

Tracing interacting literacy practices in master's dissertation writing

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Academic literacy practices are increasingly varied, influenced by the diverse education and language backgrounds of students and staff, interdisciplinary approaches, and collaborations with non-university groups such as business partners. Completing a master's dissertation thus requires students to negotiate literacy practices associated with different domains. To enable an investigation of conditions for such negotiations, this article extends the concept of literacy practices by combining insights from Academic Literacies, New Literacy Studies and Schatzki's (1996) social practice ontology. The resulting framework is applied in a case study of a student who negotiates academic requirements and entrepreneurial goals in completing a master's dissertation.

Keywords: academic literacies; literacy practices; Schatzki; repurposing; writing across domains; transformation

Introduction

Knowledge production in higher education is becoming increasingly diverse due to the varied education and language backgrounds of students and staff, interdisciplinary approaches, and collaborations with private sector partners (Baynham, 2000; Lam, 2010; Rampton *et al.*, 2014). Academic Literacies (AcLits) researchers and practitioners have long highlighted the heterogeneous nature of writing in higher education (for example, Lea and Street, 1998). They have also considered what literacies students bring to their studies from previous, often non-academic, literacy experiences and how such literacies are frequently less valued in comparison to the dominant academic literacies (for example, Jones *et al.*, 1999). A central question in AcLits and the related tradition of New Literacy Studies (NLS) is how the inclusion of extracurricular literacies can support student learning and potentially transform knowledge production in academia (Ivanič *et al.*, 2009; Lillis *et al.*, 2015).

In this context, master's dissertations in applied disciplines constitute an interesting case. On the one hand, master's dissertations are firmly located in the domain of higher education (QAA, 2010) and are generally considered to be challenging academic practices for students, constituting their first substantial, largely independent research project (Paltridge, 2002; Ylijoki, 2001). On the other hand, students in applied disciplines are often encouraged to select their own dissertation topics related to their interests, such as professional career ambitions or hobbies. These interests are connected to diverse literacies, for example, filling in forms or posting messages online. In completing their master's dissertations, students usually negotiate some of their prior literacy experiences associated with academic and non-academic domains and the academic writing requirements of their current degree programme (Kaufhold, 2015).

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AcLits researchers have examined how to facilitate the use of literacies that students bring to higher education as 'legitimate tools of meaning making' (Lillis and Scott, 2007: 13). This article contributes to this discussion by considering ways of investigating the conditions that enable or restrict students in drawing on their extracurricular literacy experiences in their dissertation work. To do so, the article develops an analytical framework by synthesizing and extending the concept of literacy practice based on insights from NLS, AcLits, and practice theory as proposed by the philosopher Theodore Schatzki (1996). The framework is applied to a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984), which provides instances of how elements from extracurricular literacy practices are transformed and integrated in dissertation writing practices. The case study illustrates the need for a conceptualization of literacy practices as based on meaning. It demonstrates how understandings, goals, and general values of literacy practices associated with diverse domains can be combined by the active contributions of student writers who draw on their extracurricular literacy experiences, supervisors who provide guidance, and interdisciplinary, applied degree programmes that enable such combinations.

Academic writing as social practice

AcLits and NLS take a social constructivist perspective in which writing is fundamentally a social endeavour. Lillis and Scott (2007: 10) programmatically state that in AcLits research 'practice is privileged above text'. The term practice, or more specifically literacy practices, is central here in two ways. First, the term highlights the need to move beyond analysing written texts and consider what people do around texts. Literacy practices in this sense encompass, for instance, talking about a dissertation with a supervisor or friends. To avoid confusion, I will use the term *activities* to refer to these observable instances of literacies throughout the article.

Second, on a conceptual level, the term denotes patterns of recurring literacy activities and people's beliefs about these literacies (Tusting *et al.*, 2000). In this sense, the term connects individuals' writing and reading activities to wider culturally formed patterns, that is, to social practices (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). The relation between individuals' activities and literacy practices is seen as mutually shaping. In other words, literacy practices develop historically through what people do with texts, and people's literacy activities are organized by socially established literacy practices (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). Being embedded in wider social practices also entails that literacy activities are shaped by ideological world views and power structures (Street, 2003). Academic literacies are thus shaped by what counts as knowledge in specific academic disciplines, university departments, and degree programmes (Lea and Street, 1998).

