

Divergent paths to parallel ends – two routes to the doctoral dissertation

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to document and discuss two divergent routes toward the doctoral degree: an article-based thesis and a monograph. Two stories are told about the struggles and challenge candidates face during their dissertation writing in these divergent formats. Methodologically, these stories are presented as vignettes from two doctoral candidates, describing and reflecting on their experiences, which are analyzed and discussed in relation to the conceptions of academic genres, Vygotskian notions of learning, and writing as identity formation. Dissimilarities between the monograph- and the article-based theses are discussed in regard to time, maturation, focus, and feedback-influences, as well how variances within these formats contribute to different writing experiences. Based on these discussions, the paper reflects on the need to develop greater awareness of genre demands and formation dimensions in dissertation writing.

Introduction

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge. This paper discusses how the process of writing a doctoral thesis engages these complexities. Our main analytical focus is on the different genre-pathways represented by the monograph and article-based theses because these represent two very different points of entrance to mastering academic genres. The questions we pose, in this respect, are the following:

What differences can be identified when comparing experiences acquired when writing a monograph versus those acquired when writing an article-based doctoral thesis, and what do these differences entail with respect to learning to master a disciplinary field?

We will approach these questions from a conceptual perspective consisting of academic genres, learning and writing as identity formation, and the experiences involving the above-mentioned dissertation formats from the perspective of two doctoral candidates.

Working within an academic genre is here related to the mastering of an academic practice of disciplinary writing, along with the criteria, conventions, and audience expectations related to it. The thesis is here defined as an entrance to a genre as an academic practice in two important ways: Firstly, academic writing is a core activity of most parts of higher education, in which written products constitute a vital part of epistemic re-production and development and thus emerge as foundational in most academic knowledge cultures (Kruse, 2006).

Secondly, the activity of writing a thesis sets off a range of different and contingent learning cycles, the challenges of which, in many respects, are not explicitly addressed in the academic culture itself (Kwan 2006). These “hidden” processes, which typically surface during attempts to master an academic genre are therefore not a strait-forward trajectory, but often appear as unpredictable, fluctuating, and confusing ruptures.

In an attempt to grasp these complexities in writing, Lea and Street (1998) represent three main models of student writing in higher education: The first is *the study skills approach*, which has assumed that literacy is a set of atomized skills, “which students have to learn and which are treated as a kind of pathology” (p. 3). The second is the *academic socialization approach*, which assumes that students learn what and how to write because the university instructor inducts students into the academic culture of the discipline or profession. Our analytical approach relates to the third model: *academic literacies*. This model originates from the so-called “new literacy studies” (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, 2007; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). Student writing and learning are here regarded as a form of identity formation rather than as skills or socialization, even if skills and socialization remain involved.

Doctoral students are positioned in these disciplinary discourses and practices without being full members of them or fully understanding their conventions and boundaries (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). Upon entering a doctorate, the candidate entertains a set of “possibilities” provided through genre resources. By consciously taking oneself into a genre as a way of valuing, acting, and expressing, the candidate thereby learns through handling the genre’s resources. Simultaneously, these resources represent limitations and are likely to be confusing, diverse, and contradictory. In this sense, the candidate is constantly facing challenges and choices, which can even cause exclusion from the academic community. Writing within a genre, in this respect, is not merely a question of comprehension, but also associated with “constellations of beliefs” (Ivanič, 2004, p. 224). In this last respect, the mastering of genres raises complex issues of emotions and identity.

To address these complex phenomena regarding learning and dissertational work, we will apply the concept of identity (Gee 2000) as a constitutive force in the process of academic writing (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). The genre literature referred to above represents an important backdrop because this conception allows us to elaborate on learning as it relates to the mastering of academic genres (Swales, 2004, 2009). Learning will, on the other hand, be

viewed based on the Vygotskian conception of internalization and externalization (Daniels, 2008), which emphasizes the amalgamation between the appropriation and enactment of knowledge. Brought together, these conceptual approaches will be applied in a discussion of the storylines represented in two pathways to the doctoral degree.

