



Vaasan yliopisto
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

OSUVA Open
Science

This is a self-archived – parallel published version of this article in the publication archive of the University of Vaasa. It might differ from the original.

Textual artefacts at the centre of sensemaking : the use of discursive-material resources in constructing joint understanding in organisational workshops

Author(s): Nissi, Riikka; Pälli, Pekka

Title: Textual artefacts at the centre of sensemaking : the use of discursive-material resources in constructing joint understanding in organisational workshops

Year: 2019

Version: Accepted manuscript

Copyright ©2019 the authors, SAGE Publishing

Please cite the original version:

Nissi, R., & Pälli, P., (2019). Textual artefacts at the centre of sensemaking : the use of discursive-material resources in constructing joint understanding in organisational workshops. *Discourse studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445619893794>

Riikka Nissi (Corresponding author)

School of Marketing and Communication

University of Vaasa

Pekka Pälli

Department of Management Studies

Aalto University School of Business

**Textual artefacts at the centre of sensemaking: The use of discursive-material resources
in constructing joint understanding in organisational workshops**

Abstract

The article examines the role of discourse in organisational sensemaking. By building links between the theorising undertaken within organisational studies and the empirical analysis of multimodal social interaction, it argues for a relational view of sensemaking and investigates how sense is made in and through social interaction in real organisational situations where language use intertwines with embodied actions and the manipulation of artefacts. In particular, the article studies the use of discourse technologies of textual artefacts in sensemaking processes. The data come from training workshops of a Finnish workplace organisation, conducted in order for the employees to delineate the history and future of their organisation with the help of writable papers. The results show how the papers exert agency in the situation by facilitating three specific discursive practices and by enabling and restricting the actions employed in constructing a shared understanding of the organisational reality.

Keywords

Relational sensemaking, social interaction, discourse technology, textual artefact, material-textual agency, organisational workshops

Bionotes

Riikka Nissi is senior university lecturer in workplace communication at the University of Vaasa, Finland. Her research interests include institutional and professional interaction and discourse in different settings. Currently, she studies the practices of organisational training and development, consultancy work and creative entrepreneurship. She has published, among others, in *Discourse Studies*, *Text & Talk*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Language & Communication* and *Critical Discourse Studies*.

Pekka Pälli is senior university lecturer in organisational communication at Aalto University School of Business in Finland. His research interests cover, in particular, strategy discourse, leadership discourse, and workspace and workplace practices in terms of interaction at work. His work has been published, among others, in *Discourse & Communication*, *Language & Communication*, *Organization*, *Management Communication Quarterly* and *Long Range Planning*.

Introduction

Contemporary working life is practically littered with practices such as organisational development or strategy workshops, awaydays, seminars, webinars and breakout group sessions all sharing a common denominator: participants are to make collectively sense about some issue or problem in their organisation by means of language and interaction. This basic idea of the discursive foundation of sensemaking has gained growing interest in research on organisational sensemaking, which sees sensemaking as a process where people aim at creating order in their organisational reality by making sense about themselves and situations that they have been involved (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). The linguistic aspect of the sensemaking process is expressed in the generally accepted idea that 'sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words' (Taylor and van Every, 2000, p. 40).

Within these linguistic approaches to sensemaking, some studies have specifically emphasised the role of conversational practices and mechanisms as sensemaking devices (Ford and Ford, 1995; Hoon, 2007; Patriotta and Spedale, 2009), claiming, for example, that social interaction impinges upon group sensemaking through the co-presence of actors (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009). More recently, some works have also highlighted the meaning of embodied action (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) and the use of artefacts in sensemaking situations (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). However, despite the wealth of literature on the subject, there are no systematic analysis of actual *discourse* as social action in organisational sensemaking processes.

The aim of this paper is to further the understanding of the role of discourse as the basic sensemaking device in contemporary working life contexts by building links between the theorising undertaken within organisational studies and the empirical analysis of situated multimodal social interaction. In this spirit, we argue for a holistic and relational view of

sensemaking and investigate how exactly sense is made in and through social interaction in real organisational situations where language use intertwines with embodied actions and the manipulation of textual artefacts. In particular, we will examine the strategic guiding of sensemaking through the use of specific discourse technologies (Fairclough, 1992) that facilitate social interaction and thus have effects in terms of agency and power involved in sensemaking processes.

Our data come from training and development workshops of a Finnish educational institution, conducted in order for the staff members to jointly delineate the history and future of their organisation. In our case, the discourse technology that facilitated social interaction had to do with the textual artefact and writing device of writable papers that were utilised in the workshop exercise. Drawing on the posthumanist view on the construction of agency (Barad, 2003) and the related notion of textual agency (Brummans, 2007; Cooren, 2004; 2008; 2009) we see that the textual artefacts exerted agency in the situation by facilitating three interconnected linguistic, embodied and material practices: the practice of writing, the practice of visualising, and the practice of sharing. In our analysis, we will show how the textual artefacts function within these practices by affecting human participation, namely, by enabling and restricting the actions employed in constructing a shared understanding of the organisational reality.

Before going to the analysis, we will review the literature that foregrounds our approach on texts and relational sensemaking, and after that, introduce our data and methodology used. In conclusion, we will recap our empirical findings and discuss our theoretical contribution in the light of earlier work that has adopted relational and discursive approaches to organisational sensemaking.

Placing texts within the relational ontology of sensemaking

In overall terms, sensemaking theories are concerned with how people create mental models of how the environment works (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995). Thus, as a sweep of the pertinent literature in organisational sensemaking (see e.g. Gioia et al. 1994; Maitlis, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Weick, 1995) suggests, research has largely concentrated on cognitions of people who either individually or in groups construct interpretations and shared meanings of reality, and create sense for themselves and others about their organisational context. Concentration on human cognition is paralleled by an emphasis of viewing sensemaking as preeminently linguistic activity: studies have shown, for example, how specific linguistic and discursive constructions and devices, such as metaphors, analogies, and narratives in particular, are important tools for sensemaking (see e.g. Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Whittle and Mueller, 2012). Hence, to a large degree, research has been concerned with how language functions as part of higher order mental processes needed for interpreting and connecting events, or, how language provides people the means for constructing narratives which are needed in cognitive sensemaking.

Recently, 'sensemaking tools' have been extended to include also embodied practices that people rely on in their sensemaking. For example, Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) pinpoint the crucial importance of artefacts for prospective collective sensemaking. In particular, their analysis in a product design work context suggests that working with artefacts supports the conversational practices through which prospective sensemaking as a group-level phenomenon occurs. In similar vein, Oborn, Barrett and Dawson (2013) show how information technologies and related artefacts such as videos or computer animations can work as sensemaking devices that support the construction of meaning in a leadership context. Other studies have demonstrated the importance of crafted artefacts such as tridimensional representations of organisation's identity (Oliver and Roos, 2007) or organisational strategy (e.g. Whittington et al., 2006; Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008) in terms

of how people make sense of both the present and the future, in other words, how they can understand events and situations from different perspectives or come up with novel ideas.

Taken as a whole, studies of using and crafting artefacts in organisational settings have elucidated how artefacts may work as cognitive ‘aids’, having the ability to distribute cognition and extend the capacity of the brain to process information (Clark, 2008; Hutchins, 1996). However, while the human cognition has been granted – at least implicitly – a central role in investigations that focus on artefacts in sensemaking, these studies also give way to another important interpretation: in addition to being tools for cognition, artefacts and other materialities can be seen to assume an agentic role in the sensemaking process. This alternative interpretation stems from the relational and holistic ontology that decenters the individual (human) self and the brain as the primary sources and sites of sensemaking (Cunha et al., 2015; Hultin and Mähring, 2017).

