

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO
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Factors Influencing Middle School Students' Sense-Making Discussions in
their Small-Group Investigations of Force and Motion

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in
Mathematics and Science Education

by

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Chair

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2001

This thesis is dedicated to:

Shannon Davis, my lovely wife, who happily supported my efforts even though she was never quite convinced that I would ever graduate

and

Shea, my wonderful son, who was absolutely convinced that I would finish my thesis, even though he wasn't quite sure what it was

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Figures.....	viii
List of Tables.....	x
Acknowledgements.....	xvii
Vita, Publications, and Conference Presentations.....	xix
Abstract.....	xx
I. Background, Rationale, and Purpose.....	1
Background.....	1
Rationale.....	4
Research Questions.....	5
Overview of Upcoming Chapters.....	7
II. Conceptual Framework.....	9
Overview.....	9
Learning and Sense-Making.....	11
The Social Origins of Knowledge and Learning.....	13
Scientific Discourse in Small Groups.....	19
Nonverbal Sense-Making: Comprehension Activity.....	25
Collaboration in Small Groups.....	30
Factors Affecting Sense-Making Discussion.....	32
Summary.....	46
III. Methods.....	48
Research Context.....	48
Data Collection.....	58
Data Analysis.....	59

IV. Classifying Students' Sense-Making Statements.....	81
Overview.....	81
The Evolution of my Framework for Sense-Making Discussion.....	82
Descriptions and Examples of the Six Components of Sense-Making Discussion.....	87
Comparing the Components of Sense-Making Discussion	103
V. Results -- Sense-Making Discussion.....	106
Results: Instances of Verbal Sense-Making.....	108
Results: Percentage of Time Dedicated to Sense- Making Discussion.....	116
Results to be Explained in Chapter 6.....	123
VI. Results -- Factors Influencing Sense-Making Discussion.....	129
Result 1a: Clarifications.....	132
Result 1b: Descriptions, Definitions, and Connections.....	137
Result 2: Predictions and Evidence.....	146
Result 3: Sense-making Differences between Sub- Section Types.....	157
Result 4: Sense-making Differences between Individual Sub-Sections.....	188
Result 5: Sense-making Differences between Activities... Result 6: Sense-making Differences between Curriculum Cycles.....	219
Result 7: Sense-making Differences between Groups.....	237
Result 8: Sense-making Differences between Individual Students.....	269
Summary.....	289
VII. Contributions and Implications.....	309
Overview of the Study.....	309
Implications for Classroom Practice in Inquiry-Based Science Classrooms.....	311
Suggestions for Future Research.....	323
Appendices	333
Appendix 1: CIPS Unit 2, Cycle 3-5 Curriculum Materials	333

Appendix 2: End-of-Cycle Power Drive Assessments.....	390
Appendix 3: Activity Sub-Sections.....	407
Appendix 4: Distribution of Sense-Making Instances in each Activity and Activity Sub-Section, by Group and Student.....	410
Appendix 5: Samples of Coded Transcripts.....	441
Appendix 6: Distribution of Sense-Making Instances for each Curriculum Cycle, by Student.....	463
References.....	467

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4-1: Evolution of my components of sense-making discussion..	86
Figure 6-1: Energy diagrams from the cycle 4 Slowing Down activity...	208
Figure 6-2: CIPS interaction tool.....	261
Figure A1-1: Activity 1 from cycle 3.....	334
Figure A1-2: Cycle 3 individual prediction sheet.....	339
Figure A1-3: Activity 2 from cycle 3.....	340
Figure A1-4: Activity 3 from cycle 3.....	344
Figure A1-5: Activity 4 from cycle 3.....	347
Figure A1-6: Activity 5 from cycle 3.....	348
Figure A1-7: Cycle 3 Idea Journal.....	352
Figure A1-8: Activity 1 from cycle 4.....	353
Figure A1-9: Activity 2 from cycle 4.....	356
Figure A1-10: Activity 3 from cycle 4.....	360
Figure A1-11: Activity 4 from cycle 4.....	362
Figure A1-12: Activity 5 from cycle 4.....	363
Figure A1-13: Activity 6 from cycle 4.....	367
Figure A1-14: Activity 7 from cycle 4.....	368
Figure A1-15: Cycle 4 Idea Journal.....	370
Figure A1-16: Activity 1 from cycle 5.....	372
Figure A1-17: Cycle 5 individual prediction sheet.....	374
Figure A1-18: Activity 2 from cycle 5.....	375