Theoretical framework

The possibilities for learning that are available in any social space will transcend the act of writing (Burgess and Ivanič, 2010, p. 238). Processes of learning will be in circulation both before and after the writing and are likely to change over time. Time and timing are, in this respect, essential in the process of learning. The writing practices in which doctoral students engage cannot be separated from these aspects of time, in which the candidate gradually identifies and resists against various social and academic positions. In this gradual process across timelines, *identity* does not emerge within the individual alone but also in relation to a social space:

The “kind of person” one is recognised as “being,” at a given time and place, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and of course, can be ambiguous or unstable. Being recognized as a certain “kind of person” in a given context, is what I mean here by “identity.” In this sense of the term, all people have multiple identities connected not to their “internal states” but to their performances in society (Gee, 2000, p. 99).

Hence, identity changes over time and across contexts. In this article, we discuss how this emerges through the writing of a doctoral thesis, including the involvement and coordination of multiple processes that exist across and along different timelines of feedback, supervision, refinement, and writing. It is reasonable to presume that the different demands and progressions in writing a monograph versus those writing published articles also enforce different interactions, contextual logics, and expectations regarding how to perform in order to be recognized. We propose that academic identity is formed through these paths and acts of writing and will explore these differences by theorizing about their limitations and possibilities as genre-practices. A sociocultural perspective on learning can serve as a helpful conceptual bridge.

Sociocultural perspectives accentuate how we learn through our engagement in social practices and the use of cultural artefacts in our surroundings (Vygostky, 1978; Daniels 2001, 2008). By using cultural artefacts, we also become cultural beings as well because we shape and re-shape our social surroundings (Engeström, 1999). Sociocultural perspectives thereby accentuate a perspective on learning that emphasizes that academic writing is a form participation and learning (Swales, 2004, 2009). “Research genres” can be defined as

knowledge practices, along with their specific conventions, norms, and values, which are internalized, appropriated, and transformed in the process of use (Swales, 2004). This means that learning these genres is a matter of participation in these practices and thereby elaborating on this knowledge through the writing process. In this perspective, learning, for the individual, is both a process of implementing socially defined knowledge and also about gaining ownership of this social field through the production of one's own material. Even if there have been substantial and even agonising debates about "how" this process emerges, the main focus in this paper and our theoretical positioning is to emphasise the compounded, integrated character of becoming a scholar through the writing of a thesis.

The above notion of knowledge as practice has been explicated in more recent trends associating knowledge with active use and contextual involvement, which focuses on becoming a part of a practice as a knowledge culture. This contextual view stresses the richness of knowledge embedded in practices involving a variety of theories, as well as unarticulated insights and techniques, norms, and history, the meanings of which are most commonly and effectively determined through direct involvement (Felstead, Jewson, & Walters, 2005).

This combination of acquiring, gaining ownership, and becoming a part of a practice is illustrated through Vygotsky's notion of internalisation and externalisation (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström, 1999). In this model, the novice begins his or her learning path with a heavy focus on internalisation (knowledge acquisition). Then, a gradual increase in knowledge enables the learner to become actively involved through externalising ideas (participation).

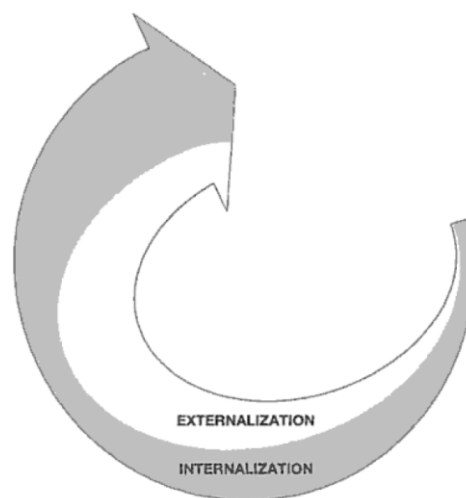


Figure 2: Internalisation and externalisation as symbiotic entities in learning and development

