

## Academic literacies: looking back in order to look forward

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### Abstract

This paper argues that we need to reclaim the institutional perspective that was inherent in some of the early work in the field of academic literacies. It offers a brief overview of the emergence of the field and examines some key developments, including an examination of areas of tension with regard to the use of the term academic literacies. It also points to the ways in which the field is drawing in valuable and complementary theoretical and methodological frames, latterly with respect to significant developments in the digital landscape in higher education. The author concludes that academic literacies researchers have ongoing work to do with regard to the changing contexts of higher education and the need to push against the relentless redefinition of the university for its commercial and transfer value as opposed to its intellectual or critical value.

**Keywords:** academic literacies, digital literacies; higher education, theoretical frameworks, transformative praxis

### Introduction

The field of academic literacies emerged in the early 1990s as practitioner researchers working with student writers began to ask searching and critical questions about language and writing in higher education (Lea, 1994; Lillis, 1997; Thesen, 1997; Ivanič, 1998; Lea and Street, 1998). With a theoretical framing in critical linguistics and anthropology it foregrounded the social, cultural and contextualised nature of academic writing. Research became increasingly associated with the rapid expansion of higher education at that time and the increase in the numbers of students from a wide range of backgrounds through different entry points (Lillis, 1997). This contrasted with the more conventional route from school to university for already privileged and mainly middle class young people. The consequence of this association has been that some of the founding principles of early work on academic literacies, for example, its concern with broader issues of institutional, political and social context became hidden, as the literature appeared on the surface to make the expansion of higher education and the entry of a wider range of students from different backgrounds its particular focus. This was despite the fact that earlier work on student writers, who were standard entrant eighteen year olds studying mainstream academic disciplines in traditional universities, had already focused on the relationship between language and culture, meaning

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and context in understanding writing in disciplines and subjects at university (see Hounsell, 1988; Taylor et al., 1988;).

In this paper, my aim is to highlight the consequences of this dilemma, that is, on the one hand, the focus on the practices and experiences of individual students and their university teachers and, on the other the broader institutional contexts within which particular forms of texts and knowledge making practices are validated. In so doing, I will review some key developments in the field and consider the significance of these against the back drop of an unsettled and shifting global higher education, to which the papers in this special edition attest.

### **Supporting student writers: precarious spaces**

Many of those who are now regarded as the founding researchers in academic literacies (see above) drew directly on their day-to-day practitioner experiences in supporting student writers. In effect, innovative approaches to pedagogy, taking account of issues of power and authority in the practice of writing, were taking place well before the term academic literacies began to be used to describe these specific approaches (see for example, Clark & Ivanič, 1991). By the early 1990s, in many universities support for students was offered primarily through language support or communication classes (Ivanič & Lea, 2006), not only away from mainstream teaching but frequently located in different spaces, in low status university rooms and buildings away from faculty departments and high status lecture theatres. Coupled with this geophysical location there was an acute geopolitical awareness experienced by those working in such centres, who often felt marginalised from the broader academic community as well as believing that the importance of the work that they were doing was not being recognised institutionally.

It was against this backdrop that academic literacies as a research base developed, creating somewhat inevitable and ongoing tensions between those practitioners with academic positions, able to pursue both their own teaching practices with students alongside their academic research into literacy practices, and those who held teaching only contracts or student support roles that did not allow time for research. In addition, by the late 1990s university management concerned with enhancing ‘teaching and learning’ and persuaded by the provenance of the term began to instigate university wide provision called ‘academic literacy’ support. In practice what this often amounted to was little more than general study skills and/or sometimes specific language support directed at particular groups of students in order to induct them into the writing practices they were likely to encounter at university, under the umbrella of the catch all phrase ‘academic literacy’. This contrasted with practitioner researchers attention to the plural use of the term ‘literacies’, signalling contested sets of socially situated writing practices evident in academic writing across the academy and, more specifically in student writing. A fuller and more recent account of debates around ‘What is Academic Literacies?’ can be found in Lillis et al (2015).

