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Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

March 19, 2008

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

427A Waterman Building

Title: Sensemaking and Dialogue in the Interorganizational Setting

## ABSTRACT

Leaders seeking to address perplexing problems, capitalize on exchanges of ideas, and maximize limited resources increasingly turn to interorganizational collaborations. There has been some research on ways to evaluate these collaborations. Other scholarship has focused on how groups of all kinds learn to converse deeply and create shared meaning.

How group members themselves experience their own meaning making activities has been largely ignored in the research. In particular, there is a dearth of understanding about how members of interorganizational collaborations create shared meaning and the extent to which they practice dialogue as Bohm (1996) and others define it.

This qualitative study illuminates experiences of making shared meaning as they occur in two Interorganizational Relationship (IOR) settings whose focus is on developing policy. Two case studies explore what the process of creating shared meaning looks like and how participants see this shared meaning contributing to IOR outcomes.

Using Weick's (1995, 2005) properties of sensemaking, the study describes several instances of sensemaking in meetings. Case studies of each IOR then demonstrate that most group members recall instances of sensemaking during the life of the IOR, although their recall of specific behaviors and turning points in meetings varies.

The study finds that shared meaning is equivocal, that is, sometimes meaning is in common among group members, and many times it is distributed or divided among them. A central finding of this study is that sensemaking creates a bridge to action even where unanimous agreement is unlikely and dialogue is largely absent.

While the complexity of issues, political nature of the policy arena, and diversity of group members render meaning making difficult in the IOR setting, the study suggests that we might learn to recognize and encourage sensemaking as a stepping stone to IOR outcomes. In addition, the conclusions explore implications for organizational development theorists and practitioners.