Figure A1-19: Activity 3 from cycle 5.....	378
Figure A1-20: Activity 4 from cycle 5.....	381
Figure A1-21: Activity 5 from cycle 5.....	385
Figure A1-22: Activity 6 from cycle 5.....	386
Figure A1-23: Cycle 5 Idea Journal.....	388
Figure A2-1: Darla's Cycle 5 Power Drive assessment.....	391
Figure A2-2: Lacey's Cycle 3 Power Drive assessment.....	393
Figure A2-3: Grace's Cycle 3 Power Drive assessment.....	397
Figure A2-4: Roxanne's Cycle 5 Power Drive assessment.....	401
Figure A2-5: Arthur's Cycle 5 Power Drive assessment.....	403
Figure A2-6: Sabrina's Cycle 5 Power Drive assessment.....	405

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1: Typical activity structure for a triadic dialogue.....	20
Table 2-2: Distribution of negotiations from Shepardson (1996).....	25
Table 2-3: Factors likely to affect sense-making discussion.....	47
Table 3-1: Unit summary for CIPS units 1 and 2.....	53
Table 3-2: Activity and idea summary for unit 2, cycle 3.....	54
Table 3-3: Activity and idea summary for unit 2, cycle 4.....	55
Table 3-4: Activity and idea summary for unit 2, cycle 5.....	56
Table 3-5: Students' initial and final understandings of ideas.....	58
Table 3-6: Distribution of sense-making components in materials.....	74
Table 4-1: Examples of requests for sense-making.....	103
Table 5-1: Instances of verbal sense-making, by cycle.....	110
Table 5-2: Distribution of requests for sense-making.....	111
Table 5-3: Distribution of actual instances of sense-making.....	111
Table 5-4: Comparing sense-making distributions in group conversations and curriculum materials.....	112
Table 5-5: Instances of verbal sense-making, by group.....	113
Table 5-6: Instances of verbal sense-making in cycle 3, by group.....	114
Table 5-7: Instances of verbal sense-making in cycle 4, by group.....	114
Table 5-8: Instances of verbal sense-making in cycle 5, by group.....	114
Table 5-9: Instances of verbal sense-making, by student.....	115
Table 5-10: Percentage of time engaged in sense-making discussion, cycle 3.....	117

Table 5-11: Percentage of time engaged in sense-making discussion, cycle 4.....	117
Table 5-12: Percentage of time engaged in sense-making discussion, cycle 5.....	118
Table 5-13: Percentage of time engaged in sense-making discussion, by activity and group.....	119
Table 5-14: Percentage of time engaged in sense-making discussion, by cycle and group.....	120
Table 5-15: Percentage of time engaged in sense-making discussion, by cycle.....	121
Table 5-16: Percentage of time engaged in sense-making discussion, by sub-section type.....	122
Table 6-1: Darla and Lacey's Idea Journal entries for idea #2, cycle 4..	163
Table 6-2: Darla and Lacey's Idea Journal entries for idea #3, cycle 4..	163
Table 6-3: Roxanne's Idea Journal entries for idea #1, cycle 3.....	178
Table 6-4: Arthur's Idea Journal entries for idea #2, cycle 4.....	178
Table 6-5: Arthur's Idea Journal entries for idea #3, cycle 4.....	178
Table 6-6: Sabrina's Idea Journal entries for idea #3, cycle 4.....	179
Table 6-7: Sabrina's Idea Journal entries for idea #2, cycle 5.....	179
Table 6-8: Activities with the highest percentage of time dedicated to sense-making discussion.....	220
Table 6-9: Activities with the lowest percentage of time dedicated to sense-making discussion.....	220
Table 6-10: Cycle 3-5 power drive scores and quarter grades.....	273
Table 6-11: Group factors affecting sense-making discussion.....	302
Table 6-12: Personal factors affecting sense-making discussion.....	303

Table 6-13: Task factors affecting sense-making discussion.....	305
Table 6-14: Context factors affecting sense-making discussion.....	306
Table A4-1: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 1, cycle 3..	411
Table A4-2: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 1, cycle 3.....	411
Table A4-3: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 1, cycle 3..	412
Table A4-4: Sense-making instances ³ for each group 2 student in activity 1, cycle.....	412
Table A4-5: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 2, cycle 3..	413
Table A4-6: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 2, cycle 3.....	413
Table A4-7: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 2, cycle 3..	414
Table A4-8: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 2, cycle 3.....	414
Table A4-9: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 3, cycle 3..	415
Table A4-10: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 3, cycle 3.....	415
Table A4-11: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 3, cycle 3	416
Table A4-12: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 3, cycle 3.....	416
Table A4-13: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 4, cycle 3	417
Table A4-14: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 4, cycle 3.....	417
Table A4-15: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 4, cycle 3	418
Table A4-16: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 4, cycle 3.....	418

