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Research Proposal:

Making sense of Sense-Making: Literature review and potential applications for Academic Libraries

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Information search processes reveal the essential personal as well as dynamic nature of information seeking. The problem context in which people search for information provides its own frame-of-reference, and the meaning and relevance of the information is largely dictated by this frame-of-reference rather than some objective measure. Analysis of information needs within this personal context is sometimes referred to as a sense-making approach to information seeking (Dervin 1983). Such an approach suggests that developers of information systems understand not only the internal aspect of an information system, but the importance of responding to the particular problem environment that the user brings to the system. If the relevance of a piece of information can be determined only by the user, evaluating information systems requires that the user constantly be consulted to determine if the information retrieved will satisfy the patron's need.

Rubin, Richard (2000). *Foundations of Information Science*. NY, NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., p. 31

Introduction

Dervin's Sense-Making methodology originates from the field of communication and sets itself against the "transmission-mentality" of traditional communication models. These traditional models focus mainly on messages and how well the sender sent or the receivers received messages. In this way, the message is objectified as something external and those who do not get the message are considered deficient. The overarching limitation of this model is that it tends to view communication as an automatic and impersonal process. The methodology of Sense-Making, on the other hand, seeks "to better understand communication from a more communicative (dialogic) perspective and apply that understanding to the design and implementation of formal communication efforts" (Foreman-Wernet, 2003, p.3). Sense-making has been successfully applied to study the use of information and information systems. In this context, sense-making approaches knowledge as a verb rather than a noun. Verbing is

the “approach to studying human sense making” and it acknowledges primarily the active process of communicating that occurs in time and space, not just what was communicated. In short, sense-making is “what users want from systems, what they get, and what they think about them” (Dervin 1992, p. 61)

Much of the research surrounding Dervin’s Sense-Making Theory has been applied to the library and information science environment, focused primarily on information seeking and knowledge gaps among users. For librarians helping users in reference interviews, the neutral questioning technique -- the interviewing strategy based on the sense-making approach (Dervin & Dewdney, 1986) -- has been a major contribution in this regard. Those who work in libraries, from library staff to librarians to library administrators, also have information needs, and they face gaps in their daily use of information to meet these needs and, in turn, the needs of their users. Little attention has been given to exploring sense-making within the working staff of libraries compared to what has focused on the user. I am interested in seeing how the Sense-making methodology could be applied to the intraorganizational structure of libraries and similar applicable tools developed for those who work in libraries.

Without a formal educational background in communication, I draw from practical background knowledge of having worked in an academic library for 7 years. In my experience, communication efforts of many academic libraries focus heavily on user feedback, particularly through the use of LibQual+ surveys to assess user satisfaction and needs. Additional attention is given to the methods of communication (email, public meetings, subject liaisons) that do and do not work from the perspective of Administrative decision making and its effects on faculty and student users of various types. As a result of feedback, further attention is then given to addressing specific communication needs at key areas of the library (the reference/circulation desk) where the most immediate contact with these users is found. With this tool, the library has effectively asked what users want, what they get and what they think about it. While departments and units are being restructured towards meeting the needs those questions address, effective and comprehensive communication strategies have not followed to all areas of the academic

library organization as a whole. We have not asked the organization, what do you want, what do you get and what do you think about it. My goal in this study is to show how critical this is to the sustained success of any communicative efforts already in place for users.

Literature Review

Castiglione (2006) points out that “continuous technical change, dwindling resources and projected personnel shortages are creating new managerial challenges for librarians on a scale unprecedented in the history of our profession” (p. 290.). He cites the knowledge management and organizational management literature (Giaseck, 1999; Phipps, 1993; Rowley, 1997; Bender, 1997) that address these issues, focusing on the need for management styles to move from transactional administering to transformational administering or strike a balance between the two. The transactional library administrator is task-oriented, while the transformational administrator empowers staff to express themselves and contribute constructively to the vision. This is not unlike the change (Gutek & Welsh, 2000) proposed from encounter to relational models of customer service that many library organizations employ when interacting with users. Further, Wombah (1996) studies the implications of performance discrepancy -- the difference between what a worker is supposed to do and what s/he actually does -- in organizations. This correlates to the sense-making process in a work organization and the implications of the lack of applicable sense-making tools in this context. The author crucially points out that “the people charged with the responsibility of ensuring that the goals of the organization are achieved are the employees” (p.352)

The goal of library and information science professionals is to meet the information needs of users most effectively. This requires the will, effort, and cooperation of an expert library workforce. Bass (as cited by Castiglione, 2006) suggests that organizational transformation occurs when leaders

facilitate communication, creativity and experimentation at every level of the organization. The literature and working experience tell us that practical tools to achieve this are not available at all levels, or at least are not keeping up with the rate of change facing our work environments. It is the aim of my research to draw attention to the need for developing these tools through the methodology of sense-making.