A major point in the above illustration is that as the learning process becomes more complex and demanding, internalisation (acquisition) increasingly takes the form of critical self-evaluation, while externalisation (contribution) emerges as productive involvement and innovative problem-solving. These conceptions might elucidate the above issue regarding how to approach and master the doctoral thesis as a genre in the process of becoming a scholar. Our view in relation to the above-mentioned concepts of identity, as well as the notion of internalisation and externalisation, is to elaborate on how these categories, taken together, can explain the challenging processes doctoral students experience when writing a thesis and also accentuate the various challenges in relation to the genre learning experienced in writing an article-based vs. a monograph-based work. These diverging methods of academic learning through participation in different genre practices are also discussed in relation to identity formation through writing within academic practices.

Methodology

To illustrate the difference between the article-based vs. a monograph-based dissertational format, the paper will empirically draw on *vignettes*. Vignettes are here defined as small stories or descriptions of situations used for research purposes (Renold, 2002). Vignettes are often used for the purpose of investigating an informant's perceptions and views. The stories or situations are typically related to challenges and dilemmas, often in a context that the informants know well. These are presented in a transparent manner in which informants are invited to reflect and discuss (Marshall & Rossman 2011). The two vignettes we use in this paper are written by academics who worked as research fellows during their Ph.Ds. Both the informants are "insiders" of an academic community, and the writing of their theses was based in the same disciplinary field. This use of a single disciplinary field should strengthen the analysis because it will allow us to accentuate the differences in the participants' writing processes while keeping the disciplinary differences to a minimum. Granting the vignettes an authentic position as the individual experiences of these two informants, these authors are also made reciprocally familiar with the others' stories, thereby allowing them to further reflect on the experiences gained through their dissertational work. These reflections have been applied in the analysis in the form of the saturation and elaboration of the empirical material. The analysis will therefore not dwell on concrete academic contexts and research fields, but allow the informants to gain insights into their own, as well as the other informant's, experience of writing a monograph or article-based thesis.

Two vignettes

Vignette A: Sam's story

My PhD project was based on qualitative research methods within the field of education. The study was based on an empirical design observing a setting over several months, with the primary focus of studying participatory patterns of learners within a given formal educational context. I chose, from the start, to base my dissertational work on the basis of publications. Structurally, the thesis was therefore written in two independent sections. The first section contained an introduction, theoretical positioning, and a summary of the entire project; the second part contained three individual articles presenting slices of empirical findings specifically angled towards ongoing discourses in the research field. These findings were also summarized in the first introductory section of the thesis.

The first article of this thesis was the one I experienced as the most demanding part of the entire thesis. The main explanation for this was my attempt to combine very complex theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspectives within the format of a single article. This problem was pinpointed by the reviewers, but the process of receiving comments and processing these comments proved to be more demanding than I had expected. One explanation for this is that the comments seemed to be addressed to an expert scholar in that some of the premises of publishing and positioning scientific contributions were taken for granted. This represented a rather steep learning curve for a novice. An additional challenge was the drawn-out process of getting published, which took almost three years.

The second article was a much less troublesome and faster process. The experiences with the first article induced me to limit my focus and reduce the number of perspectives involved in the text, thereby aiming to “hit the spot” with respect to the journal and the ongoing discourse in the field. This resulted in a much shorter timespan from the initial submission to publication in which the paper was narrowed for a more specific reading audience at an early stage.