These tensions around the use of terms and orientation towards supporting student writing are still very much in evidence today. In opening these up for debate Lillis and Scott (2007) point to a contrast between transformative and normative approaches to practice. They articulate transformative approaches as those that raise fundamental questions about writing and literacy, including explorations of what can be written and how, where these conventions

come from and in what ways they are legitimised. English explicates this approach through her work with students on 'regenring' their essays (English, 2011, 2015). She argues that, instead of focusing on what genres 'are', and teaching these features to students, we need to pay close attention to what written genres actually 'do' and particularly how they shape both thinking and knowledge production in the academy. In offering opportunities for her students to rework their essays using a range of different genres, including those drawn from journalism and drama, she offers a transformative stance in identifying genre as a pedagogic resource not merely a pedagogic goal. She illustrates how with her students regenring their essays enabled them to make their genre awareness visible and enhance their disciplinary understanding. English points to a range of theoretical traditions concerned with genre but argues that- drawing on the academic literacies frame - her notion of regenring helps students engage at the level of epistemology and enables them to become producers, not just consumers of knowledge.

English's example of paying detailed attention to knowledge production and legitimating students as knowledge producers contrasts with what Lillis and Scott distinguish as a normative approach. They argue that the latter is primarily focused on inducting students into the requirements of academic conventions and how they can become adept at handling these. They suggest that although these are also implicit in a transformative perspective, working with the conventions alone does not engage students in contested knowledge making, elicit the perspectives of student writers on this knowledge making or explore perspectives of meaning making in the academy, not least with regard to the legitimisation of the resources students bring to the academy. They argue that one way of exploring the normative/transformative intersection is to foreground the notion of critique and design central to an academic literacies perspective (see Lillis, 2003; Lea 2004).

In related debates Jacobs (2013) suggests that, despite the best of intentions of practitioners working with students in South Africa, transformative approaches to academic literacy are not common in practice. She argues that it is important to examine what counts as transformative approaches in the South African context and how one might enable lecturers to make 'explicit the norms and conventions of disciplines, as well as opening up curriculum spaces for these to be contested' (Jacobs, 2013: 133). Lillis et al. (2015) not only contributes to these ongoing debates but speaks directly to those practitioners interested in academic literacies. It offers a series of practice based, practical case studies illustrating how teacher-researchers are working with academic literacies perspectives and opens up for scrutiny what might constitute transformative practice.

A further dilemma for those working directly with student writers arises around the distinction Brian Street and I (Lea and Street, 1998) identified between academic socialisation and academic literacies. We argued that academic socialisation was concerned with the acculturation of students into disciplinary academic discourse and culture, contrasting this with academic literacies focus on institutional practices, change and power and institutions as sites of contested meaning making. We located our interest in student writing as engagement in diverse social and cultural practices within this domain.

Although we always argued that our three models of student writing were not hierarchical and that elements of each resides in the others it may be that the distinction we made between academic socialisation and academic literacies is too crude, particularly when

the former becomes explicitly associated with a normative approach. To illustrate this further I refer to a book written by Phyllis Creme and I, *Writing for University: a Guide for Students* (Creme and Lea, 2007: 3rd edition). Its purpose was to introduce to the student reader a critical and informed perspective on writing at university. Our imagined audience was that of students from across the university that we were used to working with on writing issues. Indeed examples from their approaches, perspectives and assessed work appear in the book and more were added in later editions.

Each chapter is based on an implicit mix of theory and practice. We consciously decided not to foreground theory explicitly as we wanted to focus on students' own day-to-day practice. Our underlying philosophy was to see the potential of empowering students and help them understand the contested and complex nature of writing across and within disciplines in higher education. Throughout the book we offered explanations and activities that contrasted with a deficit model, with its focus on student writing as problem. For example, there is significant attention paid to how assignments vary from one another. We reject a 'key words in the title' approach and ask the reader to analyse the title in a variety of discursive ways, suggesting that they write in some detail about the assignment and its preparation, with a dominant focus on their own understandings and experience. Readers are introduced to the idea that writing is not just an empty vessel carrying along subject or disciplinary context but integrally related to the ways in which different subjects and disciplines view the world. All the activities are contextualised and ask the reader to engage with these through their own university writing.

