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Emerging from the third space chrysalis: Experiences in a non-hierarchical, collaborative research community of practice

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Emerging from the third space chrysalis: Experiences in a non-hierarchical, collaborative research community of practice

Abstract

This article discusses the creation of a research-focused virtual community of practice (vCoP) for geographically-dispersed third space professionals, motivated by desires for enhanced professional collaboration, visibility and identity. The authors used collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to evaluate their personal reflections as vCoP participants. Data were gathered in two collaborative writing activities and analysed using thematic analysis (TA). The TA identified two connected themes, which capture the vCoP members' aspirations to transcend their current roles and be research-active through connecting with like-minded professionals. Collaborative writing activities, including authoring this paper, cultivated elements of academic identity such as independence and purpose. A non-hierarchical and supportive vCoP environment allowed the members to work beyond time and institutional constraints to foster the evolution of the community and an emerging sense of professional identity beyond that typically associated with third space roles. The paper offers a model of collaboration that could help groups in similar situations.

Practitioner Notes

1. Virtual Communities of Practice (vCoPs) can help geographically-dispersed third space, or other higher education professionals connect with like-minded colleagues to meet common aspirations and cultivate a sense of shared professional identity.
2. Democratic participation and support from fellow vCoP members promote commitment, creative thinking, motivation and an openness to generating ideas and trying new ways of working
3. Shared activities, such as collaborative writing and reflection, allow a virtual group to work within time and institutional constraints in ways that would not be achievable for each individual working alone. Such collaboration fosters the evolution of the community
4. The model of collaboration developed by this particular vCoP could be used by other groups to address questions in the changing HE landscape that are relevant to them, and plan activities to strengthen their vCoP's group identity.
5. Collaborative autoethnography is an appropriate methodology to research a particular cultural and communal context where participants act as both the subjects and the researchers.

Keywords

Third space, professional identity, professional culture, virtual community of practice, learning development

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Introduction

This article emerges from a virtual Community of Practice (vCoP) of Learning Developers geographically dispersed across the United Kingdom (UK). Learning Development (LD) or Academic Support work in Higher Education (HE) is typically carried out by professionals within the *third space*, “an emergent territory between academic and professional domains” (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 377). Research activity is central to Hilsdon’s (2011) characterisation of LD work as “a complex set of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary academic roles and functions, involving teaching, tutoring, research, and the design and production of learning materials” (p. 4). However, wider forces operating HE in the UK have *unbundled* teaching, research and service (Kinser, 2002; Macfarlane, 2011) into specialisms. Research is often marginalised or non-existent within LD contracts and role descriptions (Murray and Glass, 2011; Johnson, 2018), echoing the experiences of many teaching-focused professionals who lack institutional support to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning SOTL (Simmons et al., 2021).

The vCoP was created in early 2020 as a potential solution for supporting the research endeavours of LD practitioners who resist unbundling, and view research and teaching as mutually-dependent *constellations* of activity integral to their roles (Tummons, 2018). Conscious of the pressure and isolation of balancing scholarship with full-time student-facing work, an author of this paper had a suggestion. He originally proposed that like-minded LD professionals interested in collaborating to pursue research activities within their role might meet informally over lunch at the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) conference. Shortly afterwards, as the conference pivoted online at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the lunch proposal was adapted and became the genesis of a now thriving vCoP, similar to a Small Significant Online Network Group (SSONG) (Green et al., 2020). As the community evolved, its members confided uncertainties about their reasons for joining, and their aspirations for how the group would benefit them. Yet, in spite of these uncertainties, the community was motivated to grow, meeting monthly online as a forum for members to lead discussions on aspects of their research.

Eventually, as members of the vCoP, we began to consider the processes that underpinned our beginnings and evolution. Questions arose such as: *what sat behind our group unity? What was lacking in our professional identities that the vCoP could fulfil, and why?* These questions started a process of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) involving synchronous and asynchronous written reflections to capture our collective experiences of belonging to the vCoP. Taking part in these activities proved a crucial turning point in solidifying our identity as a group.

This co-authored paper continues our initial collaborative ventures, as we unite ten members’ voices non-hierarchically to explain the formation and organic evolution of the vCoP to a wider audience. The success of the vCoP can be argued to have occurred because of, not in spite of, the pervasive flip to online technologies witnessed during 2020. The insight possible from our collective experience need not be limited to those with interests in research. Rather, the model we have developed could assist any practitioners working in the third space (Whitchurch, 2008) who wish to nurture common ground through collaboration, or to transcend boundaries to their professional identity, but who may lack facilitative opportunities in their immediate environment.

The paper discusses three research questions: (1) how has the current landscape in HE driven a need for a research vCoP beyond existing roles and institutional structures?; (2) how have the activities undertaken by the current group contributed to shaping its identity as a vCoP?; (3) how can the formation of this group be used as an example for other groups in similar circumstances? We start

by considering the interweaving between the concepts of third space work, professional identity and vCoPs before explaining our choice of CAE as a methodological approach. We then move on to presenting the findings from the thematic analysis of our two writing activities to illuminate the dynamics which have formed and sustained our community and demonstrate how these might guide others.

Literature Review

Professional identity and third space

Academic roles have undergone significant changes over the last decade or more due to market driven managerialism (Giroux, 2011). The professional identity of the traditional academic role has therefore changed since the early 2000s, partly due to the unbundling (Kinser, 2002) of the traditional functions of academic roles: teaching, research and service. This disaggregation, alongside the increasing professionalisation of administrative staff (Kolsaker, 2014), has seen roles emerge that incorporate academic and non-academic activity, staffed by professionals with a plethora of backgrounds (Whitchurch, 2008). The groups are variously named para-academics (Macfarlane, 2011), and third space professionals (Whitchurch, 2008), and involve an amalgam of “multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary academic roles and functions” (Hilsdon, 2011, p. 14). Additionally, there is recognition of such diverse roles being both located variously (in central hubs, libraries, faculties or schools) and contracted differently (Burns and Sinfield, 2004; Hilsdon, 2011). These roles are evidently shaped by a variety of sometimes conflicting factors. Their emergence, therefore, raises profound questions about how the professional identity of those staff involved is moulded and maintained.