The third article was based on a rather narrow approach as well, but it sought to combine two different fields in a discussion of my empirical findings. This resulted in a more turbulent progression toward final publication because the referees disagreed about the value of the contribution in the text and the presented material. This last publication thus resulted in me withdrawing the paper and publishing it in a different journal. The whole experience of disapproval from a reviewer and the editor's decision not to publish was a hard but important

learning experience for me as a young scholar. It was challenging in the sense of being an unexperienced academic receiving tough feedback, but it was an important learning experience with respect to the review process and understanding the decisions that journal editors have to make concerning ongoing scientific discourses, as well as learning that a review is a somewhat unpredictable experience. I also learned to find solutions when adjusting the work.

A challenge concerning the entire dissertational work was that the papers submitted were pulled apart while going through the various review processes and the journal pipelines. This set off a redirection of the focus and contribution of my articles, which had some consequences for the entire PhD project. To some extent, this redirection was reasonable and appeared to be a positive contribution, while other aspects of it were more problematic. One of my experiences in writing an article-based thesis is that this pulling apart can raise major difficulties in completing the final dissertation.

Finally, a major challenge of the overall process concerns the time elapsed between when each submitted paper is received by the journal and when it is reviewed by the editors and referees. In my dissertational work, the timeline of the submitting and reviewing was as follows:

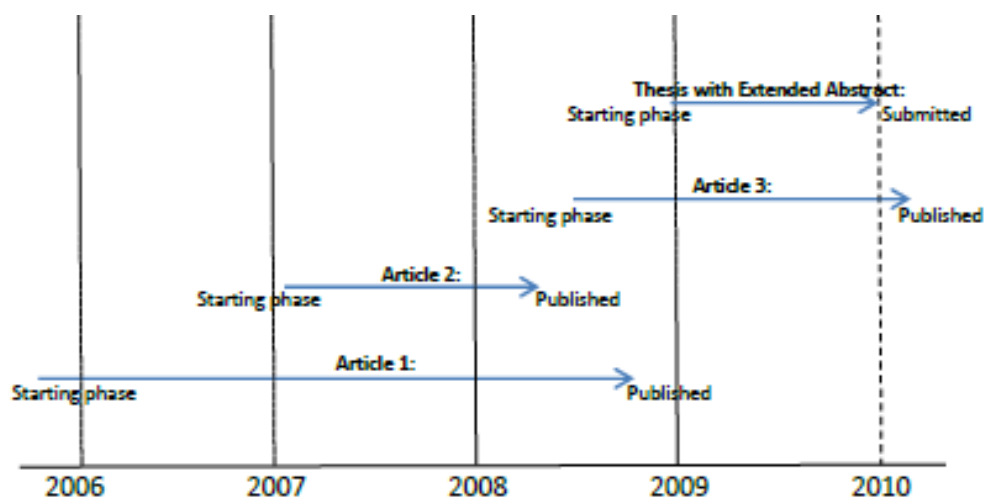


Figure 1: Progression timeline for the articles

As illustrated in the figure above, in ways in which the various articles progressed were uneven. The challenge concerning these time lapses in writing article-based dissertations is related to both the unpredictability of knowing when one is going to receive feedback and the uncertainty as to the number of revisions required, as well as potentially handling rejection.

Despite these challenges, my overall experience in writing a thesis-based on publications is that it provided me a unique opportunity to experience the realities of journal publications and participate in the frontiers of academic research. The turbulence of these experiences also prepared me for the challenges to come and made me realise that a tough feedback process not always should be interpreted as a disappointment.

Vignette B: Sara's story

The final title of the monograph was version number twelve. I really do not know how many versions of the text I created during the four years, but many re-writes were performed, some small and others very extensive. However, the monograph, as a genre, functioned as the glue for the entire process. I attended doctoral courses and obtained new ideas and inspiration. I was challenged by my supervisors and external readers. These experiences often led to changes being made in one part of the text, which in turn led to changes in other parts, and these kinds of re-writings continued throughout the entire period. The process of writing was demanding and exhausting, yet it was also a unique opportunity to explore the relationships, historicity, and contextuality of the language that I used.

