

Understanding and measuring empowerment through the eyes of young people

The use of SenseMaker at VIA Don Bosco, 2017-2021



Table of contents

1. Introduction	3
2. The SenseMaker method	4
3. The SenseMaker journey.....	6
3.1 Design of the SenseMaker process	6
3.2 Story collection	9
3.3 Pattern analysis of the data	10
3.4 SenseMaking and use	11
4. What did we learn from the stories in Madagascar and Bolivia?	14
4.1 Madagascar	14
4.2 Bolivia	17
5. Overall lessons learned	19

1. Introduction

In January 2017, VIA Don Bosco started a 5-year programme with as overall objective the social and professional integration of young people as active members of the society through skills development programmes. The main foci of the programme are finding a decent job (or self-employed) and feeling empowered after finishing their studies.

But how to understand and measure if the youngsters feel more empowered? VIA Don Bosco decided to use the SenseMaker method to yield more qualitative insights in the concept of empowerment, as seen by the youngsters themselves. The methodology was introduced and used in two countries, Bolivia and Madagascar.

These insights derived from SenseMaker were used to generate a better and more nuanced understanding of the complex process of empowerment and to inform the respective programmes. The use of SenseMaker was also designed in such a way that it allowed for stating progress in the level of empowerment during the journey that the young people took from enrolment to graduation until they were at work.

In the following sections, we will take you through the different steps of the five year SenseMaker journey. How did we set up the tool? How did we harvest and analyse the stories and patterns? What was the internal learning process in the two countries and at VIA Don Bosco HQ in Brussels?



I am a programme manager. Usually, I look at reality by reading reports about what's happening in the schools. But by reading the stories of the students (and young graduates), I really felt connected with their lives. To me, it's a whole new library that has opened.

Diane Holisoa Rakotondrabe, Technical Development Office,
Filles de Marie Auxiliatrice, Madagascar



2. The SenseMaker method

Imagine collecting hundreds of personal experiences from students and young graduates about how they perceive their school environment and how they see their professional future. Instead of asking students' opinion through a set of a pre-defined questions, we simply listen to them and capture what matters to them. After the young people have shared their experiences, they self-interpret their own stories based on a set of signifier questions that reveal deeper insights in the context of their experiences. These hundreds and sometimes thousands of micro-narratives and answers to follow-up questions are then entered in a dedicated software, which allows us to visualise patterns. These patterns and the stories behind them then serve as insightful monitoring data and food for discussion and sensemaking in the Vocational Training Centres supported by VIA Don Bosco.

What is described in the above paragraph is the essence of SenseMaker: a complexity-aware, narrative-based method that involves collecting, analysing, debating and sharing large numbers of short stories about people's experiences. SenseMaker asks storytellers to interpret their own stories; by doing so, it shifts the power of interpretation of the narratives to the respondent, instead of the external researcher or expert.

The method enables users to gather and analyse large numbers of experiences from people. Patterns and trends across stories are then identified, giving insights into the drivers, behaviours, dynamics, contextual factors and actors in people's lives. The methodology is specifically developed to enable a better understanding of reality through the respondents' eyes.

SenseMaker is used for assessments, monitoring, evaluations and research. It can be used as a stand-alone method or in combination with other Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) methods. It lends itself well to participatory monitoring and evaluation and an adaptive management practice. It recognises that personal narratives allow better access to contextualised knowledge.

THE STEPS OF A SENSEMAKER PROCESS:



1. DESIGN OF THE SENSEMAKER PROCESS AND TOOL

Together with the project staff, the process is outlined and the narrative questioning is drafted. It consists of a prompt question (which generates the story) and a set of signifier questions.



2. STORY COLLECTION AND SELF-SIGNIFICATION OF THE STORIES

Stories are gathered through individual conversations or group sessions (physical or online). Stories can be collected by a group of trained facilitators. Immediately after telling or writing down the story, storytellers themselves give additional meaning to their story using a series of follow-up questions (signifiers).



Some advantages of the use of SenseMaker:



Experiences, not opinions. The starting point is the personal experience of people (students and young graduates in the case of VIA Don Bosco) around the topic of inquiry, and not the collection of opinions or scoring against pre-defined indicators. It is not a collection of long and in-depth stories from a small group of people, as with some other storytelling methods, but a listening exercise gathering day-to-day experiences, moments and events from hundreds and sometimes thousands of stories. From this, we are able to 'read' the education system through the eyes of the young people.