This socially situated perspective further holds that literacy practices are associated with specific 'domains of life' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000: 8). Academic literacy practices, for instance, are associated with the domain of education. What counts as appropriate academic writing for a master's dissertation is patterned by the institution of higher education. At the same time, domains and associated practices do not exist in isolation but relate to other domains. Thus, while the concept of domains highlights the situatedness of literacy practices, it also raises questions of boundaries and overlaps between domains (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). Kell (2013) discusses this issue and critiques approaches that study literacy practices separately, within the boundaries of specific domains. She warns against 'a priori assumptions about what literacy is' (Kell, 2011: 613) and related predetermined notions of power structures in specific domains. Instead, Kell (2013) argues for research that follows the trajectories of meaning-making activities across socio-geographical sites and domains, and an examination of the varying ways power structures impact on meaning-making.

The interrelations and potential tensions between literacy practices associated with different domains are evident in AcLits research that considers literacy experiences that students bring to their academic writing (for example, Ivanič *et al.*, 2009; Thesen and Cooper, 2013). These literacies are frequently associated with domains such as home or work, and they are often less privileged and visible in the context of higher education (Lillis, 2001). A central contribution of AcLits to the study of students' writing development has been to consider how drawing on students' extracurricular literacy practices might challenge conventional ways of meaning-making in higher education and, most importantly, support student learning (Jones *et al.*, 1999). Moreover, in the current diverse and interdisciplinary context of higher education, the influence from other domains, such as the business sector, is increasingly noticeable (Lam, 2010). Yet, transferring practices across domains is complex and practices cannot be transferred as 'whole' (Ivanič *et al.*, 2009: 114).

How practices interrelate and interact across domains has been investigated from several angles. In their seminal study, Ivanič *et al.* (2009) investigated how vocational curricula can be enriched by drawing on students' extracurricular literacies. The researchers established a list of core elements that constitute literacy practices. These elements include participants, audiences, purposes, content, and artefacts (Ivanič and Satchwell, 2007). Identifying the characteristics of each element enabled the researchers to distinguish literacy practices associated with the domains of education, home, and work. For instance, students' home and work literacy practices often involved collaboration among several participants, while their academic assignments required individual work. Categorizing literacy practices according to the elements highlighted similarities between these practices that could be used as potential connecting points for 'networking' (Ivanič and Satchwell, 2007: 106), that is, for incorporating elements of home and work literacy practices into the academic domain. In addition, literacy practices with distinct elements could be networked if some of these elements 'resonate[d]' (Mannion *et al.*, 2009: 336). The metaphor of resonance implies the need for an 'attunement' of literacy elements 'in subtle ways so that [these elements] have a relationship with other literacy practices' (Mannion *et al.*, 2009: 329). This need for attunement or subtle transformation underlines the fact that interactions of literacy practices depend on more than the quality of constitutive elements.

In parallel to Kell's (2013) call for moving away from a focus on distinct domains, an alternative approach traces individual students' text trajectories and investigates interrelations between different practices in terms of 'repurposing' (Prior and Shipka, 2002: 215). Repurposing denotes the process of relocating and transforming extracurricular literacy activities into academic literacy practices. Roozen (2010), for instance, demonstrates how a student successfully repurposes literacy experiences of writing a prayer journal and of generating visual art designs into note-taking and organizing her essay content. In repurposing the literacy activities into the current literacy practice, the activities are transformed in relation to the specific purposes at hand. While Roozen's (2010) study underlines the fluid nature of meaning-making highlighted by Kell (2011) and the agency of the student, it excludes the role of institutional power structures as the context of academic writing. Nevertheless, what can be repurposed also depends on the nature of the academic discipline, the curriculum, and pedagogy adopted on an academic course (Cooper, 2011). Repurposing is thus not a linear process but involves a negotiation of dominant academic literacy practices and connected values as to what counts as academic work and knowledge. Students can choose and be creative in repurposing past literacy experiences; however, these choices can be limited due to power structures that privilege certain literacies but silence others (Thesen and Cooper, 2013).