Professional identity initially develops around accepted professional norms, often based on official accreditation (Tan et al., 2017). As their professional identity evolves, an individual searches for unique features that signify their professional belonging and internalise the distinctive processes used by their profession (Degn, 2015). Thus, when discussing professional identity development, there is a need to distinguish between internal and external factors (Martin et al., 2020). The internal factors range from personal “values and beliefs” (Harris, 2005, p. 426) to interests and past experiences (Arvaja, 2018). The external factors are both formalised elements of a profession such as required skills and adherence to regulations (Mackay, 2017), and social conventions such as peer-perception, practices and discourses (Pierson et al., 2020). All of this is key when exploring the professional identity of an academic, as any academic role operates across a blend of social environments: *micro* (department, college, etc.), *localised* (institution, mission group, etc.), and *global* (professional networks, international initiatives, etc.) (Trede et al., 2012).

It is important to acknowledge the identity of third space professionals, those working in the space between traditional academic roles and professional domains, as they perform crucial bridging functions between students and academic staff, and occupy transitional spaces between students’ worlds inside and outside universities. Gravett and Winstone (2019) note that students hold such support in high regard and can form unique trust-based relationships with the staff involved. Such insights reveal much about the apparent core role and mission of third space staff. Equally they contribute to explaining why the staff involved are seldom regarded as having traditional academic status or duties (Chanock, 2007) and their roles often being misunderstood (Murray and Glass, 2011). Malkin and Chanock (2018) identify that the issues are partly remedied if third space staff collaborate outside of immediate professional groups; doing so boosts identity and visibility, with

the possible compromise of diluting the core professional roles. Third space professionals thus face moral dilemmas about how to balance extended identities with contractual roles.

Despite the challenge in developing some facets of professional identity, the desirability of doing so means many third space staff will seek out opportunities regardless. Although third space staff may find *localised*, workplace-based opportunities to develop their roles as teachers, facilitators or developers, they may well need to explore *global* networks (Trede et al., 2012) such as professional associations or web-based communities to develop more scholarly facets of their identity. Often, third spaces inside universities are typified by opportunities counterbalanced by lost freedom and autonomy. Therefore, a fulfilling third space professional identity often requires supplementation with outside collaborations, leading many staff to adopt what Whitchurch (2019) terms *itinerant identities*. Such activity has been clearly documented in a number of academic settings from departmental heads in Danish universities (Degn, 2015) through librarians in New Zealand (Pierson et al., 2020), teaching-focused faculty in Australia, Canada and the US (Simmons et al., 2021), to British practitioners who have become academics later in their careers (Dickinson et al., 2020). These examples illustrate professionals attempting to retain elements of academic identity such as “freedom, autonomy and purpose” (Harris, 2005, p. 421) whilst working within the constraints of time and institutional requirements.

Virtual communities of practice

With the emergence of the third space professions, opportunities arise for practitioners to expand their professional horizons through forming communities of practice, a concept coined by Lave and Wenger (1991). Wenger (1998) discussed how three concepts, *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise* and *shared repertoire*, must be present for a group to qualify as a CoP, through which practitioners draw upon, explore and exchange “explicit and tacit knowledge” (Li et al., 2009, p. 2) to enhance understanding through collective engagement (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). According to Tummons (2018), in CoP’s within HE, interactions can be through a range of multifaceted avenues, lenses and shared constructs, provided compatibility with the CoP’s aims is foregrounded. Tummons (2018) suggests that “participation entails learning as an epistemological necessity of community membership” (p. 19); through collaboration, the aims of the community are met.

The ubiquity of modern communications and collaborative technologies has evolved since Lave and Wenger (1991) first defined CoPs, developing opportunities for virtual communities of practice. Adedoyin (2016, p. 359), drawing on ideas from Dubé et al. (2006), defines a virtual community of practice (vCoP) as “an expanded and geographically unbounded version of CoP which utilises the connectivity and interface provided by a wide variety of information and communication technology digital tools”. McLoughlin et al. (2018) have reviewed literature on vCoPs and report a number of benefits for professional communities such as interprofessional development, but state that issues of privacy, trust, encouragement and technology need to be addressed. It is possible, therefore, to create an environment of trust and accountability for a vCoP (Myers, 2017), yet it is important to explore what makes an online community successful, and why members are motivated to join and engage.

Individuals can be extrinsically and/or intrinsically motivated to join vCoPs (Pang and Capek, 2020). Extrinsic motivation is created externally to a group, such as a course leader creating a group for course participants (Lees and Meyer, 2011). However, Schofield et al. (2018) identify that knowledge-sharing within a CoP can be reduced if the CoP is created by management, due to an element of competition. CoPs are perhaps more likely to be successful when there is a mutual and

intrinsically motivated interest (Nistor et al., 2015; Pyrko et al., 2017), for example to share knowledge and learn from fellow group members. Wasko and Faraj (2005) have found that a success predictor for professionally-based CoPs is members' desire to enhance their professional reputation, while Haas et al. (2020) observe that greater engagement with CoPs goes hand in hand with workplace engagement. Motivation for participating in a CoP can vary, therefore, with a more successful CoP emerging where the community naturally aligns through mutual co-creation of knowledge and genuine collaboration, over any hierarchical or personal motivations. In keeping with this tenet, the development of a vCoP for the third space authors in this paper arose from a genuine collective goal of engaging in a research community that transcended their institutional roles. Therefore, the process that Harris (2005) describes – balancing time and institutional constraints with the desire for autonomy and freedom – appears an extremely relevant foundation to the VCoP in question, and underpins much of the reflection from its members that forms the basis for the remainder of this paper.

Methodology and methods

Collaborative autoethnography

The study was conducted using CAE, a constructive, interpretive, qualitative methodology developed from individual autoethnography, for completing research as a community (Chang, 2008; Greene, 2014; Lapadat, 2017). With CAE, two or more researchers identify the research topic and collect, analyse, interpret and write up shared autobiographical data from their personal stories as participants, acting as both the subject and the researcher within a particular cultural and communal context (Chang et al., 2013; Ngunjiri, 2014). From an ethical perspective, participants speak for themselves, own their personal data and have a level of control over how their voice is presented (Chang, 2013). Data collection involves conversations between the co-researchers to capture a wide range of perspectives within a CoP, and data analysis and interpretation are completed jointly by the co-researchers (Geist-Martin et al., 2010; Lapadat et al., 2010). Participants also have a chance to receive feedback and mentorship from their co-researchers (Chang et al., 2013).