Self-interpretation. By answering follow-up questions, storytellers provide further information and give additional layers of meaning to what is expressed in their stories. They make a primary assessment of their own stories and by doing so reduce the bias of external researchers or analysts.



Visual patterns representing trends and dynamics. Strong clusters, trends, and outliers give rapid insights into the drivers, behaviours, dynamics, contextual factors and actors in people's lives.



A unique combination of qualitative and quantitative data, which connect to and complement each other to generate better insights. Narratives are turned into numbers and patterns, which in turn derive meaning and context from the underlying narratives. The SenseMaker software (developed by Cognitive Edge) and associated dashboards allow for a rich analytical process.



Every voice counts equally. Valuing each person's experience means there is no capture or selection of the best or most significant stories. People share stories and experiences that matter to them, which can be both negative or positive, or a mix of both. Dominant voices are not favoured above others: every voice, every story is used equally to visualise and analyse emerging patterns and trends. It is therefore an ideal method to give equal voice to those people who are often not heard.



3. DISCOVER EMERGING PATTERNS

In this step, the patterns based on the signifier questions are visualised in a dashboard. An analysis of these patterns provides an informed view of the key themes, dynamics, challenges, influencing factors, etc. of the shared experiences.



4. EXPLORE THE STORIES BEHIND THE FIGURES

Based on the patterns, we read and analyse the stories (preferably in groups). We discover things that confirm what we know, allow ourselves to be surprised, get a more nuanced view of reality and so, we can unpack important themes.



5. COLLECTIVE SENSEMAKING, LEARNING AND ACTION

In a participatory workshop with the project staff and involved stakeholders, the patterns and stories are further discussed. In this collective 'sensemaking' process, we give meaning together, generate insights and formulate action points.

3. The SenseMaker journey

3.1 Design of the SenseMaker process

The SenseMaker journey aimed to provide a more nuanced understanding of empowerment and how this is reflected in the lives of young people in Bolivia and Madagascar. Voices That Count guided us through this five year process. In a kick-start workshop, VIA Don Bosco's programme staff from head office, Madagascar and Bolivia laid the foundations for the SenseMaker process and decided on the core dimensions to be reflected in the Signification Framework, i.e. the SenseMaker tool.

Since the tool needed to reflect the different dimensions of empowerment, we started with an exploration of existing models such as the theory of Zimmerman (1995)[1] and Steenssens, K. (2013) [2]. Focusing on the three interrelated dimensions (the intrapersonal, interactional and behavioral component) that, if present in togetherness, lead to individual and psychological empowerment or well-being.

The 3 main dimensions of empowerment

A. PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT	B. RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT	C. BEHAVIOURAL EMPOWERMENT
1. Having a sense of control in my life. 2. How I stimulate and engage myself to influence my own situation and to take decisions that improve my own situation. 3. Self-confidence, having a positive feeling about myself (my life values). 4. Feeling myself capable/competent. 5. Having a good view on my personal objectives (my aspirations), my desires, my needs. Having knowledge of my strengths and weaknesses. 6. Having knowledge: having the competences for knowing to know, knowing to do and knowing to be.	7. Being conscious about the opportunities that exist in the world of work / having the knowledge on rights and obligations / duties at the job. 8. Being conscious about my own social status. 9. Comprehension and being conscious about relations with others: knowing the importance and having the capacity to (re)negotiate these relations. 10. Having the capacity to mobilise resources, network, knowledge, competencies, money,... 11. Sense of belonging / having the feeling to belong to a group.	12. Assertivity, being able to defend oneself properly. 13. Making conscious choices. 14. Being able to manage difficult situations and to solve problems. 15. Participating in the (broad) community. 16. Having the possibility and taking initiatives to influence the circumstances at work or at school.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF EMPOWERMENT FOR VIA DON BOSCO

[1] Zimmerman M.A. Psychological empowerment – issues and illustrations (1995)

[2] Steenssens K. Grondslagen en uitdagingen voor het meten van empowerment. (2013)

The VIA Don Bosco staff from head office, Bolivia and Madagascar translated this theoretical underpinnings into a practical framework taking into account the reality of VIA Don Bosco's work with vulnerable youngsters in technical and vocational schools. It consists of a prompt question, a set of signifier questions, and a limited number of socio-demographic questions.