In this view, the physical-material environment and the embodied human action in that environment are not seen as subordinate to higher order cognitive sensemaking processes. Instead, just as human actants, equipped with human cognitive skills, can exert agency in sensemaking, artefacts can exert agency over human actants and their cognition. Cunha et al. (2015) give an example of this in their analysis where they demonstrate – through an extreme case – how the body may take over the cognitive mechanisms in some particular circumstances (see also Cunliffe and Coupland 2012).

However, as Cunha et al. (2015) emphasise, such distinctions in sensemaking as between the body and emotion, body and cognition, or emotion and cognition, are ‘artificial boundaries between mutually related dimensions of complex, intertwined processes’ (p. 47). Hence, echoing the poststructuralist and posthumanist views on the construction of agency (Barad, 2003; Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1982), holistic and relational approach stresses that agency in sensemaking does not reside with actors but is instead embedded in circulating

‘flows of agency’ in material-discursive practices (Hultin and Mähring, 2017). In other words, the relational approach emphasises action and views agency as any entity’s capacity to participate in action (Cooren et al., 2012).

From this standpoint, the technology of ‘text’ makes a particularly interesting case, as it has the capacity to blur the boundaries of agency involved in sensemaking. It is exactly because of texts’ technological and material affordances – how they can be used and for what they can be used – that they gain agency as regards to the unfolding of the event where sense is made through producing and interpreting various kinds of textual artefacts. More specifically, in their material capacity, texts facilitate human participants’ embodied actions of, for example, writing with the pen and paper, touching and pointing at the papers, gazing at them, or arranging them spatially. Also, in their semiotic capacity they are (and embed) linguistic devices affecting sensemaking. Thus, we can see how textual work that comprises both the textual artefacts and the activity of writing may combine the different facets of sensemaking within a joint interactional process: it is linguistic (draws on language), it is material (draws on objects, artefacts and the material context), and it is embodied (draws on body).

Our data highlights one more important aspect about sensemaking and the technology of text. In the case we studied, all this textual work is guided in the sense that a professional consultant instructed the workshop exercise, following a specific method which outlines, for example, how the writable papers are used, how much time is used for writing, or how the texts as material objects are worked on in a group after being first finished individually. Thus, what we can see here is an example of a discourse technology, an activity type that is developed into specific expert forms of using language and has its own specialist ‘technologists’ – such as the consultant in our case – who master and monitor and thus guide the proper use of it (Fairclough, 1992)¹.

What is important to emphasise here is that it is the very use of discourse technologies that facilitates the unfolding of social interaction. Therefore, they have an indirect but crucially important effect on the ways of making sense – given that they impinge upon social interaction which, for its part, impinges upon group-level sensemaking processes (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009). We will illustrate this theoretical stance to relational sensemaking in the remainder of this article as we conduct a detailed analysis of the workshop exercise.

Data and method

The data for the study come from a training and development program of a Finnish educational institution, namely, a school district responsible for providing comprehensive education. The training lasted for eight months and was held for the steering groups of over 40 local schools within the district with an aim to rejuvenate the organisational culture by pinpointing the challenges and development areas in the schools' leadership practices. The training was provided by a consulting company, and during the initial meetings between the upper management of the school district and the leading consultant it was agreed that it would be run using a social constructionist perspective (see Gergen, 2009). Therefore, the consultant would use methods that aid the participants to see their organisational reality as a joint accomplishment constructed in and through daily work practices – in order to find alternatives to these practices as the training proceeds.

The training was arranged as specific one- or half-day workshops that took place in gymnastic halls or congress and meeting premises outside the schools. The days consisted of talks by the consultant and other speakers and various reflexive exercises undertaken by the steering groups. Depending on the module, there were 13-45 groups present, each with approximately 5 members. In collecting the data, the workshops were followed through observant participation and videotaped by using several cameras, leading up to 45 hours of video data. The videotaping specifically focused on three steering groups.

In this article, we will study a workshop exercise where the consultant requested all the steering groups to create a joint narrative about the past, the present and the future of their schools. Initially, we became interested in the exercise due to the evaluation it received from the groups: in the closing discussion of the workshop, the groups described the exercise as a ‘turning point’ in terms of their professional reflection. We figured that this perception of the exercise as a critical event had to do with the particular nature of the exercise. As mentioned, all workshops involved numerous reflexive exercises and the groups also had a digital platform where they documented the results of their group work. However, only this exercise was accomplished with the aid of writable papers. This led us to focus on its distinct material basis. The exercise lasted for approximately five hours. At first, the groups were instructed to outline the current organisational phenomena related to workplace wellbeing, and after that, the historical trajectories of these phenomena. This was followed by envisioning positive and negative future scenarios and their historical trajectories from the current moment. Finally, the narratives created during the exercise were shared with the steering groups from other schools.

In the initial analysis of the data, we observed that the phases included in the exercise were based on three distinct discursive practices that were utilised at different points of the exercise. Thus, in outlining the current organisational phenomena, future scenarios and the historical trajectories of these two, the exercise was accomplished through the practice of writing and the practice of visualising that followed each other chronologically and were repeated at each phase. In presenting the results to other groups, the exercise was based on the practice of sharing. (See Figure 1 below.)

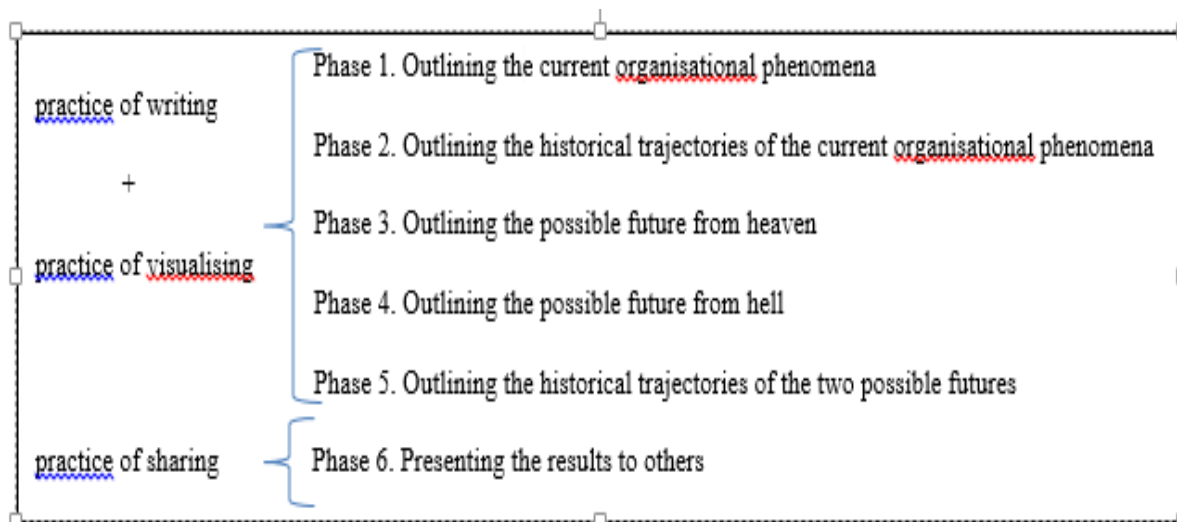


Figure 1. Different phases of the exercise and the discursive practices employed

This observation led us to study more closely the way the three practices were accomplished interactionally, and in particular, the way the textual artefacts of writable papers were mobilised within each one of them. Methodologically, our study draws on ethnomethodological conversation analysis which investigates how the participants achieve an intersubjective understanding of the social world in and through multimodal social interaction so that this understanding about what is happening is publicly displayed and updated on a turn-by-turn basis (e.g. Sidnell and Stivers, 2012; Streeck et al., 2016). We will especially build on previous conversation analytical studies that approach writing as situated, multimodal social practice and examine the production and use of textual objects in specific sequential and activity contexts within different institutional settings where they are, for example, employed for institutionally-relevant documenting purposes (see Mondada and Svinhufvud, 2016). With this focus on the discursive nature of sensemaking, we aim to bring new, empirically grounded knowledge about the interplay between linguistic, embodied and material resources in real-time organisational sensemaking processes, where establishing joint understanding is facilitated by the use of discourse technologies of writable papers that enable and restrict the unfolding of interaction and social event.