A question that emerged in the first phase of the thesis work was whether I would write a monograph or an article-based dissertation. At that time, there was an increasing tendency toward article-based dissertations, which had come to be seen as preferred. These were usually written in English to be published in international journals. For my thesis work, I found good arguments for both genres. Writing focused research articles is an important part of the academic craft, and there are good reasons to write in this format from the start. Moreover, one will have many readers by publishing in international journals. On the other hand, writing a monograph is a unique opportunity to truly engage in in-depth reasoning.

After careful consideration, I decided that I would write a monograph. The most prominent reason for this was that the empirical material I was working with was designed as a holistic ethnographic and exploratory study. Thus, it was not easy to divide the study into various focused subtopics. I decided to write a monograph relatively early and also began to write from the beginning of my PhD study. From the moment I decided to write a monograph, this genre played an important role as a mediational tool during the process of writing. My gradually increasing understanding was reflected in the text, and the text frames and structures influenced how I organized the further research work. The format in which the results would be presented remained important, and a gradually increasing awareness of the

monograph as a genre mediated the entire research process. A monograph provides a relatively large space in which to explore subjects in-depth and present comprehensive and lengthy trains of thought. It allows for rich reasoning with many distinctions and nuances. It provides an opportunity to explore connections from the first page to the last, and it allows for lengthy explanations of how various elements are interrelated.

According to the committee, the final text was a valuable contribution to the field, both theoretically and methodologically. Theoretical rigor and sound correlation were highlighted as the strengths of the monograph. Mastery experience and pride in one's own achievements is a profound emotion. However, the positive feeling of success was relatively quickly replaced by something completely different when I began transforming the long complex lines of reasoning from the monograph into focused research articles.

The relationships and connections between various empirical and theoretical issues were at the forefront of my consciousness when I started writing the first article. It turned out to be difficult to transform these relationships and connections into the refined and focused points required for an article. In the monograph, "everything was interwoven with everything," and that also appeared to be the case with my own thinking about the phenomena I had studied. When I introduced one concept or one finding from the study into the new article, it appeared to me that the entire argument of the thesis came with it onto the page. Because of that, I was not able to distinguish between what was *text* and what was *my thinking*. The first article was submitted and rejected by five journals before I gave up. The text had, according to the reviewers, interesting potential, but the focus was not clear enough, and the argument appeared to be implicit and vague.

Several years later, I began to work on it again, and this time, I managed to refine some ideas from the monograph into clear points that fit the article format. Seven years after the dissertation, this article was published. It felt like a bit of a victory!

In parallel with this rather troublesome writing process, I began as a postdoc, and a new research project was initiated. I was also involved in other research projects, and planning to publish articles from the outset was a part of them all. Just as the monograph mediated the doctoral thesis, I now experienced that the article format was very central to how we planned, implemented, and thought about the new studies. However, this genre mediated my learning path in completely different ways than the monograph did during the PhD project. Knowing articles would be the final output, it was quite natural to define distinct foci very early in the

process. The publications from the new projects were also met with criticism from reviewers, but they were accepted after several rounds of revision.

Discussion

Written texts have the capability to endure and coordinate events across different points in time, and in producing texts, writers coordinate related experiences that unfold over multiple timelines. This combined process of over- and across-time relations is interesting and intriguing, especially in comparing the two vignettes above. In Sam's story, the timeline unfolds very differently than in Sara's. Sam experienced three very diverse review processes, which progressed unevenly and did not follow a predictable advancement in accordance with the PhD project as a whole; the three articles in Sam's thesis represent an ongoing coordination challenge. Moreover, due to the complexity in the development of article one, the revision of the following pieces also influenced the work on the other articles. In this respect, Sam was obstructed by but also benefitted from the review processes across his publications. Sam's writing of the extended and summarizing abstract of the thesis also played a role in coordinating the articles, but this represents a different and more retrospective time logic regarding his academic achievements. In Sara's case, the writing was a more gradually process of refinement. Even though Sara's text was also written in pieces (chapters), these sections were crafted more on the basis of a totality and to enhance and clarify the congruence and logic of an integrated piece of work.

