Shared sensemaking during a strategic change process: a non-managerial perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This study offers insight into how individuals in non-managerial positions make sense of a strategic change as it unfolds. We explore the dynamic aspects of how these individuals perceive and engage with the evolving process, and how shared strategic understanding is created. The study aimed to bridge the gap between structure and action by highlighting the agency of faculty staff members, during strategic change, in a business school context.

Design/methodology/approach – The study utilized a longitudinal, real-time, inductive approach based on a single explanatory case study to describe how phenomena change over time in context, focusing on faculty staff members in non-managerial positions. Qualitative data was collected in three phases involving real-time reflective diaries and observations, interviews, and documentation. A combinatory process-practice ontology, was adopted, complemented by a "temporal lens" to capture the strategic change process as it unfolded.

Findings – The authors present a temporal process model of strategic change and identify four enabling factors through which shared sensemaking was achieved during the change process. Additionally, the study explores the role of tensions and dissonance in fostering reflection and progress within the context of organizational change.

Originality/value – Findings contribute to the concept of shared sensemaking, and we illustrate how a change process is enabled through the interplay of dynamic (less visible) practices and static (prescriptive) elements of a change process. We contribute towards theory development through a more comprehensive understanding of contextual dynamics and how change processes unfold and interweave, by considering process, structure, and context.

Keywords Strategic change processes, Temporality, Process ontology, Shared sensemaking, Tensions, Socio-materiality, Non-managerial employees

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Within Higher Education institutions (HEIs), the practice of strategy, or strategizing, takes place in "pluralistic contexts" (Denis *et al.*, 2007, p. 179). Such organizational contexts tend to be characterized by divergent and multiple objectives, diffuse power, and knowledge-based

work processes requiring individuals to make sense of complex and often ambiguous situations within a plurivocal setting (Holstein *et al.*, 2018; Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017; Brès and Raufflet, 2013).

Business schools, specifically, are affected by change processes that take place within a continuously "fluxing world" (Chia, 2014). In these institutions, operations unfold amidst hyper-competitive landscapes characterized by heightened turbulence and complexity (Krücken, 2021; Naidoo, 2018). Responding to external accreditation requirements and the need to adhere to business principles (Deem and Johnson, 2000), business schools face increased pressure to transform their strategic conduct, including their business models and educational paradigms (Hommel and Thomas, 2014). Amidst these changes, faculty members in business schools find themselves tasked with coping, interpreting, and making sense of the evolving landscape. Consequently, business schools serve as relevant institutions to study strategic change, reflecting the ongoing transformation of their operations, business models, and educational paradigms. Limited research has focused on HEIs, as pluralistic settings, where a variety of potential narrators are present. Meyer *et al.* (2018) explain that faculty staff and professors play an important role as strategic agents, as they are responsible for mediating between strategic macro intentions and academic interests. However, academic faculty units within universities are less understood in the mainstream strategy literature, especially in how they make sense during change.

In this study, we traced the sensemaking processes of faculty members in non-managerial positions by tracking a strategic change process over three years, in real-time, within a single business school context. We investigated their engagement in the process, addressing the research question: "*How do multiple processes and practices interplay as a strategic change process unfolds, from the perspective of faculty staff members?*" We also considered what role materiality fulfills in the sensemaking and sense-giving processes of these individuals. We view materiality as constituting a "practice" (Lê and Spee, 2015) that cannot be separated from the process, as it is part of the "situatedness of human action" (Tsoukas, 2017, p. 145). By adopting a combinatory practice-process ontology with a sensemaking lens as part of our theoretical framework, we aimed to capture "the realities of agency" and flow (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 410). We also respond to various calls for further research to expand the scope of actors involved in strategic change by analyzing a bottom-up approach to change (Burgelman *et al.*, 2018; Cabantous and Sergi, 2018; Müller and Kunisch, 2018). Most studies on sensemaking typically focus on occasions of sensemaking, rather than on the sensemakers themselves (Hernes and Maitlis, 2010). Those studies that focus on the sensemakers, typically focus on the managerial perspective, and on deliberate or episodic activities (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). Our study provides insights into the "sensemakers" - the faculty staff members – from a non-managerial perspective, shedding light on how shared sensemaking occurred during a dynamic process amongst these individuals. We contribute to practice and process research by highlighting the importance of social practices, tensions, and sensemaking in understanding complex processes. We address the dynamic and less visible aspects of change, demonstrating how emerging practices interplay with explicit ones. This provides a comprehensive view of how these processes were sustained through human involvement, considering process, structure, and context.

