

THINKING PIECE

Curriculum change as collective sensemaking: A programme-level SoTL perspective

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Abstract

Curriculum redesign involves more than gathering evidence and implementing change. In this Thinking Piece, I reflect on a participatory redesign of two master's programmes that I lead, framing the work as programme-level scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). The redesign began after my analysis of Studiebarometer data identified programme organisation as a student priority, prompting a local inquiry into students' learning experiences across the two programmes. The findings informed domain-specific working groups, a faculty workshop, and consultations with individual instructors. As the redesign unfolded, student evidence was repeatedly interpreted, reframed, and negotiated as it moved through disciplinary and programme-level discussions. I argue that participatory curriculum development makes this movement visible and shows how evidence is remade as it becomes the basis for curriculum decisions. From this perspective, I conceptualise curriculum change as collective sensemaking, with the programme leader creating conditions for shared interpretation and integrating multiple legitimate perspectives into a coherent basis for action.

Keywords: *programme redesign; collective sensemaking; student voice; scholarship of teaching and learning; programme leadership*

Introduction

How staff conceptualise curriculum shapes what co-creation with students becomes possible

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(Bovill & Woolmer, 2019), and academics' agency in curriculum change depends on how they position themselves within their institutional context (Annala et al., 2023). What remains less visible in these accounts is what happens to evidence from students as it moves through a redesign and what that movement requires of the person leading it. I address this question by reflecting on my experience of leading the redesign of two master's programmes. Through the lens of sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005) and programme-level SoTL (Chick et al., 2025), I focus on how evidence from students was interpreted, reframed, and integrated as it moved through disciplinary and programme-level discussions.

My starting point was an analysis of Studiebarometer data, which highlighted the importance of programme organisation for students' overall satisfaction (Mwesiumo, 2026). Among eight dimensions of the student experience, programme organisation emerged as the most important, ahead of teaching quality and the learning environment. It encompasses academic coherence and progression between courses, as well as the quality and accessibility of programme information. This finding prompted me to ask what coherence, progression, and relevance look like from students' perspectives within a particular programme. I therefore undertook a more contextualised inquiry into students' learning experiences across the two programmes that I lead.

Inquiry into the curriculum as experienced by students

I initiated a local quality-development inquiry around a question that had become increasingly important to me at programme level. I wanted to understand how students experienced the curriculum as a connected educational journey rather than as a collection of separate courses. At the outset, I assumed that redesign would follow a fairly rational sequence of gathering evidence, developing proposals, consulting faculty, and producing a revised programme. With that expectation in mind, I trained two students as research assistants to conduct interviews and contribute to the initial analysis. Between April and May 2025, 20 first- and second-year students, purposively selected across the specialisations, participated in individual semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed with consent.

What struck me first was the consistency of certain concerns. Students across the two programmes described similar experiences, and I noticed aspects of the curriculum that were difficult to recognise from within individual courses. I heard considerable appreciation for the programmes' strengths, including disciplinary breadth, a wide choice of specialisations, accessible faculty, and business cases connecting theory with practice. At the same time, recurring concerns about overlap, uneven workloads, relevance, sequencing, and preparation for research and professional practice made me look differently at how the programmes worked as a whole. The interviews helped me see where coherence and progression held, where connections broke down, and where the educational journey we intended did not fully match the one students experienced.

Initially, I thought the problems and solutions were straightforward. If a course appeared repetitive, I assumed it should be removed. If the sequencing seemed illogical, I thought it should be changed. The students' accounts seemed immediately actionable because I was treating them as if they pointed directly to solutions. I soon realised that this was too simple. Students could see connections, discontinuities, and workload patterns across courses in ways that instructors responsible for individual subjects often could not. Yet identifying a problem did not necessarily reveal the right response. A course that appears repetitive to one group may provide essential grounding for students with different academic backgrounds, while one considered irrelevant may simply be poorly positioned.

This was the first important shift in my thinking about programme redesign. I moved from treating student feedback as evidence of what needed to change to seeing it as evidence that

required interpretation. This understanding aligns with scholarship on student–staff partnership, which takes students’ contributions seriously without assuming that students and academics occupy identical roles in curriculum decisions (Bovill, 2014; Bovill et al., 2016). I began to see student voice as something that should inform curriculum development without determining the response.

