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Playful learning as a driver of intersubjective sensemaking in management education

Anne-Ryslène Zaoual and Bénédicte Jamin

Artois University, Lille Économie Management (LEM) – UMR CNRS 9221, Arras, France

Abstract

Sensemaking constitutes a central component of managerial work and, as such, represents a key issue for management education. This study examines a playful pedagogical device implemented in a strategic management course. It draws on a qualitative analysis combining *in situ* observations, semi-structured interviews, and reflective reports. The findings show that this device stimulates intersubjective sensemaking through dynamics of self-expression, discussion of representations, and construction of shared understanding. Four complementary dimensions underpin this process: a structuring yet open framework, a close instructor–student relationship, grounding in students' representations and experiences, and mediation through playful and creative materials. These dimensions generate and sustain, to varying degrees, both surprise and ambiguity, while contributing to the establishment of a climate of trust. This tension between destabilization and reassurance appears central to students' engagement in intersubjective sensemaking within teams. This study contributes to a better understanding of the conditions under which intersubjective sensemaking emerges in a playful learning context. It also offers practical implications for instructors and higher education institutions.

Keywords: *Management learning; Intersubjective sensemaking; Intersubjectivity; Playful learning*

Handling editor: Lionel Garreau; Received: 21 December 2023; Accepted: 10 April 2026; Published: 25 June 2026

Collective action in organizations relies heavily on actors' ability to make sense of ambiguous or uncertain situations. This process, referred to as sensemaking (Weick, 1979, 1993, 1995, 2000), constitutes a central component of managerial work (Autissier & Vandangeon-Derumez, 2021; Barabel & Meier, 2022; Bibard, 2012b, 2018; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Journé & Raulet-Croset, 2008; Kieran et al., 2021). While grounded in individuals' cognition, emotions, and experiences, meaning is constructed in and through social interactions (Brown et al., 2015; Giordano, 2006; Maitlis, 2005). Intersubjective sensemaking represents one register of this interactional process. It refers to the articulation of individual subjectivities (Weick, 1993, 1995), through which meaning is negotiated and comes to be shared (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gephart et al., 2010; Tsoukas et al., 2020). This process leads individuals to continuously adjust their interpretations, opening up the possibility of renewed ways of acting. Such dynamics are particularly relevant in a context marked by growing calls to prepare managers capable of rethinking economic and social models (Calcei et al., 2022; Carton &

Valiorgue, 2023; Vandangeon-Derumez & Saives, 2022). In this respect, fostering collective sensemaking capacities has become a key challenge for higher education (Van der Hoorn & Killen, 2021).

From this perspective, playful learning¹ appears to be a particularly relevant approach for engaging students in learning situations where peer interactions play a central role (Dudézert & Chourabi Tantan, 2024; Kübler & Carmouze, 2023; Lépinard, 2022a; Maizeray, 2022). While some practices drawing on playful mechanisms, such as business games or serious games, are now well established in management education, others remain less institutionalized. This is particularly the case of *serious gaming*, which involves repurposing recreational games for educational use (Lépinard & Menier, 2023).

Building on prior research on playful learning in management education (Lépinard, 2022b, 2023; Lépinard &

¹The term *playful learning* is used in this paper to refer to what is commonly described in French as *ludopédagogie*.

*Corresponding author: Anne-Ryslène Zaoual, Email: aryslène.zaoual@univ-artois.fr

Vandangeon-Derumez, 2019), this study examines a pedagogical device implemented in a strategy course at the master's level. The course brings together students preparing for managerial roles in the health and social care sector. Adopting an abductive approach (Avenier & Thomas, 2012; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021), the study investigates the extent to which playful learning can help design learning environments that foster intersubjective sensemaking within student teams. The analysis draws on empirical material collected over 4 years (observations, exploratory interviews, and collective reflective reports) and highlights the conditions that support students' engagement in intersubjective sensemaking.

The article is structured as follows. We first present the theoretical foundations of the study, followed by the methodology and the findings. We then discuss the theoretical contributions and practical implications for instructors and, more broadly, for higher education institutions.

Theoretical background

In this section, we first introduce the concept of sensemaking, highlighting its importance in organizational life and managerial work, as well as its relevance for the education of future managers. We then present playful learning as a promising approach to fostering intersubjective sensemaking in management education.

Sensemaking as a fundamental activity in organizational life and managerial work

Organizational environments have been conceptualized through a range of theoretical perspectives that, over time, have contributed to shaping managerial practices (Bibard, 2012a; Chanlat, 2022, 2023). While classical management theory and contingency theory conceptualize the environment as an objective and external reality (Milano, 2017), perspectives inspired by symbolic interactionism view it instead as a dynamic social construction (Koenig, 2017; Maitlis, 2005; Rojot & Wacheux, 2006). Originating in sociology, this stream emphasizes that social reality is constructed through interactions and the meanings individuals assign to their own actions and those of others. Within this perspective, the environment is no longer understood as an external constraint imposed on individuals, but as the product of ongoing interpretive and interactional dynamics, which in turn contribute to its evolution (Koenig, 2003; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In organizational contexts increasingly perceived as complex and uncertain (Barabel & Meier, 2022; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Journé & Raulet-Croset, 2008), rationalist or deterministic models show their limitations in guiding managerial action (Hutchel & Molet, 1986; Lorino, 2006; Mack et al., 2016). Faced with a growing volume of information, individuals are led to simplify and interpret

reality (Koenig, 2003; Vidaillet, 2003b; Weick et al., 2005). In this context, sensemaking emerges as a central activity within organizations (Journé & Raulet-Croset, 2008; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015).

Sensemaking refers to the process through which actors construct meaning when confronted with events perceived as surprising or ambiguous (Autissier & Vandangeon-Derumez, 2021; Vandangeon-Derumez & Autissier, 2006; Weick, 1979, 1995). Although multiple definitions coexist (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), we adopt Laroche's (1996, p. 226) perspective, according to which meaning is not given but constructed through 'an active process of making something (meaning) out of something else (a situation, an event, a statement)'. When an event captures attention, a sensemaking process may be triggered (Raulet-Croset, 2024; Vidaillet, 2003a). Individuals then mobilize their cognitive frames, emotions, intuitions, and personal experiences to interpret the situation (Cornelissen, 2012; Koenig, 2017; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This interpretive work unfolds and intensifies through social interactions, contributing to reducing ambiguity and stabilizing a shared understanding (Allard-Poesi, 2003, 2005; Autissier & Vandangeon-Derumez, 2021; Koenig, 2003). Sensemaking is thus widely recognized as a fundamentally collective process, primarily enacted through conversational practices (Brown et al., 2015; Giordano, 2006; Maitlis, 2005; Vandangeon-Derumez et al., 2022). It may also be supported by material practices. Several studies show that artefacts such as operational drawings (Dietrich et al., 2018), maps, sketches, and photographs (Garreau et al., 2015), as well as prototypes (Carlile, 2002) help make individual intuitions and interpretations visible and articulate them. These artefacts thus facilitate the transition from the individual to the collective level of sensemaking (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

Collective sensemaking can be understood as unfolding across two distinct registers, in a dynamic tension between stability and transformation. Generic sensemaking involves individuals relying on existing rules or established action patterns, which helps ensure the continuity and stability of meanings (Allard-Poesi, 2005). In contrast, intersubjective sensemaking emerges in equivocal situations, when 'habitual frames of understanding no longer suffice or cannot be automatically applied', thereby undermining individuals' ability to continue acting (Vidaillet, 2003b, p. 117). In such situations, individuals are led to 'synthesize and bring together their individual thoughts, intentions, and feelings' (Allard-Poesi, 2003, p. 103), which may initially differ. Through this process, individual subjectivities evolve and are reconfigured (Vidaillet, 2003a), enabling the renewal of meaning and, more broadly, fostering innovation (Allard-Poesi, 2005). In turn, this gives rise to a joint, at times even fused, subjectivity (Wiley, 1988), also referred to as intersubjectivity (Weick, 1993, 1995).

Because sensemaking is intrinsic to organizational life and managerial work, it occupies a central place in management education. Its value in learning settings lies in several characteristics: it connects cognition and action (Vidaillet, 2003a), balances complex thinking with simple action (Colville et al., 2012), integrates subjective and objective knowledge (Schwandt, 2005), and exposes students to new experiences (Flamand et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, learning to collectively construct meaning, particularly in its intersubjective dimension, represents a major challenge in management education (Colville et al., 2016). This capability is essential not only for making sense of complex and uncertain situations, but also for legitimizing and coordinating collective action (Koenig, 2003). More fundamentally, it may directly contribute to the making of strategy (Garreau et al., 2015; Rouleau et al., 2007).