This article is structured as follows: We first discuss the relevance of sensemaking theory in understanding strategic change from a non-managerial perspective. We then elaborate on the concept of shared sensemaking and discuss how temporal dynamics are a central component of a strategic change process. Following this, we present our methodological approach and discuss the study's key findings. We conclude the paper with a temporal process model of strategic change.

Theoretical background
Sensemaking theory and strategic change: a non-managerial perspective
Previous studies have demonstrated the central role of sensemaking in organizational processes involving strategic change (Weiser, 2021; Balogun *et al.*, 2015; Gioia and Thomas, 1996). In dynamic and turbulent contexts, organizations need to respond and adapt to continuous changes in the business environment (Obembe *et al.*, 2021). Sensemaking processes are crucial in the ability of organizational members to make effective strategic decisions amidst strategic change and contribute to these change processes. Furthermore, during strategic changes, organizational members need to establish and maintain a shared understanding to uphold relationships and foster collective action (Weick, 1993).

Sensemaking is about crafting the meaning necessary for change projects to proceed (Weick, 2008) and involves individuals' efforts to comprehend and make sense of unforeseen or confusing events (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), giving meaning to the situations and events that constitute everyday life (Corley, 2003). According to Gioia (2006, p. 1719) sensemaking "is the predominant way of going about our most essential human task namely understanding how people make sense of experience."

Sensemaking theory is closely linked to the strategy-as-practice domain given its broad scope and interconnections to various topics and constructs (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015). Firstly, sensemaking focuses on the social context in which meaning is constructed (Smerek, 2011), emphasizing it as a collaborative process influenced by collective efforts (Weick, 2008) within relational settings (Balogun *et al.*, 2015). Secondly, sensemaking is routed in the meaningful lived experiences of social actors (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) and their interactions aimed at establishing "strategic understanding and commitment" (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990, p. 232). We thus utilize sensemaking theory to examine and comprehend individuals' interpretative responses to change (Stensaker and Falkenberg, 2007) and to explore the creation of shared strategic understanding.

Literature established that strategic decision implementation involves diverse organizational actors (Obembe *et al.*, 2021), yet it often focuses on managerial perspectives, neglecting non-managerial employees' roles. Employees' reinterpretations of meanings of change over time have largely been overlooked (Bartunek *et al.*, 2006; Sonenshein, 2010; Vaara *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, coping within pluralistic institutions has received little empirical study thus far (Denis *et al.,* 2007; Kraatz and Block, 2008; Kodeih and Greenwood, 2014), particularly when illustrating how individuals and groups create shared meaning within ambiguous and complex situations. Thus, there are calls for more research on how social settings outside top and middle management affect strategic decisions, knowledge sharing, and communication (AlMansour and Obembe, 2021a, b). In this article, we regard faculty staff members in non-managerial positions within a business school setting as active social actors who react to and interpret change.

Gioia and Thomas (1996) state that strategic change necessitates a revision in the interpretative schemes by *all* the members of the organization, not just top management. Change of this kind involves high levels of uncertainty and flux, often requiring buy-in from multiple stakeholders (Gioia *et al.*, 2012). Korin *et al.* (2022, p. 283) emphasize that strategy practice encompasses "the whole arena of strategy work", which includes the tools, materials, techniques, and practitioners who "consume the products of strategizing". In our study, we conceptualize sensemaking as "a social process of meaning construction and reconstruction" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442) involving multiple organizational members and recognize it as an ongoing and dynamic process shaped by practices and material factors (Jansson *et al.*, 2020; Hultin and Mähring, 2017; Orlikowski and Scott, 2015). We depart from the cognitivist tradition to adopt a conceptualization of sensemaking that emphasizes the significance of social structures, processes, and practices in individuals' sensemaking processes (Vaara and Whittle, 2022).

Shared sensemaking and temporal dynamics

We consider human action a social process "situated in the flow of time" (Dawson and Sykes, 2019, p. 104) as time is inherent in both change processes and within the strategic management context (Kunisch *et al.*, 2017; Langley *et al.*, 2013). We, therefore, highlight the temporal dynamics linked to strategic change and understand shared sensemaking as the process of collectively constructing an understanding of the meaning of change over time (Soini *et al.*, 2021).

Identifying temporal dimensions assists in revealing how the various practices are related, bringing to the fore factors that either enable or limit strategizing (Hydle, 2015). Bansal *et al.* (2022, p. 7) state that "temporality adds dimensionality to organization life", as it exposes how people experience the world, their actions, and how they organize. Kunisch *et al.* (2017, p. 1007) argue that a time lens is particularly useful in terms of strategic change as a temporal lens can enrich our understanding of strategic change by developing "a much richer and more textured understanding of strategic change." Temporality and how we connect our memories and future to the present are important when we want to understand how organizations change over time (Dawson, 2014).

