

## Chapter 13

# Applying Sense– Making Methodology to Design Knowledge Management Practices

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter introduces readers to Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM) and demonstrates how it has been applied to design knowledge management projects for the public sector. The projects described in this chapter were implemented between November 2005 to June 2006 when the main author was the Head of Knowledge Management for the Improvement Service for the Scottish Government, a company limited by guarantee with a budget provided by the Scottish Executive, with the aim to improve the efficiency, quality and accountability of public services in Scotland through learning, sharing knowledge and delivering improvement solutions. Sense-Making Methodology is based on a set of assumptions which challenge some fundamental knowledge management thinking. The SMM assumptions imply the need for alternative procedures to be implemented to promote knowledge sharing. Three primary applications are discussed: (a) conducting user study to understand user needs; (b) designing web-based KM systems; and (c) facilitating dialogue to nurture communities of practice. This chapter aims at stimulating further thinking and debate in adopting theoretically informed approaches to implement knowledge management practices.*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-954-0.ch013

## **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter introduces Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM) a philosophically derived approach which allows knowledge management (KM) practitioners to more fully understand and listen to user's needs to inform the design of alternative KM practices. This chapter uses three examples to illustrate how SMM has been applied it to design knowledge management practices in the public sector in Scotland. The KM practices discussed were implemented between November 2005 to June 2006 as part of the public reform agenda with the aim to promote knowledge sharing across 32 Scottish local authorities to drive continuous improvement.

Sense-Making Methodology is a philosophically derived approach for studying communication as communication. SMM is built on a set of meta-theoretical assumptions about people, reality, information, power and context. SMM is user-oriented in that it is asking researchers and practitioners to more fully address what users "really" need. SMM assumes that to do this we need to enter into a dialogue with users as well as with system practitioners by attending to approaches to understanding communicating between users and systems and users and practitioners that are based on communicative principles, rather than transmission principles (Dervin, 2003, 2008).

Relating to the field of knowledge management, SMM redefines 'knowledge' and challenge the assumption that information or knowledge can bring out the realities (1998). Instead, 'realities' are considered always gappy and can only be understood from multiple perspectives in a given time-space moment and can be subjected to change over time. Therefore, knowledge cannot be treated as a commodity that can be captured, stored, retrieved and used. 'Knowledge' becomes 'sense-making' and 'sense-unmaking' or in this chapter refer to as a verb labeled 'knowledging'. Knowledge management becomes the designing of 'sense-making' and 'sense-unmaking' practices

and systems to allow users to self-reflect as well as to gain multiple perspectives from listening to what others can offer and ultimately to address users' needs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: KM PHILOSOPHIES AND THE ASSOCIATED PRACTICES**

A review of knowledge management (KM) literature shows a proliferation of publications in the last 10 years. The debate on what 'knowledge' is (and how to manage 'knowledge') has been intense and often contradictory. The confusion in this new, emergent field is created by a variety of ontological and epistemological assumptions. In this section, we will review KM literature which explicitly addresses philosophical assumptions and have informed KM practices.

In early 1990s, since Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) introduce the concept of 'tacit' (i.e. knowledge in a person's head which has a personal quality and is hard to formalize and communicate) and 'explicit' knowledge (i.e. knowledge that is transmittable in formal, systematic language), scholar and practitioners have find ways to turn tacit knowledge into explicit. Knowledge is used interchangeably with 'information' and is managed as 'something which can be written down or codified' (Sutton, 2001). Knowledge is seen as objects which can be managed independent of the users or the recipients of the knowledge. The value of knowledge can be objectively assigned by experts according to a set of objective criteria.

This understanding of knowledge as objects has profound impact on the design of first generation KM practices which include:

1. Making 'tacit' knowledge explicit by investing in KM systems or global best practice databases which 'capture' the knowledge of experts. The 'capture' approach continued with an emphasis on capturing, storing,

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