The notions of resonance, repurposing, and negotiation of institutional values highlight different conditions for the interaction of literacy practices in postgraduate writing, namely,

the similarity of elements of literacy practices, the agency of participants, and the institutional structures. In order to synthesize these notions for investigating interactions of literacy practices, it is helpful to advance the conceptualization of literacy practices. Indeed, NLS and Aclits scholars have explored the potential of wider social practice theories for literacy research to trace developments of meaning-making across socio-geographical sites and domains (Kell, 2011), implementations of educational policy (Hamilton, 2011), and access to education (Grenfell *et al.*, 2011). The approach to practice developed by the philosopher Schatzki (1996) has been suggested for the investigation of relations between literacy practices (Barton and Lee, 2013; Baynham and Prinsloo, 2009; also Boud and Lee, 2009). However, to my knowledge, no detailed application of Schatzki's ontology to the study of postgraduate writing has been made. In the remainder of this section, I outline how Schatzki's ontology can be applied as a framework, that is, a heuristic or 'language of description' (Kell, 2013: 3), to investigate the conditions for repurposing extracurricular activities into master's dissertation writing.

The two most significant contributions from Schatzki's (2002) ontology for developing such a framework are the centrality of meaning and the inner organization of practices. What constitutes a practice, in Schatzki's view, lies in the mutual dependence of practices and activities. A practice provides the logic and meaning for its activities, that is, specific doings and sayings, while it is only through the actualization of a set of activities that this practice exists (Schatzki, 1997). Therefore, activities are not *a priori* a part of a practice, even if they might be considered as typically constituting this practice. This position replaces the need to distinguish literacy practices based on a categorization of constitutive elements as initially suggested by Ivanič *et al.* (2009). For the repurposing of extracurricular activities into academic literacy practices, this means that what can be repurposed does not depend on the similarities between core elements but on how the activities relate to the logic of the different practices. Moreover, not only people but also objects influence the logic and actualization of practices, as objects can change, stabilize, or regulate activities (Schatzki, 2002).

For the consideration of interactions between practices, it is important to observe that what can be understood as belonging to a practice is not random but organized (Barton and Hamilton, 2000). Schatzki's (2002) ontology supports this view and provides more detail. He asserts that activities are governed by four organizing dimensions: (1) practical understandings; (2) explicit rules; (3) teleoaffective structures; and (4) general values. Practical understandings encompass the know-how of being able to do the activity, of identifying the activity, and of knowing how to prompt and respond to the activity. Rules are explicit formulations, principles, or instructions, typically articulated by those in authority. They provide points for orientation on how activities should turn out (Schatzki, 1997). Teleoaffectivity pertains to hierarchically and normatively ordered goals and related feelings. This dimension underlines that people act purposefully and that goals and affect are indivisibly connected. It further suggests that activities are organized by a range of hierarchically ordered goals and that this order of goals can shift throughout the actualization of a practice. The fourth dimension, general values, denotes underlying views and values that can relate to a range of practices.

This view of practice based on meaning and governed by organizing dimensions can account for observations that literacy practices involve 'recurrent patterns of behaviour' while they are 'never completely fixed' (Papen, 2005: 30). This can be illustrated in two ways. First, the organizing dimensions are normative and incorporate institutional power structures, yet, power has to be understood here as intrinsic in people's interactions. Power in this sense is multidirectional, top-down and bottom up (Dreyfus *et al.*, 1983). This view of power is compatible with Kell's (2013) contention that power is not a predetermined, fixed category. Second, people who participate in literacy practices are to an extent socialized into these practices (Barton *et al.*, 2007; Lave

and Wenger, 1991). For instance, students might learn rules of what should be included in a method chapter of their dissertation. At the same time, students come to their dissertations with different 'literacy histories' (Barton and Hamilton, 1998), that is, past writing experiences. Their individual sets of experiences, derived from participating in various literacy practices, may influence the concrete actualization of their dissertation writing. Therefore, each actualization of a practice through a set of activities carried out by individuals with particular histories bears the possibility of transformation of the overall practice (Pennycook, 2010; Schatzki, 2002).

Applying Schatzki's ontology to academic writing systematizes and extends AcLits and NLS insights and enables a response to Kell's critique. The focus on meaning provides an alternative perspective on students' repurposing of their literacy experiences. The organizing dimensions provide a heuristic for a systematic investigation into the conditions for repurposing extracurricular literacies in master's dissertation writing within the context of the institutional requirements set by the degree programmes.