However, latterly, as authors we have interrogated how far the volume has been able to reflect the contested nature of the academic literacies approach- or what Lillis and Scott (2007) refer to as transformative. We have reflected on whether the written word, with its imagined student reader, can ever engage fully with the notion of student writing as meaning making without the dialogic, exploratory and critical possibilities of student-teacher interactions. This leads us to reflect what happens when we fix and reify ideas in print, and the potential for them to take on their own representations and interpretations. Our conclusion has been that it is indeed difficult and challenging to articulate the principles of academic literacies in guidance for students, as the very act of fixing and reifying tends to appear normative despite the best intentions of the authors. This may also be the case in teaching contexts that take place within the limits of the curriculum in terms of time and space.

### **Expanding the academic literacies lens**

Thesen touches on a related theme in her observations about 'how to books' for postgraduate student writers, although her concern is with respect to the limitations of the genre rather than the actual intentions of the authors. She exercises disquiet about publications of this nature and draws on the work of Kamler and Thomson (2006) in support of her argument. Their analysis of these text types suggests that they have the effect of deskilling students and ignoring issues of power and authority in the way in which they position students as novices encouraging them to mimic existing conventions rather than recognising that they are deeply problematic. Thesen's particular interest here is in the potential of critical approaches to writing and she draws on these to foreground risk in academic and, more specifically, postgraduate student writing. In this regard her perspective is strongly influenced by a range

of 20<sup>th</sup> century social theorists' writings around 'risk', including Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Douglas (1992), and the later critiques of this work, which have pointed to the dominance of Anglophone traditions in this regard. Her interest is in how we can use this work to explore risk within higher education and the postgraduate sphere, with regard to students' own personal and experiential commitment to their writing. This contrasts with dominant institutional approaches, which seek to contain and manage risk, as examined by McWilliams (2009). Thesen (2013) signals how examples of, what she terms 'risk objects' are signified in institutional approaches to both plagiarism and research ethics. The editors of this volume (Thesen and Cooper, 2013:15) stress that:

the act of writing involves decisions about which representations of the research world will prevail, which meanings will be invested, and find semiotic form capable of carrying meanings across contexts.

We are equally interested in what meanings are deleted, suppressed, crossed out – the meanings that do not see the light of day, that are shed along the way. Decisions about what will or will not be included will always be emotionally invested and cannot just be read off the surface of texts, but call for close attention to the grain of meanings with which writers invest their texts. Risk is about process: it is relational, seeking connections between what is brought along and what is achieved or realized; it is ontologically rich, inevitably indexing the writer's subjectivity and 'interest' (Kress, 2001: 72).

The research on postgraduate writing -- signalled by Thesen and Cooper -- is indicative of an expansion of academic literacies from its original focus on undergraduate student writers. In this respect, in 2004, I outlined the principles of an approach to course design, exploring these through the examination of a post graduate online course taken by practitioners working in higher education (Lea, 2004). I developed this further in a discussion of a postgraduate certificate in 'academic practice' for new university lecturers (Lea, 2012), arguing that turning the lens on new contexts of writing in the academy illustrates how the theoretical and methodological approach that underpins academic literacies can be usefully employed and developed to examine how new genres are claiming space across the university. For some years there has been increased attention to writing in professional and vocational contexts (Baynham, 2000; Rai, 2004) in line with the global shifts towards professional contexts of study. For example, Coleman's work (2012) illustrates how professional and vocational domains from outside the university are being brought into the academy. She examines the implications of this for our understanding of how particular sets of multi-modal literacy practices are privileged and valued. Her work also signals how the predominant focus of the field on accounts of individual practice can hide broader institutional and sectoral considerations.

In order to understand more about the relationship between the professional context and the curriculum we need to examine the multi-modal literacy practices of professional contexts and, more specifically, how these are played out within the curriculum itself (Coleman and Lea, 2015), not merely with regard to the personal practices of either students

or their teachers. Drawing on Bernstein's work (2000) on recontextualisation, Coleman combines this with a literacy-as-social practice perspective to explore knowledge production in visual communication and media courses at a South African university of technology. In her analysis of the recontextualisation process she uncovers how knowledge and associated practices are reconfigured in course content and assignment topics and multi modal tasks. (Coleman and Lea, 2015). She argues that the literacy practices embedded in these courses simultaneously look both ways, towards the profession and towards the discipline.