As an approach to community inquiry, CAE supports the development of relationships based on trust, shared vulnerability and equal power and status for all participants (Hernandez and Ngunjiri, 2013). As such, the methodology promotes collective over individual agency, as participants establish goals, identify and agree how to work together to examine their own perspective on a topic, and challenge that of others for the co-creation of knowledge (Lapadat, 2017; Taylor et al., 2014). Each collaborator is recognised as an author at the end of the research process but co-authorship makes it easier to maintain greater anonymity for participants than is often possible with individual autoethnography (Lapadat et al., 2010). The research output provides a detailed narrative description and analytical interpretation of the collective experience of the members of a single group or CoP. In turn, this can engage members of the wider community, inspiring them to reflect on their own practice and extending the initial experience beyond the original participants (Méndez, 2013). All of these features of CAE made the methodology relevant to the current study.

Data collection

In keeping with the community focus of CAE, and the principle of using the researchers' experience as primary data to understand a particular cultural and communal context (Chang, 2013), data for this study were collected through spontaneous, collaborative, simultaneous free writing in a synchronous online writing session lasting 30 minutes. Members of the vCoP were invited to use a

shared document in *Google Docs* to respond to 12 questions on six topics: the role participants envisaged for the vCoP when they joined; the future potential of the vCoP; the research status of each participant within their HE institution; the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the member's decisions to join the vCoP; reflections on writing a paper as a group; and the member's knowledge of theories which might underpin a paper about forming and developing a vCoP.

The intention for the data collection process was for participants to reflect on their memories and observations to capture their experience of participating in the community over time. This approach allowed the group to construct their own autoethnography whilst simultaneously creating a collective picture (Chang, 2013). Eight group members contributed to the document in *Google Docs*. Following this initial task, seven individuals also shared their reflections on being part of the collaborative writing process itself using *Padlet*, a digital canvas that allows a group to share material. Two members of the community who were not present for the synchronous writing session were subsequently invited to add their responses to the documents asynchronously.

Data analysis

CAE does not prescribe a set structure for data analysis. For this study, the data sets were analysed by adapting the principles of Thematic Analysis (TA) outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2020). As a flexible, inductive, iterative approach, TA is consistent with CAE as a constructive, interpretive methodology (Chang, 2013; Lietz et al., 2006) and reflects Braun and Clarke's (2020) recent emphasis on researchers adopting a reflexive and subjective position throughout the analysis process. As demonstrated below, TA is also suitable for a team of researchers working together to code, analyse, interpret and validate written text captured in a number of different formats (Terry et al., 2017).

Although all 10 researchers completed a quick initial synchronous exercise to look for common words and possible themes in the datasets, the full TA was completed by four of the co-researchers. Table 1 sets out the stages of the TA and principles that the TA team defined to guide the process of data analysis.

With regard to the coding process itself, each participant entry was assigned a label based on the two different data sets. For the collaborative *Google Doc*, the 12 questions were labelled (Q1-Q12), and as this element of the data collection process was synchronous, answers were coded by order of response rather than by participant (A1-A12). Not all questions were answered by all respondents and some questions had multiple answers by the same person. The seven responses to the asynchronous *Padlet* task were coded in order of response (E1-E7) and refer to individual participants anonymously. Every extract used in the discussion section is identified using combinations of these labels¹ to identify which data set the items were extracted from, ensuring transparency.

Ethical considerations

All the study participants were volunteers who willingly contributed and owned their personal data, removing the need for formal ethical approval. There was no funding for the research, and participants received no financial or other compensation.

¹ For example, an extract coded as (Q1A5) is part of the fifth answer to the first question in the synchronous activity, and an extract coded (E4) is from the fourth response on the *Padlet* activity

Table 1: Stages and guiding principles for the thematic analysis

Stage	Action	Guiding principle(s)
1: Independent coding	Each member of the TA team independently examined both data sets (the collaborative <i>Google Doc</i> and the subsequent reflections in <i>Padlet</i>) to familiarise themselves with the content, search for patterns and meanings, and generate initial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).	<p>To provide a rich thematic description of the entire dataset, initial codes were created without an existing coding frame or any preconceptions about the data analysis.</p> <p>This approach, described as “reflexive TA” by Braun and Clarke (2020), recognises that the process of data analysis and interpretation is inevitably influenced by researcher subjectivity, and emphasises the need for reflexivity throughout the analysis process.</p>
2: Refining the codes	<p>The TA team worked together to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - refine the codes by identifying commonality. - group the initial codes into categories to identify sub-themes. - further categorise the sub-themes to two main themes. 	<p>Working independently and then as a group, allowed the team to identify areas of overlap in the data (Sawrikar, 2019) and capture “something significant or interesting about the data” (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p. 3356).</p> <p>An inductive approach to identifying themes ensured that the findings emerged directly from the data, rather than from prior expectations or models (Thomas, 2006).</p> <p>Developing <i>latent themes</i> (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that go beyond the semantic content to examine ideas, assumptions, concepts or ideologies resulted in a deeper analysis of both the group’s emerging identity and the members’ perceptions of community.</p> <p>Searching for meaning and experience(s) that are socially constructed and reproduced, rather than residing within individuals, is also consistent with the constructive, interpretive paradigm of CAE (Chang, 2013; Lietz et al., 2006).</p>
3: Data validation	Two additional authors worked through one dataset each to test the consistency of the final coding and the interpretation of the original material.	A deductive approach to data validation helped to increase validity in the process (O’Leary, 2017).
4: Final revisions and validation	<p>The core TA team considered the comments from each of the additional authors to make final revisions to the themes and sub-themes across both data sets (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018).</p> <p>The full TA was returned to the additional authors for a final review.</p>	This ‘double-checking’ completed the data validation and the TA cycle.