Tim's negotiation of academia and being an entrepreneur

To gain insights into the conditions for incorporating extracurricular literacies into dissertation-writing practices, this section illustrates the framework based on a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984). The case has been selected because it offers a rich mix of instances where activities are repurposed for the dissertation project from different extracurricular literacy practices, namely, from managing time as an entrepreneur, completing an undergraduate dissertation, and applying for business funding. While not all students might be as enthusiastic as the student in this case, all face the challenge of negotiating previous literacy experiences when completing a new assignment (Roozen, 2010).

The study

The case has been selected from a wider ethnographically oriented case study involving 12 students from 4 social science departments. At the centre of this case is Tim (pseudonym). The data for this case study include six dissertation drafts and six subsequent interviews lasting between 45 and 80 minutes. The interviews with Tim were central to gaining an emic perspective on the understandings of the literacy practices (Schatzki, 2012; Tusting *et al.*, 2000). In the interviews we discussed Tim's drafts as 'talk around text' (Lillis, 2008: 355) and his literacy histories, to elicit Tim's perceptions on his current writing, understandings of his texts, and connections he made to his literacy histories (Prior, 2003). In addition, Tim updated me on his progress via a series of emails. To gain additional perspectives on the literacy practices, I collected secondary data, including interviews with Tim's two supervisors, a supervision observation, Tim's bachelor degree dissertation, and the programme's dissertation handbook. The contact with Tim was established via an email sent out by the programme administrator to all students. After the first interview with Tim and with his consent, I interviewed his supervisors. All interviewees were informed about the research in advance and gave their consent before the interviews in accordance with the ethics guidelines of the university where the research was conducted.

The student interviews and emails were thematically coded (Crang and Cook, 2007). The codes were derived from both the theoretical practice framework and the empirical data. They index descriptions of literacy activities and writing techniques, past and current activities connected to the dissertation work, future expectations and aims, and Tim's evaluative comments on his writing. The codes served as a 'retrieval mechanism' (Mason, 2002: 158) to follow the

development of how Tim made sense of his writing across subsequent interviews and emails (see Lillis, 2008).

The comparison of successive drafts added insights into Tim's perspective on his writing activities. The drafts were analysed as 'text histories' (Lillis and Curry, 2006: 5) in relation to the interviews. The secondary data helped contextualize and triangulate the central data analysis. The notes from the observation and supervisor interviews were coded using a subset of the coding catalogue. Content analysis was applied to gain insights on the departmental requirements from the dissertation handbook. The data from the different sources were analysed and connected to each other in an iterative process to gain a holistic understanding of perceptions of, and conditions for, negotiating practices (see Barton and Hamilton, 1998).

Background to Tim's case

The case study is situated at a UK research-intensive university with a master's programme on innovative e-business shared between the departments of Management and Computer Science. The interdisciplinary programme has an applied focus, which is evident in the dissertation pathways. The standard dissertation option combines the dissertation with completing an internship at a company. The second option, recently introduced, connects the dissertation to developing a start-up business. In contrast to these applied pathways, the third option allows a literature-based project. According to one supervisor, the programme initially envisaged a final report on work in industry but, following university guidelines (see QAA, 2010), introduced the academic dissertation format. This statement indicates a contradiction between the business-oriented aims of the applied programme and the academic requirements for master's programmes.

Tim had completed his undergraduate degree in his native Central European country and had written his dissertation in English. He was attracted to the master's programme because of his aim to become an entrepreneur. During the master's, Tim had developed a business idea and he chose the start-up pathway for his dissertation. He was supported by a supervisor from each of the two departments and a mentor who was an entrepreneur. Tim's dissertation systematized literature on entrepreneurial networking from relevant academic fields. It was intended as scientific underpinning for his e-business. Initially, Tim distinguished strongly between his past and current academic experiences and his 'imagined future' (Barton *et al.*, 2007) in the business domain. For instance, when talking about his cooperation with his practical mentor, he stated:

He put up a challenge once. I was talking to him about the start-up methodology that I've got and he said, yeah, look, this is all nice but as long as you don't sell anything it's, you know, you can tell me whatever ... So it's hard to talk to him from an academic point of view.