Playful learning as an approach to fostering intersubjective sensemaking in management education?

Sensemaking is mobilized across various areas of management education, including the teaching of organizational change (Vandangeon-Derumez et al., 2022), business ethics (Baïada-Hirèche et al., 2024), corporate social responsibility (Preuss et al., 2023), and project management (Van der Hoorn & Killen, 2021). The pedagogical initiatives presented in these studies often draw on experiential learning (Kayes, 2002). Among active learning approaches, playful learning, which constitutes 'an intermediate space between transmissive teaching and professional simulation' (Lépinard & Vandangeon-Derumez, 2019, p. 18), has attracted growing interest (Lavigne, 2022; Legrix-Pagès, 2024; Lépinard, 2022a).

Revisiting Caillois' theoretical contribution² (1958) helps to better understand the specificities of playful learning in higher education, even though some of these characteristics do not fully apply. In this context, playful activities are embedded in an asymmetrical pedagogical relationship, which limits their voluntary nature. They may also be considered productive, as they are oriented towards learning outcomes. By contrast, uncertainty (Brougère, 2024; Henriot, 1969) remains central in many playful learning experiences, as participants are often collectively engaged in processes of interpretation and decision-making (Weick, 1979, 1995).

Caillois' (1958) typology, structured along a continuum between *paidia* (free and improvised play) and *ludus* (rule-based play), also provides a useful framework for examining playful learning approaches. In higher education, playful learning can be seen as leaning towards *ludus*, insofar as it is associated with pedagogical objectives and, in some cases, serves to assess

knowledge and skills (Caraguel et al., 2022; Maizeray, 2022). Caillois further identifies four main forms of play: *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation and role-play), and *ilinx* (vertigo). Some of these forms are more prominently at play in playful learning, which often combines several of them. For instance, business games and certain serious games simultaneously mobilize *agôn*, through competitive dynamics between teams (Kingston, 2024; Lépinard, 2022b), and *mimicry*, by inviting participants to engage with simulated situations. A similar logic underpins role-playing experiences, which rely on *intercreativity*, understood as a process through which participants jointly construct a fictional world (David, 2014). By encouraging students to collectively imagine possible developments of a situation characterized by incompleteness (Caïra, 2024; Lépinard, 2024a), such learning experiences inherently draw on intersubjective processes. In addition, playful learning frequently involves a material dimension, which contributes to representing situations and making decisions or actions visible. This is the case, for example, with maps and tokens used in wargames (Lépinard, 2022b) and role-playing games (Caïra, 2024), as well as with LEGO® bricks (Bonneau & Bourdeau, 2019; Dann, 2018; Zenk et al., 2018) or Playmobil figures and accessories (Andres et al., 2024; Meletiadou, 2024), which are used for modelling purposes.

The literature highlights several objectives associated with the use of playful learning in management education. It is notably seen as a means of enhancing student engagement, particularly by eliciting positive emotions (Maizeray, 2022). It also introduces a form of decontextualization that can foster a sense of letting go and some demystification of knowledge (Lépinard, 2022b). Furthermore, it is mobilized to support the development of both technical and transversal skills (Caraguel et al., 2022; Lépinard, 2024b). Overall, these approaches primarily emphasize the effects of play in terms of engagement and skill development. By contrast, the interactional dynamics of intersubjective sensemaking in playful learning experiences remain relatively underexplored.

Methodology

The section dedicated to the methodological approach is structured into two parts. The first provides a detailed description of the pedagogical device, specifying the target audience, the objectives pursued, and the changes it has undergone since its initial implementation. The second outlines the data sources used and how they were processed and analysed.

Description of the pedagogical device

The pedagogical experience analysed in this article was implemented by one of the authors as part of a 15-h strategic

² He defines play as a free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, rule-governed, and fictional activity.

Table 1. Structure of the pedagogical device

Phase	Activity	Objective	Procedure	Playful and creative material	Duration (h)	Deliverable
(1) Exploration	1	Establishing relationships within teams	Individual and free selection of cards	Songes game (illustrated cards only)	4	n/a
	2	Expressing individual representations of strategy and building an initial shared understanding	Ranking cards based on how strongly they evoke strategy (individual, then collaborative)	Songes game (four identical illustrated cards assigned to all teams + numbered cards)		
(2) Prototyping	1	Identifying key stakeholders and understanding their needs in relation to organizational strategy	Selection and articulation of cards	Jeu des besoins (a needs-based card game)	4	n/a
	2	Designing an ideal approach to strategy-making	Collaborative creation of a shared 3D model	Playmobil Pro modelling kit		
(3) Formalization	1	Consolidating and formalizing an ideal approach to strategy-making	Collaborative drafting of a charter based on the prototype	n/a	3	Charter
(4) Reflexivity	1	Producing a narrative of the work carried out and engaging in reflective analysis	Collaborative writing of a reflective report	n/a	4	Reflective report ^a

Source: Own elaboration.

^aDuring the first year of implementation, teams were primarily asked to describe their prototype. From 2021 to 2022 onwards, the reduction in course hours led to a shift in this assignment towards a more reflective format, aimed at deepening the debriefing sessions conducted in class. In addition to presenting the work carried out, teams now respond to a series of questions that invite them to reflect on the learning experience.

management course bringing together students from two groups within a master's programme in management for the health and social care sector. The first group consists of students in initial education enrolled on a work-study basis in a variety of organizations, such as nursing homes, centres supporting children with disabilities, and residential care facilities. The second group consists of continuing education students enrolled in a Health Management Training Institute (Institut de formation des cadres de santé, IFCS). These students generally have several years of professional experience in healthcare organizations, and some have already taken on managerial responsibilities (Divay, 2018). As part of their IFCS training programme, these students are required to attend a few university courses, including the strategic management module.

In this configuration, where the two groups meet only periodically at the university, a noticeable divide can be observed, as participants rarely mix spontaneously. This distance, both generational and professional, is reflected in the following student account: 'healthcare managers, including myself, are mostly people with field experience [...] of a certain age, while in the [other] [...] cohort, we encountered younger students who were just starting their professional lives. So that probably created an invisible barrier between us ...' (E4 – 2019–2020)³

³ Each interview is identified by a code (e.g. E1, E2, etc.), which corresponds to the numbering used in Table 2.

During the initial years, the course relied in part on a teaching case centred on a hospital setting. This choice facilitated identification for students training as healthcare managers, but made it more difficult for others to appropriate the case. This observation led to the design of a pedagogical device aimed at leveraging the complementarity of student profiles: on the one hand, students returning to education with significant professional experience; on the other, students in initial education who are more accustomed to mobilizing conceptual tools. The objective was to encourage students to identify issues that transcend the organizational configurations in which they operate, through a cross-reflective approach to the making of strategy. The device thus seeks to create conditions conducive to dialogue between knowledge, skills, and experiences, beyond perceived differences in background. First implemented in the 2019–2020 academic year, it has undergone successive adjustments (see Appendix 1). Table 1 provides a synthetic overview of its structure, with a more detailed description available in Appendix 2. Over the 4 years covered by our analysis, 157 students, organized into 21 mixed teams, took part in this pedagogical experience.

The pedagogical device draws on a set of playful and creative materials, primarily used during the exploration and prototyping phases. The formalization and reflexivity phases extend the collaborative work by leading to the production of

a charter outlining the ideal approach to strategy-making and a reflective report, both of which are subject to assessment.

Data collection and analysis

This research adopts an approach centred on students' lived experiences. It draws primarily on exploratory interviews conducted during the first year of implementation (see Table 2) and on reflective reports, all collected and analysed in French.

Leading sessions in which up to seven teams could work simultaneously, the instructor was not in a position to implement a formal observation protocol. Her attention was primarily focused on introducing activities, managing time, and responding to numerous student requests. However, by circulating among the teams and engaging with them regularly, she was able to capture *in situ* cues of participants' experiences, including verbal exchanges, facial expressions, and body language. Particular attention was paid to how students

interacted and engaged with the materials. Directly embedded in the pedagogical relationship, these observations reflect a situated and engaged approach, shaped by the shared experience of the instructor and the students (Bardon et al., 2020). In addition, numerous photographs were taken over the years during each activity, by both the instructor and the students. Table 3 summarizes the materials used in this study, specifying their nature, characteristics, and purpose.