Using the example of a film production course, her detailed, ethnographic research illustrates how tensions and fractures are evident as knowledge and practices from the film industry become transformed in the curriculum. She also observes, in this context, a significant difference between knowledge and practices recontextualised from the film industry, such as the subject 'Production Practice', and those evidently associated more closely with disciplinary and academic environments, such as 'Film Appreciation and Development', pointing to the distinction made in the course timetable between practical and theoretical subjects. Whereas in the theory subjects students are required to produce written texts such as essays, the practical subjects ask students to show their skills and abilities with respect to the kinds of film making processes legitimised by the film industry. Text and literacy practices associated with the film industry are found within the practical subjects, whereas those in the disciplinary context are found within the theory subjects. She argues that this artificial distinction enables credibility for theory based subjects in the curriculum and, consequently, in this context students are asked to write recognisable academic texts, such as essays. She notes that one reason for this requirement to undertake more conventional forms of academic writing might be the apparent marginalisation of theoretical subjects in the curriculum and lack of a distinct disciplinary identity in the film production curriculum. This results in an overemphasis on decontextualised and generic forms of academic writing, which provide a particular version of academic credibility in what otherwise might be regarded as a practical and vocational course.

In a recent paper (Coleman 2016) Coleman makes a broader argument that curriculum decision-making in the South African university of technology environment is affected not only by industry and disciplinary demands, but also by socio-structural features and ideologies that are particular to that sector of higher education. Drawing on her research in both graphic design and film production courses, she illustrates how the dominant curriculum and assessment texts and practices are those drawn from industry whilst, at the same time, reductionist and decontextualised approaches to academic writing are privileged. Coleman's contribution to academic literacies is a broader institutional understanding of how both assessment and other curricula texts articulate particular sets of beliefs and ideologies around what counts as legitimate knowledge making practices. This she locates in the specific university of technology context in South Africa. These insights into institutional workings are particularly valuable to those working in similar professional and vocational contexts, where 'being academic' is a significant marker of academic credibility for particular sets of legitimated textual practices.

### **Emerging digital landscapes**

Probably one of the most significant changes to the higher education landscape and to the relationship between students and university teachers in the last decade has been the emergence of digital technologies. As McKenna and Hughes (2013) argue, digital environments offer many affordances in relation to emerging textual practices, with respect to fragmentation, reconstruction and the curation of texts. McKenna and Hughes are interested in the ways in which literacy practices may be disrupted in a digital world and the implications of this for 'values' in relation to power, control and trust in the university. In common with Thesen and Cooper, their interest is in plagiarism. They point to the articulation of trust between students and teachers and between institutions and students as a consequence of plagiarism detection software (PDS). They suggest that the issues of trust, control and surveillance implicated in the use of this detection software is never even discussed or explained to students. Instead neutrality and objectivity is taken for granted as a good thing, stifling any potential debate about the values that the university is communicating to students about academic writing practices. McKenna and Hughes (2013: 21) also point to the ways in which students' texts become recast as digital objects as they are uploaded to the system and their writing becomes a 'commodity to be judged'. Yet, as they remind us, teachers of academic writing have always emphasised the importance of different types of writing, such as drafts for self or others to review. These are now in significant danger of being negated by the requirement to use PDS.

They contrast the ways in which the PDS software is designed to fix and reify the written student text with academics' own use of digital texts in both open scholarship and social media spaces. In terms of the latter, the sector increasingly values those texts which are regarded as 'academic' but are themselves unstable, fragmented and often multi-authored. They suggest that, for example, blogging and the use of Twitter have changed the way in which academics are writing their subject. There is increasing evidence that new forms of authorship are emerging (Bayne, 2006) and the boundaries between readers and writers are increasingly blurred, as academics tweet and retweet, for example, often with their tweets being followed closely by their students.

Bayne and Ross (2013) explore related debates in their exploration of an experimental online Master's course at the University of Edinburgh. Students and teachers work in a web-based open course, engaging explicitly in digital forms of meaning making, this includes assessment through a 'digital essay' and the production of what they call a 'lifestream', that is a collection of each student's public web content, including their own postings and commentaries on other postings. Because the course is open everything is visible to the public, the blogs, chats, tweets and assessed lifestreams as well as the teacher communications. They argue that the structure of the course offers the opportunity for 'creative and flexible literacy practices that emphasize collaboration, publishing, multimodality, and remix' (Williams 2013: 183). Bayne and Ross (2013) are particularly interested in what it means to be human in a digital world and the implications for meaning making practices but their arguments are relevant for all contexts of academic literacies. In their own context they point to the tension that is emerging between the bounded classroom and the 'autonomous human subject expressed and worked through the course design' (97). In addition to their interest in the unbounded nature of the course they point to the open and 'leaky' (98), nature of students' own blogs, and other digital textuality, which can be