(Interview 3)

Tim's orientation to these domains shapes his work and his repurposing negotiations. The following two sections discuss instances of repurposing alongside the organizing dimensions from Schatzki's ontology.

Organizing work as an entrepreneur

In the first repurposing instance, Tim applies time-management activities he associates with entrepreneurial work to his academic project. While time management is also used in dissertation writing (Grant, 2005), Tim associates it with advice from his entrepreneurial mentor. The mentor suggested logging tasks to dates in a diary and categorizing them according to their level of

importance. This would help Tim evaluate to what extent he had accomplished his tasks and become more efficient:

At the end of each day you just look at what have you done, what didn't you do. Why did you not do it and so forth. And you can structure your day more. Like you have a meeting at 9 and at 4, so in-between, what can you do?

(Interview 2)

Tim showed me his A5-sized diary with a weekly overview on double-pages. He used different colours and sizes of letters to indicate levels of urgency and importance for each item. Tim considered this technique system to be an improvement compared to his previous use of notes on Post-its. In this instance, the diary and the highlighter pens become meaningful tools that support Tim's coordination of his start-up and dissertation work (see Kell, 2011).

The observable activities of categorizing, highlighting, and evaluating can be found in academic and business domains. In their utilization for time management, the activities connect to the value of efficiency that pertains to both domains. This value is evident in the mentor's advice and the supervisor's concern for timely completion of the dissertation, which he articulated in the observed supervision session. In terms of practical understandings, it can be inferred that Tim draws more on his academic experience, since he had little entrepreneurial experience but was confident in his academic work. Nevertheless, in the interview Tim connects the use of the diary clearly to his imagined future as entrepreneur. He derives the rules of logging dates in certain ways from the mentor as a representative of the business world. Moreover, Tim strongly distinguished between the overall goals that govern practices in the domains of business and academia. Whereas the main goal for an entrepreneur in the business world is profit – according to Tim's mentor – Tim's academic goal is a good degree classification.

This instance illuminates the different levels of similarities and differences between literacy practices alongside the organizing dimensions. The repurposing in this instance depends only partly on the resonance of elements of literacy practices across domains, as suggested by Ivanič and Satchwell (2007). It is Tim's making sense of the activities in terms of his entrepreneurial work that helps him use them for his dissertation project.

Developing the methods section

In the second repurposing instance, Tim draws on his literacy experiences from writing his bachelor dissertation in another European country and from his writing of business funding applications to develop his current methods section. Tim repeatedly referred to his successful undergraduate dissertation, which was also literature-based. He linked it to his current dissertation in terms of teleoaffectivity by stating that he enjoys 'bringing ideas together and integrating them' (interview 2). When writing the bachelor dissertation, Tim developed an outline with chapter headings and subheadings early on. He added content to each chapter as he progressed in his research. To underline this point, Tim showed me the initial outline for his bachelor dissertation, with similar headings to his final version. He used the same technique in his master's dissertation and clearly drew on the practical understanding from his previous literacy experience.

In contrast to his bachelor project, the master's dissertation included a methodology section. From the guidelines in the dissertation handbook, Tim knew that this section was expected, but he was uncertain about how to frame his literature-based approach in terms of methodology; he reviewed literature and contacted lecturers at the university and beyond for suggestions on relevant literature: 'I am still unsure ...: What can/should I write in the Methodology part? What is this "called", what I am doing and how should I express this?'

To help him develop this section, Tim included guiding questions in red font under the section heading. He had adapted this from his experience of filling in funding applications for his start-up business. According to Tim, these application forms contained a sequence of questions that helped create a structured business plan. The question approach chimed with Tim's use of chapter headings to further focus his writing. Thus, Tim applied his practical understanding of answering questions in a business application form to his academic work. Moreover, the underlying goal of developing a structured text was compatible with his goals for his dissertation.

The content of the questions for his methods section can be traced to his supervisor's advice: 'just say what you did, succinctly ... It is one of the principles of science that a paper should contain sufficient detail to allow the work to be repeated by someone else'. Tim formulated his questions according to this rule: 'How did I approach answering the research question? So others can reconstruct it.' Following this advice within the appropriate academic register required further supervisor feedback. For instance, instead of Tim's description of his methods in terms of 'conversations with experts', the supervisor suggested the term 'interviews'. Tim finally wrote, 'the literature review was driven by informal interviews with experts in certain fields, which seem to play a role for the networking entrepreneur'.