Textual agency in the workshop exercise

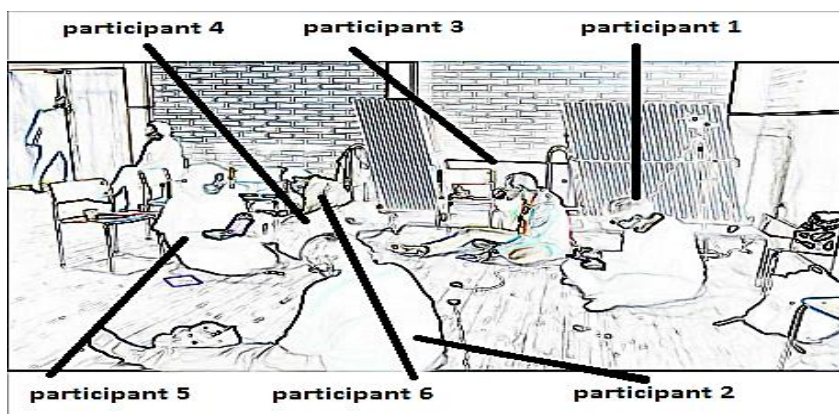
In this section, we will study how textual artefacts exert agency in the narrative exercise taking place in the training. More specifically, we will explain how the exercise centers on the textual artefact of writable papers that, in their material and semiotic capacity, facilitate the interactional accomplishment of the exercise and thus steer the sensemaking process. By doing so, we will focus on the three discursive practices mentioned above, namely, the practice of writing, the practice of visualising and the practice of sharing through which a joint understanding of the organisational reality is construed.

The Practice of Writing

In the practice of writing, the textual artefacts of writable papers guide the sensemaking process by providing an aid for documenting the views and ideas of the group members. Previous research has shown how textual objects and joint writing can be employed to establish and support the collaborative nature of various organisational tasks, such as the production of a strategic document. In these cases, writing that takes place in interaction is distinguished by specific spatial arrangements of the setting. This is to allow a visual accessibility to all and thus to enable a shared object construction in the situation, where everyone present is expected to contribute to the text production by providing suitable input, although the actual writing or typing is typically undertaken by a sole participant (e.g., Asmuß and Oshima, 2012; Nissi, 2015; Samra-Fredericks, 2010).

Here, the textual objects and writing function in opposite ways. In the exercise, writing occurs at each phase where organisational phenomena are outlined, but is conducted independently with the help of the very texts. In terms of interaction, this means that the group members shift away from their mutual engagement in order to establish a new orientation towards the textual artefacts so that writing can take place. This can be seen from

- 11 **liittyvää (0.3) ilmiötä. (0.4) sen takia se on neutraali nyt tää asia. (1.0) eli:**
wellbeing (0.3) at the school. (0.4) because of that this question is neutral. (1.0) so:
- 12 **↑antakaa semmonen (.) ajattelurauha itse kullekin (0.4) muutama minuutti iha hiljaa.**
↑give each one of you (.) a kind of space to think (0.4) a couple of minutes completely quietly.



- 13 ALL GROUP MEMBERS SIT DOWN ON THE FLOOR AND WRITE QUIETLY

Prior to the extract, the consultant has already explained that the exercise involves writing down the views and ideas of each group member and delivered pieces of paper to the groups. On lines 1–12, he gives further instructions concerning the content (lines 1–3, 6–11) and the method (lines 3–6, 11–12) of writing, explicating that it should be accomplished individually by using one paper for each view. Initially, the members of the group are not focused on the consultant, but engaged in their own activity, marked in embodied ways by their circular formation (see Kendon, 1990; also Mondada, 2012). Therefore, there are two concurrent frames for action (see Haddington et al., 2014) in the setting although the group members are also linked to the consultant-led exercise through the pieces of paper in their hands.

However, as the instructive turn of the consultant unfolds, the group members begin to alter their focus and shift from one activity to another, as shown with participant 1 (P1) in the picture on line 2. She starts to break away from the physical proximity of others after the consultant produces an explicit directive *ja alotetaan* 'let's begin' (line 1) and moves her body into the anticipatory writing position (cf. Pälli and Lehtinen, 2014). At first, she orients

towards the ongoing activity of the consultant delivering the instructions, but then towards the upcoming activity of writing, marked by her changing gaze from the consultant to the textual artefacts she is holding.

Other group members, for their part, repeat this embodied action. Therefore, the same shift is accomplished by each one of them (lines 6–10) so that when the turn of the consultant is completed all the participants are engaged in writing on their own papers (line 13), thus following the consultant's request to 'give -- space to think' (line 12). Unlike in some other settings (see Mondada and Svinhufvud, 2016), here the writing bodies do not interact with each other, for example, by taking part in simultaneous verbal exchange. Instead, writing is distinguished by a joint withdrawal from mutual interaction by turning away the gaze or the whole body altogether, as seen in the picture on line 13. Interestingly, the way the space and the multiple activities of the setting are interactionally managed, in fact urges all the group members to take part in the activity of writing in the same degree. In other words, the way the writable papers are used in interaction elicit the individual contributions of the participants (cf. Nielsen, 2012) and coerce them to become immersed in providing observations about the organisational phenomena.

In sum, we can see how the textual artefacts affect joint sensemaking in the practice of writing by initially reorganising the participation framework and obliging the participants to align with the ongoing training activity at the onset of the exercise. In this way, they also elicit the proportionate contribution of individual group members and engage them in joint idea development for further uses of the exercise.

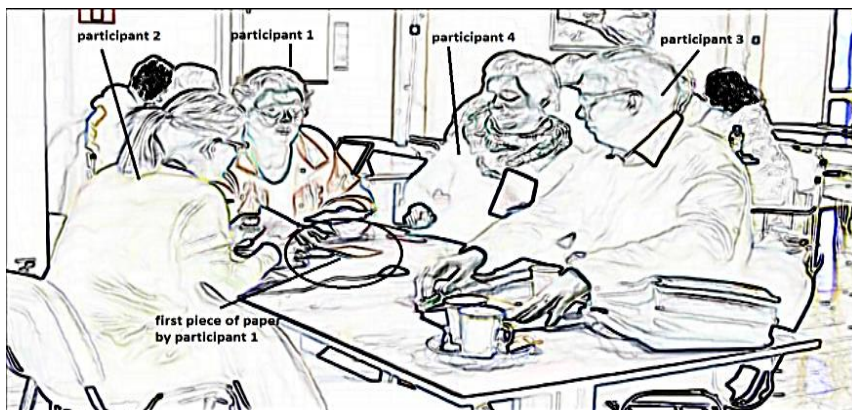
The Practice of Visualising

In the practice of visualising, the textual artefacts function to adjust the individual contributions to each other. Therefore, they again influence the interactional dynamics of the sensemaking process. This is because after writing, the groups are instructed to organise their

individual papers into one visual configuration, which compels the group members to re-establish their mutual engagement and reciprocal spatial orientation. This is accomplished by bringing the papers into the shared space in the middle of the participants (see Kendon, 1990) both by presenting their content to other group members and by locating them on the spot where everyone has a direct physical access.

This is shown in extract 2 where group 2 begins to build their visualisation concerning the current organisational phenomena. The new activity is initiated by participant 1, who presents her first piece of paper by producing a direct quote of its content and by placing it on the table (lines 1-2).

Extract 2. Arranging the papers illustrating the current phenomena. Group 2.



