



# ISM SEMINAR

## Autumn Term 2016-17

- Speaker:** Professor Jennifer Howard-Grenville, Cambridge Judge Business School
- Title:** Sensemaking from the neck down: a practice perspective (with Isaac Holeman and Mark de Rond)
- Date:** Wednesday 07 December 2016
- Venue:** M2, WBS Teaching Centre
- Time:** 14:00
- Abstract:** Despite significant advances, empirical studies of sensemaking have tended to emphasize the extent to which it entails a cognitive process, or something that happens “from the neck up”. While Weick’s original formulation did allow for a broader theorization, reliance on archival and interview-based data may have inadvertently underplayed contributions of the body and materiality. In this paper, we rely on a unique ethnography of a world-first attempt to scull the navigable length of the Amazon river to better understand how body, mind and material are implicated in sensemaking processes. Drawing on extensive video data, we are able to observe the high level of risk and uncertainty involved in the attempt, enabling our analysis of sensemaking in real time. We find that, first, the body can play a central role insofar as sensemaking relies on cues provided first and foremost by it, or on “the way things feel”; second, sensemaking emerges from situated actions involving bodies and the materiality of the situation, each of which is implicated in the enactment of a sensible environment; and third, sensemaking is less concerned with meaning-making as popularly conceived, than with the simple act of affording progress. These three findings may help release the “headlock” that has characterized empirical work in the sensemaking tradition, and, in redirecting scholarship towards an embodied turn, recast aspects of Weick’s sensemaking theory that have been inadequately explored.
- Biography:** Jennifer Howard-Grenville contributes to organisation theory through in-depth studies of how people work from within to change organisations, communities, and occupations. By focusing on the processes through which people seek change, her scholarship advances theoretical understanding of organisational routines, culture, identity, and identification. Reflecting her interest in change around issues of social and environmental import, Jennifer’s work also contributes to an interdisciplinary scholarly conversation on business and the natural environment. She is recognised as a leading qualitative researcher with a focus on process theorising, and frequently presents on these topics at business schools, conferences and junior scholar academies.
- Dr Howard-Grenville’s work has been published in *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Annals*, *Organization Studies*, *Research Policy*, *Journal of Industrial Ecology* and several other journals. She is the author of *Corporate Culture and Environmental Practice* (Edward Elgar, 2007), which documents her nine-month ethnography of environmental practice change at the world’s largest semiconductor manufacturer, and co-author or editor of three other books.
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