In this instance, Tim combines his practical understandings from his experiences in academia and in the business domain. He identifies overlapping goals for his literacy practices in both domains and derives the rules for what the methods section should contain from his supervisor's general advice. To perceive and express his approach as scientific method and apply these rules, he requires the supervisor as 'mediator' (Dysthe, 2002: 493).

Conclusion

The article discusses the conditions that enable or restrict postgraduate students in repurposing aspects of their extracurricular knowledge in their dissertation work. To gain a deeper understanding of such repurposing processes, the article synthesizes and extends the concept of literacy practices, which is central to AcLits perspectives on the social situatedness of academic writing. It builds on Ivanič *et al.*'s (2009) work and clarifies that literacy practices are constituted by meaning rather than by core elements. Perceived distinctions between literacy practices associated with different domains, such as academia or the business world, are therefore fluid (Kell, 2013).

The concept of literacy practices also highlights the inextricable connection between individuals' activities and shared 'social worlds' (Barton and Hamilton, 2000: 8). In other words, practices only come into existence through the activities of individuals, while these activities are governed by organizing dimensions of practical understandings, rules, teleoaffective structures, and general values (Schatzki, 2002). The notion that practices are governed by organizing dimensions offers explanatory resources that go beyond the metaphor of resonance and provide an analytical framework for tracing the 'complex reorientations' (Ivanič *et al.*, 2009) involved in repurposing processes across practices.

Investigating repurposing instances through the lens of these organizing dimensions allows the consideration of both the dynamic nature of literacy practices and their embeddedness in normative structures. The case study explains how Tim negotiates the goals, rules, and values of literacy practices that he associates with distinct domains, namely, entrepreneurial businesses and academia. The normative structures related to these goals, rules, and values affect Tim's work at different times to different degrees. For instance, Tim traces his time-management technique to the business domain, while the rules for writing his method section can be traced to the academic domain. This observation of the alternating influence of different, albeit overlapping,

normative structures is compatible with Kell's (2013) view that power structures cannot be considered as *a priori* characteristics of literacy practices.

Applying the lens of organizing dimensions connects the focus on the student as active participant, emphasized in the concept of repurposing, with the focus on normative social structures associated with specific domains. Thus, the attention shifts to literacy practices as social phenomena and their interaction across domains. As individual, Tim actively identifies the 'fit' (Blommaert and De Fina, 2015) between literacy practices when repurposing activities, such as the use of guiding questions he derived from the business applications. At the same time, identifying this fit is made more likely by the nature of the applied programme. Moreover, the social nature of literacy practices is highlighted by the role of mediators in repurposing, such as Tim's supervisor mediating academic registers or his mentor mediating entrepreneurial behaviours.

On the institutional level, the framework accounts for the dynamic development in the higher education landscape, despite its persistent traditions and national guidelines (QAA, 2010). Changes in knowledge production not only influence the inclusion of literacy practices associated with non-academic domains at the researcher level (Hamilton and Pitt, 2009) but also at the master's level. The case illustrates how the student's work is shaped by the normative structures of both academia and the business domain.

The discussion leads to implications for postgraduate writing pedagogy. Supporting writing development requires the collaboration among subject specialists, writing experts, and students because innovation and transformation is a networked phenomenon (Ivanič *et al.*, 2009; Paxton and Frith, 2014). As Cooper (2011) states, the pedagogic fit between supervisor and student expectations is one of the determining factors of successful repurposing. An awareness of underlying values and understandings might help to shape students' and supervisors' expectations of dissertation practices. As the case shows, this requires a cycle of writing and feedback, that is, a dialogue between students and supervisors.

Finally, institutions need to enable different assessment formats that correspond to the changing conditions of knowledge production in higher education. While Tim's dissertation can be considered as traditional in its literature-based format, its connection to the development of a start-up business highlights the increasing overlap between academia and business sectors. This overlap might warrant different formats of final assessments, as originally intended by the developers of Tim's master's programme. Following Pennycook (2010), who states that change of practices is inherent in each of its actualizations, it can be argued that Tim's actualization of dissertation-writing practices contributed to a small degree to modifying his supervisors' expectations of what a dissertation on their programme could look like.

Notes on the contributor

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