*PLACES A PAPER ON THE TABLE

01 P1: ***mulla lukee** ↑**lasten muut-** (0.3) **vauhdikkaasti muuttuvat tilanteet pulmat**
**it says in mine ↑the children's cha- (0.3) rapidly changing situations problems*

02 **ja haasteet?**
and challenges?

*PARTICIPANTS FLICK THROUGH THEIR PAPERS

03 *(1.1)

*PLACES A PAPER IN THE SAME SPOT ON THE TABLE

04 P2: **mulla varmaan menee** ↑**lasten** ***käyttäytyminen puhetapa siihen samaan.**
*in mine ↑children's *behavior a way of talking probably goes together with that.*

((lines omitted: other group members place their papers on the table))



*REACHES OVER TO PLACE A PAPER IN A NEW SPOT

05 P1: **sitte mulla on täällä tämmöne *työyhteisön tuki (0.4) tuki** <↑**muille**>
*then I have here this kind of support for the *work community (0.4) support for*

06 **(.) kasvanut ja kasvaa edellee.**
 <↑**others**> *(.) has grown and is still growing.*

*ALSO PLACES A PAPER IN THE NEW SPOT

07 P2: **(mulla että) <ai^kuiste väline *keskustelu>.**
*(in mine that) <the discussion between the *adults>.*

08 P3: **joo:**
ye:s

*ALSO PLACES A PAPER IN THE NEW SPOT

09 P4: **tuki *kollegoilta kuuntelu ja (käytännöt).=**
*support from *colleagues (.) listening and (practices).=*

*ALSO PLACES A PAPER IN THE NEW SPOT

10 P3: **=mulla on täällä (0.3) *yhteistyön voima (.) mutta mulla on myös huolipuhe (0.3) että:**
*=I have here (0.3) *the power of collaboration (.) but I also have problem talk (0.3) so:*

*P3 SLOWLY PLACES ANOTHER PAPER IN THE NEW SPOT AND GAZES AT OTHERS

11 ***(1.6)**



((lines omitted: the visualisation built so far seen in the picture above))

12 P4: **no mul on täällä tuota (0.5) .mt >(mä en tiedä)< onko se (0.3) ehkä se on johonki**
well I have here like (0.5) .mt >(I don't know)< is it (0.3) perhaps it goes somewhere

*POINTS VAGUELY TOWARDS THE FIRST SPOT

13 ***tä^hän (mul on täällä) haastavien oppilaiden vaikutus toisiin oppilaisiin**

**here (I have here) the influence of the challenging students to other students*

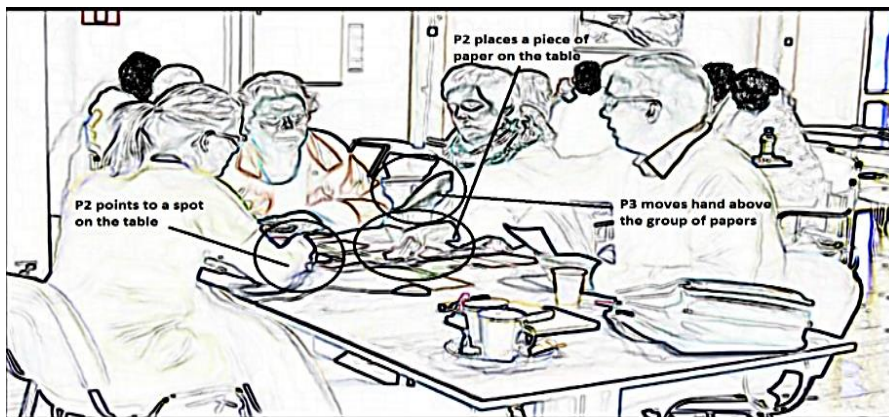
14 **ja henkilö[kuntaan.**
and the st[aff.

15 P2: [mm

16 P3: **nii.**
yes.

**P4 MOVES A PAPER IN THE AIR BETWEEN THE TWO DIFFERENT SPOTS*

17 **(0.3)*



**POINTS TO THE FIRST SPOT ON THE TABLE*

18 P2: (-) **oppi*lai[sii.**
*(-) to stu*de[nts.*

**MOVES HIS HAND BACK AND FORTH ABOVE THE FIRST SPOT*

**P4 PLACES A PAPER IN THE FIRST SPOT ON THE TABLE*

19 P3: [***eli se on *op- (.) täähän on vähän niinku (0.3) oppi[lassek[toria kaikki.**
*[*so it is *stu- (.) this is all a bit like (0.3) the stu[dent sec[tor here.*

20 P4: [nii.
[yes.

21 P1: [nii.
[yes.

**POINTS TO THE SECOND SPOT*

22 P4: **mutta se että se vaikuttaa myös [*henkilökun[taan turvallisuuden ja**
*but it also affects the *st[aff mem[bers in terms of safety and*

23 P2: [mm

24 P1: [no nii ↑totta kai.
[well yes ↑of course.

24 **kuormituksen näkökulmasta.**
the work load.

As seen, the initial turn of participant 1 is followed by participant 2, who also quotes her piece of paper to others (line 4). However, grammatically, her turn is designed differently so that rather than merely presenting the paper participant 2 assesses its relation to the paper of participant 1. In other words, by means of the textual artefact she adjusts her observations about the surrounding world to the observations of another group member, and by doing so, begins to build a broader category (see Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015) of ‘student related phenomena’. This is done both verbally as well as by placing the papers in the same spot on the table, whose spatial character also provides a semiotic resource for categorisation work. One can now see how the participants begin to construct a shared understanding about the current organisational phenomena through the alternate presentation and arrangement of the papers. At the same time, the papers begin to organise the way in which turns are taken, each group member being entitled to one paper – and observation – at the time.

On lines 5-6, participant 1 presents another piece of paper, and in this way, starts to build a new category. This is indicated by the turn-initial particle *then*, which introduces a topical shift as well as her embodied reaching into the new spot on the table. This time, her turn is followed by a succession of immediate responses (lines 7–10), where the other group members place their own papers in the same spot and thus display agreement in constructing the new category of ‘staff related phenomena’. However, participant 3 also brings into the conversation an observation that differs from the views presented by others: *mutta mulla on myös huolipuhe* ‘but I also have problem talk’ (line 10). His differing observation is facilitated by the textual artefact, which he quotes before placing it slowly in the same spot (line 11). This reduces his own agency in the action and shifts it to the textual object which allows him to display disagreement without overtly disaffiliating with others.

After this, two distinct categories of organisational phenomena have been set up and agreed as a conjoined effort of the group members and by means of textual artefacts (see the picture within omitted lines). This creates expectations for upcoming interaction as the subsequent papers will now have to fit into these existing categories. This becomes evident on lines 12–14, where participant 4 attempts to place her piece of paper on the table, the speaker expressing doubt both verbally (line 12) and later on by moving her paper above the different spots (line 17). This can be seen as a request for others to provide assistance (see Kendrick & Drew, 2016), which takes place by participant 2 proposing the first spot verbally and through pointing (line 18) and participant 3 redefining the category formed by the papers within this spot (line 19). This is followed almost immediately by participant 4 placing her piece of paper in the proposed place (see line 19) while also explaining the reason for her doubt with the help of the visualisation (lines 22–24).