Analysing one's own teaching practice entails a reflexive effort that is rarely accessible in the moment. Reflexivity is more likely to emerge *a posteriori*, as one confronts one's account of the experience with others' interpretations (Chartouny, 2024). Pedagogical experiences can thus become research objects shaped through exchanges with peers (Calcei et al., 2022). This perspective underpins the present study, which brings together the instructor who designed the device and a colleague from the same faculty, with whom she has collaborated for several years on issues related to innovations

Table 2. Individual exploratory interviews

Interview	Gender	Age	Program	Date	Duration (min)
E1	M	35	Second-year master's student preparing for management roles in health and social care organizations (initial education)	30 June 2020	48
E2	F	23	Second-year master's student preparing for management roles in health and social care organizations (initial education)	7 July 2020	50
E3	M	44	Student in a 1-year professional healthcare management training programme leading to a master's degree (continuing education)	9 July 2020	53
E4	F	41	Student in a 1-year professional healthcare management training programme leading to a master's degree (continuing education)	27 November 2020	51

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Materials used in the study

Nature	Description	Purpose
Exploratory interviews	Conducted after the first implementation of the pedagogical device (4 interviews, 202 min, 34 pages).	Explore perceptions by collecting individual accounts of the learning experience.
Reflective reports	Produced collaboratively by student teams (21 reports, 259 pages).	Understand teams' collective experience and the perceived effects of the pedagogical device through collaborative narratives combining description, justification, and reflective analysis. All 21 reports were examined; 19 are used for illustrative purposes in the results and in Appendices 3–5.
Observations	Based on informal in-class observation by the instructor, drawing on free-floating attention and ongoing interactions with students.	Capture, in real time, cues of students' experience in its emotional and relational dimensions.
Photographs	More than 150 photographs taken by both the instructor and the students, with the students being asked to document their process and their prototype as part of their reflective report.	Document the learning activities; the photographs were not subject to coding, but some were used for illustrative purposes in Appendices 1 and 6, to support the presentation of the pedagogical device and the results.

Source: Own elaboration.

in teaching and learning. The latter's external perspective, detached from both the design and implementation of the device, facilitated critical distance and a reflexive re-examination of the experience (Evered & Louis, 1981; Louis & Bartunek, 1992). Conducted within an abductive framework (Avenier & Thomas, 2012; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021), the content analysis (Bardin, 2013; Blanc et al., 2014) combines chronological and thematic coding of the interviews and reflective reports. The coding focused on the teaching sequences that involve playful learning activities. Chronological coding traced the different stages of the pedagogical experience following the progression of activities, while thematic coding, more transversal in nature, examined the conditions supporting intersubjective sensemaking within the teams.

Findings

The presentation of our findings is structured in two stages. First, we examine the exploration and prototyping sequences, which fall within the scope of playful learning, by analysing the activities they comprise and how they progressively engage students in intersubjective sensemaking. We then identify the transversal characteristics of the pedagogical device that foster intersubjective sensemaking. Our analysis is illustrated with excerpts from individual interviews [E] and from the reflective reports [RR],⁴ translated into English.

From introspection to co-construction

First steps towards intersubjective sensemaking

The exploration sequence consists of two activities based on *Songes*, a game designed to encourage personal expression and the sharing of perspectives.

During the first activity, team members express themselves using three illustrated cards of their choice. No specific theme is imposed. This absence of framing is intended to suspend immediate engagement with disciplinary content and allow for an initial form of expression not yet shaped by forthcoming concepts. This open-ended selection, which may initially be unsettling, enables students to engage with the activity on their own terms: 'An opportunity for each participant to introduce themselves and share a part of who they are, depending on what they wished to disclose' (RR3 – 2022–2023). These initial interactions foster mutual discovery and the identification of shared values: 'Despite our different backgrounds, we shared common values and principles' (RR3 – 2023–2024). Although students are accustomed to group work, they highlight the unusual nature of this activity: 'it was the first [group work]

where time was specifically devoted to "breaking the ice". Everyone had the opportunity to get to know one another, which facilitated participation from all' (RR3 – 2022–2023).

The second activity engages students in reflecting on strategy through an individual and then collective ranking of four images from the same game. Interpretations are shared, enriched, and progressively evolve towards an initial shared perspective: 'Sharing each other's representations generated new and original ideas, thus fostering a common understanding' (RR3 – 2023–2024). Discussions about the rankings reveal that many students, particularly those in continuing education, tend to reason at the level of their team or work unit and struggle to situate themselves at the organizational level. This difficulty highlights one of the key challenges of the strategic management course: moving beyond a perspective rooted in day-to-day management in order to initiate a shift in scale. The debriefing of this activity thus serves as a lever to support this shift in perspective, leading students to view strategy as a set of choices shaping the future of an organization.

The analysis of this first sequence highlights several dynamics that contribute to an initial experience of intersubjective sensemaking among students. These dynamics, which unfold and intensify through ongoing interactions, support the emergence of a climate of trust. Students thus refer to the creation of 'an environment of attentive listening [...], which enabled those who initially felt some apprehension to connect with others and fostered a sense of fairness and benevolence across the group' (RR2 – 2022–2023). The first dynamic, centred on self-expression, does not yet constitute intersubjectivity *per se*, but establishes the relational foundations necessary for it to emerge. The second dynamic, based on the discussion of representations, makes visible the plurality of interpretations and opens the possibility for students to reconsider and adjust their own perspectives. Finally, the third dynamic, focused on the articulation and integration of individual interpretations, leads students to construct an initial shared understanding. Appendix 3 illustrates these three dynamics through excerpts drawn from the reflective reports.

Deepening intersubjective sensemaking through 3D modelling

In the prototyping sequence, teams are invited to deepen their reflection by developing an ideal approach to strategy-making. The work begins with an activity in which the *Jeu des besoins* is used to identify the main stakeholders in the health and social care sector, along with the issues associated with them. These interactions reactivate the dynamics of individual expression, discussion of representations, and construction of a shared perspective, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

⁴ For the reflective reports, we indicate the team number followed by the corresponding year (e.g. RR3, 2022–2023). The excerpts were selected for their illustrative value.

We each selected a few [cards], presented them to the rest of the group [...] [and] realized that groups of cards were starting to form, so we organized them by theme. This led to an exchange of ideas based on each person's representations, from which a shared vision of the key components of our strategy emerged. (RR2 – 2022–2023)

This work confronts students with the difficulty of agreeing on the meaning of the different components of their ideal approach to strategy-making, as illustrated in the following account: 'We had to be very creative to express abstract concepts such as "steering" or "training". Symbolism was our guiding principle, as we played with homonyms and wordplay. This was not an easy task when our representations and associations were not entirely aligned!' (RR2 – 2023–2024). Prototyping, supported by modelling kits, extends and intensifies the dynamics initiated in the previous activities. This second activity engages students on both relational and cognitive levels. On the one hand, it strengthens interpersonal ties by fostering further exchanges around representations, values, and experiences. On the other hand, it provides new opportunities for students to refine and enrich their interpretations by deepening the exchange of perspectives: 'We all expressed our ideas, then listened to others and were able to step back from our initial point of view' (RR3 – 2022–2023). By crystallizing each team's shared perspective, the prototypes also enable students to project themselves into the implications of their ideal approach to strategy-making, as suggested by the following testimony: 'Modelling different situations brings out a shared understanding of strategy and illustrates the positive impact this concept can have on an organization's culture' (RR4 – 2022–2023).

Overall, the prototyping sequence deepens intersubjective sensemaking by immersing students in a more complex collective elaboration (see Appendix 4). In particular, it requires students to engage in processes of abstraction, connection, and articulation between the different components of an ideal approach to strategy-making.

Characteristics of the pedagogical device fostering intersubjective sensemaking

While the previous section analysed how the activities in the first two sequences progressively lead students to construct a shared perspective on strategy, this section highlights the transversal characteristics of the pedagogical device that make this intersubjective sensemaking possible. Additional excerpts from reflective reports and interviews illustrating each of these characteristics are provided in Appendix 5.

Structuring yet open framework

The pedagogical device consists of a series of activities designed to engage students in exploring how strategy can be conceived

and implemented in health and social care organizations. These activities follow a pedagogical progression, involving intermediate or final outputs. Several teams thus describe a balance between structure and flexibility, as illustrated by the following excerpt: 'The establishment of a clear direction helped guide our thinking, offering a clear structure while leaving room for creativity' (RR4 – 2023–2024). The instructions are deliberately open-ended, for example when students are invited to prototype an ideal approach to strategy-making without any pre-defined form or specific components. Such instructions allow for diverse interpretations: some teams adopt a processual view of strategy, while others place greater emphasis on its purposes or on stakeholders' needs and challenges. Although this openness may initially be perceived as disorienting, it can gradually foster collective engagement, as explained by one team: 'despite the broad instructions at the outset, which could be unsettling, we quickly realized that this freedom allowed us to develop [...] genuine collective intelligence' (RR1 – 2022–2023). Thus, the pedagogical device is based neither on strict structuring nor on unbounded freedom, but on the articulation of both. From the students' perspective, this tension between structure and openness results in an experience that is both reassuring, because the process is perceived as clearly structured, and destabilizing, due to the ambiguity of the instructions. It is precisely this tension that contributes to engaging teams in intersubjective sensemaking.