duplicated and networked, supporting similar claims made by McKenna and Hughes. The authors' intention in using digital essays, as opposed to conventional assignments, is to encourage students to take a critical stance towards what Goodfellow and Lea (2007: 68) refer to with regard to the digital as 'the embeddedness of cultural assumptions and values associated with print literacies'. In addition, drawing on critical posthumanism, Bayne and Ross 'attempt to problematize the representation implicit in much educational discourse (Biesta 1999) –the notion that the human subject can be seen as separate from the objects of knowledge with which it is concerned' (104). Although articulated through a different theoretical lens – that of post humanism – the fundamental point they are making here resonates strongly with all we know from an academic literacies tradition with respect to the ways in which student academic writing is so commonly separated off for assessment purposes from the autonomous writer. Bayne and Ross argue that from a posthumanist perspective there is no such distinction between the object and subject. As Edwards puts it 'education has focused on the learning subject as a result of an a priori assumption of a separation of matter from meaning, the object from the subject' (Edwards 2010: 104).

The work of Bayne and Ross fits more broadly into a body of research concerned with social and material approaches to literacy in the digital university (see Lea and Goodfellow, 2013). This social and material orientation derives from the theoretical and empirical work of the New literacy Studies (NLS) and, more specifically, academic literacies, but is also informed by the sociomaterial approaches arising from the sociology of translation (Hamilton, 2011), within the body of work known as Actor Network Theory (see Law, 2009 for further discussion). 'This work adds generatively to a social literacies perspective because it enables an interrogation, analysis and explanation of material textual practice in terms of assemblages of texts, technologies and participants' (Goodfellow and Lea 2016: 429). This kind of approach helps us as literacies researchers to think differently and interrogate the categories we have tended to take for granted. In common with educational research more widely, academic literacies research tends to work with respect to entities, such as: universities, department, students, teachers, institutional documentation, assignments etc. Fenwick and Edwards (2012) argue that these are not immutable and are no more than assemblages of myriad things, ordering and governing practices in particular ways. Actor Network Theory, derived from science and technology studies, would suggest that they are actually precarious networks that require significant amounts of work to sustain them.

Fenwick and Edwards (2012) argue that there is always a potential for counter networks, alternative forms and spaces to develop, with some networks more powerful than others. There is always constant tension between networks and their enactment: this pull and push between networks is at the heart of how the university is constantly reinventing itself (Lea 2013: 142).

Alongside more familiar theoretical and methodological framings, sociomaterial perspectives are being increasingly harnessed by literacies researchers as they turn their attention to emerging textual practices in the digital university. In Gourlay, Hamilton and Lea (2013) the authors point to these perspectives in their discussion of what they see as difficult conversations across disciplinary areas, in this instance, between those from a literacy studies



tradition and those scholars working within the field of learning technologies. Of particular concern is the way in which the use of the term digital literacy/ies is associated with a strongly normative perspective on academic practice (see Goodfellow, 2011; Lea, 2013). Mindful of the differences and tensions between the traditions of literacies and learning technologies research, this article speaks to those who work at this intersection in higher education. They observe that the term 'literacy' (or literacies) 'is constantly being parted from its root meanings and used in multiple, confusing ways' (Gourlay, Hamilton and Lea, 2013: 2).