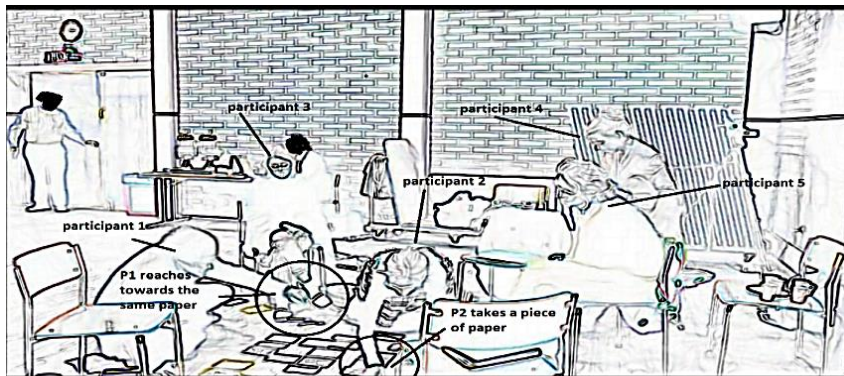
The extract shows how the individual papers and the views they convey become accountable when brought into the shared visualisation. In this way, the textual artefacts blend the different voices of the group members together so that the group is constituted as a single entity. Therefore, in the practice of visualising, the group members not only collaboratively decide the acceptable location for the textual artefacts, but draw on and are influenced by the texts' capacity to define and categorise the world as they make sense of the way different organisational phenomena intertwine in organisational life.

However, later on in the exercise the group member actually produce the ideas to be written down on the paper while simultaneously bringing the textual artefacts into the configuration built. In this way, the practice of writing and the practice of visualising merge. This, in turn, again creates a different kind of participation framework, one group member now physically

filling in the papers while others provide input for the activity of writing (cf. Nissi, 2015).²

This is shown in extract 3, where group 3 is building a visualisation concerning the historical trajectories of the current phenomena.

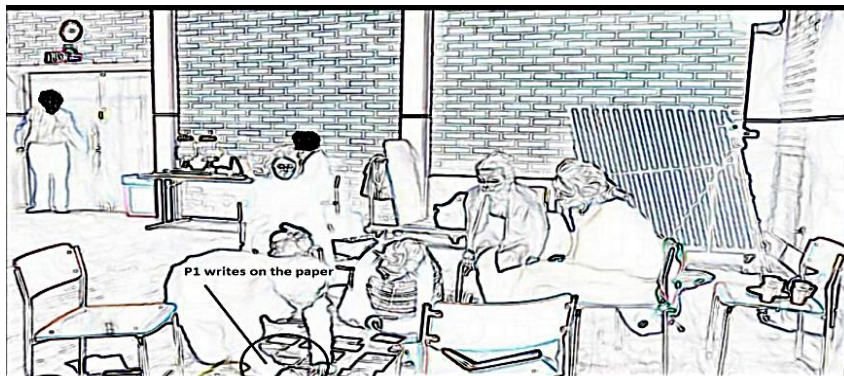
Extract 3. Arranging the papers illustrating the historical trajectories. Group 3.



*REACHES TOWARDS THE PAPER TAKEN FROM THE FLOOR BY P2

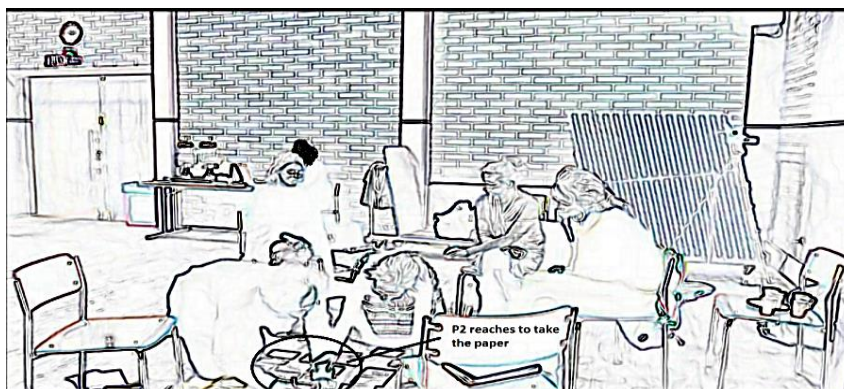
01 P1: ***(yheksänkyt) seitsemän.**

**(ninety) seven.*



*P1 WRITES ON THE PAPER PLACED IN THE CENTER OF THE VISUALISATION BY P2;
OTHERS MONITOR P1'S WRITING

02 ***(2.3)**



*REACHES TO TAKE THE PAPER P1 IS WRITING ON

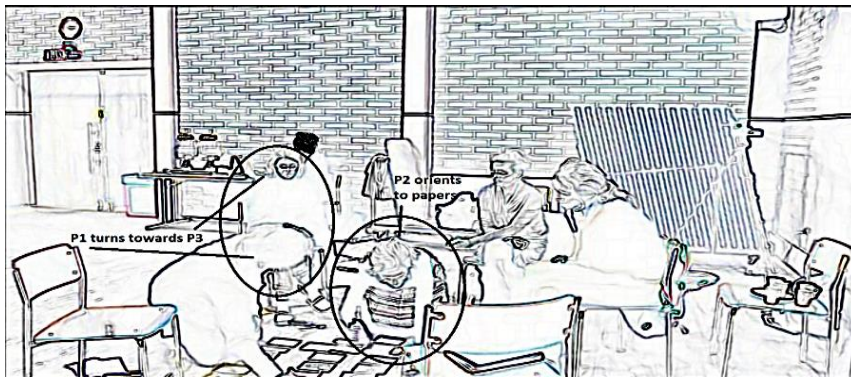
03 P2: **ja *sitte**
*and *then*

*P1 MOVES THE PAPER TO ANOTHER SPOT ON THE FLOOR; P2 FOLLOWS THE HAND
MOVEMENT OF P1 WITH HER OWN HAND

04 *(0.8)

*MOVES THE PAPER TO A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT SPOT
*TAKES ANOTHER PAPER FROM THE FLOOR AND
PUTS IT TOGETHER WITH THE FIRST PAPER

05 P2: **eiks *↑täältä lähe myös tää *avoin ilmapiiri.**
*doesn't *this open atmosphere also *stem from ↑here.*



*TURNS GAZE TO P3 WHILE P2 KEEPS ORIENTING TO THE PAPERS

06 P1: ***onks se ↑kakstuhatta viis jotakin kun tuli (.) merja.**
**is it ↑two thousand and five or something when (.) merja came.*

07 (0.3)

08 P3: **öö (.) ↑viis vai kuus.**
uhm (.) ↑five or six.

09 P1: **↑kakstuhatta kuus.**
↑two thousand and six.

10 P1 WRITES ON ANOTHER PAPER

Prior to the extract, the group members have already filled in their pieces of paper concerning the historical trajectories of the current organisational phenomena and presented them to each other. Here, they still add a date in the papers placed on the floor and arrange them into a linear timeline. At the beginning of the extract, participant 1 utters the word *seitsemän* ‘seven’³ and writes it down on a piece of paper located near him by participant 2 (line 2). Here, the two group members form an interactional team that accomplishes the action of producing a writable idea as a conjoined effort, facilitated by their physical proximity – while

others take part only by monitoring. Once the date is added on the paper, participant 2 attempts to transfer it to a suitable spot (line 3). This action is however accomplished solely by participant 1 (line 4), who in this way claims his primary access to the paper. Interestingly, participant 2 shadows his hand all the way (see line 4), attempting to guide his actions, and finally corrects the position of the paper slightly (cf. Kääntä and Piirainen-Marsh, 2013) (line 5), thus asserting the dispersed ownership of the paper. Compared with previous extracts, one can now see how the affordances of the paper produced jointly are different to those produced alone, as in the latter case it is only the writer who actually touches the paper.

Once the paper is finally placed in the visualisation, participant 2 proposes a way in which another historical event could be situated in the organisational timeline, illustrated by a second piece of paper that she picks from the floor and puts together with the first one (line 5). However, now participant 1 does not orient to her at all, but also initiates a new activity of filling in yet another piece of paper and aligns with participant 3 by turning a gaze towards her (line 6). This is followed by a sequence, during which these two group members engage in collective remembering about the date of a specific event and thus jointly negotiate the date to be documented in the paper (lines 6–10). By doing so, they create an alliance based on their shared experience (cf. Djordjilovic, 2012), this alliance now being exclusive to participant 2 whose history in the organisation is shorter.