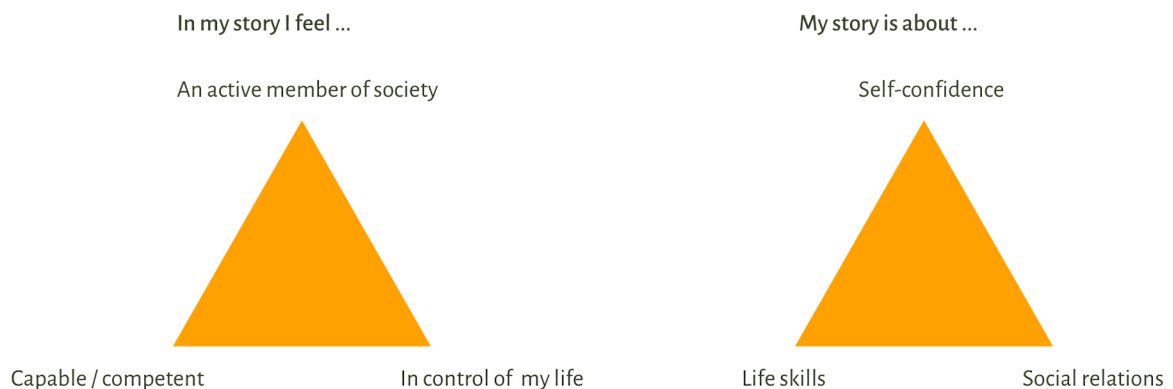
→ The **prompt question** triggers a respondent's memory to share a specific, concrete experience or event. The prompt question used for within this VIA Don Bosco project was:

"Think of an important experience or situation related to your current situation where you felt really proud / motivated or on the contrary disappointed/ discouraged with respect to your professional future. Describe what happened"

→ A set of **signifier questions** is framed around the topics of interests and asks the storyteller to provide additional insights about the experience shared in the story. The storyteller answers these questions immediately after sharing their story. SenseMaker typically uses a combination of different type of signifier questions: the most common ones are multi-choice questions, triads and dyad questions.

TRIAD QUESTIONS

The storyteller is asked to indicate the relative importance of three elements or concepts, placed at the corners of a triangle, by positioning their response within the triangle. Triad questions are used to explore a concept, test an assumption or understand constraints and enablers.



SLIDER QUESTIONS

The storyteller positions an answer along a spectrum between two opposing extremes. A dyad question helps us understand the relative presence of a single concept or aspect.

In the context of your story, who determines your professional future?

I am totally in control of my professional future  Other people determine my professional future

MULTI-CHOICE QUESTION (MCQ)

MCQs allow us to disaggregate findings into sub-clusters and compare differences between subsets of respondents (e.g. to understand the drivers or impacts of different conflict situations, or how stories with positive and negative emotions differ).

My story is about ... (max. 2)

- ☐ having self-confidence
- ☐ being assertive
- ☐ maintaining social relationships
- ☐ making choices
- ☐ solving problems
- ☐ influencing circumstances at work/school
- ☐ feeling capable
- ☐ pursuing ambition / career goal
- ☐ Other

What aspect has most influenced the situation in my story? (max. 2)

- ☐ where you live (home / boarding school / ...)
- ☐ where you come from (rural/urban)
- ☐ your family situation
- ☐ your education
- ☐ your gender
- ☐ your economic situation
- ☐ your passion and interests
- ☐ your relationships/social connections
- ☐ Other

Socio-demographic questions about the storyteller are used to make comparisons between different (sub)groups such as age, gender, name of the vocational training centre, geographical location, etc.

Framing the signifier questions based on a conceptual framework worked well and guaranteed the inclusion of different dimensions of empowerment. In addition, the questions were contextualised based on the expertise of the programme staff who worked already for years in youth empowerment programmes. Although a test session with a diverse group of young people (students and young graduates) was organized to finetune the questions, the design process could have been improved through a more active role of young people in the design process, especially in finding the appropriate 'youth' vocabulary in Malgache and Spanish.