Methodology

Research design and case context

We employed a longitudinal-processual method to investigate the transition or change process, allowing us to observe how phenomena and processes evolve (Langley *et al.*, 2013). Our approach predominantly adopts a constructive understanding of change, viewing it as socially constructed through the actions and interactions of organizational members (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). We followed a strong process ontology, which means that aspects of emergence and temporality were given prominence (Cabantous and Sergi, 2018).

A single interpretive case study was the methodological design choice for the current study. The unique organizational context chosen for the study was a business school in South Africa that was established in 1976 and is affiliated with the largest university in the country. The pseudonym used for the business school will henceforth be *Business School SA*. The scope and aim of the current study were to track the curriculum and module development process of their flagship master's level qualification, following the accreditation of the revised degree structure. We tracked the change process over three years (2016–2019). The investigation focused on how faculty staff members interpreted and made sense of the strategic change process that they went through. Only faculty staff members directly involved in the change process and positioned outside of formal managerial roles were purposefully chosen as the change recipient group. The faculty staff members had to be permanently employed in their current positions for a minimum of two years.

The chosen organizational context was deemed appropriate, as the change process experienced by faculty staff members falls under the classification of "strategic change". Strategic change events, such as accreditation and the development of qualifications, influence the identity and legitimacy processes of business schools. Wilson and Thomas (2012, p. 371) refer to the "strategic choice" that business schools face and the challenge of re-positioning themselves in scholarly and practice-based landscapes. The pressures of accreditation standards, rankings, and regulations, constrain such strategic choices in business schools (Wilson and Thomas, 2012). Consequently, business schools often confront paradoxical issues (Alajoutsijärvi *et al.*, 2015), resulting in complex, fragmented, and ambivalent settings. There are calls for more micro-level studies of processes, practices, and performance among business school faculty in various academic fields and settings (Kodeih and Greenwood, 2014; Meyer *et al.*, 2018). For illustrative and explanatory purposes, the methodological process we followed is classified into three broad phases in Figure 1 below.
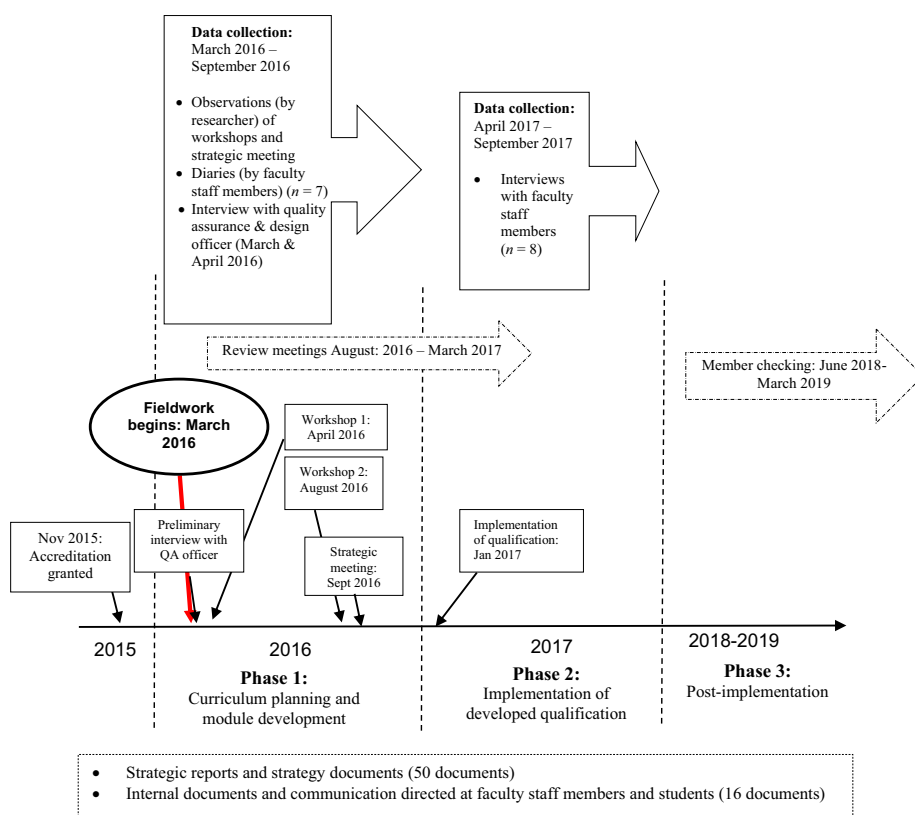
Source(s): Authors' own work