Findings and discussion

Overview of themes, sub-themes and codes

The TA team of co-researchers identified two distinct themes from the data analysis, *Questioning the current learning development (LD) role* and *Making us fit – finding a sense of belonging*, as well as two sub-themes for each (see Table 2). The first theme refers to how we (as participants) questioned our perceived roles and institutional constraints. This process of questioning has led to a desire to develop our professional selves by moving away from silo working and collaborating with like-minded third space professionals through an external network. The second theme is viewed as the consequence of the first. Due to the perceived limitations on our professional identities demanded by our current roles and institutions, the second theme identifies a need for action to develop a unique sense of belonging through establishing opportunities to collaborate, and forming and evolving a research vCoP.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Code
1. Questioning current LD role	1.1 Desire for different possibilities of professional development	1.1.1 Development of professional self
		1.1.2 Trying something new
		1.1.3 Inspiration from and support <i>for</i> others
	1.2 Transcending role boundaries	1.2.1 Moving away from existing silos
		1.2.2 Including research into LD
		1.2.3 Lack of recognition
2. Making us fit – Finding a sense of belonging	2.1 Establishing opportunities for sharing and cross-pollination	2.1.1 Finding commonality: shared values, beliefs/interests
		2.1.2 Shared online tool improves the writing process and productivity
		2.1.3 Learning from others
	2.2 Creation of a virtual community	2.2.1 Working to achieve a shared goal (Doing together)
		2.2.2 Impact of ‘live’ writing task (Doing together)
		2.2.3 Peer influence on motivation and productivity (Doing together)
		2.2.4 Feeling connected (Perception of togetherness)
		2.2.5 Feeling part of community (Perception of togetherness)
		2.2.6 Reflecting on the identity of the group (Perception of togetherness)

The discussion section considers the two themes by delineating their respective sub-themes and using data extracts to support the interpretation. The initial element of the discussion focuses on the first theme, *questioning the current LD role* and examines the origin of our motivations to join the vCoP. Since these are influenced by the roles and structures in which we currently work, the theme

links to the first research question: *how has the current HE landscape driven a need for a research vCoP beyond existing roles and institutional structures?* The second part of the discussion centres on data from the second theme, *making us fit – finding a sense of belonging*. Here, the processes which led to members gaining a greater sense of belonging can shed light on the second research question: *how have the activities undertaken by the group contributed to shaping its identity as a vCoP?* Finally, a discussion of the positive impact the group has had on our professional identity and LD in a wider sense allows us to formulate an answer to the third research question: *how can the formation of this vCoP be used as an example for other groups in similar circumstances?*

Questioning current LD role

Desire for different possibilities of professional development

The data in the first sub-theme echo the literature on reasons why we join networks and CoPs (Wasko and Faraj, 2005). The reasons cited in the data refer to intrinsic motivation to develop professionally, such as “feedback” (Q2A1) from experienced researchers and “sharing of ideas” (E4) that supported our research and professional development. At the same time, more tangible, external motivators were visible, such as the desire to “increase my own research profile/time to fit with institution requirements” (Q1A10). Thus, the findings echo the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that drive participation in CoPs (Pang and Capek, 2020).

In the data, intrinsic motivations and internal gain, such as better understanding, were more commonly cited than external motivations. Still, it is important to note there is a strong community element to the desire to develop our professional selves. Our responses emphasised the need to “share experience and practice with like-minded practitioners” (Q1A5) and “the LD research community” (Q1A4). “Ensuring that the collaborative aspect remains at the forefront of future activities” (Q1A7) was a key concern in the data, demonstrating that we regard the three attributes that characterise CoPs, *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise* and *shared repertoire* (Wenger, 1998), as primary tools to achieve the desired development of our professional identity.

Therefore, it could be argued that the internal and external factors that shape professional identity (Martin et al., 2020) are particularly closely intertwined here, which might be explained by the specific nature of the professional identity of third space staff in academia. External factors such as required skills, adherence to regulations (Mackay, 2017) and social conventions like peer-perception, practices, and discourses (Pierson et al., 2020) are less clearly defined for these new professional identities. These third space identities are often defined *ex negativo*, i.e. through the absence of many features of more traditional academic roles. Therefore, it makes sense that our search for alternatives to missing aspects of academic work, such as research activities, stems less from external pressures and more from our own intrinsic desire to include these aspects. In this interpretation, the predominance of intrinsic motivations in the data suggests that the interest in a research vCoP could arise, in part, from a response to the changes in the HE landscape described earlier in the paper.

Such an interpretation can be further supported by the emphasis on the joy of trying something new. This notion featured in various reflections on the shared writing the group undertook, described as something we have “not really tried [...] before” (Q12A3), which is “different” (Q11A6) and “more liberating” (Q11A6), or a “leap into the unknown” (E7) that helps “break up the monotony” (E7). Although it is possible to experience such pleasure when finding a new approach that enlivens an externally enforced task, it could be argued that the pleasure derived from experimenting with a new

form of collaboration is much more likely to arise in a context where intrinsic motivation predominates. This reading of our data would suggest that this vCoP is an example of third space staff turning towards “global networks” (Trede et al., 2012) to develop the more scholarly facets of their identity. Other extrinsic motivations, such as the hope that participation can fulfil external expectations, or contribute to workplace-based engagement (Haas et al., 2020), might also be present, but are less significant than intrinsic interest in developing professional identity through the exchange with others and experimentation.

Yet, one of our codes puts this reading into question: under 1.1.3. all coders identified data that focused on the wish to provide inspiration and support *for* others. This included thoughts on how the work done by our vCoP might not just “inform our own work” but also “provide a toolkit of support for new LDs” (Q3A1), engaging “those who are less engaged” (Q3A7) and offering “informal mentoring” (Q3A8). Such excerpts, seemingly primarily concerned with the development of others, do not easily align with the idea that participation is, first and foremost, regarded as a path for developing our own professional identities. Even if developing others is interpreted as a by-product of participation and not a reason for engaging with the group, it could cast doubt on the interpretation that the vCoP is regarded solely as a path towards individually developing a broader academic identity. If professional development is considered on the level of group identity, however, these data do not necessarily disrupt our analysis. On the contrary, sharing the positive impacts from us being in the vCoP could fulfill our desire to make research and scholarship about LD accessible to a wider proportion of colleagues. Through this, we can contribute to developing the group identity of the profession and we echo Samuels’ (2013) call for a coherent scholarship base that supports LD work.

