Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a collaborative method for analysing and interpreting information, observations, and participation results. Unlike scientific analysis, it does not focus on systematically coding data or conducting statistical evaluations. Instead, it aims to identify patterns, relationships, themes, and insights in order to develop a shared understanding of a situation.

Participation Depth	Inform · Participate · Have a say
Project Phase	Finalisation & Impact · Reflection & Evaluation
Goals	Structuring & Prioritising
Format	Analogue · Digital
Duration	1 - 3 Hours · 1 Day - 1 Week
Target Group	Directly Affected · Organised Actors
Group Size	Small Group up to 15 · Medium Group up to 30
Characteristics	Simple · Structured

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The aim of Sensemaking is to organise, understand, and interpret large amounts of information collaboratively. The method helps reveal patterns and relationships, providing a foundation for decisions, recommendations, and future actions.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Materials

Analogue

- Pinboard or large wall space
- Moderation cards or sticky notes
- Markers
- Printed interviews, protocols, or participation results

Digital

- Online whiteboard tools (e.g. Miro, Mural)
- Spreadsheets or shared documents
- Digital sticky notes

2. Gather the Material

Collect all relevant information in one place.

This may include:

- interview notes
- workshop documentation
- transcripts
- survey results
- photographs
- maps
- observation notes

The better the material is organised beforehand, the easier the collaborative analysis becomes.

3. Define the Key Question
Decide which question the analysis should answer.

Examples include:

- Which topics matter most to participants?
- What are the biggest challenges?
- Which needs are mentioned most frequently?
- Which measures receive the strongest support?

4. Assemble the Analysis Team
Work with several people whenever possible. Different perspectives help reduce blind spots and make the results more reliable and transparent.

Execution

1. Review the Information
All participants first familiarise themselves with the available material. Important statements, observations, or notable findings are highlighted or noted.

Helpful questions include:

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What stands out?

- What keeps recurring?
- What is surprising?

2. Collect Observations
Write individual observations on cards or digital sticky notes.

Each card should contain only one observation or idea.

Examples:

- "Many people feel unsafe at night."
- "The route to school is frequently described as dangerous."
- "There are too few places where young people can gather."

3. Identify Themes and Patterns
Sort and group similar observations together.

Typical themes may include:

- safety
- quality of public spaces
- mobility
- communication
- accessibility

As similar observations are grouped, initial patterns and relationships begin to emerge.

4. Develop Shared Understanding
The group discusses the identified patterns.

Helpful questions include:

- What do these findings tell us?
- What might be causing these issues?
- What relationships can we identify?

- Which perspectives might still be missing?

This is where the shared understanding is developed.

5. Draw Conclusions
Based on the discussion, formulate conclusions and possible actions.

Examples include:

- Which topics require further investigation?
- Which measures appear most promising?
- Which target groups should be involved more actively?
- Which questions remain unanswered?

6. Prioritise
If many findings emerge, prioritise the most important ones.

Helpful questions include:

- What is most important?
- Where is action most urgently needed?
- Which findings are most relevant for the project?

Evaluation

1. Document the Results
Record:

- thematic clusters
- key findings
- conclusions
- priorities
- recommended next steps

Photographs of pinboards or copies of digital boards should also be saved.

2. Validate the Findings

Whenever possible, present the findings to participants again.

This allows them to confirm whether the interpretation reflects their experiences accurately and whether important aspects have been captured correctly.

3. Plan the Next Steps
Use the findings to define concrete follow-up actions.

Examples include:

- organising additional participation activities
- developing measures or action plans
- exploring specific topics in greater depth
- supporting political or administrative decision-making

Source: Kerr, J., Cheers, J., Gallegos, D., Blackler, A. & Kelly, N. (2023): *The Art of Co-Design: A Guide Through Creative Collaboration*. BIS Publishers.

WHEN USEFUL?

- a large number of interviews, notes, or participation results are available.
- different perspectives need to be brought together.
- participation results should lead to concrete actions.
- a shared understanding within a project team needs to be developed.

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- no information or data has been collected yet.
- only statistical analyses are required.
- decisions have already been made.
- very little material is available and no synthesis is needed.

TIPS

- Work with several people to include different perspectives.
- Clearly distinguish observations from interpretations.
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Record findings as specifically as possible.

- Use visualisations and thematic clusters to reveal relationships.
- Allow sufficient time for discussion, as this is often where the most valuable insights emerge.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- no meaningful data or participation results are available.
- only statistical or quantitative analyses are required.
- decisions have already been finalised and no further interpretation is needed.
- the available material is too limited to identify meaningful patterns or relationships.

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/sensemaking