Data sources
Processual, historical, and contextual data was collected over three phases from four main sources. Phase 1 involved observations conducted by the researcher and reflective diaries kept by seven faculty staff members during the process' curriculum planning and module development stage. The observations and reflective diaries were conducted simultaneously to track the evolving organizational context. This phase allowed us to use a "real-time" approach to observe emerging patterns and study detailed data as events unfolded (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2017), providing an insider's perspective and real-time feedback from participants. Phase 2 constituted the interview phase and took place during the first year of implementation of the newly developed Master's degree. This phase allowed us to collect both retrospective and prospective accounts of how the faculty staff members made sense of the change process. Four participants consented to review meetings in Phase 1 and Phase 2 to discuss the researcher's interpretations of observations and research notes made in the researcher's reflective journal. To corroborate our findings and final data structure, member checking was conducted over nine months after implementing the new curriculum. Lastly, documentation concerning the organization and change process was reviewed and served as an important triangulation and supplementary source for contextual understanding. The study duration spanned three years.

Data analysis

We followed a process approach (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2017) as the specific phenomena under investigation needed to be viewed as continuous and always in flux (Langley *et al.*, 2013). Subsequently, our data analysis required various levels and a multi-analytic approach to display actions as unfolding (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2017).

Firstly, thematic analysis was conducted in the beginning stages, which allowed for patterns to be seen in the dataset. Secondly, a grounded theory approach was followed, which required a rigorous process of repeated sifting, analyzing, and re-analyzing the data to identify emerging concepts and contribute towards theory development. Initially, we followed a predominantly inductive approach where data was not pre-coded. However, we found that incorporating in vivo codes alongside open codes was necessary to preserve participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding. These in vivo codes also provided a useful analytic point of departure (Charmaz, 2006). The next stage involved a second-level analysis whereby researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions were used. To enrich the conceptual and theoretical perspective of the process, we employed a mixture of coding methods as the data analysis proceeded (Saldaña, 2016). The third part of the analysis involved organizing themes under higher-level constructs (Floersch *et al.*, 2010). This involved constant comparisons of small components of the data, and the construction of a system of categories and themes that described the phenomena that were being observed (Langley, 1999). We then used a narrative and code-weaving approach to integrate key codes and phrases into a narrative form to focus on the temporality and sequencing of experiences and stories shared (Floersch *et al.*, 2010; Saldaña, 2016). Interpretations based on narrative strategy and grounded theory provide a sense of participants' lived experiences (Gehman *et al.*, 2018).

Findings

We begin the discussion of our findings with the past, present, and future narratives that were captured early in the data analysis process. Temporal interconnectedness refers to locating change in past, present, and future time (Pettigrew, 1990, p. 269) and through these narratives, we captured qualitative temporality – the lived experience of change (Dawson, 2019). We then present our findings to show how a shared context was created through the interplay of four key enabling factors identified during the code-weaving stage of our analysis.

Locating change within an evolving context: past, present, and future narratives (early insights)

The first key insight involved an organization "in flux" as participants described an evolving organizational context through past, present, and future narratives. We observed that faculty members expressed excitement and enthusiasm in a rather tentative manner. When probed further, faculty members frequently reflected on the historical context and the organizational realities experienced before the change process, comparing it to the current situation and where they are now. Faculty members spoke about the high management turnover in the years before the curriculum and module development process, resulting in high levels of instability, which negatively affected the overall culture. While there were negative perceptions regarding the past situation, they expressed optimism for the institution's future direction.

Table 1 provides illustrative quotes of the past, present, and future narratives describing the evolving organizational context.

One faculty staff member expressed:

An evolving context		
Positive perceptions of the current context	Retrospective statements about historical context (retrospective sensemaking)	Positive prospective outlook (prospective sensemaking)
I would describe it as an exciting place to be at the moment . . . there are some very good things happening here If you look at other business schools, if I compare that, I think we are leaders in terms of the new qualification . . .	. . . you have to understand where we come from . . . If you asked me that a few years ago, I would probably say . . . If you'd asked me two years ago, I'm not sure whether I'd have said that It is an evolutionary process . . . when I started here . . .	I think, as we go along, we will reach maturity and it will happen . . . there's more of an understanding that we have to find our own niche in the market and so on and I think that's becoming clearer as we go on I think the *Business School SA*. is in upward trend I think we still a bit in flux and I think we're still trying to find that equilibrium but it's already a lot better than what it used to be . . .