Transcending role boundaries

Such a focus on developing a group identity is supported by a strong theme in the data that relates participation in the vCoP to the perceived limitations of these third space professionals’ identities. In contrast to the idea that a third space offers new opportunities (Whitchurch, 2008), the data featured a clear emphasis on limitations – in respect of research, at least – particularly the sense of isolation created by the lack of opportunities to share research concerns within workplace-internal networks. Our data exhibited a range of reasons for isolation, including universal ones, such as “lonely writer’s block” (Q11A2) and being an “early career professional” (Q1A7) or “part-time doctoral student” (Q1A6). The most prominent one, however, was the lack of local infrastructure to support a broader academic identity, namely insufficient “chance[s] to talk about research with peers at work” (Q1A6) and lack of “knowing how to approach or connect with others” (Q1A7) in a field where there are only “pockets of good research without any critical mass” (Q1A9) in one place. Lacking these opportunities creates an impression of isolation. As one member of our vCoP memorably stated: “I am sitting in a silo in one tiny part of the country” (Q1A3). This sense of isolation could explain why we regard collective action and sharing as useful tools to develop our professional identity. If identity is determined by both people’s perception of self and how they are perceived by others (Jenkins, 1996), there is no point in developing our own identity in a silo.

The data clearly showed that this desire to change the group identity was linked to the unbundling of different functions in academic professions described in the literature. We perceived the absence of research in our current roles as a shortcoming in our desired professional identity. Such externally imposed constraints sit clearly at odds with our perceptions of our professional selves (Johnson, 2018), which seems to have ignited a desire to move beyond current constraints and take a more active scholarly approach. Therefore, it could be argued that we have striven to retain elements of

academic identity whilst working within the constraints of institutional requirements (Harris, 2005). To illustrate this point, one of us referred to scholarly activity in their role as “always ‘hobby research’ [which] feels like pushing outside boundaries of my job to be research active, not encouraged within it” (Q1A6). The reason why “having that research aspiration in higher education is more often a dream to make than a reality” (Q7A7) seems to be linked to a lack of resources to encourage scholarly practice – “lack of infrastructure for exchange” (Q3A4) or “of resources for research: above all time” (Q2A5). There were also links to what appears sometimes to be a deliberate lack of support from management, ranging from not having “any research support and not [being] generally encouraged to do research”, (Q7A2) to active resistance: “doing research has been pushed against actively in the past” (Q7A4), and even those “on academic contracts [...] had to fight hard to get research back into the job description when they rewrote it” (Q7A9).

The data also emphasised an aspect of identity common to several of us, namely that our contract types were impacting our ability to be involved in research. There is extensive discussion about the lack of academic contracts for LD staff in the literature and the resulting impact on their involvement in scholarly work (Burns and Sinfield, 2004; Hildson, 2011; Hilsdon, 2018; Johnson, 2018). For instance, one of us mentioned that not being on an academic contract means “publishing and research are not an incentive or a means of progression professionally” (Q7A5). Similarly, “many [professionals in similar contracts] [...] struggle against this problem and give up or in other cases just quite legitimately don’t want to do research” (Q7A4). Even where publications had been achieved, this was often dismissed, as shown by one member’s frustrating experience trying to contribute to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a system for assessing the quality of research in UK HE; their publications were excluded as “my job did not have a significant research component” (Q7A9). The data seem therefore to indicate that our involvement in research in our respective HE institutions is limited and generally restricted to “those who are inclined” (Q7A5) or “have the motivation” (Q7A1). The conclusion that “contracts make it hard to include [research activity] as part of our regular practices” (Q5A6) thus supports the interpretation that participation in this vCoP is driven by intrinsic motivation, as discussed above. At the same time, we are conscious of the external factors, such as contracts, which determine how the profession is seen and set boundaries around our professional identity.

The contradiction between personal interest in developing research and structures that hinder rather than support it was clearly identified as a reason for participation in the vCoP. For instance, one of us reported that “this is another reason why I see this group and collaborative research and writing, such as this, as being so important” (Q7A6). Others who described themselves as less experienced researchers, mentioned that “this is partly why I joined the group, to seek support/advice from those that have already embarked on this activity” (Q7A2). The creation of the vCoP also appeared to be presented as an opportunity to help shape our professional identities and consider “what we want [our professional] core domain to be” (Q5A6). For many of us, developing the research culture and scholarship of our discipline will consolidate our professional identity and, in turn, that of fellow professionals (Hilsdon, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Samuels, 2013). For example, one member stated: “if I wanted to teach without research, I wouldn’t have become an academic; LD needs active researchers if it wants to be an academic field, as this research is essential to back up our teaching practice” (Q8A5). Another echoed this view and suggested that a more even split of teaching and research activities in their current roles would be a positive change for learning development professionals, as it could lead “to teaching more informed by scholarship” (Q8A3). There is, therefore, a recognition that “that these changes do not just affect individuals, but touch on far bigger questions about the purpose of academia” (Q8A5), which dovetails with arguments made by Simmons et al. (2021) and Hall (2020) that many academic professionals, even those for whom research is contractual, lack the time, in practice, to carry out research.

These bigger questions about professional roles and our place in academia explain why the concern about lack of recognition expressed in our data was not limited to a personal level. Although we clearly sought recognition for ourselves, the data also highlighted a strong sense that the lack of value assigned to this third space profession and research in its field means an important voice that could contribute to the bigger questions concerning academic recognition is missing. One member illustrated this lack of recognition by explaining that “I joined the group as I think that LD has an awful lot to offer HE” (Q1A8). The same member went on to suggest that researching and publishing in this field could “highlight what we do [...] and the impact of this on student learning” (Q1A8), again reinforcing the need to develop a more robust scholarly corpus. Another member reflected on the perception of their role by stating that it “is seen as less valuable than others” (Q8A1). The same individual added that “so much useful work [that we do] is not properly acknowledged” (Q8A1) and reiterated the need for “research [...] to inform our practice which would in turn further help students and our colleagues” (Q8A1). Furthermore, the data suggested that often our involvement in research appeared to be concerned with metrics, outputs and reporting on what worked at a pragmatic level (Hilsdon, 2018). For instance, one person commented that “it would be good if we could be allowed to go beyond the numbers and look into the reasons for the success or failure of a teaching intervention” (Q8A4). Hence, the limited opportunities to be involved in research are connected to our recognition and status as professionals operating in the third space.