Close instructor – student relationship

The instructor stays actively engaged with the teams throughout the activities: '[she] moved around the room and remained accessible at all times, despite the large number of students' (RR2 – 2021–2022). This proximity enables her to monitor the teams' progress and quickly identify obstacles, whether related to misunderstandings of the instructions or difficulties in appropriating the materials. According to the students, this accessibility facilitates exchanges and fosters a more egalitarian and collaborative pedagogical relationship: 'The instructor's support was different. [...] [She] positions herself at our level, [...] moves forward with us, and helps us reflect' (RR1 – 2023–2024). While these interventions generally help clarify objectives, they may also, when they challenge certain choices, temporarily disrupt students' sensemaking and slow their momentum. Some teams then require time, or even a further exchange with the instructor, to regain direction. These moments of uncertainty provide opportunities to revisit the ongoing work and to recognize that doubt, and the discomfort it may generate, are inherent to the construction of meaning. Described as a 'resource person who supports the development of collective ideas' (RR4 – 2022–2023), the instructor, through a stance akin to coaching, thus contributes to creating a climate conducive to intersubjective sensemaking.

Grounding in students' representations and experiences

The pedagogical device builds on students' representations and experiences. From the very first sequence, they are invited to draw on their perceptions of strategy as a starting point for collective work. As noted earlier, this activation of representations also reveals certain limitations or blind spots in their understanding of strategy. Beyond this revealing effect, such grounding fosters the discussion of perspectives. Collaborative work, supported by the instructor's interventions, gradually enables students to connect lived situations with theoretical concepts: 'We made many connections thanks to your guidance, linking our own practices across our different organizations' (E4 – 2019–2020). Students also highlight the empowering nature of this approach and its role in group dynamics: 'We relied on our personal knowledge, both theoretical and professional, to achieve this outcome. We felt valued because this work was co-constructed by the entire team, and everyone was able to contribute through their experience and their perceptions' (RR1 – 2022–2023). In this way, the grounding of the pedagogical device in individual representations and experiences supports a process of collective elaboration within which students articulate fragments of professional realities.

Mediation through playful and creative materials

At first, these materials, perceived as unusual, surprise students and may even unsettle them. They elicit mixed reactions, combining curiosity, amusement, and scepticism: 'We had never used games as a working medium. Some of us quickly got into it, while for others it was a bit more difficult at first ...' (RR6 – 2022–2023). As the activities unfold, teams gradually appropriate these materials, as students realize that they facilitate both the expression of ideas and listening. In particular, they help make subjectivities visible by revealing the diversity of individual representations: 'The result was surprising: we did not all share the same definition of perfection! [...] This seemingly simple exercise highlighted each person's aspirations and goals' (RR3 – 2021–2022). Working with these materials also facilitates the articulation of different perspectives and the construction of shared meanings: 'We didn't always agree [...], but we always managed to bring ideas together: [...], it's very easy to merge them and create a structure that lies somewhere in between' (E2 – 2019–2020). This process is also accompanied by a form of symbolization, which introduces a degree of distancing and supports a move towards greater abstraction, particularly through the use of metaphors.

Beyond their role in facilitating interactions, these materials also help make visible the actors, resources, and constraints that teams associate with strategy-making. The way these

elements are arranged within the prototypes reveals how teams structure their ideal approach to strategy-making (see Appendix 6). For instance, adhesive tapes are sometimes used to delineate areas corresponding to different spaces, issues, or stages of the process. Strings or other accessories are also used to connect certain elements of the prototypes. Figures, cards, and accessories are frequently combined to materialize situations, interactions, or trajectories. These configurations make the interdependencies between the different dimensions of strategy more perceptible.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the dynamics at play within a playful learning experience implemented in a strategic management course. The analysis highlights the role this pedagogical device plays in fostering intersubjective sensemaking. We present below the theoretical and practical contributions that stem from these findings.

Theoretical contributions

Playful learning, which is increasingly being adopted in management education curricula (Baruel Bencherqui et al., 2018; Jääskä et al., 2022; Lépinard, 2022a, 2023; Loon et al., 2015; López et al., 2021), encompasses a wide range of teaching practices. Our study suggests that certain collaborative playful activities can foster intersubjective sensemaking, thereby extending recent work on sensemaking within management education (Baïada-Hirèche et al., 2024; Preuss et al., 2023; Van der Hoorn & Killen, 2021; Vandangeon-Derumez et al., 2022). More specifically, collaborative playful activities may help learners come to view strategy as a collective construct (Rouleau et al., 2007), one that is fundamentally intersubjective. They thus offer students the opportunity to experience certain modalities of strategy-making by engaging them in processes of discussion, negotiation, arbitration, and formalization. In a context marked by growing attention to the participatory dimensions of strategy (Birkinshaw, 2017), this approach resonates with recent reflections on strategy teaching.⁵ It invites us to consider strategy courses not only as spaces for the transmission of models and tools, but also as spaces where students can grasp the interactional dynamics of strategy-making.

More broadly, our findings indicate that intersubjective sensemaking in playful learning contexts emerges through interactional dynamics that intertwine and reinforce each other (see Figure 1). These dynamics are grounded in self-expression,

⁵ In the French academic context, initiatives led within the Association internationale de management stratégique (AIMS), such as the MACCA thematic group and, more recently, the creation of a Pedagogy Standing Committee, reflect a commitment to supporting reflection and action in pedagogical innovation in the teaching of strategy.

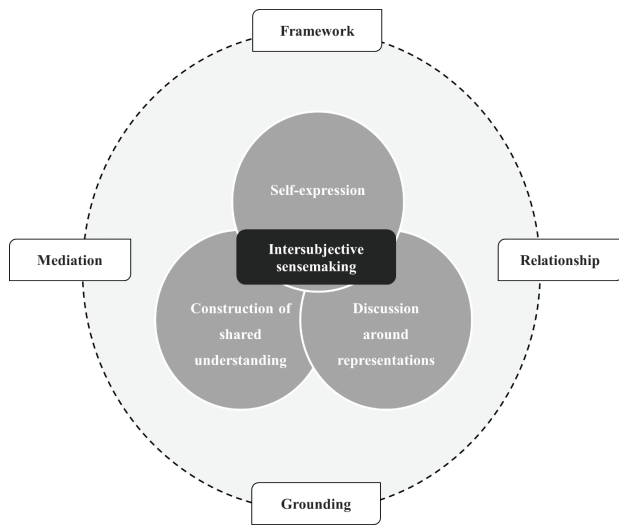


Figure 1. Conditions and dynamics of intersubjective sensemaking in playful learning context. Source: Own elaboration.

discussion of representations, and construction of a shared perspective. Four complementary dimensions, identified in our model, underpin this process: a structuring yet open pedagogical framework, a close instructor–student relationship, grounding in students’ representations and experiences, and mediation through playful and creative materials. These dimensions jointly contribute to shaping a pedagogical environment that is both destabilizing and reassuring (Jamin & Zaoual, 2022). They generate and sustain, to varying degrees, surprise and ambiguity, while also fostering a climate of trust. This tension between destabilization and reassurance appears to be a key driver of the exploration, confrontation, and evolution of representations. From this perspective, these dimensions can be interpreted as a form of presence (of the framework, the instructor, the students, and the objects) that shapes learners’ engagement in intersubjective sensemaking.