Source(s): Authors' own work

. . . I think, at the moment, we are at the point where these forces are coming together, trying to create uniformity or homogeny of understanding of 'who we are'. Now there is a positive vibe, there is a belief that we are beginning to see the emergence of the identity that we are looking for . . .

These narratives reflected a constantly changing environment as opposed to a static position. Gioia *et al*. (2002, p. 632) suggest that successful change necessitates a blend of the valued past with the envisioned future. This provided us with an early glimpse of the retrospective and prospective sensemaking processes faculty staff members went through which was an important component of how they responded to and made sense of the change they were experiencing.

Creating a shared context – shared sensemaking
A key observation involved the prevalence of factors that facilitated the advancement of the strategic change process and factors that impeded it. During the code-weaving stage of our analysis, these were categorized as hindering and enabling factors. We first address the hindering factors in our discussion and then present the dimensions of creating a shared context.

Hindering factors: resistance and initial inertia
Early on, when participants described the beginning stages of the change process, some levels of resistance and tension were evident.

I think what I disliked was the pessimism that, at times, came through from ourselves regarding the process and I did indicate to you why that, normally, that inertia, fear of the unknown, and defense of the territory.

One faculty member described the beginning of the process as "very very painful" and "fraught with a lot of suspicion". The initial resistance to change was primarily ascribed to the inertia experienced due to the fear of the unknown. Apprehensions were expressed concerning workload demands, lack of time, the prescribed multi-stakeholder approach in an organizational culture biased towards compartmentalization of tasks, and potential turf wars regarding ownership of modules that required cross-departmental collaborations within the approved curriculum structure.

Enabling factors: four key dimensions
Four enabling dimensions emerged, involving sensemaking and sense-giving imperatives that assisted in creating a shared context and were categorized as enabling factors 1–4 (see Table 2): overcoming employee inertia, distributed leadership, socio-material practices, and iterative cycles. Notably, these enabling factors involved both explicit and implicit practices. Some practices emerged organically and evolved during the process, while others involved deliberate actions and processes.

Enabling factor 1: overcoming employee inertia
A noticeable part of the change process was how some participants expressed initial tensions with established practices, but over time, the dynamics changed into a positive experience and outcome. The evolving context, combined with various social interactions and processes, led to the legitimization of the need for change and motivated active participation to ensure progress. One faculty member mentioned how the first step of the process was "to break those silos that we have put around ourselves". Another faculty staff member mentioned how "certain decisions had to be made to push the process forward". Overcoming initial inertia required conscious efforts, indicating a context that demanded episodes of discomfort where tensions were present.

> First and foremost, the accreditation process itself forced us to look each other in the eye and, in a manner, realize that, when we look at programs, the student walk is not about the academic content, it's about the experience. So, it forced us to accept that part and, in a way, pushed us together.

A surprising aspect was the rather deep levels of reflection that faculty members shared about their shortcomings during their lived experiences. One faculty member admitted that "a lot of people are happy in their comfort zones", while others "[have] done it this way for forty years". Various references were made about the silo effect and how faculty staff members were accustomed to working in these silos. Overcoming this initial inertia was a necessary part of the process, and once certain silos were broken, the process became more collaborative. The initial tension played an important role in some situations, proving necessary to legitimize and implement a different approach.

Enabling factor 2: distributed leadership – "gaining momentum"
A second key insight emerged as we observed how the change process allowed certain leadership roles to develop, which played an important part in advancing certain aspects of the process. One participant described the leadership as:

> . . . not leadership that pushed the development, it was leadership that allowed it to evolve . . .

Another participant expressed how the collective abilities of informal leaders kept the momentum going and assisted in creating a shared context especially when uncomfortable discussions needed to be had:

> even though initially the body language was non-team orientated, if I can put it that way . . . as it unfolded, obviously, with the interface ability of our moderation team from DPA, the comments, which were very hard and hard hitting on the benefit of the students, made most of us realize that we might need to approach this from a team point of view . . . we might need to leverage the strengths that we have.

> There were some uncomfortable discussions with [colleagues from the] curriculum development [function] and some heated words were exchanged, and you can understand as academics . . . we tend to be territorial. So, someone has to take us out of our comfort zone . . .