This concern with the bigger picture also suggests that our vCoP is based on mutual intrinsic engagement that focuses on a common industry problem (Moran and Hobbs, 2018), not simply personally-driven motivations. First of all, this focus on the professional identity of the group in the data obtained through our CAE approach confirms that our search for a more holistic professional identity is prompted by shifts in the HE landscape described in the literature, as assumed in the first research question. The mismatch between our expectations of the new, third space roles and our sense of professional identity leads to our search for other networks, such as this research vCoP. Those of us engaged in this research are looking for a way to expand our own professional identities and naturally align in what we wish to co-create to develop a broader sense of professional group identity. In other words, we are intrinsically motivated to achieve a shared goal. Since intrinsic motivation is, according to Schofield et al. (2018), a positive indicator for successful CoPs, it could be expected that our vCoP can achieve positive impacts, which will be explored in the next theme: how has co-creation and collaboration through the vCoP contributed to expanding our professional identity? Analysis of this theme will show how this formation process can be used as an example for other third space professionals in similar circumstances.

Making us fit – finding a sense of belonging

Establishing opportunities for sharing and cross-pollination

As a vCoP, we believe it is important to go beyond identifying issues into actively creating opportunities to engage in activities that align with a more desirable group identity. The data showed that we agreed on the importance of the sharing and cross-pollination of ideas in this context. This included both the sense of confirmation we gained from “discuss[ing] ideas with like-minded researchers” (Q1A4), “shar[ing] experience and practices with like-minded practitioners” (Q1A5) and the “pleasant [...] surprise to find so many shared ideas and thoughts from like-minded individuals” (E3). These benefits may arise from the psychological impact of feeling a sense of belonging based on identifying with and receiving recognition from other group members with similar values (Hall, 2000). The data also demonstrated the more practical, positive impact of the collaboration: the online *live* writing task (collaborative *Google Doc*), in particular, was seen as a

shared endeavour in defining the group's identity and direction. The data appeared to illustrate that undertaking this task by pooling resources in written form had proved "to save time" (Q11A2) and be "time-effective and resource-efficient" (Q11A3), compared to completing the exercise either as a verbal group discussion or individual writing. We also thought that working together had been "more engaging and productive" (E2) because it fed on the thought processes of various people. Even beyond the direct contributions made, we felt that the knowledge that there were "people around doing the same" (E7) helped to inspire, without increasing worries about being "judged"(E4), due to contributions being anonymous.

The data thus supported the insight that collaboration can increase motivation (Ness et al., 2014), and that this is linked to the open nature of the task: an "exercise with no rules" (E4), making it "much easier to write" (E4) and reducing "writer's block" (E1). The "open approach to sharing information in each section" (E6) ensured that co-authorship became more than a simple division of labour. This approach allowed our geographically-dispersed group to harness technology to foster co-creation of knowledge and share activity in a format that each member could influence to shape the outcome, whilst benefiting personally from the process itself: "shar[ing] a range of ideas and thinking with group members from different institutions" (Q2A8). This process helped us to "see gaps in each others' views" (Q11A5) and gave "inspiration for new lines of work" (Q2A3) leading to the creation of "knowledge" and "confidence" (Q1A3) for the individual members.

Our experiences appear to resonate with the conceptualisation of collaborative writing as possessing a "disruptive, radical and productive methodological capacity" (Gale and Wyatt, 2017, p. 355): "productive" in terms of our creative and unpredictable outputs, "disruptive" and "radical" in terms of our reframing of our professional identity away from accepted norms and limitations. Participation in the collaborative writing tasks and the shared work on preparing this paper benefited us by offering a sense of belonging to a new community that more closely resembles aspects of our desired professional identity. At the same time, being part of this vCoP contributed to further developing the missing research element of our professional identities by offering an opportunity to learn from others' approaches to research.

In the next section, the impact of belonging and doing will be explored beyond the individual level, addressing our second research question: *how have the activities undertaken by the group contributed to shaping its identity as a vCoP?*

Creation of a virtual community

The creation of a community is an aspect that was prominent in the data. In particular, there was an emphasis on action and a strong element of reflection on the role of this vCoP. In practical terms, group activities created an infrastructure for collaborative working towards a shared goal, which addressed some of the gaps we identified in our roles as third space professionals. By working to achieve the shared goal of producing a research paper, we gained better access to "contacts for research" (Q1A3) and possible "collaborat[ors] on research questions" (Q1A5). This is particularly important in a context where our immediate work environments often lack third space role models who have successfully shaped the research aspect of their professional identity. Observing others in the vCoP gave insight into "how the different professionals within the educational community could innovatively collaborate" and offered "a platform [...] to know how to navigate my journey with other professional roles in mind" (Q1A7). At the same time, the collaborative nature of the work had made it more visible than individual research time. Having a commitment in the calendar offered an important line of defence against competing time demands, as it helped "provide the space and

time” (E5) to “get some free-writing done” (E5) and “carv[es] out time and a place [...] given the chaos of the rest of my working week” (Q7A6). The value we attach to having such a network of people and protected time reflects the general importance we attach to successful research (Kyvik, 2013). Still, it is not surprising that this is particularly relevant for learning developers, since they, like many third space professionals, often lack both time and networks in their working lives.

The same could be said about the need for outlets for research: we valued “the possibility of being involved in publishing and collaborative writing endeavours” (Q1A4) and emphasised the importance of “team[ing] up with others who share similar research interests” (Q3A1), undertaking “research into LD practice [...] collaboratively” (Q1A8) based on “collective thoughts” (E2), particularly in “cross-institutional projects or research” (Q3A4). Again, the importance of such structures is not unusual. Many PhD programmes in traditional academic disciplines offer *fora* for exchange and training in writing for publication (Bergen et al., 2020). The creation of research groups in departments recognises the value of regular exchange and “the notion of science as distributed intelligence” (Finholt, 2005, p. 75). It could be argued that our vCoP contributes to creating alternative group structures that do the same for LD, but that are currently missing. However, it is interesting to note that the structures created by this vCoP differ in that they result from a bottom-up approach, determined by us and neither fostered nor, in most cases, directly supported by our employers. On the contrary, subsuming some of our activities under the label of a research vCoP could be regarded as an attempt to reify them, a purposeful attempt to create a sense of “solidity, of projected concreteness” (Wenger, 1998, p. 62) that challenges this lack of support.