All in all, the extract demonstrates how the textual artefacts also aid the group members to form collaborative systems that fluctuate and transform during the group's situated sensemaking, depending, for instance, on shared experiences that become embedded in the writable papers and spatial arrangements of these papers in relation to human bodies and other objects of the setting.⁴

The Practice of Sharing

In the practice of sharing, the textual artefacts are used to present the results of the exercise to other steering groups. As explained earlier, during the exercise each group has created their own visualisation where the current state, past times and potential futures of the organisation can now be seen as a coherent organisational narrative in the unique arrangement of the writable papers. It is the very papers and their use in interaction that thus make joint sensemaking of the group visible, shareable and communicable to the participants outside the group as the consultant finally instructs the groups to present their visualisation to other steering groups.

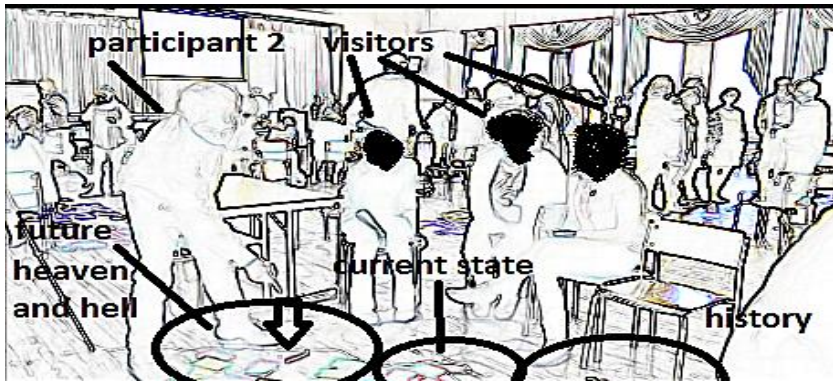
In extract 4, group 1 has finished their exercise and chosen participant 2 to stay behind and introduce the visualisation to other steering groups while the rest of the group members go to see the visualisations build elsewhere. At the beginning of the extract, participant 2 has just begun his presentation directed to three visitors from different steering groups.

Extract 4. Sharing the organizational narrative with other groups. Group 1.

**STEPS TOWARDS THE FUTURE END OF THE VISUALISATION*

01 P2: **et *jossain määrin tässä (.) sekottuu tää helvetti ja taivas toisiinsa ja ainaki (0.3)**
*so *in some respect here (.) hell and heaven are mixed together and at least (0.3)*

02 **ne tavat joilla päästään ni vaikeaa sanoo mihi (0.3) ops (-) (.)**
the ways to get there so it is difficult to say where (0.3) curriculum (-) (.)



*MOVES HIS FINGER BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL

*MAKES HIS FINGER STOP WHERE HEAVEN IS

03 ***viekse se helvettii vai viekö se*** (.) he he
**does it take you to hell or does it* (.) he he*

04 V1: he he he

05 P1: \$↑**ku(h)mpaan se vie\$.** (0.4) luultavasti se on pi- (.) on potentiaalia **molempiin**
\$↑wh(h)ich one will it take you\$. (0.4) probably it is po- (.) has potential for both

*POINTS TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE VISUALISATION

06 **mutta tota.** (0.3) *↑**koulun historia** alkaa vuodesta **kahdeksanseitsemän (-) ja sitte** (0.4)
*but like (0.3) *↑the history of the school begins from year eighty seven (-) and then (0.4)*

07 **kesti** (0.3) **kahtkyta kahdeksan sitte tuli mauno** (1.2) **sillonen aluerehtori**
lasted (0.3) to eighty eight then came mauno (1.2) the principle for the district at the time

((lines omitted: P1 continues his presentation concerning the history of the school))

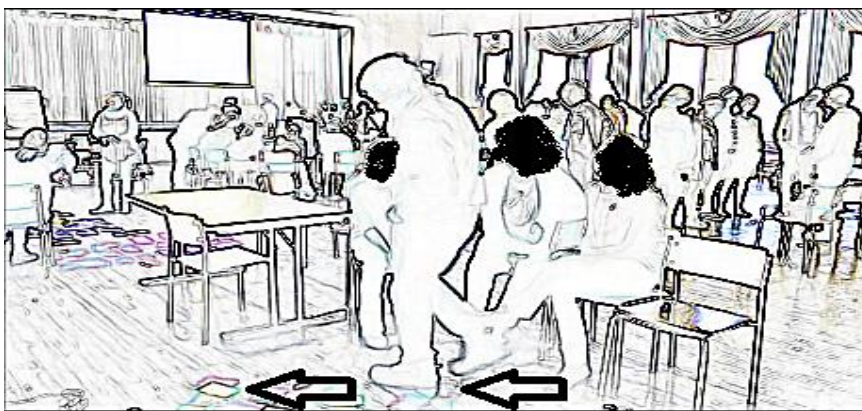
*GAZES AT THE PAPERS

08 *↑**tää monikulttuurisuus** (0.3) **meil on niinku semmonen aika** (.) **suuri teema ja** (0.5)
**↑this multiculturalism (0.3) is for us a kind of quite (.) big topic and (0.5)*

*POINTS TO V1

09 **haaste myöski sitte** (0.3) **niinku tietysti kaikissa** (.) ***rantalalan koulussa myöski** (0.4)
*also a challenge (0.3) like of course everywhere (.) also in *rantala (0.4)*

10 **ja tota** (1.1) **koulun pidossa ja opetuksessa ja kaikessa.** (0.4)
and well (1.1) in running the school and in teaching and everything. (0.4)



*WALKS TO A DIFFERENT SPOT

11 *o- on meillä täällä sitte (.) tämmöstä henkilö (0.3) *henkilöjuttua --
 *we also do have here (.) this kind of personnel (0.3) *personnel issues --

In presenting the visualisation, the groups do not always follow the chronological order of the events. In the extract above, participant 2 begins his presentation from the future. This is prompted by the spatial and material organisation of the setting, the speaker being positioned near the future end of the visualisation when the visitors arrive – on line 1, he steps closer to the papers depicting the future scenarios to mark the starting point of the presentation. In his turn, participant 2 explains how the different future options overlap with each other in the shared vision of the group (lines 1–3). This explanation is accomplished both verbally and with a pointing gesture, the speaker letting his finger move between the different spots (line 3) and finally to cease at the option of heaven (line 3). Here, the pointing gesture also completes the turn, as the speaker does not verbally produce the latter component of the alternative question: *viekse se helvettii vai viekö se (.) he he* 'does it take you to hell or does it (.) he he' (line 3). By doing so, he can be seen to treat the matter under discussion as potentially delicate and invites – with the affiliation seeking laughter – the recipients to identify with the problems that have to do with the unpredictable future. This functions to build rapport with the recipients by placing them in the same identity category of organisational members with similar issues.

Next, participant 2 moves on to presenting the history of the school (lines 6–7). The topical shift is again indicated by a pointing gesture, the speaker using his finger to bring the other end of the visualisation with its papers into the spotlight. As shown earlier, the shared organisational narrative is constructed collaboratively as the individual papers are brought into the expanding visualisation and accepted one-by-one. However, the way in which participant 1 now refers to the papers does not raise up the individual contributions and the

preceding negotiation related to them. Instead, it treats the information in the papers as a matter-of-fact reality and construes the school as an independent and objective entity with verifiable historical events.

After the history, participant 2 introduces the current state of the organisation by referring to two particular phenomena, multiculturalism (lines 8–10) and personnel issues (lines 11).