From student voice to collegial interpretation

As the student feedback moved into the next stage of the redesign, I established three working groups representing the main specialisations in the programmes. I asked each group to examine the students’ accounts, review the relevant courses, and propose changes to content, course portfolios, sequencing, and progression. At the time, I saw my main task as building academic support for changes suggested by the student feedback. I assumed that participation would help me determine which proposals colleagues could accept. In retrospect, I treated participation primarily as a way to secure approval rather than as an opportunity for shared interpretation.

My understanding began to change as the working groups engaged with the findings. Discussion shifted from deciding which suggestions to implement towards examining what students’ experiences revealed about the conditions supporting or constraining learning. A student’s experience of repetition, for example, did not necessarily mean that a course should be removed. It could point to a need for more advanced content, clearer expectations about prior knowledge, or better preparation earlier in the programme. What I had treated as relatively direct feedback became a set of questions requiring interpretation from both disciplinary and programme-level perspectives. I began to see the groups’ most valuable contribution in how they reframed students’ experiences as programme-level questions.

I came to understand these discussions as local collective sensemaking. Students contributed distinctive knowledge of the curriculum as they lived it, while colleagues brought disciplinary expertise and judgements about what graduates should know. My own role changed too. I found myself moving away from securing support for an interpretation I had already formed and towards creating conditions in which these viewpoints could challenge and reshape one another. Participatory curriculum development therefore came to mean distributing the work of interpretation across those involved.

When different domains of the faculty saw different programmes

The working groups presented their recommendations at a faculty workshop in November 2025. Before the workshop, I expected it mainly to help us discuss the proposals and move towards agreement. As the discussion unfolded, I became more aware of how differently the faculty understood the programme. I noticed that individual instructors tend to focus on their own courses, domain groups on sequences of related subjects, and students on how the programme unfolds across courses and over time. As programme leader, I was increasingly responsible for seeing how these perspectives fitted together as an educational whole. What surprised me was how easily each perspective could appear complete from within its own vantage point. A change that strengthened one specialisation could unsettle another, while a course valued within one domain could appear marginal against the programme’s wider purpose.

The workshop changed how I understood the task in front of me. The conversation gradually moved from “my course” and “our domain” towards “our programme”, a shift I see as central to collective sensemaking. Weick et al. (2005) describe sensemaking as an ongoing process in which people extract cues from complex circumstances and construct plausible understandings that

support action. In the workshop, different groups brought different cues, including student comments, disciplinary priorities, teaching experience, external developments, and institutional requirements. I came to see that no single perspective was sufficient on its own and that a programme-level interpretation could emerge only by bringing these partial views into relation with one another.

The difficult conversations came afterwards

Some proposed changes meant cancelling courses, substantially redesigning others, or redistributing content. This part of the process changed my understanding the most, since it touched courses that instructors had spent years building and teaching. Until then, I had largely treated courses as components within a curriculum architecture. The consultations that followed made me realise that courses also embody academic labour, history, expertise, and identity. For a colleague who had taught a course for years, a proposal to discontinue it could feel like a judgement on the continuing relevance of their own expertise, and what looked like restructuring at programme level could be experienced as loss at the individual level.

More than once, I found myself preparing counterarguments before a consultation had even begun, treating a colleague's attachment to a course as an obstacle to manage rather than knowledge to understand. It was easier to recognise resistance in others than to recognise my own tendency to dismiss that resistance too quickly. I had to find a way to take objections seriously without allowing individual ownership to determine the curriculum.

Further meetings with affected instructors sometimes led me to reconsider the original proposals. In some cases, we found alternatives, such as modifying a course or making it optional rather than discontinuing it. I began to see disagreement as another source of sensemaking because it exposed assumptions and consequences none of us had fully considered. I increasingly asked what the proposal had failed to take into account. Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) distinction between sensemaking and sensegiving is useful here. Sensemaking involves developing an understanding of change, while sensegiving concerns attempts to influence how others understand it. In our case, both were happening at once. Working groups explained their reasoning, instructors articulated what they believed would be lost, and I tried to keep programme-level objectives visible while remaining open to revision. What emerged was negotiated movement towards something coherent enough to act on.