THE SAMPLING STRATEGY

An important part of the design is the decision on the sampling strategy: whose voices do we want to hear? In view of the purpose of this SenseMaker process, we decided to capture stories from young people throughout the entire lifespan of their journey. Together with the respective partners in both countries, we identified four types of respondents, all between 15 and 29 years of age and with an equal mix of male and female respondents:

- a. Students at the Vocational Training Centers that were in the first year of their training
- b. Students at the Vocational Training Centers that were in the final year of their training
- c. Students that finished their training minimum 6 months to 2 years ago that are at work
- d. Students that finished their training minimum 6 months to 2 years ago that are not working

3.2 Story collection

At the start of the story collection process, VIA Don Bosco organised a training workshop for 10 story collectors in each country. Bolivia chose to work with internal staff from the Technical Development Office while the team in Madagascar opted for a story collector team from an external research centre to avoid that students would not be able to express themselves freely in the presence of teachers or staff.

For the students, the story collection itself was organised in group session in classrooms, i.e. groups between 20 to 40 people. Students wrote their stories and answers individually on paper forms. In Madagascar, the story collection process was done in Malgache.

Graduated students were invited to join group session at a specific location, also guided by facilitators. The total number of respondents for this group was rather limited since students moved or changed contact details and VIA Don Bosco lost track of the students over the years.

An internal evaluation on the SenseMaker process learned that students appreciated the approach as they could share their own story. Most of them indicated that they could easily understand the questions and indicated answering the triads and dyads as fun. However, young people that were less proficient in writing and reading, especially the beginner students, had some problems with understanding all questions. A mixed approach for the story collection, i.e. group collection and individual interviews for young people that are less literate was recommended for future SenseMaker processes.



After collecting the stories in groups, the stories and answers to the questions were entered in the SenseMaker software. In the case of Madagascar, this was done by the external research center. The stories were first translated in into French before they were entered in the SenseMaker database. This extra step of entering the data took extra time as it was quite an effort given the big numbers of stories. It also extended the time between collection and analysis. In Bolivia, staff and teachers entered the stories. The big advantage was that in this process, they already got very valuable insights into the life of young people, what they value and what matters to them, even before the analysis started.

3.3 Pattern analysis of the data

After the first story collection in 2017, an initial in-depth analysis pattern analysis was done by the MEAL coordinator at VIA Don Bosco HQ . The first-time analysis comes with a learning curve and took some time and also made clear that a dedicated and trained person was required to carry out the analysis process.

The fact that the first feedback on the results and sensemaking workshops took quite some time, after the end of the story collection, led programme staff in Bolivia and Madagascar to think that the data analysis process was a demanding and extremely complex process. The internal evaluation learned that at that stage the local staff and teachers felt that they did not have the time nor the skills to carry out the analysis.

For the second round, due to some staff changes and lack of availability of the MEAL staff, Voices That Count carried out the analysis for VIA Don Bosco and compiled the main insights in a report. However, the fact that programme staff of Madagascar could not directly engage with the data during the analysis phase - also because the SenseMaker analysis software at that time was far from user-friendly - was seen difficult to move forward discussing the insights with their partners. This was an important lesson for the next round.

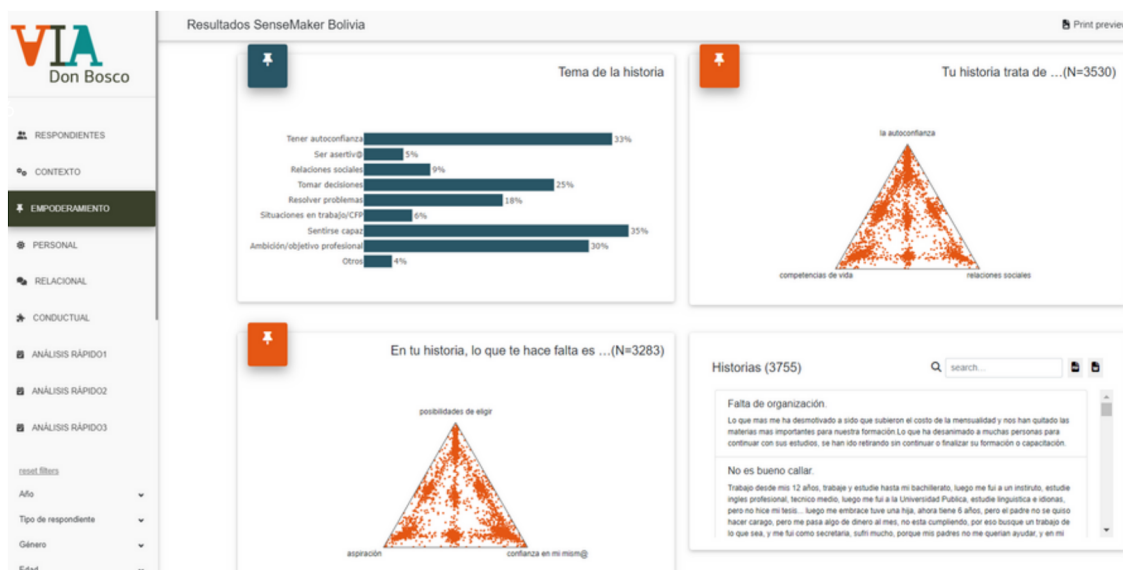
To support the country offices to interact with the graphs and stories, Voices That Count developed two tools that enhanced not only the analysis and sensemaking but also the uptake and use of the SenseMaker data and results in the respective countries:

- ☑ the development of a standard **empowerment analysis framework** to guide the pattern story analysis; and
- ☑ the development of a **tailor-made online dashboard** for VIA Don Bosco framework that presents and visualises all the available data in a structured way. The dashboard is accessible for everybody in the organisation and allows for people to interact and engage with their own data in a user-friendly way.



The new dashboard has opened our eyes. In the next months and years, I will continue to explore and to extract story packs which we can use in workshops or trainings. Our journey in exploring the data has just begun.

Diane Holisoa Rakotondrabe, Technical Development Office,
Filles de Marie Auxiliatrice, Madagascar



SCREENSHOT OF THE ONLINE DASHBOARD FOR THE VIA DON BOSCO BOLIVIA PROGRAMME

3.4 SenseMaking and use

After the first pattern analysis process in 2017, the MEAL officer of VIA Don Bosco facilitated a sensemaking workshop in Bolivia and Madagascar. There were workshops at country level with the respective staff from the Technical Development Offices, job placement officers, and a selected group of teachers and students. Participants discussed the patterns and read story packs. Through the stories, they got insights in the world of the students and received interesting feedback about the programme.

As a result of this, the team in Bolivia jointly developed action plans with teachers and students that sought to address some of the main aspects identified in the stories. They also organised workshops in each of the training centres, where a few the director, teachers, job placement officers and a selected group students engaged in a collective sensemaking process. This was perceived as an very enriching activity. In Madagascar unfortunately, it was only at the very end of the programme that staff organised workshops in each of the centres.



For the teachers themselves, reading the stories was also looking into the mirror: it made them look at how they approached their lessons and the students, the good and the bad sides. In the end, they thanked us for the new insights they got.

Jeannot Rasolondraibe, Bureau technique de développement salésien, Madagascar



SenseMaker gave us the opportunity to see the world through the eyes of the young people. It is not only their story that is “voiced” but also their perception on empowerment, therefore offering a lot of potential for learning and improving VIA Don Bosco’s programme strategy.

Laura Vincx, Programme Manager VIA Don Bosco El Salvador, Honduras & Bolivia

The internal evaluation learned that the students enjoyed reading the stories from other students, as they felt that they are not alone, and that other young person also has the same struggles as them. In addition, they felt their voice was heard as their ideas and recommendations were considered for the next year program activities. The participating students also stated that they appreciated that they were able to learn more about their own challenges and those of other students. One remark however was that the number of participating students was rather limited and often the more vocal and active students participated.

Also, the teachers and the job placement officers mostly appreciated that they better understood students’ point of view, their educational challenges and what they needed. Understand the struggles in young people’s daily lives gave valuable feedback for the programming. Often they also learned about internal dynamics in the centres as well as operational issues that needed to be addressed.

As mentioned before, a boost to the sensemaking process and the use of the sensemaker data for programming came with the provision of an online dashboard. The easy access and possibility to explore the data for specific contextualised topics and learning questions enhanced the use of SenseMaker for their programming. People could explore what interested them most and look into the experiences of specific centres. The direct access to the stories and the possibility to export specific story packs assisted in deeper analysis of the stories.