The authors draw on NLS, arguing that it has always paid attention to the textual and semiotic aspects of learning and the functional and symbolic roles that textual practices play in education. However, they also recognise that this predominant focus on texts has meant that literacies researchers have been somewhat slow to respond to the significance of the digital, resisting the correlation of specific literacy practices with a specific channel of communication. In examining the significance of this they point to the different epistemological and methodological approaches taken by those working in learning technologies and those coming from an academic literacies tradition. The former make the assumption that digital technologies can directly influence learning and, significantly, the acquisition of learning skills, and the latter are concerned with ethnographic approaches to understanding learning and the ways that participants engage in contested meaning making practices in digital contexts. In their detailed discussion of these contrasting perspectives the authors conclude that in their use of the terms 'digital literacy' and 'digital literacies' academic literacies researchers/ practitioners and learning technologists are talking past one another. Whereas on one hand the NLS perspective - embedded in academic literacies - is most effective as critique, the authors note that 'the elasticity of the notion of literacy has enabled it to be co-opted to serve a range of different agendas' (Gourlay, Hamilton and Lea, 2013: 8). As a result they question whether this means that the ethnographic, disruptive orientation of the term 'literacies' has been lost in its re-emergence in the ubiquitous use of the term 'digital literacies'. This leads them to argue that we need to retain a critical 'literacies' perspective in order to clearly distinguish it from skills and competency based 'digital literacy' institutional agendas. This is indeed resonant of earlier debates around the use of the terms academic literacies as a critical frame and academic literacy as a description of learning and teaching academic writing conventions, as discussed above.

This paper has already illustrated how other theoretical frames have been drawn generatively into literacies research and debates. Gourlay (2013) argues that insights from media theorists such as Hayles (1999), who apply post-human perspectives to digital mediation (see also discussion of Bayne and Ross, above) helps us to examine taken for granted binaries such as human versus machine, sharing much in common with work from Actor Network Theory, in understanding how humans and technologies are co-evolving. In their discussion, Gourlay, Hamilton and Lea (2013) acknowledge that although it may be inevitable that terms such as 'digital' and 'literacy' may be taken up by different areas of scholarship to mean different things this does not preclude our quest to make visible the 'embedded and implicit understandings, assumptions and ideological positions that are carried by these terms' (10). Indeed, recognising this diversity and the tensions that arise from it are what must drive forward scholarship in our field.

### **Looking forward**

In this paper I have signalled the breadth of academic literacies research and the ways in which its methodological lens has been widened, with attention to complementary theoretical perspectives from other related fields. The thrust of the argument has been the need for a shift from the practices of individual students to the broader institutional and socio-political landscape. There continue to be significant changes taking place across an increasingly global higher education and we know that the relentless marketisation of the sector is already threatening the very existence of departments in humanities and social sciences across universities. The value of a university degree is no longer measured intellectually as the beginning of a lifetime project of learning, or knowledge as a social good but calculated purely in economic terms both for the individual student and for society. Students are saddled with long-term debt resulting from the payment of fees, which, in the UK, now stands at an average of £44,000 per student at graduation. Students in South Africa have been in conflict with their institutions and the government about increases in fees and the status of aspects of the curriculum (see Le Roux in this special edition about the relationship between the student protests and academic literacy practices).

These are uncertain and difficult times across higher education globally, with little that we may recognise as the academic knowledge-making practices of universities in a marketised higher education. On the other hand, digital environments could, potentially, be more empowering as textual practices are less constrained and new knowledge and meaning making practices are permeating the curriculum. The fact that students are expected to research, use a range of sources and take control in ways that would not have been possible before may have the effect of breaking down the normative/transformational divide around student writing. For example, rather than focusing on the final written product, the student essay, with its provenance encapsulated but also hidden in a References section or a Bibliography, we may see more opportunities to examine and make visible the conglomeration of textual and technological practices that went into a piece of student writing and, most importantly, explore ways to do this with our students. We are already seeing the possibilities for supporting student engagement in a sociomaterial world which offer alternative models of authorship and scholarship as new forms of textual collaboration and dialogue are made possible through digital texts that are more open and potentially collaborative.

A literacies frame is absolutely central to our endeavour to understand this new world of textual practice across the university. Simultaneously though, it is evident that universities are seeking to control the curriculum and validate particular textual practices in extending their reach through, for example, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (see Goodfellow and Lea, 2016). Whereas the digital university offers new possibilities for textual participation, alongside this we see increasing administrative activity and surveillance, for example, with respect to the PDS software. As academic literacies researchers we need to continue to push against the latter and all kinds of redefinition of the university for its commercial and transfer utility, as opposed to its intellectual or critical value. We are well

placed to lead a critique of the role of the digital in institutional transformation in the sector, making visible, through our research, the shift in social values and the decentring of the university and paying detailed attention to issues of contestation around its knowledge making processes and textual practices.

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