Participant 2 treats these phenomena as separate topics and demonstrates their boundaries by walking to a different spot within the visualisation (see line 11) (cf. De Stefani and Mondada, 2013). Importantly, he treats both of them as potentially delicate matters, displayed by the specific turn design with numerous pauses, discourse particles (*well, like*) indefiniteness markers (*this kind of*) and negative or vague lexicon (*challenge, personnel issues*). While presenting, the speaker also gazes (line 8) and points (line 11) to the papers on the floor. With these embodied means, he shows to be acting only as an animator (see Goffman, 1981) for the matters documented jointly in the papers, further supported by the use of the pronoun *us/we* (lines 8, 11). Shortly, he discloses the matters under discussion not as his own opinions, but as social facts outlined collectively by the group.

Interestingly though, the particular paper participant 2 refers to actually belongs to the papers related to future scenarios, but in his turn, he treats it as part of the here-and-now reality. Therefore, it can be seen how the textual artefacts and the visualisation they form finally function as a flexible resource for making sense of the organisational reality, with its interlinked past, present and potential futures talked into being and ratified through their public disclosure. To sum up, the extract shows how the textual artefacts thus have a capacity to stabilise meanings in the sensemaking process (cf. Karlsson, 2009). In other words, we can here see what Derrida (1988) calls “*restance*”, a staying capacity of texts, as the *restance*

essentially means that because of their existence and agency, texts provide stability and iterability, which are characterising features of organising and organisations (Cooren, 2009).

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined how textual artefacts come to matter and exert agency during organisational sensemaking situations. In particular, we have studied how the situated materiality functions as the key driver of sensemaking by facilitating the very sensemaking process in organisational workshops. Consistent with the view of nonhuman agency as any entity's capacity to participate in action and make a difference (Cooren et al., 2012), we presented a case where textual artefact and writing device of writable papers gained an agentive role in the specific discursive practices of the workshop exercise. (See Figure 2.)

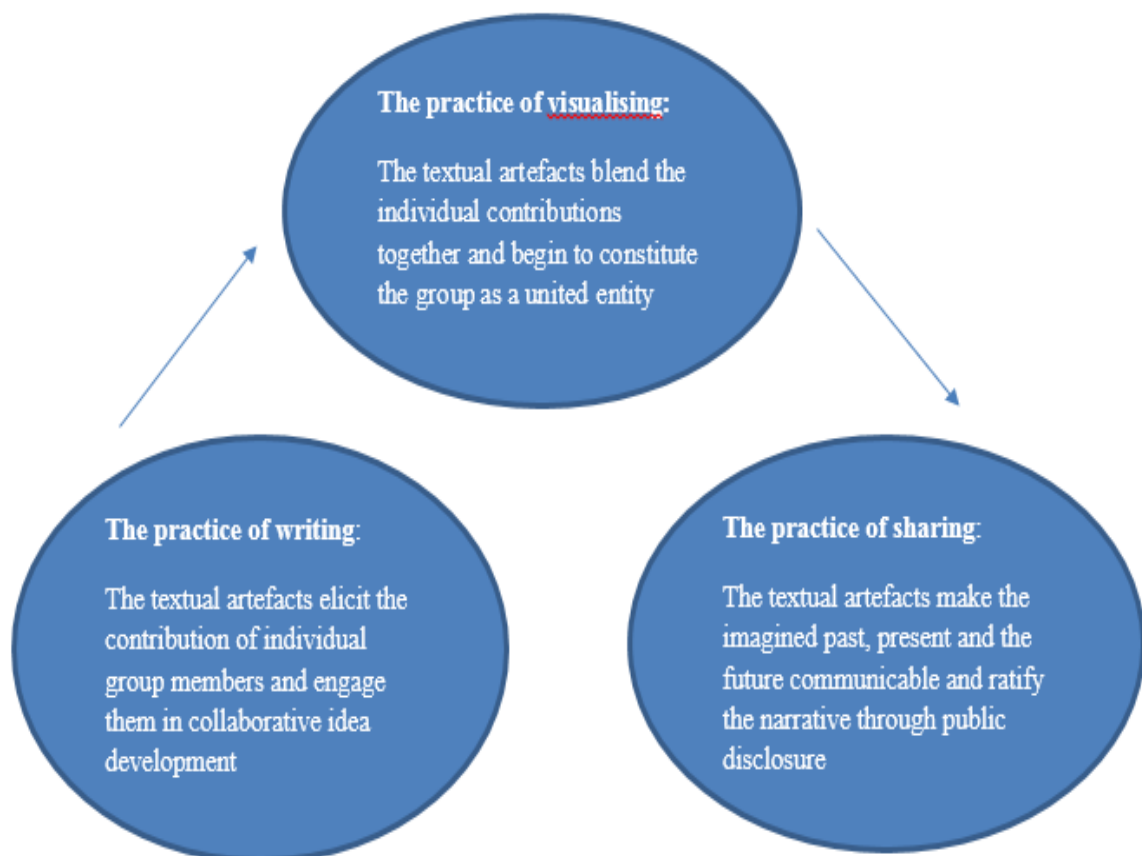


Figure 2. The agentive role of the textual artefacts within the discursive practices of the exercise

Therefore, our analysis echoes the key theoretical ideas in the relational perspective to sensemaking (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; Hultin and Mähring, 2017) which has emerged as an alternative to human-centred and cognition-centred views of sensemaking. However, our study adds to the literature propounding the relational ontology of sensemaking by empirically analysing the ways in which the participants engage in the activity of writing to make sense of the current state, past times and prospective futures of their organisation. Our analysis demonstrated how the guided, embodied practice of writing and organising the texts – centering on the textual-material artefacts of writable papers – works as a discourse technology (see Fairclough, 1992) that facilitates the group members' participation and contributions in interaction, thus impinging on the group sensemaking.

Hence, by focusing on the actual turn-by-turn sequential unfolding of interaction through which sensemaking took place our study brings together and advances two important theoretical ideas put forward in previous organisational research: one is that artefacts affect group level sensemaking (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012), and the other is that social interaction as a situated activity too has an effect on sensemaking (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009). As regards the agency involved in sensemaking, our analysis particularly develops and exemplifies the view that agency is distributed in relations between material objects, embodied actions and written and spoken language – and the human participants interacting with these resources in their situational context.

Importantly, our study also demonstrates how all of these semiotic resources can become strategically mobilised in specific institutional settings – such as the organisational workshops presented in this paper where they are used to create social sharedness between the members of the organisation, and in this way, to reinforce the organisation's capacity for collaborative action. Therefore, while the linguistic resources enable the joint construction of various possible worlds and the negotiation of their categories, the embodied resources bring the bodies physically together and allow their coordinated movements, thus also creating a sense of a shared world. The material resources, for their part, act as a mediational means for reproducing social sharedness between multiple groups and participants. In this light, organisational sensemaking can be seen as a guided creation of renewed intersubjectivity between the members of the organisation, proceeding at different levels simultaneously and facilitated in and through language, human body and the material technologies.

Notes

1. Fairclough (1992, 2001) mentions diverse discourse technologies such as interviewing, teaching, counselling, and advertising. For Fairclough, discourse technologies are devices or toolkits to disseminating specific discourses and knowledge related to these discourses, and they serve the ends of bureaucratic control in society.
2. However, the groups move into such joint performance at different stages of the exercise. Analysing these differences is beyond the scope of this article.
3. The speaker probably means the year 1997 and refers to a specific event that has taken place then.
4. In extract 3, group 3 builds the visualisation on the floor. However, some of the group

members sit down on nearby chairs. This constructs a different participation role for them, as they take part in the exercise only by observing or commenting on the narrative under construction. Group 2, for its part, builds the visualisation on the table, which offers all the participants a similar opportunity to take part in the exercise in terms of touching the papers. However, at the same time it restricts their movement in the space and opportunities for joint action, as the participants have to stand up in order for them to perceive how the different pieces of paper are connected to each other. Group 1 also builds the visualisation on the floor. As there are no material restrictions, this spatial arrangement allows a dynamic movement in the space. The participants can, for instance, walk around the visualisation, which supports a shift in perspectives as they move from one piece of paper to another. It is, however, beyond the scope of this article to analyse the groups' different uses of the training space more systematically.