After the workshop and consultations, I consolidated the revised proposals into a programme-level structure to ensure coherence, balanced workloads, and alignment with student, academic, and industry needs. This experience made the integration work visible to me. I had to hold together reasoning about student experience, progression, workload, academic expertise, and stakeholder interests, while recognising that no single person had a complete view of all of them. I found my role shifting between listener, convener, negotiator, and integrator. What had initially looked like a curriculum design task increasingly became, for me, a process of connecting perspectives and finding workable compromises. Formal approval did not end the process, as the changes generated administrative work well beyond the approval deadline. I learned that curriculum change unfolds recursively, as later developments can reopen earlier interpretations and decisions.

What collective sensemaking adds to SoTL

Reflecting on this experience, I conceptualise programme redesign as an iterative process of listening, interpreting, localising, generating, deliberating, negotiating, integrating, and institutionalising. Figure 1 depicts how interpretive complexity increased as students' accounts

encountered disciplinary perspectives and competing interests, peaking during deliberation and negotiation before partially settling through integration and institutionalisation. The dashed arrows show how later developments repeatedly reopened earlier interpretations and reshaped emerging proposals.

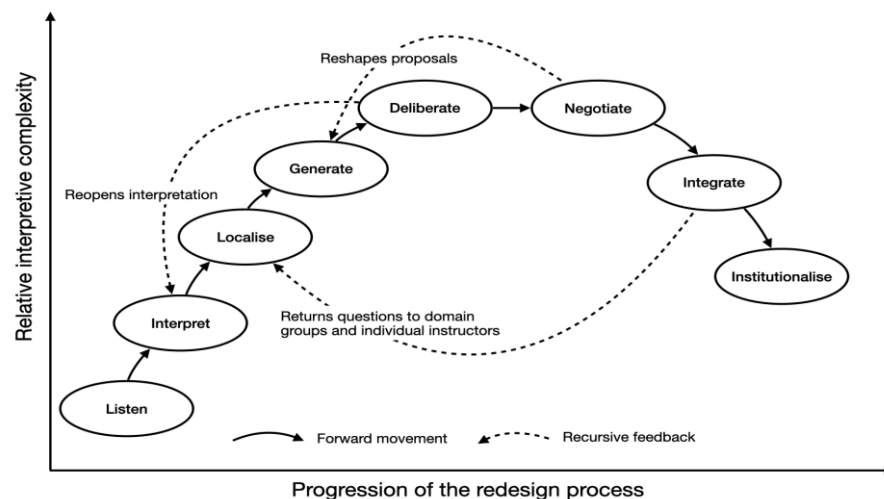


Figure 1. Interpretive complexity and recursive feedback during the programme redesign

From this experience, I draw four SoTL insights. First, evidence acquires meaning through interpretation as student accounts and faculty recommendations move through different contexts. Second, collective sensemaking makes different forms of expertise, interest, and ownership visible. Third, leadership involves creating arenas for interpretation and taking responsibility for integrating different perspectives. Fourth, successful participation can produce an outcome sufficiently coherent and legitimate to support collective action, even when some curriculum decisions are not universally preferred. I believe these insights extend beyond this particular context. In any curriculum review informed by student voice, colleagues may interpret an apparently clear concern differently. Programme-level SoTL, I would argue, requires partnership both with students and among those who interpret and act on what students say.

Ethical reflection

This is a situated reflection on an internal quality-development process. The student interviews informed programme development, and I synthesised their accounts at programme level. I do not reproduce identifiable quotations or treat the material as a formally analysed dataset. My dual role as programme leader and author shaped what I noticed, how I interpreted events, and how I present them here. I have therefore sought to represent disagreement as a feature of curriculum change without attributing it to particular individuals.

Conclusion

I began the curriculum redesign process with a straightforward ambition to listen carefully to

students and use their experiences to improve two master's programmes. The process changed how I understood curriculum development. As student feedback moved through disciplinary and programme-level discussions, it was interpreted, challenged, and reshaped, requiring me to hold several legitimate forms of reasoning together.

Through participatory curriculum development, I became more aware of the competing interpretations, interests, and assumptions that shaped the redesign. This experience led me to understand curriculum change as collective sensemaking and programme leadership as the work of creating and sustaining spaces in which different perspectives can be brought into relation, negotiated, and integrated into an educational whole.

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