Examples of 1st order illustrative quotes	1st level codes	2nd level codes	Code weaving: aggregate themes
Theme 1: Hindering factors Unfortunately, more often, when change comes, we tend to be territorial, we tend to lean towards defending your own space . . . So at the beginning, that was a difficult challenge to sell the part. It was quite tough So yes, there was a, definitely, increase in terms of workload. There was definitely a lot of anxiety and concern I had huge reservations . . .	• Initial inertia • High workload • Silo effect • Initial resistance-territorial • Tensions regarding turf wars • Fear of unknown • Lack of time	Resistance and initial inertia	Hindering factors
Theme 2: Enabling factors certain decisions had to be made to push the process forward . . . So everybody specialises and we don't ever get . . . that's what, to me, absolutely stands out in this event . . . the fact that we worked in a team. I just liked that	• Pushing the process forward • Breaking silos (through team approach) • Individuals reflecting on the past • Episodes of tensions and dissonances	Overcoming employee inertia	Enabling factor 1
. . . instead of looking at hierarchy, they looked at knowledge and that worked well . . . it was because of, probably, at the time, a group of informal leaders, if I want to call it that, that were not formally appointed to do this but thought it is important enough to spend time on this and so on that moved the whole . . ..that kept the momentum	• Colleagues learnt from each other • Informal leaders initiating change • Approach based on competence, not hierarchy • Assistance from external specialists • Good leadership by academic director enabling teamwork	Distributed leadership	Enabling factor 2
. . . so I did that for the module that essentially encapsulates everything that's in the module and then I discussed that with colleagues, showed it to them, just got a sense of whether they believe that it can work and, so . . . And, whenever one of our colleagues completed their particular section pertaining to a module, it was sent out to everybody else who was part of that particular team for developing that module so that they could also then critically read it, give their inputs	• Creating a framework • Templates and instructions • Research and reading • Meetings to structure the qualification • Workshops • Sharing information resources • Checklists	Socio-material practices	Enabling factor 3

(*continued*)

	Examples of 1st order illustrative quotes	1st level codes	2nd level codes	Code weaving: aggregate themes
	And that was, essentially, a process of reading, writing, reading, writing, rethinking, deleting and so on I think, for me, informal discussion, just testing ideas with colleagues. I like to work from structures so I would create a structure first and . . . At times, you would go days and days reading a lot of articles, viewing a lot of videos, but ultimately, rejecting them . . .	• Testing ideas with colleagues and getting buy-in • Back-and-forth interactions • Processes of adjustment • "Ebb and flow"	Iterative cycles	Enabling factor 4
Table 2.	**Source(s):** Authors' own work			

Participants expressed the importance of having uncomfortable discussions at the outset to push them beyond their comfort zones and away from the old ways of doing things. This was another instance demonstrating how episodes of tension and conflict were essential to propel the process forward.

Enabling factor 3: socio-materiality
The third key insight involved aspects of materiality, namely strategic documents, policies, workshops, templates, and frameworks (more prescriptive and planned aspects of the process) – and how they were intertwined with the social processes and practices that were embedded in the change process. An important aspect of the module development phase involved the initial conceptualization of the modules, laying the foundation for content development and facilitating the integration of these modules into the new qualification. After the conceptualization process, the participants referred to how the strategic documents "came to mind" and played an important role in providing a "compelling rationale for the change". Another participant mentioned how, later in the process, the templates "then managed to crystalize our thinking and our thoughts". Notably, faculty staff members tended to use more prescriptive aspects of materiality later once a shared context was achieved.

When I've done that, I can see the value of that, but before that, I just saw that this huge . . . admin thing that I must do . . .

But, before we got that form thing I thought really? But there's a lot of positive things to say afterwards about these because it was really guiding us.

In discussions about the templates, known as Form 1 (Registration of Qualification at the South African Qualification Authority Form) and Form 3 (Module Registration Form), it was interesting to observe that some participants had initially experienced tensions and resistance towards these forms. One participant indicated:

I found the completion of these forms really irritating but necessary.

This participant described the evolving context and how his perception of the forms changed upon reflecting at the end of the process. As the process evolved, participants seemed to become more comfortable with these forms, realizing how necessary they were in the process. Notably, there was a moment of reconciliation when faculty staff members realized the importance and value of teamwork, documents, and templates. Moreover, there was evidence

that initially discord, and dissonance were experienced, arising from the collision between structure and process. However, as the process evolved, a shared context was reached, leading to greater clarity.

Enabling factor 4: iterative cycles
Throughout the process, we observed how back-and-forth cycles and adjustments were required to make sense of certain aspects. The back-and-forth cycles aided participants in comprehending the process of change and were an ongoing activity.