These findings invite a closer examination of each of the identified dimensions. The structuring yet open framework allows for a form of incompleteness that resonates with Lépinard’s (2024a) analyses, whereby certain playful learning activities foster students’ autonomy and agency. This incompleteness, which may be experienced by them as a form of ambiguity in interpreting instructions and expectations, nevertheless constitutes a source of creative latitude, provided that they are able to overcome it. The close instructor–student relationship translates into a plurality of roles assumed by the instructor. As both architect of the pedagogical device and facilitator of the learning process (Fatien & Lauzon, 2024), he is often led to adopt a stance akin to coaching (Maizeray, 2022; Papageorgiou & Kokshagina, 2022). Grounding in students’ representations and experiences helps bridge theory and practice

by making concepts more meaningful and more readily relatable. It also values experiences of self and others, as well as subjectivity (Bartunek & Ren, 2022; Chanlat, 2022; Journé et al., 2012; Vidaillet & Vignon, 2010). Students thus position themselves more as contributors to collective learning. This shift in the pedagogical centre of gravity, from the instructor to the students, however, entails greater self-exposure, which may give rise to a sense of vulnerability. While it is recognized as an important component of managerial learning (Corlett et al., 2019; Hibbert et al., 2022; Jackson, 2018), the expression of vulnerability requires a safe environment to mitigate the discomfort it may cause (Corlett et al., 2021). This condition is also critical in educational contexts. In this respect, mediation through playful materials appears particularly relevant for facilitating expression and supporting respectful interactions (Taylor & Statler, 2014). By fostering symbolic thinking and metaphorical associations (McCusker & Swan, 2018), such objects can help articulate individual perspectives and give rise to shared meanings (Dann, 2018; Martineau et al., 2022; Peabody & Turesky, 2018; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

Practical contributions

Our practical contributions are primarily directed at instructors as well as higher education institutions.

Implications for instructors

As part of experiential approaches, playful learning can enhance students’ engagement across management disciplines. It contributes to making academic subjects more accessible, while supporting intersubjective sensemaking through classroom interactions. Instructors can thus draw on playful materials to foster the exchange of views and the construction of shared perspectives. However, the implementation of playful learning strategies is not without constraints. Instructors often face challenges related to cohort size, particularly when activities rely on materials. Like other active learning approaches, playful learning requires instructors to engage physically, cognitively, and emotionally, both in preparation and in the classroom. The instructor’s stance, akin to coaching, can thus be structured around four complementary modes of action (see Table 4).

Finally, engaging students in a reflective process following a playful learning experience can enhance their awareness of evolving knowledge and skills, while fostering more explicit connections between theory and practice (Lépinard, 2022b). This reflexivity can take various forms: a debriefing facilitated by the instructor (Lépinard, 2024a; Sanchez, 2023), or the production of deliverables in which students recount their emotions, the difficulties encountered, and the strategies adopted.

Table 4. Four modes of action in playful learning instruction

	Practical implications
Frame	Design playful learning activities with clear objectives and instructions, while leaving room for students' interpretation and initiative.
Connect	Foster a relationship of trust that supports collaboration by building connections with students and encouraging peer interaction.
Engage	Foster engagement and a sense of collective momentum by encouraging exploration and initiative.
Unlock	Help students overcome obstacles without acting on their behalf, by identifying points where they get stuck and offering appropriate support.

Source: Own elaboration.

Implications for higher education institutions

Although playful learning is gaining traction in French higher education,⁶ as reflected in the growing number of educational initiatives, conferences, and research projects, its institutional recognition remains uneven (Legrix-Pagès, 2024). Its integration into teaching practices often requires pedagogical acculturation on the part of instructors. In this respect, mandatory pedagogical training for newly appointed lecturers provides a promising avenue. Administrative staff, particularly those working in student guidance and career services, may also benefit from greater familiarity with playful learning. Training sessions and workshops for sharing experiences can facilitate the dissemination of playful practices and tools. Regular ideation sessions, in which instructors can test games and playful materials and reflect on their potential teaching uses, can offer a space for experimentation, exchange, and collaboration. These initiatives, often supported by institutions' teaching and learning centres, highlight the role of such dedicated services in supporting instructors' professional development.

Beyond these initiatives, institutions can also leverage a range of resources to support the development of playful learning. For instance, some academic libraries have already developed game lending services, while facilities such as fablabs (fabrication laboratories) and campus printing services can provide instructors with the means to design and produce playful learning artefacts. These spaces can also support student-led game development projects, in which game design becomes a learning experience in its own right. Taken together, these examples highlight the importance of connecting and coordinating the various services already present within institutions to foster an ecosystem conducive to playful learning.

Conclusion

Building on the analysis of a playful learning experience implemented in a strategic management course, this study sheds light on the conditions that foster intersubjective sensemaking. From a practical perspective, it offers avenues for instructors

⁶ Grounded in the French higher education context, these implications may resonate differently in contexts where playful learning is more widely established.

seeking to design and facilitate playful learning activities, and for institutions aiming to support their adoption and implementation.

Our study is not without limitations. Because it focuses on collaborative activities, its findings may not extend to other forms of playful learning, such as competitive or individual activities. Furthermore, while the pedagogical device analysed proved particularly relevant for a mixed cohort of master's students, its transferability to other profiles remains uncertain. Younger students, with less professional experience, may find it more challenging to engage with an approach that combines introspection and self-exposure.

At the same time, this study opens up promising avenues for future research. A first avenue would be to explore intersubjective sensemaking in collaborative digital environments such as Minecraft Education or Luanti, where interactions take place remotely. Examining the potential blind spots and pitfalls of intersubjectivity in educational contexts could be another avenue. Further research is also needed to deepen our understanding of how playful learning can contribute to more embodied and meaningful management education. In this regard, future studies could seek to clarify which playful practices can be mobilized depending on the targeted skills. More broadly, this research illustrates how the interface between the different dimensions of academic work can be actively engaged as a space for reflexivity and synergy, through an ongoing dialogue between teaching practice and scientific research (Calcei et al., 2022; Poteaux, 2013).

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Appendices

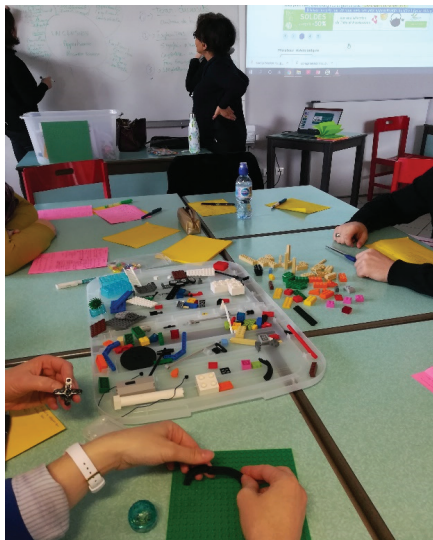
Appendix I. Evolution of the pedagogical device

The pedagogical device was progressively adjusted in response to the constraints encountered (reduced teaching hours, increasing student numbers, and short session duration). The appendix traces this trajectory by presenting, for each academic year, the methods and tools mobilized, along with a brief description and photographs taken during the sessions.

Academic year	Number of students	Number of teams	LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY®	Songes game	Jeu des besoins	Playmobil Pro
2019–2020	33	3	×			
2020–2021	Pedagogical device suspended (module delivered remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic)					
2021–2022	36	5	×	×		
2022–2023	49	7		×	×	×
2023–2024	39	6		×	×	×
Total	157	21	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: Own elaboration.

The LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® method, for which the module instructor is certified, was used during the first 2 years. Developed in the 1990s, this method is used to solve complex problems and support decision-making in organizations (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014; Roos & Victor, 2018). It involves presenting participants with a series of construction challenges, during which they use the materials (bricks, accessories and minifigures) to develop metaphorical models related to the topic explored.



At the table, students explore the materials, while other team members begin to develop ideas on the whiteboard (academic year 2019–2020).



Built by a team using LEGO® bricks, this shared model* represents an ideal approach to strategy-making (academic year 2021–2022).

Note: *The *shared model* constitutes one of the possible collective outputs at the end of a LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® session. It is developed from the individual models previously built by the participants in response to a given prompt. Each participant is then invited to identify, within their own model, the element they consider most central. From these elements, the group co-constructs a collective model that integrates a meaningful contribution from each participant. The shared model is neither a juxtaposition nor an exhaustive aggregation of individual models. Rather, it is based on a process of articulating selected elements into a common narrative. This type of output is often used in shared vision-building sessions, where the aim is to foster a collective understanding of an issue.

Source: photographs taken by the students.

In 2021–2022, Songes is introduced to facilitate initial interactions within the teams. This game is 'designed to foster connections and develop empathy [by eliciting] reflections and discussions related to perception, interpretation, and emotion' based on illustrated cards that generate 'a wide range of interpretations and rich discussions'. (Source: Format ludique website, our translation)

Activity 1



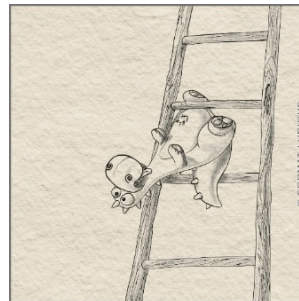
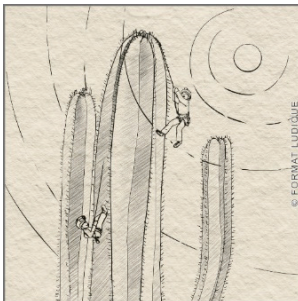
The students explore the cards before making their selection. This phase introduces a three-step process (choose, explain, appreciate) aimed at fostering connections within the teams (academic year 2021–2022).