OUR SENSEMAKER JOURNEY

BOLIVIA

MADAGASCAR



2017

JAN - APR

Design of the SenseMaker process and tool, including field testing (in both countries)

MAY

On-site training of 10 story collectors and a supervisor (team 1) followed by 954 youngsters from 7 Vocational Training Centres sharing their stories

MAY

On-site training of 10 story collectors and a supervisor (team 1) followed by 807 youngsters from 6 Vocational Training Centres sharing their stories

SEPT

Pattern Analysis and Sensemaking workshops followed by action planning

SEPT - DEC

Pattern analysis, in-country sensemaking workshop and action planning

2019

APR - MAY

One day refresher of story collectors and a supervisor, followed by 1042 youngsters from 7 Vocational Training Centres sharing their stories

MAY

On-site training of 10 story collectors and a supervisor (team 2), followed by 1074 youngsters from 7 Vocational Training Centres sharing their stories

AUG - NOV

Pattern analysis and report

AUG - NOV

Pattern analysis and report

2021

MARCH

Introduction to the dashboard (in both countries)

MAY

Online refresher training for the story collectors led by the supervisor, followed by 1759 youngsters from 7 Vocational Training Centres sharing their stories

JULY

Online refresher training for the supervisor leading team 2, followed by 1077 youngsters from 7 Vocational Training Centres sharing their stories

AUG

Sensemaking workshop followed by action planning

OCT - JAN 2022

Pattern analysis and in-country sensemaking workshops in 3 FMA schools (Oct 2021) and SDB schools (Jan 2022)

4. What did we learn from the stories in Madagascar and Bolivia?

4.1 Madagascar

The majority of training courses in the Vocational Training Centres in Madagascar are three-year courses. This led to a very interesting collection of stories to explore: the boys and girls who shared their experiences as beginners in 2017 did so as final-year students in 2019, and as young graduates (working or unemployed) in 2021. The stories from this particular group were read and discussed in a sensemaking workshop during the National Forum at the end of the five-year programme.

Besides exploring patterns and stories at national level, specific topics of interest were investigated in the different training centres that took part in the SenseMaker study. Below, we present three general insights, leaving aside all the little “aha” moments during the discussions that are so difficult to capture.

INFLUENCE OF FAMILY AND TEACHERS IN HOW YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL EMPOWERED

Analysing the patterns and the stories gave us a great deal more insight into how both the family context and teachers play a role in the different stages of the students' careers. In general, beginner students mainly indicate that their parents (or wider family) are the most influential actors in their stories. For final-year students, the influence of their teachers – and to a lesser extent their classmates – grows over time. The importance of family increases again after graduation, especially among young people who are unemployed. In terms of gender, girls tend to mention their parents/family more often as an influencing actor, compared with boys.

The fact that the influence of parents decreases while young people are at school and the impact of others, such as teachers, increases could be seen as a good indicator of growth towards adulthood. However, we also learn from the stories that this impact is not always experienced as positive. Some young people feel unfairly treated, sometimes even discriminated against by teachers because of their social background or gender. Communication between teachers and students heavily impacts the degree of optimism and motivation of the young people.

The influence of family in the choice of training course is not to be underestimated: in quite a few stories, boys and girls mention that the course in which they are enrolled was imposed by their family rather than being their own personal choice. Others say that they were not sufficiently informed about the different courses of study and the employment prospects on completion of the course. Very few storytellers associate their stories with “following my passions and interests”.





STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THEIR PROFESSIONAL FUTURE

Education and social relations are the two factors that are indicated as being most influential in the stories students shared. The education factor increases in importance over time, except in two centres. Economic situation only ranks third. Reading these stories, poverty in general – especially problems with paying school fees – and insufficient financial resources to start a small business emerge as major obstacles that are not adequately addressed by the centres. We need to be more creative in finding solutions, e.g. setting up a revolving fund to kick-start businesses.

Knowing that a significant gender imbalance exists in Madagascar, it is quite remarkable that students and young graduates do not see gender as a strong factor that plays a role in their professional future, or else they do not recognise how it influences their daily experiences: very few girls deliberately tick “gender” as an influential factor in their stories.

FEAR OF THE EMPLOYMENT ENVIRONMENT

From reading the stories of young graduates, we learned that entering the labour market is a big challenge. Many young people also feel a weakened sense of control. Many describe their uncertainty, their fear of entering the labour market. Some graduates talk about disappointment because they cannot find a suitable job: they are in a job that does not correspond to their training. Others complain about not receiving a decent salary and not being treated well at work.