One faculty member described the process as follows:

> And then, when we then started doing the development, I realized that the learning outcomes . . . and the form threes are very important because of the learning outcomes and the assessment criteria because that's what we put into the study units. So, once I started working with it, I realized that it's not going to be sufficient. So, I made a lot of changes to it and I will probably have to sort that out somewhere along the way. So, I had to make a lot of changes to the learning outcomes which have to go back into the form threes to reflect more what we ended up doing. It is still developing as we go along . . .

Discussion

In Figure 2, we present our findings at a theoretical level, depicting the temporal dynamics evident during the process, which encompass tensions and instances of collision between structure and process. For explanatory purposes, Figure 2 illustrates a linear process; however, this process was considerably more complex, involving various back-and-forth cycles and aspects of adjustment.
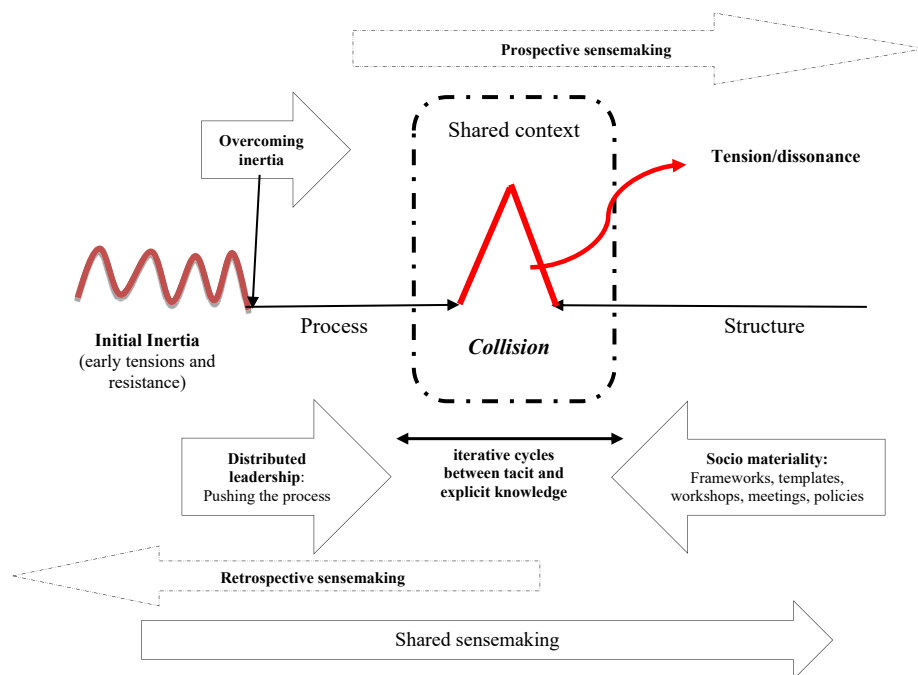
Figure 2.
Temporal dynamics between process and structure

Source(s): Authors' own work

Research often interprets change as a static point in time. Our study took on a longitudinal "real-time" approach and adopted a conception of the change process as continuous. Combined with a strong-process approach, we consider the ongoing sensemaking processes that individuals were involved in as a strategic change process unfolded. We show how both retrospective and prospective sensemaking processes are continuous and occur at all levels, both individually and collectively (Dawson, 2019).

By acknowledging that change processes take place within a "fluxing world" (Mackay and Chia, 2013) and within a wider social process (Pedersen and Dobbin, 2006), we contribute to organizational practice and theory by acknowledging context, flux, and temporality within a framework of individual and group action. We focused on process, structure, and socio-materiality, illustrating how sensemaking emerged through a dual process of human actions and the interplay of social and material practices (Hultin and Mähring, 2017; Orlikowski and Scott, 2015).

We recognize the meanings and changing practices and praxis related to sensemaking and sensegiving, and we show how strategy is built (Thomas and Ambrosini, 2015). Furthermore, we show how consensus is achieved and contributes to the development of the concept of shared sensemaking (Soini et al., 2021) by showing how a shared context occurred through four key dimensions. Similar to Almansour and Obembe (2020, 2021a, b), we provide additional insight into the internal dynamics of social actors, illustrating how specific social processes had an impact on consensus development. In our case, social processes involve less visible elements such as distributed leadership, back-and-forth cycles of adjustment, and socio-material practices. Weick et al. (2005) argue that, within iterative cycles, sensemaking involves both social interactions and systematic processes. We demonstrate how meaning emerges from the dynamic interaction ("ebb and flow") between implicit practices involving knowledge sharing and social processes alongside explicit practices and structured elements of the process. Crucially, the reciprocal exchange between social interactions and formal written documents generated meaning. A significant portion of the sensemaking process would have been compromised without these cycles. Consequently, we provide insight into some of the coping practices that were initiated by individuals, "all seeking merely to respond constructively to the predicaments they find themselves in" (Kodeih and Greenwood, 2014, p. 10).