Each student presents the three selected cards to the rest of their team (academic year 2023–2024).

Source: photographs taken by the instructor:

Activity 2



Shown above are the four cards selected by the instructor to explore students' initial representations of strategy.

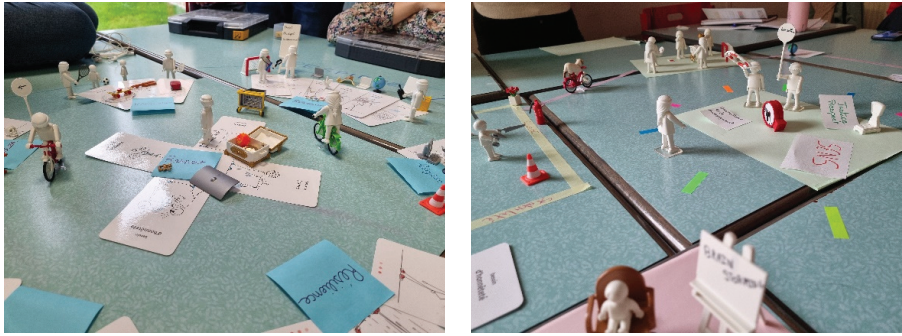


Students first rank the cards individually, then agree on a collective ranking. This activity encourages the exchange of ideas, the negotiation of meaning, and the development of an initial shared understanding (academic year 2021–2022).

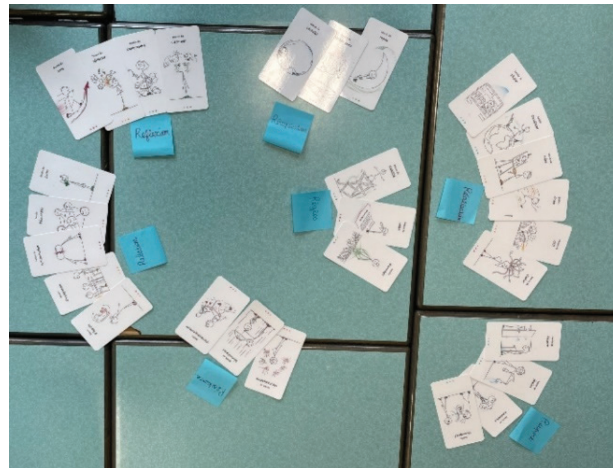
Source: photograph taken by the students.

From the 2022–2023 academic year onwards, the increase in student numbers made it difficult to run a LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® workshop, which involves time-intensive progressive challenges and ideally one facilitator per team. LEGO® bricks were therefore replaced by Playmobil Pro modelling kits, which also enable the visual representation of ideas and support collaborative problem-solving. These materials proved easier to implement in 4-h sessions led by a single facilitator.

In the same year, we introduced Jeu des besoins to engage the students in an approach inspired design thinking principles, which emphasize empathy and collaboration in addressing complex issues. This game consists of a set of cards representing fundamental needs, with illustrations and keywords.



Prototypes of an ideal approach to strategy-making, collectively built by students (academic year 2022–2023).



On the tables, the students lay out the cards they selected after collectively discussing the needs of stakeholders in a health and social care organization in relation to its strategy (academic year 2022–2023).

Source: Photographs taken by the instructor and the students.

Appendix 2. Description of the teaching sequences

Sequence 1 – exploration

Duration: 4 h

Playful and creative materials: a box of the Songes game is provided to each team

Activity 1 **Pedagogical objective:** establishing relationships within teams

Pedagogical outline:

1. **choose:** each student selects three cards (no theme is imposed; the choice is personal and made without discussion);
2. **explain:** in turn, students explain to the others why they chose these cards;
3. **appreciate:** each participant provides positive feedback to each team member; explaining what they found meaningful in their choice of cards.

Activity 2 **Pedagogical objective:** expressing individual representations of strategy and building an initial shared understanding

Pedagogical outline:

1. **rank:** each student individually ranks four cards (selected by the instructor and identical for all), placing first the card that best represents strategy and last the one that represents it least. Each student then presents their ranking;
2. **converge:** each team develops a collective ranking of the four cards, according to the modalities of its choice;
3. **share:** each team presents its ranking to the others.

Debriefing – Putting into perspective the fundamentals of strategic management (level of analysis and object of strategy)

Sequence 2 – prototyping

Duration: 4 h

Playful and creative materials: each team is provided with a copy of Jeu des besoins and a Playmobil Pro modelling kit; due to the cost of the kits, sharing of the materials is sometimes necessary when the number of teams is high

Activity 1 **Pedagogical objective:** developing the ability to identify the stakeholders in the health and social care sector affected by organizational strategy and to understand their needs in relation to it

Pedagogical outline: teams identify stakeholders, then select from the Jeu des besoins cards those they consider most relevant for strategy-making

Activity 2 **Pedagogical objective:** developing the ability to build a shared vision of organizational strategy

Pedagogical outline: drawing on the needs identified in the previous activity, teams model their ideal approach to strategy-making using a Playmobil Pro kit

Sequence 3 – formalization

Duration: 3 h

Activity 1 **Pedagogical objective:** developing the ability to consolidate and formalize a shared vision of organizational strategy

Pedagogical outline: building on their prototype, teams develop a charter presenting the main elements of their ideal approach to strategy-making

Sequence 4 – reflexivity

Duration: 4 h

Activity 1 **Pedagogical objective:** developing the ability to produce a narrative of the work carried out and to engage in reflective analysis

Pedagogical outline: teams produce a reflective report structured around two dimensions: (1) an account of the different learning activities and outputs, with a particular emphasis on the prototype and its meanings, supported by photographs, as well as a presentation of the charter and its development; (2) an analysis of the learning experience, based on a series of questions.

1. What surprised you during this course?
2. What did you appreciate?
3. What did you appreciate less?
4. Is the work you produced in this course different from what you usually produce in other courses? If so, why?
5. Do you feel that you have developed skills? If so, which ones?
6. Does this pedagogical approach change the relationship with the instructor?
7. Would you consider reusing these methods in a professional context? Why?
8. What role and qualities of a manager seem essential to you in relation to strategy?

Source: Own elaboration.

This pedagogical device is delivered entirely in person, with no preparatory work required from students. The latter are organized into teams of 5 to 8, and all deliverables are produced during the sessions. Sessions may take place in one or several rooms, depending on availability constraints, with configurations varying from year to year and across the different sequences of the pedagogical device. Grouping teams facilitates the communication of instructions and support, while dispersing them helps limit noise and provides more comfortable working conditions, particularly during the production of final deliverables.

Appendix 3. Illustrative excerpts of intersubjective sensemaking dynamics in Sequence I

Activity I

Self-expression

'The "Songes" game facilitated this moment of connection. Each of us, in turn, chose cards without specific instructions. We noticed that the cards naturally reflected our everyday concerns: stress related to the end of our studies, the master's dissertation, and the difficult balance between student, professional and personal life . . . While this sharing of personal experiences enabled us to develop empathy towards other members of the group, it also allowed us to get to know one another'. (RR3 – 2021–2022)

'During the first class, we had the opportunity to get to know each other through an icebreaker [. . .]. Each member of the group quickly found their place, as everyone had equal speaking time and was listened to equally. This allowed us to begin the group work in a positive way'. (RR2 – 2022–2023)

'This initial contact allowed us to listen carefully to one another and to give ourselves sufficient time and space to express ourselves, each in turn. We created a climate of trust that played an important role in the successful completion of our collective work'. (RR5 – 2022–2023)

'The first session aimed to get to know the personalities of each member of our team. [. . .] That day, two people were absent from the group (planned and excused absences), but this did not prevent us from getting to know each other. [. . .] During this session, each of us chose three illustrated cards reflecting our personality and shared with our peers what they evoked for us. Then, each person had to choose one of the images presented by their peers whose explanation had particularly interested them'. (RR6 – 2022–2023)

'The first activity, called an "icebreaker", consisted of getting to know one another through a card game using images. Once the images were laid out on the table, we had to choose three that resonated with us, in connection with our state of mind that day. We then had to explain to the whole group why we had chosen these images and what they evoked for us. After that, in turn, we selected from our peers' images the one that resonated with us the most and justified our choice. This first activity allowed us to initiate contact with the different members of the group [. . .]'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

'First, in randomly formed groups, a workshop was conducted using the Songes card game to explore individual representations. This game involved each person selecting three cards that resonated most with them and then explaining their choice. This workshop made it possible to "break the ice" among group members and, for some of us, to get to know each other. [. . .] This first workshop provided a basis for helping us work together on building a prototype for implementing an ideal strategy'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

'This first step encouraged individual expression. [. . .] Each member of the group expressed themselves, even those who were less confident speaking up. [. . .] A positive dynamic developed within the group, combining trust and harmony. [. . .] We noted the importance of the icebreaker activity in the first session as highly conducive to creating this bond and the resulting harmony. Indeed, it is an activity that encourages personal sharing, making it an approach grounded in our lived experience. A climate of benevolence was thus established from the outset, and we all felt confident in showing spontaneity and authenticity during this activity'. (RR3 – 2023–2024)

Discussion of representations

'We were able to begin the very first group session with a photo-language exercise, which enabled us to create bonds and to contrast our different points of view'. (RR3 – 2022–2023)

'Through the cards chosen, we observed that each person had a different interpretation of the same card. This game had a twofold effect: on the one hand, it opened us up to others, and on the other, it created a bond between us'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

Building an initial shared understanding

Not applicable

Source: Reflective reports.