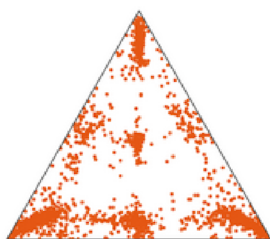
These stories tell us that we need to devote more attention and energy to the guidance of young people to prepare them for the transition to employment, and also to ensure a longer follow-up after they leave school to support them in this sometimes difficult process of integration. We also need to increase our efforts to raise awareness of decent work among companies and advocate with governments on working conditions.

IMPACT OF THE TRAINING PROGRAMME: FROM BEGINNER STUDENTS TO GRADUATE STUDENTS

Pattern analysis showed that, overall, the training programme has a positive impact in several areas: more positive emotions linked to the stories, a greater focus on a combination of “feeling capable” and “being in control of one’s life”, an improvement in life skills (self-confidence, having influence on the situation, being in control of one’s professional future), as well as the elimination of the greatest differences between boys and girls in terms of personal empowerment.

In my story I feel ...

An active member of society



Capable / competent

In control of my life

Final year students
Madagascar (2017-2019-2021)



4.2 Bolivia

After each of the three story collection rounds in Bolivia, a sensemaking workshop was held together with all the stakeholders in order to analyse the most important outcomes and trends. The primary focus of these workshops was to understand the key factors influencing the lives of the youngsters, to analyse what it meant for the programme and to develop action plans. Below we present the most important findings concerning the main aspects of empowerment.

PERSONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL EMPOWERMENT

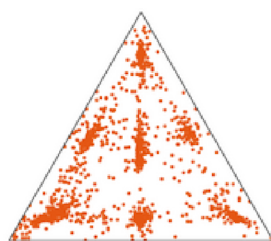
We learned that, as youngsters advance in their educational and professional careers, more positive emotions are linked to the stories. Reading the stories revealed a strong correlation between having a positive attitude and gaining new knowledge (both at the centres and at work). We also read how much youngsters value their learning process. Negative emotions, however, are frequently linked to a lack of work experience, working in a field other than the training course from which they graduated, and teachers or employers not showing appreciation of their work or discriminating against specific students.

Analysing the patterns and the stories provided more insight into the specific kind of knowledge and experience youngsters needed to succeed in the labour market. Additionally, it became clear that teachers' appreciation of the students' work, and a high focus on soft skills and vocational guidance are also key aspects that contribute to young people's empowerment and enable them to be better positioned in the labour market.

On the other hand, there is a general trend for youngsters to have more self-confidence and control over their professional future, especially for final-year students and working youngsters. Women at work generally feel more “capable and competent” compared with “being an active member of society”. For men at work, this latter aspect is more dominant in the stories.

In my story I feel ...

An active member of society



Final year students
Bolivia (2017-2019-2021)

Capable / competent

In control of my life



RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

Family situation is a factor that becomes more and more important in the youngsters' stories throughout the implementation of the VIA Don Bosco programme. The influence of fathers, mothers and other family members is usually linked to positive stories, and the general trend is that youngsters point out that their family situation becomes more influential as they progress in their education. This becomes even more noticeable in the stories of working youngsters. We note that family situation is a major motivation in their studies and work. Youngsters who experience a lack of family support, however, are affected in their self-esteem and decision-making.



Thanks to our SenseMaker journey, we gained a better understanding of empowerment, and we reoriented our MEAL and programme interventions. In the sensemaking workshops, it became clear that there was a specific need to include families in the training process, and to help develop young leaders and support women's entrepreneurship. We took this into account in developing our next five-year programme.

Rosalynn Motiño, Programme Manager at the Planning and Development Office Bolivia

5. Overall lessons learned

So what did the SenseMaker journey bring us? The main achievements and lessons learned can be summarised by the following quotes that were gathered during the reflection process at the end of the programme.

"We see the world through their eyes and get an understanding of their world."

For VIA Don Bosco, it was the first time that they engaged and listened to students at this scale. SenseMaker generated a wealth of data, both narrative and statistical data. It allowed them in a tangible way to 'enter' the world and reality of the young people. SenseMaker clearly spells out how young people perceive their situation and professional future.

"Empowerment is complex and has many angles."