Our findings illustrate how process and structure often collide, and where back-and-forth movements characterize the social processes that constitute strategic change processes. Adjustment involves going back (while looking forward) and repeating certain aspects, thus reaching different or adjusted outcomes. Insight on non-linear aspects of strategic change emphasizes that iterative processes are important in understanding how strategy practices emerge and evolve (Langley and Lusiani, 2015; Korin et al., 2022). These insights contribute to the theoretical understanding and structural conceptualization of strategic change.

Lastly, a key outcome of the study was the tensions associated with strategic change, and how they were often needed to create a shared context. Similar to Obembe et al. (2021), social interactions were a key enabling factor when dealing with resistance or episodes of tension and inertia. Uncomfortable discussions needed to be part of the process, and both retrospective and prospective sensemaking were necessary to make sense of the change that faculty staff members were going through. Tensions are especially prominent in pluralistic settings (Spee and Jarzabkowski, 2017), and the suggestion is that we view these periods of tensions not only as negative aspects of a change process. Rather, we observed how these periods of tensions or dissonance were periods of processing and contemplating for individuals, enabling them to reflect and prepare or pause, before making sense of the situation. Cashman (2012) suggests that a step-back reflective action can be a way of sensemaking and may be necessary in some situations before progress is achieved. In line with Bouty et al. (2019), the findings show that tensions and conflict are normal parts of

organizational life, and these can have positive unintentional consequences for the advancement of change.

We acknowledge the limitations of our research. When we set out to explore the processes and practices during a strategic change process, we recognized that our aim was not to generalize. We wanted to provide deep data and rich descriptions to draw on so that we could uncover the portable principles (Gioia *et al.*, 2012) from one setting to another. While case studies often produce findings that are unique to the organizational context under review, it is possible to extend case study findings to other contexts, especially when large-scale processes such as organizational change are being examined (Yin, 2009). Consequently, it is hoped that the findings from the current study can be extended to other pluralistic contexts.

Directions for future research and implications on practices
We provide three possible avenues for future research. Firstly, we show how the notion of "distributed leadership" was a key element in enabling a shared context. Aligned with Nonaka and Toyama (2007), the context determined the "leaders" as opposed to the title or position within the organization. More studies need to consider multiple actors and the notion of "distributed leadership" as opposed to the conventional models of leadership where a single leader is viewed as heroic. We also allude to how power, in the form of distributed leadership, affects sensemaking processes. The power dimension remains relatively implicit within the sensemaking process and practice literature, particularly when focusing on employment levels outside managerial positions (Vaara and Whittle, 2022; Schildt *et al.*, 2020). Further research is required to explicitly prioritize the power dimension as the focal point of analysis.

We demonstrate that shared sensemaking necessitated instances of disruption and tension to propel the process forward. The literature offers limited accounts of how resistance or episodes of tension can enable a change process and lead to new understandings (see Thomas *et al.*, 2011). Further research is required to fully understand how episodes of tension or resistance influence a change process, particularly in enabling change.

Lastly, this study depicted how prospective and retrospective accounts of strategic change were important meaning-making aspects of a change process. While retrospective accounts of sensemaking have received much interest in both the sensemaking and SAP literature, research on prospective sensemaking is still scarce (Cornelissen and Schildt, 2015), and more research is needed to focus on "truly prospective forms of sensemaking" (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 97).

Conclusion
Our study introduced a temporal process model that integrates stable and evolving aspects of an organizational context undergoing strategic change. We advance the concept of shared sensemaking and identify four critical factors enabling collective sensemaking processes during a strategic change process: overcoming inertia, distributed leadership, socio-material practices, and iterative cycles. We also show how more subtle and temporal components are produced and reproduced within an ongoing flux of processes by addressing the impact of the social actions and processes of organizational members (outside of the managerial arena). Consequently, we bring to the fore the specific dynamics and intricacies associated with strategic change processes. In conclusion, we aimed to provide a compelling "change story" contributing towards a more comprehensive understanding of how organizational members in non-managerial positions engage in and contribute to a strategic change process, highlighting the specific dynamics within strategic change processes. We achieved this by offering an alternative temporal model of change for understanding the processes and practices that underlie strategic change from a non-managerial perspective.

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JSMA

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