References

Asmuß B and Oshima S (2012). Negotiation of entitlement in proposal sequences. *Discourse Studies* 14(1): 67–86.

Barad K (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs* 28: 801–831.

Brummans B H J M (2007). Death by document: Tracing the agency of a text. *Qualitative Inquiry* 13(5): 711–727.

Butler J (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex.'* New York: Routledge.

Clark A (2008). *Supersizing the mind: Embodiment, action, and cognitive extension.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Cooren F (2004). Textual agency: How texts do things in organizational settings. *Organization* 11(3): 373–393.

Cooren F (2008). Between semiotics and pragmatics: Opening language studies to textual agency. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40: 1–16.

Cooren F (2009). The haunting question of textual agency: Derrida and Garfinkel on iterability and eventfulness. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 42(1): 42-67.

Cooren F, Fairhurst G T and Huët R (2012). Why matter always matters in (organizational) communication. In: Leonardi P M, Nardi B A and Kallinikos J (eds) *Materiality and organizing: Social interaction in a technological world.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 296–314.

Cunha M P, Clegg S, Rego A and Gomes J (2015). Embodying sensemaking: Learning from the extreme case of Vann Nath, prisoner at S-21. *European Management Review* 12: 41–58.

Cunliffe A and Coupland C (2012). From hero to villain to hero: Making experience sensible through embodied narrative sensemaking. *Human Relations* 65: 63–88.

Derrida, J (1988). *Limited Inc.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

De Stefani E and Mondada L (2014). Reorganizing mobile formations: When “guided” participants initiate reorientations in guided tours. *Space and Culture* 17: 157–175.

Djordjilovic O (2012). Displaying and developing team identity in workplace meetings – a multimodal perspective. *Discourse Studies* 14: 111–127.

Fairclough N (1992). *Discourse and social change.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fairclough N (2001). *Language and power.* New York: Routledge.

Ford J D and Ford L W (1995). The role of conversations in producing intentional change in organizations. *Academy of Management Review* 20: 541–570.

Foucault M (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry* 8: 777–795.

Gergen K J (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community.* Oxford: Oxford University.

Gioia D A, Thomas J B, Clark S M and Chittipeddi K (1994). Symbolism and strategic change in academia: The dynamics of sensemaking and influence. *Organization Science* 5: 363–383.

Goffman E (1981). *Forms of talk*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Philadelphia.

Haddington P, Keisanen T, Mondada L and Nevile M. (2014). Towards multiactivity as a social and interactional phenomenon. In: Haddington P, Keisanen T, Mondada L and Nevile, M (eds) *Multiactivity in social interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 3–32.

Heracleous L and Jacobs C (2008). Crafting strategy: The role of embodied metaphors. *Long Range Planning* 41: 309–325.

Hill R C and Levenhagen M (1995). Metaphors and mental models: Sensemaking and sensegiving in innovative and entrepreneurial activities. *Journal of Management* 21: 1057–1074.

Hoon C (2007). Committees as strategic practice: The role of strategic conversation in a public administration. *Human Relations* 60: 921–52.

Housley W and Fitzgerald R. (2015). Introduction to membership categorization analysis. In: Housley W and Fitzgerald R (eds) *Advances in membership categorization analysis*. London: Sage, pp. 1–22.

Hultin L and Mähring M (2017). How practice makes sense in healthcare operations: Studying sensemaking as performative, material-discursive practice. *Human Relations* 70: 566–593.

Hutchins E (1995). *Cognition in the wild*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Karlsson A M (2009). Fixing meaning: On the semiotic and interactional role of written texts in a risk analysis meeting. *Text & Talk* 29: 415–438.

Kendon A (1990). *Conducting interaction: Patterns of behavior in focused encounters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kendrick K and Drew P (2016). Recruitment: Offers, requests and the organization of assistance in interaction. *Research on language and social interaction* 49: 1–19.

Kääntä L and Piirainen-Marsh A (2013). Manual guiding in peer group interaction: A resource for organizing a practical classroom task. *Research on language and social interaction* 46: 322–343.

Maitlis S (2005). The social processes of organizational sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal* 48: 21–49.

Maitlis S and Lawrence T B (2007). Triggers and enablers of sensegiving in organizations. *Academy of Management Journal* 50: 57–84.

Maitlis S and Christianson M (2014). Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward. *The Academy of Management Annals* 8: 57–125.

Mondada L (2012). Garden lessons: Embodied action and joint attention in extended sequences. In: Nasu H and Waksler F C (eds) *Interaction and everyday life: Phenomenological and ethnomethodological essays in honor of George Psathas*. Lanham

MD: Lexington Books, pp. 293–311.

Mondada L and Svinhufvud K (2016). Writing-in-interaction: Studying writing as a multimodal phenomenon in social interaction. *Language & Dialogue* 6: 1–53.

Nielsen M F (2012). Using artefacts in brainstorming sessions to secure participation and decouple sequentiality. *Discourse Studies* 14: 87–109.

Nissi R (2015). From entry proposals to a joint statement: Practices of shared text production in multiparty meeting interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 79: 1–21.

Oborn E, Barrett M and Dawson S (2013). Distributed leadership in policy formulation: A sociomaterial perspective. *Organization Studies* 34: 253–276.

Oliver D and Roos J (2007). Beyond text: Constructing organizational identity multimodally. *British Journal of Management* 18: 342–358.

Patriotta G and Spedale S (2009). Making sense through face: Identity and social interaction in a consultancy task force. *Organization Studies* 30: 1227–1248.

Pälli P and Lehtinen E (2014). Making objectives common in performance appraisal interviews. *Language & Communication* 39: 92–108.

Rouleau L (2005). Micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving: How middle managers interpret and sell change every day. *Journal of Management Studies* 42: 1413–

1441.

Samra-Fredericks D (2010). The interactional accomplishment of a strategic plan. In: Llewellyn N and Hindmarsh J (eds.) *Organisation, interaction and practice: Studies in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 198–217.

Sidnell J and Stivers T (eds) (2012). *The handbook of conversation analysis*. Boston: Wiley-Blackwell.

Stigliani I and Ravasi D (2012). Organizing thoughts and connecting brains: Material practices and the transition from individual to group-level prospective sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal* 55: 1232–1259.

Streeck J, Goodwin C and LeBaron C (eds) (2011). *Embodied interaction: Language and body in the material world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor J and Van Every E (2000). *The emergent organization: Communication as its site and surface*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Weick K E (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Whittington R, Molloy E, Mayer M and Smith A (2006). Practices of strategising/organising: Broadening strategy work and skills. *Long Range Planning* 39: 615–629.

Whittle A and Mueller F (2012). Bankers in the dock: Moral storytelling in action. *Human Relations* 65: 111–139.

Appendix. Transcription conventions.

.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
↑	Rise in pitch
w <u>o</u> rd	Emphasis
>word<	Faster pace than the surrounding talk
<word>	Slower pace than the surrounding talk
wo:rd	Lengthening of the sound
wo-	Word cut off
\$word\$	Smile voice
he he	Laughter
.mt	Smack
(0.5)	Pause in seconds
(.)	Micro pause (less than 0.2 seconds)
=	No pause between two adjacent utterances
[Beginning of overlapping talk
*	Beginning of overlapping embodied action
TURN HIS HEAD	Embodied action
(word)	Item in doubt
(-)	Item not heard

((lines omitted))

Transcriber's remarks