Activity 2

Self-expression

'These pedagogical methods help to increase interaction between participants. Indeed, they make it possible to develop knowledge of others through the selection of picture cards representing what strategy means to us'. (RR3 – 2022–2023)

'Once again, the introductory game gave us the opportunity to speak and allowed each of us to express ourselves in turn and to listen in order to choose a common card. What was initially an imposed exercise became a natural way of working within the group'. (RR5 – 2022–2023)

'To conclude this activity session, we were given a series of four illustrations by the teacher, which we had to rank individually using numbered cards placed face down, in order to identify the different stages of an organizational strategy: from number 1 (best represents an organizational strategy) to number 4 (least represents an organizational strategy). In a second stage, each of us presented our ranking in turn, providing explanations'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

'In the second part of the session, based on four given cards, each of us had to rank them according to our own view, from the one that best defined strategy to the one that defined it least. Each group member then explained their ranking'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

Discussion of representations

'The advantage of this method is that it allows us to compare points of view and to initiate exchanges between participants. Individual differences led to small debates and enabled discussions on a range of topics, which we found very valuable'. (RR3 – 2022–2023)

'As the interpretation of the illustrations is specific to each individual, this led to rich and varied discussions, enabling group members to understand one another [...]'. (RR3 – 2023–2024)

Building an initial shared understanding

'We then reflected collectively on a group ranking. This second activity enabled us to begin a shared reflective process, moving from an individual ranking to a collective understanding'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

'After everyone had finished explaining their choices and following a collective reflection, we were able to agree on a shared ranking that suited the whole group'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

Source: Reflective reports.

Appendix 4. Illustrative excerpts of intersubjective sensemaking dynamics in Sequence 2

Self-expression

'We began by building and deconstructing selected figures in order to familiarize ourselves with the tool. We then explained how we interpreted our creations to the other members of the group'. (RR2 – 2021–2022)

'The second challenge consisted of reproducing given figures within a set time. Naturally, we gravitated towards the figures that best suited us: more complex figures for those who enjoy a challenge, or figures with human faces for others who favour aesthetics. Once these figures had been built, we were asked to add certain pieces to express one of our personal qualities'. (RR3 – 2021–2022)

'The LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® workshop is an innovative method that helped to engage all members of our group. In particular, it fostered active listening through feedback [...] to individual stories'. (RR5 – 2021–2022)

'We each selected a few of them [cards of the Jeu des besoins] and presented them to the rest of the group'. (RR2 – 2022–2023)

'We discovered group work through an original tool we were not familiar with: Playmobil® ... This method was playful. It gave an important place to group dynamics, allowing everyone to express themselves freely. Each team member found their place. Listening was attentive and supportive, thereby creating a calm atmosphere'. (RR6 – 2022–2023)

'Individually, we had to select the cards that, in our view, corresponded to the needs to be addressed in order to develop our conception of an ideal strategy'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

Discussion of representations

'Working in pairs on a given theme also encouraged us to listen to one another. We quickly realized that we did not see things in the same way'. (E3 – 2019–2020)

'We first exchanged views on our individual representations'. (RR1 – 2021–2022)

'During this presentation [based on the Jeu des besoins], we realized that groups of cards were emerging, so we organized them by theme. An exchange of ideas on these themes, drawing on each person's representations, then took place [...]'. (RR2 – 2022–2023)

'For one of us, perfection meant quantity and using all the bricks; for another, it was synonymous with fluidity and the possibility of space between each brick...'. (RR3 – 2021–2022)

'We were able to access each group member's views in real time'. (RR6 – 2023–2024)

Construction of a shared vision (prototype)

'Through the creation of this model, we represented different facets of inclusion. It reflects our different representations'. (RR2 – 2019–2020)

'We really appreciated being able to build a definition of inclusive strategy in a cohesive and spontaneous way. The scene composed of all our individual ideas brought shared values to light'. (RR1 – 2021–2022)

'We gathered all our elements and arranged them on a baseplate to create links between them, with the aim of telling our story in relation to inclusive strategy'. (RR2 – 2021–2022)

'Throughout this work, we made decisions, resolved issues, and selected each element'. (RR3 – 2022–2023)

'In the same dynamic, during the Playmobil® activities, we did not initially agree on the needs, but through negotiation and listening, we were able to define our scenes, with everyone feeling fully satisfied'. (RR5 – 2022–2023)

'We had to reach agreement on our views of each need in order to share our representations. [...] We decided to create a single scene bringing together what we saw as the essential needs, so that the organizational strategy would be as ideal as possible'. (RR6 – 2022–2023)

'In the end, only eleven cards were used to create the prototype. We then arranged them in chronological order according to our understanding of a strategic project approach'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

'Negotiation was a skill that was particularly developed through the various exercises and strategic games. The search for shared solutions, the understanding of different perspectives, and the ability to find common ground were key aspects of our development'. (RR4 – 2023–2024)

Source: Reflective reports and individual interviews.

Appendix 5. Illustrative excerpts on the characteristics of the pedagogical device fostering intersubjective sensemaking

Structuring yet open framework

'Each sequence of the workshop was well structured while still leaving enough time for discussion and sharing'. (RR1 – 2021–2022)

'The deliberately broad instructions were not understood in the same way by everyone'. (RR1 – 2022–2023)

'We felt free, even though we had been given instructions'. (RR3 – 2022–2023)

'What we were able to build, although only loosely structured by the instructions, left ample room for creativity and reflection'. (RR5 – 2022–2023)

'Clear instructions helped us to structure our ideas and bring out our creativity'. (RR6 – 2022–2023)

'We may have been unsettled by the fact that the instructions for each activity were based on teaching methods different from those usually used. Indeed, the instructor encouraged us to give free rein to our imagination [...]. When carrying out the tasks, there was not just one way of doing things; we were encouraged to produce work that reflected who we are'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

Close instructor–student relationship

'In this workshop, the instructor did not position herself "above" the group, but rather "alongside" it, as a facilitator'. (RR3 – 2021–2022)

'The instructor's role as a facilitator allowed learners to be creative and imaginative'. (RR5 – 2021–2022)

'We particularly appreciated the instructor's regular visits to the groups, which helped to motivate us through constructive feedback and encouragement'. (RR1 – 2022–2023)

'She [the instructor] also took on a coaching role, helping to refocus the group's dynamics on the task and to strengthen team spirit and cohesion'. (RR4 – 2022–2023)

'We noticed that, during the various sessions and unlike in other courses, the instructor remained available to all the groups. During the exercises, we felt that we could approach her more easily, even though she was leading the activities and discussions. We greatly appreciated this approach [...]. (RR5 – 2022–2023)

'The instructor was there to support and guide us. She helped us to stay focused on the objectives, without intervening directly in our work. She was also easily accessible and responded readily to our requests. It felt like a mutual exchange, with no "hierarchical" or "authoritarian" barrier'. (RR6 – 2022–2023)

'With this method, communication is two-way, allowing students to express their thoughts and reflections and to feel heard [...]. We are also encouraged in our work and praised for the work we have produced'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

'The instructor's support and positioning during the development of the project encouraged us to reflect and to push ourselves further, particularly in terms of our creative capacity'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

'The instructor–student relationship appeared less marked. This gave us the feeling that the instructor was more accessible, and that we could freely ask questions and express our views without feeling judged. The pedagogy adopted allowed for a more individualized approach to supporting students. Each of us was able to feel like an active participant in the course [...] and to be regarded as a professional'. (RR6 – 2023–2024)