The richness of the multiple perspectives in the two countries led to a clear understanding that the empowerment process of young people is complex and has many angles. 'We have started to understand the concept empowerment much better through the stories of young people'. Although the SenseMaker tool provides a generic lens (the same in each country), the data generated made in the two countries clear that understanding empowerment of young people is highly contextual and different dynamics are influencing empowerment, for example: the role of the family in relation to people's perspective and labour opportunities, the distinction between young people that want to work as an employee versus a self-employed person and the importance of gender and age within the preparatory process towards the labour market. Those are aspects that will get more attention in the next programme. Although we generally saw that young people feel more empowered during their educational journey, we see a fall back when people start working. Stronger guidance will be required in the early stages of a new work experience.



"It created a space to have closeness with youngsters."

Apart from the results of SenseMaker, participating in the SenseMaker analysis impacted the programme staff and teachers to talk with students: it stimulated interesting discussions about young people's challenges in life, their views on education and dreams for their professional future. It created a space to have closeness with youngsters, going beyond the "cold approach" of writing project reports. A more personal relationship was generated through the stories, and it somehow created a safe space for students to also share less positive experiences with teachers.



"It's not only about collecting stories, but also about engaging with the patterns and narratives to drive action."

The interactions and sensemaking events stimulated concrete changes in programming in the centres at both strategic and operational level, especially in Bolivia. Some youngsters were involved from the story collection till feedback of the results and in some centers also with the formulation of action plans. Because of the continuous collection and getting very familiar with SenseMaker, we somehow created a culture of action-research. An important lesson of this SenseMaker trajectory is to make sure that people can engage easily with their own data. This is a crucial aspect to guarantee the use of the results and inspire action. The multiple patterns and possible cross-tabulations combined with hundreds of stories might be overwhelming and generate a feeling of 'where do we start?' A user-friendly and logically structure dashboard was a gamechanger in making the data accessible and being used by the programme staff and partners to the extent that some partners continue using the data for further analysis and discussions.



"We generated a rich database of stories."

This long-term SenseMaker trajectory has led to a rich databases of over 3000 stories per country. This can still be used in the future for, multiple purposes such as communication, reporting, publications, Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL), investigating specific topics and even during project interventions and learning events.

"We moved beyond anecdotal evidence."

In this trajectory, SenseMaker was used as an internal evaluation process rather than an embedded monitoring approach, but it helped VIA Don Bosco to understand the importance of qualitative data for MEAL and it allowed us to learn to work with stories and qualitative data on a larger scale, compared to the work with focus groups. It generated data that goes beyond the anecdotal. The patterns and trends that emerge from the large-scale listening exercises speak for themselves and can't be denied and act as a mirror to the programme staff.

"SenseMaker works better if it is embedded into the organisational processes."

Based on the experience and the final reflection VIA Don Bosco gained some insights with regard to capacities and organisational conditions implementing a long-term SenseMaker project.

Like many NGOs, VIA Don Bosco operates within a context of limited financial resources and faces some staff changes in the lifespan of a 5-year programme. Therefore, it is critical to guarantee continuous support from management, both at HQ and in the respective countries. This project clearly benefited from a core group of motivated people that were committed to invest in this innovative narrative approach. These was a critical factor to maintain the momentum. However, it was felt that an enhanced engagement of the programme staff and partners during the design process could have resulted in improved ownership throughout the entire process.

The SenseMaker process was organised as an internal evaluation approach but disconnected from the ongoing MEAL-processes, hence the process was not embedded in the existing rhythms of the programme. This caused challenges along the way as it required ad-hoc initiatives. More efforts could have been made to look for the integration of SenseMaker into the existing MEAL-system.

From the outset of the SenseMaker process, it is important to put equal effort and resources in the sensemaking and use stages as in the design and collection process. This goes alongside the need for a bigger investment in internal capacity on analysis and facilitating sensemaking processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER USES OF SENSEMAKER



Initiating the use of SenseMaker in other countries is best done with a light pilot project (and not a five-year engagement with three large-scale story collection cycles), in order to gradually build internal capacity, motivation and ownership.



In addition to the longitudinal use of the empowerment framework, SenseMaker can also be used to organise light topical narrative pulses to gain quick real-time insights on specific topics in the programme (school desertion, labor insertion of women, generation of youth entrepreneurship and its stability over time, ...)



'Less is more'. A lighter set of signifier questions will create a lighter SenseMaker tool allowing faster analysis and a more easy reading of the data by programme staff.



Add story listening to story collection. The story collection phase has a higher potential to be an empowering moment in itself, if organised as a well-facilitated process that allows students to share and discuss their stories among peers.



Explore the use of SenseMaker for communication, funding and reporting purposes.

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