Similar to the personal benefits described above, the synchronous collaborative writing task as part of CAE as the overall methodology, was credited as “a really important experience in the life of the group” (E2). Allowing us to “just get [...] thoughts out quickly without much pondering” (Q12A2) was “helpful to shape the group and our aims even further” (Q4A4). Reflecting on the identity of the group was instrumental in determining what “binds the group” (Q7A10) and the shared “reasons for being here” (Q7A10). The data clearly showed that this is not solely a matter of our insight but an essential element of defining “a shared purpose and reason to exist” (E3), which “will allow the group to take shape and inform future sessions” (E4). In other words, the *live* writing task can be considered pivotal in establishing what members wanted our vCoP to do.

The possibility of gaining knowledge and understanding through writing has been extensively studied, but mostly the notion of *writing to learn* (Bazerman et al., 2005) refers to individual writing. However, there was evidence in our data that the *live* writing task allowed a similar process to take place on a group level. Writing to learn activities do not usually focus on the reader and communication but involve “order[ing] and represent[ing] experience to our understanding” (Kiefer et al., 2000-2018, para. 6). This focus on our understanding and experience was echoed in the reflective data, where we reported “a feeling of freedom of expressing one’s own ideas” without “the pressure of potentially be[ing] seen as a ‘not-knowing’ or as a ‘not-qualified enough’ participant” (E6). Allowing anonymous participation in the writing task was perceived as “liberating” (E7), reducing any fear of “be[ing] judged for my response” (E4), and shifting the focus onto expressing and ordering our own thoughts. Yet, at the same time, the presence of co-writers, rather than potential readers, was seen as a healthy antidote to “pondering the same paragraph for ages” (Q11A6), as reading the contributions of others increased insight. This additional “group-think” (E6) beyond the confines of our ideas offered further inspiration, and seeing “a clear parallel” (E6) between contributions provided confirmation for “a self-conscious author-persona” (E6). Writing together for collective learning has been, in short, “a really empowering experience” (E6).

These reactions to the *live* writing task reflected the impact that participation in the group and other shared activities have had in general. Collaboration was portrayed as “much more engaging and productive than one person trying to pull the thoughts of a group together” (E2), and the experience of the “inspiration” (Q4A7) gained made us both “more proactive” and “aware of projects going on” (Q2A1). These positive outcomes were perhaps best summarised by one of us who described it as “quite a magic effect [...] spur[ing] me on and help[ing] me getting started” (E7), inspiring them “to achieve that little bit more than you can alone” (E7). This inspiration was associated with higher productivity, as it helped the vCoP members to “get on” (E1) and “get work done” (E2). While research into peer effects suggests that observing and being observed by others often has a positive impact on perseverance, and hence productivity (Buechel et al., 2018), one of us was still “pleasantly surprised and taken aback by how productive the collaborative writing task was” (E3). This expectation may stem from the perception that writing and research have long been perceived as solitary, rather than group, activities (Lunsford and Ede, 1990), although this perception is changing (Topping et al., 2000). Conversely, engaging in shared writing is likely to be more motivating, since taking part means we can not only enact behaviours associated with the research component of identity, but also receive external validation of those behaviours (Jenkins, 1996).

Summary of findings

The data from our reflections suggested that the two-fold benefits of demonstrating and being validated for behaviours impacted on our sense of both individual identity and, more subtly, group identity. First of all, it is seen in the fact that we are part of a group that is connected not just by a shared, externally attributed, professional identity, but also by a desire for a broader professional identity. The data showed that the “supportive connections within the group which I do value” (Q2A8) were seen as connections to a “research community [...] coming together” (Q1A11). Although two of us acknowledged the impact of the pandemic, which had increased “the feelings of disconnection” (Q2A5), and the need for “belonging, acceptance and normalcy” (E6), these circumstances were mentioned less frequently than the act of doing something together, “working on the same document” (Q11A1) or “see[ing] them writing” (E4) and “shar[ing] that online writing space” (E5). Overall, the impact of this work on “shared understanding of everyone’s different concerns/ideas connected to the same issues” (Q11A4) seems to have been more important in adding “an extra layer of connectedness” (Q11A4) than simply reducing the social isolation induced by the pandemic. Furthermore, two of us emphasised that this sense of being “much more connected with others” (Q10A2) worked “despite the obvious physical distance” (E3), supporting the idea that connection had filled a void that is unrelated to the pandemic but created by other developments in HE.

The data also revealed that establishing such missing connections is not seen as an individual endeavour, as can be observed from the repeated use of the word “community” (Q1A3; Q1A10) or variations such as “a research community” (Q1A1; Q1A11) or “a community of like-minded individuals” (E4). This word choice indicates that we perceive the group as more than a solution to a problem in our professional lives. This impression is further supported by the emphasis on “sharing” (Q2A6), the opportunity to leave a mark by “contribut[ing] and know[ing] that my thoughts could be documented and included” (E2) and the reference to “an atmosphere of genuine collectivity and collaboration” (E5). The “sense of a community coming together” (Q1A11) suggests that the group is perceived as an act of creating wider structures in our field of work, not just a personal endeavour. The vCoP is clearly envisioned as “something which is a part of the wider LD community, but which also has its distinct interest (i.e. research) feeding into the ethos, practice etc. of the wider community” (Q5A4).

On both an individual and a group level, shared activity was considered to be essential: we valued the fact that participation in the vCoP was not reduced to verbal exchange or simply “talking about it” (Q116), without further action, and saw our written activities as merely the first step towards actively creating new opportunities. The writing activities were also seen as the basis for reflection and “helping the group learn more about its identity” (E7) allowing us to “identify synergies” (Q7A10), which in turn “will allow the group to take shape and inform future sessions” (E4). Specific activities were the only area where we explored what else could be done, rather than confirming our satisfaction with the previous work of the group, suggesting that further “clear goals [...] would help focus” (Q4A2), “calling for firmer structures” (Q4A3), a “more robust process of how meetings are structured” (Q4A3) or “clearer aims” (Q4A6). These comments could be found amid positive references to the work carried out so far, so they did not seem to be intended as criticism, but as an indication of how we saw the future of the group, i.e. as an active community that works towards developing what is currently more of a third space profession into one “where research is a core part of its domain and practices” (Q5A6). Whether our vCoP does this through its activities, or functions as a “research-dating platform” (Q4A7), or in other words as a catalyst for other research activities in LD, the aim remains the same: to “sell it to the broader community” (Q5A1), and to shape the collective professional identity towards a more holistic understanding that resists the unbundling of research from our roles.