The sense-making methodology claims that we actively bridge gaps in our knowledge within our own personal and variable context. Even though we may possess predictable characteristics such as being among a certain generation of library users or working in an academic library organization which may influence our questions (gaps) and our answers, the sense-making literature – applied to information seeking and use as well as knowledge management -- points to the more powerful role that our personal constructions play in these situations. This can be problematic to study, especially in a rapidly changing environment of an academic library.

The study of users' information seeking is certainly not new to the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession. The literature addresses thoroughly the myriad issues involved in users' information seeking. Carol Kuhlthau's (1993) is a major contributor to the research of information seeking behavior, Her Information Search Process model seeks to understand the process by which users learn from information and her research builds on the sense-making model of Dervin. Dervin and Dewdney (1986) have also proposed useful tools that library professionals can use to more effectively meet users information needs. Their neutral questioning technique is the interviewing strategy based on the sense-making approach. Information seeking and use in the workplace has also been explored by Leckie, et al. (as cited by Cheuk, 1998). Cheuk (1998) applied sense-making methodology to study information seeking and use in the workplace of engineers and architects. The results of these studies have served to test the applicability of the sense-making model. The study of this method within the workplace of libraries themselves has not been explored. More importantly, the research lacks the

practical application and specific tools for those within the organization to the degree that this methodology has already made possible for our users.

Research Questions

In reviewing literature I aim to answer the following questions: How does Dervin's Sense-making Methodology seek to resolve the issue of communication gaps in general? In what contexts has this been already applied? What parallels and further applications can be explored within intraorganizational structures of academic libraries?

Limitations

This study like others before it, will serve to test the applicability of the sense-making methodology in a new context, that of the library workplace. This study will lay the groundwork to propose further research into developing methods for implementing practical applications of sense-making methodology in the library workplace. Such further study will likely involve a variety of other methods (interview, survey, observation) that this particular study will not address.

Population and Setting

The setting for this study will focus on academic libraries with the particular three fold population focus on: library staff (support staff and librarians), middle management (department heads, assistant deans), and administration (deans, provosts).

Methodology

The design of my research will employ documents analysis methods to review the literature related to Dervin's Sense-Making theory, much of which (Dervin, 1986, 1998, 2003) has been applied to the library and information science environment focused mainly on communication gaps among users. Dervin's (1980) edited 2 vol. *Progress in Communication Sciences* establishes the framework from which sense-making developed. Other useful overview works authored by Dervin (1992, 1998, 2003, 2005) are also used to establish an understanding of the methodology.

Some authors (Cheuk, 1998) have applied Dervin's theory to the workplace. I expect to find particularly relevant Grunig's (1993) correlation of sense-making to interorganizational structures and the role of image and symbolic leadership. I will also consult resources from which Dervin drew heavily (Carter 1972, 1989, 1991) in her development of the sense-making methodology.

I will study the various methodological applications of sense-making with the help of the Sense-making website, which offers a comprehensive "author roster". I have scanned this list for titles relevant to LIS and organizational management. In addition, I've included literature reviews already published on sense-making methodology to establish perspective for this study within the existing research.

Timeline and Budget

Expenses associated with this research are minimal with one potential exception. The International Communication Association (ICA) has hosted at its Annual Conference a Sense-making Workshop every 3 years or so since 1996. Another could be anticipated for 2008. In March of 2008, I will investigate the possibility of attending and secure funding for the 2008 ICA Annual Conference, should it host a 5th

Sense-making Workshop. The annual conference is held in May 2008 in Montreal, Canada. Full expenses associated with this event would total approximately \$2000.

Formal analysis of the literature will extend through February of 2008. I will report on the conference in June and incorporate further analysis to my research through July. I plan to complete the research and investigate possible publication venues by Fall of 2008.

Institutional Review Board and Role of the Researcher

This research complies with the guidelines established by the Emporia State University Office of Graduate Studies. No human subjects will be participating in this research project. The role of the researcher is to explore the methodology and practice of Sense-making through a review of the literature of its origins and in which it is currently developing, to analyze in particular literature related to Library and Information Science (LIS) and Organizational Management, and to propose further research/potential quantitative studies to the area of Academic Library's inter-organizational information needs.

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