Table A4-17: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 1, cycle 4	419
Table A4-18: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 1, cycle 4.....	419
Table A4-19: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 1, cycle 4	420
Table A4-20: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 1, cycle 4.....	420
Table A4-21: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 2, cycle 4	421
Table A4-22: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 2, cycle 4.....	421
Table A4-23: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 2, cycle 4	422
Table A4-24: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 2, cycle 4.....	422
Table A4-25: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 3, cycle 4	423
Table A4-26: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 3, cycle 4.....	423
Table A4-27: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 3, cycle 4	424
Table A4-28: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 3, cycle 4.....	424
Table A4-29: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 4, cycle 4	425
Table A4-30: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 4, cycle 4.....	425
Table A4-31: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 4, cycle 4	426
Table A4-32: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 4, cycle 4.....	426
Table A4-33: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 5, cycle 4	427
Table A4-34: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 5, cycle 4.....	427

Table A4-35: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 5, cycle 4	428
Table A4-36: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 5, cycle 4.....	428
Table A4-37: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 6, cycle 4	429
Table A4-38: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 6, cycle 4.....	429
Table A4-39: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 6, cycle 4	430
Table A4-40: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 6, cycle 4.....	430
Table A4-41: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 1, cycle 5	431
Table A4-42: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 1, cycle 5.....	431
Table A4-43: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 1, cycle 5	432
Table A4-44: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 1, cycle 5.....	432
Table A4-45: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 2, cycle 5	433
Table A4-46: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 2, cycle 5.....	433
Table A4-47: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 2, cycle 5	434
Table A4-48: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 2, cycle 5.....	434
Table A4-49: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 3, cycle 5	435
Table A4-50: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 3, cycle 5.....	435
Table A4-51: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 3, cycle 5	436

Table A4-52: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 3, cycle 5.....	436
Table A4-53: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 4, cycle 5	437
Table A4-54: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 4, cycle 5.....	437
Table A4-55: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 4, cycle 5	438
Table A4-56: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 4, cycle 5.....	438
Table A4-57: Sense-making instances for group 1 in activity 5, cycle 5	439
Table A4-58: Sense-making instances for each group 1 student in activity 5, cycle 5.....	439
Table A4-59: Sense-making instances for group 2 in activity 5, cycle 5	440
Table A4-60: Sense-making instances for each group 2 student in activity 5, cycle 5.....	440
Table A6-1: Sense-making instances for cycle 3, by student.....	464
Table A6-2: Sense-making instances for cycle 4, by student.....	465
Table A6-3: Sense-making instances for cycle 5, by student.....	466

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Sandifer, C. (2000, August). Factors influencing middle school students' small-group scientific discussions in their investigations of force and motion. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Physics Education Research (PER) conference, part of the summer meeting of the American Association of Physics Teachers, Guelph, Ontario.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Factors Influencing Middle School Students' Sense-Making Discussions in
their Small-Group Investigations of Force and Motion

by

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Diego, 2001

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In this study, I adopted a combined individual and sociocultural perspective on learning in order to investigate small-group discussions in an inquiry-based middle school science classroom.

The specific purpose of the study was to answer the following research questions: (a) How can we classify students' sense-making statements?, (b) To what extent do students engage in sense-making discussion (SMD)?, and (c) Which factors provide support for students' SMD? To answer these questions, two groups were videotaped during the Interactions and Motion unit from the Constructing Ideas in Physical Science middle school curriculum.

To classify students' sense-making statements, I developed a six-component framework for sense-making discussion. My six components of sense-making discussion are: predicting a phenomenon or experimental outcome; clarifying the facts of a phenomenon or experimental result; describing and explaining a phenomenon or experimental result; defining, describing, clarifying, and connecting scientific concepts, procedures, processes, and representations; testing knowledge compatibility; and making a request for any of the above.

The extent of students' sense-making discussions was established by (a) documenting instances of student sense-making according to the six-component scheme, and then forming distributions of sense-making instances, and (b) calculating the percentage of time that groups dedicated to sense-making discussion.

To determine the influence that various factors have on students' sense-making discussions, I first drew on the research in collaboration, discourse, and nonverbal sense-making to arrive at an initial list of personal, group, task, and contextual factors that would likely influence the SMD in this study. I then picked out significant quantitative differences in sense-making between groups, students, and different portions of the curriculum (cycles, sub-sections, etc.), and determined to what extent the initial list of factors contributed to the significant differences in SMD, and also to what extent any additional factors contributed to these differences.

My analysis showed that many of the factors from the initial list helped to explain the differences in sense-making. I also identified six other factors that contributed to these differences: capacity for intra-group guidance, intellectual capacity, time available for sense-making, external guidance, awareness of the curriculum structure, and an awareness and valuing of the curriculum goals.