This act of establishing a more prominent space for research in our personal, professional identities and that of the professional group identity leads to our final research question: how can the formation of this group be used as an example for other groups in similar circumstances? We have suggested in this paper that a research vCoP can successfully address the sense of lost freedom and autonomy (Harris, 2005) that third space professionals can feel. This vCoP offered an opportunity for collaboration across our immediate professional network, which has impacted our sense of professional identity. The shared writing activity provided opportunities for reflection on the process, and positive feedback on our self-perception as researching practitioners, both through the activity itself and the fact that fellow group members witnessed it. Yet, collaboration in this vCoP has *also* created a product, i.e. this paper – it has allowed us to do what researchers do: to create a visible trace to the desired research component of our professional identities. This paper thus offers a possible way of bolstering visibility and identity (Malkin and Chanock, 2018) for third space professionals in academia. Whether potential vCoPs wish to place research, or another aspect of professional identity, as their shared goal, we believe they should strongly consider how to democratically design and carry out activities which allow that goal to be tangibly realised, rather than only hypothetically discussed.

Developing visible structures that foster a desired professional group identity and reclaim the unbundled research component is not a new process for LD or other third space professions, as shown by the creation of the Journal of Learning Development in HE (JLDHE) or annual conferences organised by ALDinHE. With its more informal approach, this vCoP will have less impact on the identity of the profession than these bigger initiatives, but its very informality gives it greater flexibility and makes the ethos of openness its central characteristic. There are, as a result, fewer barriers to participation and more space to use collaborative writing for inquiry that pursues a “sense of wonder” (Gale and Wyatt, 2017, p. 356). This open nature, open both in terms of participation and potential outcomes, invites further examination of the potential benefits that can be gained from an approach that focuses on mutual support and experimentation. All of this said, the link forged between the vCoP and ALDinHE presents an opportunity for the vCoP members to gain or maintain visibility and influence within the broader professional group.

Conclusion

At first sight, the working processes we reflect on in this paper could merely seem to confirm our desire to develop more traditional academic identities and structures for ourselves both personally and as a group. The blueprint we describe might be considered just a form of resistance to the unbundling of research, teaching and service within HE in the UK (Kinser, 2002). However, the evidence from our CAE suggests that our motivations go beyond resistance to constraints, to encompass a quest for a supportive research environment in which to thrive. As such, those elements of our analysis that highlight the effects of unbundling, such as contracts with single specialisms and the desire amongst third space practitioners to transcend the resulting professional structures which constrain research within their roles, inform the answer to our first research question – *how has the landscape of HE driven the need for a research vCoP beyond existing roles and institutional structures?*

In relation to our second question – *how have the activities undertaken by the current group contributed to shaping its identity as a vCoP?* – our findings show that it is the non-hierarchical, highly supportive nature of the group that has been fundamental in shaping the group's identity across all the activities we have undertaken. An emphasis on support is perhaps not wholly unexpected for a group with strong teaching identities. Nevertheless, the power of the collaborative, collegial structure of our vCoP and the outcomes achieved such as this paper, stand in direct contrast to typical academic structures and processes, where the need for individual outcomes, notably peer-reviewed papers in high impact journals, drives a much more competitive environment on both an institutional and an individual level (Hall, 2020). The democratic nature of our vCoP also counterbalances the increasing top-down management of research activity fuelled by the push in UK HE institutions to optimise their submissions to the REF. Overall, vCoP members have felt really valued and appreciated, leaving them motivated to continue engaging.

This difference in structure between the more typical academic hierarchy and our vCoP could be read as an indication that our group has simply not understood the academic game, and does not play according to the rules that govern research in academia. Given that we are a group of third space professionals who do not face professional pressures to create a long publications list and comply with departmental research goals, it is true to say that we exist outside of, or at least on the margins of, the external pressures which dictate the rules of the academic game. The question is whether this is necessarily a disadvantage or whether there is potential in using marginalised positions to convey valuable but seldom-heard perspectives, as Bakhtin (1981) argues. The emphasis in our data on the benefits of a supportive, collegial environment could evidence the positive impact that a more collaborative, nurturing approach can bring to a research community. Achieving the aims of a group through democratic participation builds commitment and intrinsic motivation at a level few staff members might achieve when projects are imposed externally. Feeling welcomed and supported by fellow participants fosters an openness to try new ways of working, rather than leaving individuals feeling reticent about changes and stifling opportunities to think outside the box. Furthermore, although there is an emphasis in the literature on how professional identity is strongly influenced by professional norms and accreditation processes, our vCoP members have chosen to focus on challenging these norms and the associated behaviours as a cohesive group.

Motivation, openness to change and new ideas, and creative thinking are essential for successful research. So with regard to our third and final research question – *how can the formation of this group be used as an example for other groups in similar circumstances?* – the evidence we have

provided about our approach to developing our vCoP offers a model for harnessing and nurturing diversity in ways that challenge the more managerialist, competitive structures in academia. The collaborative model for writing this paper alone indicates that even without those more traditional academic structures, it has been possible and fruitful to actively *do* – rather than talk about doing – the very research that provided the impetus for the vCoP’s existence. The output – a single paper focused on the role of this collaborative project in reshaping professional identities – cannot alone answer wider questions about whether and how the diverse voices of third space professionals can be accommodated in the research landscape. Nevertheless, the model of collaboration that has developed from the activities of our vCoP can set an agenda for how other communities might do research that contributes new insight and knowledge in fields that relate directly to third space professionals, or to address questions in the changing HE landscape that are relevant to them and their discipline.

In terms of lessons for other groups, we conclude with the suggestion that CoPs should carefully identify and implement activities that allow the reasons for their existence to be realised practically and, wherever possible, democratically. In this way, all members feel valued as contributors, no matter what their levels of perceived experience and expertise at the outset. The experience of writing together has been a particular catalyst to move our vCoP forward, allowing the members to both engage in research activity and, in doing so, receive positive reinforcement from peers.

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