will be retained for future sensemaking actions. All participants indicated that aspects of the “old” way of working and the new digital system in place would be useful in the future. Therefore, sensemaking is not only retrospective but future-orientated, in what Cristofaro (2022) refers to as “future-orientated retrospection” (p. 7). It was revealed that sensemaking can be helpful in the process of adapting to new ways of working. The participants had to learn to be innovative by creating new ways to adapt to working outside of offices with all the resources they were accustomed to. They also learnt to manage their own spaces and time without the physical presence of a supervisor. During this time of COVID-19 and lockdowns, many people had to work from home, and sensemaking helped them redesign their environment to successfully adapt to a new way of working.

The results can also inform distance education institutions on how staff can be assisted with sensemaking; for example, providing infrastructure, trusting individuals to reinterpret policies sensibly, and using supportive monitoring systems. In addition, policies and working conditions should take into account that future-directed work will always involve volatility and uncertainty and that employees need to be sensitised to the need for continuous sensemaking and adaptation.

Change has always been the “new normal” in distance learning, and sensemaking theory allows us to understand how small to radical change in the working environment is accepted by people in that environment. In the context of distance education, technologies have filtered into the teaching, learning, and support spaces, and changed how these can be offered to students. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way support staff had to organise and design their own working environments, work schedules, and processes in a way that caused an organisation shock and resulting sensemaking.

We acknowledge the limitations of the study—there were only four participants, they were all from one institution, and our data relied on online interviews. Studies involving fine-grained analysis of a single longitudinal case study would add to these findings and strengthen the recommendation in this field, as would similar studies in different contexts to enable a sensemaking framework for distance education.

This study contributes to understanding sensemaking at a distance institution during a pandemic and seeks to answer some of the questions regarding sensemaking in a virtual context. Sensemaking theories and conceptual frameworks appear to be useful in understanding changes and disturbances in distance education environments and contexts. The study provides valuable insight into how times of volatility and uncertainty influence sensemaking of staff at distance institutions.

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