

## APPLYING SENSE-MAKING METHODOLOGY TO FOCUS GROUP DESIGN

by

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### CITATION AND COPYRIGHT INFORMATION:

Dervin, Brenda (2007). Applying Sense-Making Methodology to focus group design: Addressing both collective and individual agency. Presented at Non-Divisional Working Symposium on "Making communication studies matter: Field relevance/irrelevance to media, library, electronic, communication system designs, policies, practices." May 24, San Francisco. Available at:

[http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/meet/2007/meet07\\_dervin.pdf](http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/meet/2007/meet07_dervin.pdf)

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### THE SUBSTANTIVE CONTEXT: PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Focus groups are much used as an approach to soliciting input from users and audiences in a wide variety of contexts -- e.g. marketing research, exploratory research prior to formalized survey and experimental applications, and as a primary data collection approach, primarily in qualitative studies but sometimes in quantitative. Authors have much to say about the strengths of focus group approaches. They are cost effective interviewing approaches, for example; and many argue that because they involve participant-to-participant interaction they tap collective consciousness in ways that individual interviews cannot. These theorists argue that understanding what an individual agent thinks or feels provides an unrealistic assessment of how that individual behaves because individual agency is implemented only in collective conditions (e.g. in groups, cultures, communities, societies, etc.). Further, they argue that collective portraits are the important focus for research work.

The project reported here has been ongoing since 1991. The foundational premise of the project is that a genuinely communicative approach to communication research must tap agency both as it is implemented by agents acting as individuals and by agents acting within collective conditions. To favor only the former will necessarily under-represent both the collective constraints within which all actors are bound and also miss the ways in which collective structures are also often freeing. To favor only the latter will necessarily under-represent the ways in which individual actors sometimes act outside or against collective constraints and sometimes use collective conditions in unexpected ways. Important to this argument is the assumption that addressing issues of both collective and individual agency is essential for research, system designs, and practices that attempt to address user and audience studies regardless of the particular rubric (among a large number) within which these studies are conducted. Examples include: citizens (e.g. reacting to political or policy events); patients (e.g. responding to medical practitioners); patrons (e.g. users evaluating museums or libraries); employees or employers (e.g. getting their jobs done, struggling with organizational conditions); consumers (e.g. buyers or potential buyers evaluating products, services, institutions); students (e.g. evaluating and making-sense of educational institutions, procedures).

Results to date over some 15 applications have been promising. One major gain is seeing that focus groups conducted in this way provide fresh insights into user and audience phenomenon. Focus groups are best used in conjunction with deeper one-on-one interviews because no focus group can provide the kind of time and individual attention to a sense-maker that deep interviewing permits. An especial gain from this project has been seeing how focus group and individual interviews informed by Sense-Making Methodology can complement and supplement each other. An especial struggle in the project has been dealing with participant expectations that disciplined talk is somehow controlling and non-democratic. When, for example, a participant reacts emotionally to something someone else says, the leader must be prepared to gently interrupt the interrupter and explain reasons for disciplining communication in this way. In a Sense-Making focus group, the leader then encourages the interrupter to fully write all thoughts in the individual's focus group journal and to utilize the final talking round for these passionate reactions. Most often, by the time the final round arrives, the interrupter has a changed perspective and is able to talk in a framework focused on understanding rather than persuading.

#### THE APPROACH TO DIALOGUE PRESENTED HERE

The approach used here is derived from Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology. It explicitly assumes that:

- \* Spontaneous group talk almost always yields talk about habitual (and often hegemonically-constrained) thoughts/feelings actions.
- \* Group talk is usually highly constrained because it hides within it seemingly "neutral" practices that in actuality cloak within them always present forces of power (i.e. habitus).
- \* Human beings are capable of enlarging their communicating repertoires and disciplining their communicatings in ways that favor communication for understanding others rather than communication for agreeing, disagreeing, persuading or controlling others.
- \* We cannot understand an other outside of the context of the experiences that lead to their sense-makings.
- \* The ever-present mandate of the human condition is discontinuity so that no matter how habitual practices are or how constraining conditions are, there are always gaps within people (no person is all one thing) as well as between people, spaces, and times.

These premises have been implemented in focus groups in the following ways:

- \* Entry for all talk is situated -- participants are asked to link their thoughts, ideas, feelings, conclusions, and so on to their lived experiences.
- \* Participants are assumed to have consistent as well as inconsistent sense-makings and are invited to talk about these.
- \* Participants are assumed to be as socially and personally aware as researchers, albeit in different ways, and are invited to theorize about how they see connections between things.
- \* Participants are explicitly asked to link their comments to their understandings of power forces -- their own, those of others, those of institutions, communities, cultures, societies.
- \* Talk is engaged in turn-takings rather than spontaneously.
- \* Participants are asked not to interrupt with their agreements, disagreements, reactions to what others say. Rather, while the group is on-going, individual participants are asked to write focus group journals in which they enter things they particularly agree with, disagree with, are confused by, and would if time ask more about.

\* In a final round, participants are asked to comment on where they most agree with an other and where they most disagree, what they see as accounting for these agreements/disagreements, and what in their circumstances leads them to be interested in/concerned about these issues.

#### WHY A DIALOGIC APPROACH

Briefly, in the framework of the arguments above, the project assumes that spontaneous focus group talk can yield only a partial picture -- a picture that reflects too much habitual and hegemonic practices and fails to capture how people navigate and struggle between individual agency and collective agency. Further, it is assumed that traditional focus group practices fail to get a full picture of the internal sense-makings that users and audiences bring to their interactions with the designs, policies, and practices of media, library, electronic, information, and communication systems. It is these internal sense-makings that practitioners serving users and audiences must ultimately connect.

#### REFERENCES AND LINKS TO RELATED DOCUMENTS

(These items provide extensive literature reviews and discussions supporting the arguments above or examples of Sense-Making designed focus groups)

\* Dervin, B., Reinhard, C.D., Shen, F.S. (2006). Beyond communication -- research as communicating: Making user and audience studies matter - paper 2. [Information Research, 12\(2\), paper 287](http://informationr.net/ir/12-1/paper287.html). Available at: <http://informationr.net/ir/12-1/paper287.html>

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\* CHAPTER I: Dervin, *Project overview: Sense-Making Methodology as dialogic approach to communicating for research and practice*.

Dervin, B. (1991/2001). *An example of a Sense-Making designed focus group: Design for focus groups for phone user constituencies*. Unpublished report. <http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/art/artabsdervin91focus.html>

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