Grounding in students' representations and experiences

'The course developed progressively, as the instructor introduced successive challenges, drawing on our experiences and feelings'. (RR2 – 2021–2022)

'Everyone's ideas were heard, and we based our work not on the scientific literature but on our personal experiences. [...] Through our professional experiences, we were able to derive a shared definition specific to our group'. (RR3 – 2021–2022)

'We therefore started from individual professional situations in order to build collective intelligence around our experiences. [...] The analysis of our professional practices made it possible to give meaning to our collective approach'. (RR4 – 2021–2022)

'To represent professional situations experienced by group members. [...] We were able to build our charter through collective intelligence by taking into account everyone's experiences and perceptions'. (RR5 – 2021–2022)

'The project draws more on our professional experience, encouraging connections between theory and practice'. (RR4 – 2022–2023)

'We exchanged views on our personal and professional situations'. (RR6 – 2022–2023)

'It should also be noted that we were used to producing objective work based on scientific and referenced material; in contrast, in this module, we were encouraged to engage in subjectivity and reflexivity [...]. In this module, the pedagogical method stimulated us, as we became active participants in our own learning [...]. In other courses, we are most of the time passive'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

'We had previously experienced group work in which priority was given to the division of tasks rather than to each person's experience and perspective. [...] We felt listened to both as individuals and as field professionals'. (RR6 – 2023–2024)

Mediation through playful and creative materials

Surprise

'Most of us had never used play as a mediator for work before. Surprisingly, we quickly found ourselves getting caught up in the game'. (RR1 – 2021–2022)

'Reactions within our group were quite diverse, reflecting each person's individual emotional response to a playful pedagogical device. Indeed, the introduction to strategic management through play is surprising on several levels, as LEGO® is associated, in the collective imagination, with childhood'. (RR2 – 2021–2022)

(Continued)

'When the use of the kit [...] was announced, we were surprised by the materials provided and by the wide variety of elements and accessories available'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

'We were surprised by this playful pedagogy. We are not used [...] to using this method as a means of learning'. (RR6 – 2023–2024)

Familiarity

'Using LEGO® is simple: you put pieces together and choose colours. Like everyone in my group, we had all, at some point in our lives, whether in childhood or as parents, handled LEGO®, so there was nothing difficult about it, and it was really enjoyable [...] to reconnect with our inner child ...!' (E4 – 2019–2020)

'These are figures that everyone knows [...], each person was able to relate to elements of the kit'. (RR1 2022–2023)

'Right away, we were enthusiastic. We opened the kit and looked at the different figures and accessories. Our inner child took over for a few moments, then we refocused and concentrated on the instructions'. (RR6 – 2022–2023)

Destabilization

'What are they going to make me do with a children's toy?' (E2 – 2019–2020)

'As soon as instructions were announced, we were sceptical. Was working with a game suited to the professional world? Would we be able to represent our thinking through 3D creations? Would we all interpret the elements in the same way?' (RR3 – 2021–2022)

'Developing a prototype of an ideal strategic approach [...] changed our usual ways of organizing and working compared with other courses. The use of innovative tools [...] to address a serious topic unsettled us, as they are unconsciously associated with play'. (RR1 2022–2023)

'The beginning of this "unconventional" work using an innovative pedagogical method unsettled our usual habits, representations and ways of working in a group. [...] The proposed method (imposed groups, activities with cards and Playmobil®) initially surprised us and may have been a source of apprehension'. (RR2 – 2022–2023)

'Certain innovative tools aroused reluctance and questioning among some participants, as they held preconceptions about them'. (RR1 – 2023–2024)

'The use of Playmobil® as a pedagogical tool was surprising, as were the game cards, which required us to use metaphors to explain concepts. In a university context, we did not expect to use games, which may have unsettled some of us'. (RR5 – 2023–2024)

Progressive appropriation

'Some were surprised by their rapid creativity and overflowing imagination; others, on the contrary, needed a little more time to find inspiration. Through observation, questioning, interest, and enthusiasm, ideas gradually began to take shape'. (RR2 – 2021–2022)

'This feeling [apprehension], however, quickly faded, giving way to a desire to become involved and to innovate'. (RR2 – 2022–2023)

'During the session, we surprised ourselves with the imagination we showed and the way we used the tools. [...] We discovered a less rigid and more playful format, in which we worked with simple, playful tools that we were not familiar with. [...] This course format, full of "social tools", was a source of inspiration for our professional practice'. (RR7 – 2022–2023)

Facilitation of interactions (self-expression, listening)

'In fact, it helps to translate our thinking; [...] we can more easily [...] convey our message to the person in front of us'. (E1 – 2019–2020)

'[This] enabled the group to represent their views on management and to share them'. (RR2 – 2019–2020)

'The mediator [...] facilitates the expression and illustration of each person's experiences and their sharing within the group'. (RR1 – 2021–2022)

'Against all expectations, discussing our personal situations was made easier through the use of a universal transitional object: LEGO®. We were surprised by the role a brick could play: a reassuring element for the shyest among us, or, for others, a visual support more expressive than words'. (RR3 – 2021–2022)

'This helped create a group dynamic'. (RR1 2022–2023)

'[This] allowed us to set aside our preconceptions, to listen to one another, and to build confidence in ourselves and in the group. [...] We were struck by the fluidity and speed of exchanges between people with different identities and from different professional backgrounds, which we found very enriching'. (RR2 – 2022–2023)

'To express our point of view in ways other than through writing'. (RR3 – 2022–2023)

'Each of us was able to speak more freely using the chosen cards or through the constructions [...]. [...] It was "easier" to express ourselves with a support'. (RR4 – 2022–2023)

'Listening intensified over the course of the work. The tools once again acted as facilitators'. (RR5 – 2022–2023)

'The use of various pedagogical tools such as Playmobil® and the Songes cards enabled us to create a calm working environment and stronger team cohesion, which was more conducive to producing the required deliverables'. (RR2 – 2023–2024)

'The illustrations helped us to express and argue our ideas, feelings, and experiences in a freer and more creative way'. (RR3 – 2023–2024)

'Some apprehension may have arisen due to the mixed and imposed composition of the groups. Contact with strangers can be unsettling, but this was ultimately eased by the game. Preconceptions and "barriers" gradually fell away throughout the process, giving way to the sharing of experiences. [...] This allowed us to get to know one another, to establish dialogue, and to build connections. A group dynamic emerged. [...] Each member was able to express their point of view and contribute to the progress of the project'. (RR6 – 2023–2024)

(Continued)

Collective elaboration

'The fact of touching, handling, having sensations at our fingertips, and interacting with others, because at one point we combined things. I touched my colleague's individual elements and *vice versa* so that we could assemble them'. (E4 – 2019–2020)

'Collectively, we attempted to model what an inclusive strategy is. [...] This hands-on method is perceived as a reflective tool, allowing us to imagine the organization and the roles of each stakeholder. It highlighted the possibility of a space for discussion, exchange and sharing among team members to think about strategy together'. (RR2 – 2021–2022)

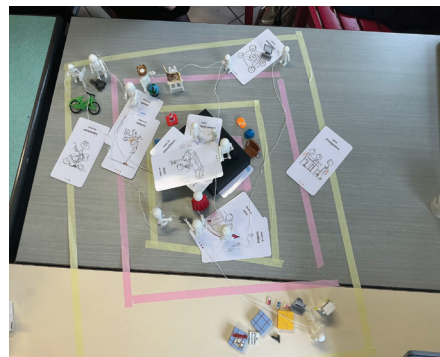
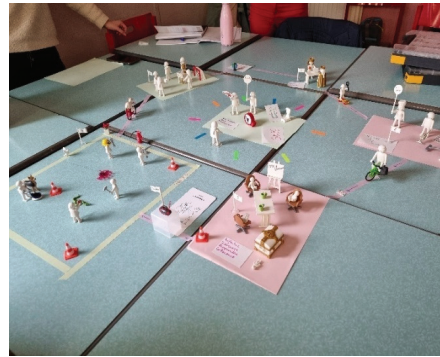
'Moreover, the use of Playmobil® has a light-hearted dimension that allowed us to step back from the subject, to find metaphors and symbols that gave meaning to our prototype'. (RR1 – 2022–2023)

'To connect our ideas and points of view'. (RR3 – 2022–2023)

'We imagined and created our ideal strategic approach using the Playmobil® provided to us'. (RR4 – 2022–2023)

Source: Reflective reports and individual interviews.

Appendix 6. Examples of prototypes of an ideal approach to strategy-making



Source: Photographs taken by the instructor and the students.