If we relate the experiences of these different processes to learning and identity formation, Sara was involved in a strongly intertwined progression, in which each piece at "...any given *moment* is temporally extended by its integration with other processes to include the past and the future" (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010, p. 234). While this process appeared to be very different for Sam, his pieces were also *temporally extended by their integration*. But the temporality in his integration was partially postponed until the extended summary but also integrated via the learning that occurred during the reviews. In this sense, both pathways represent interconnectedness, but with very different connotations and meanings. From the perspective of academic genres as social practices, these temporal features signify dissimilar ways of participating and becoming culturally and socially recognized. While Sam's work was facing rebuttals from multiple highly selective academic arenas, Sara's work progressed within the confines of her supervisors and local academic community. The two stories thereby differ in the way in which their work was challenged through academic discourses, evaluation, enactment, use of language, and how they addressed a readership. From the start, they applied

different semiotic resources in this respect, doing so in ways that not only resulted in different written end-products but also ultimately brought them on different pathways in terms of how they related to academic genres as social practices.

This last point also gives us reason to believe that Sam and Sara experienced a different academic development, in which the written products and how these circulated in given contexts expectedly influenced their academic identity and knowledge formation as writer's (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). How and to what extent a written text is commented on, included, or excluded from the academic community influences how the writer perceives him or herself as a part of this community. In Sam's case, this not only resulted in inclusion but also in exclusion. Sam was more-or-less obligated to undergo this academic peer assessment, while Sara, despite her openness to input and commentary on her work, deliberately chose not to draw on external comments during the final work on her thesis. Instead, she continued with what she, at a certain point, perceived as the continuity and thread in her project. As Sara's "maturation" continued, receiving input during the later stages of her work would only be perceived as a disturbance, unless the commenters were familiar with her work.

The contrast between Sara's maturation and Sam's constant cyclic progression through various pieces is striking, and it is interesting in relation to the concepts of internalization and externalization as an illustration of how these two candidates learned through the writing of their theses. While Sara's internalization extended over several years and was gradually modified and transformed into an externalized text, Sam experienced a situation in which he was expected to externalize, i.e., contribute and become productively involved in the academic community, quite early in the writing process. This not only entails the three specific pieces but also all the review processes, with their later revisions and adjustments. This creates a complex web of "pasts and futures" with partially separate and partially intertwined internalization and externalisation cycles (Engeström, 1999). In addition, both Sara and Sam experienced learning cycles that had far-reaching consequences, in which the experiences of writing publications versus a monograph provided them with different bases for their continuing work as academics and researchers.

In this sense, Sara and Sam hold different positions because they continue to participate in academic discourse, which in the given field, is heavily based on article publications and less oriented towards monographs. After their dissertations, Sara and Sam therefore entered the academic community differently not only with respect to their doctorates as end products but

also regarding the experiences and identities they have formed throughout the process of entering the academic community. The monograph, on Sara's part, offers little experience in handling and coping with peer-based feedback and journal conventions. Sam, on the other hand, has gone through an academic formation in which creating meaning out of a text is based on an ongoing dialogue with unknown representatives of the academic community, with a more collectively oriented adjustment and revision process as a part of his identity. A constitutive element of Sam's approach is that through his doctorate, he consciously *created* this act of collective writing (Burgess and Ivanič, 2010, p. 240): writing as a way of being constructed in the interface between the writer's identity and how the text produced will be read by the academic audience. The process of creating pieces of texts, such as in Sam's case, may be contradictory and perceived as fractured and disjunctive, but the way he worked through his thesis made him try to understand how his work would be perceived and judged within academic discourse. Of course, for both Sara and Sam, their dissertational work still depended on what the readers made of it, but in Sara's case, this was more-or-less a compromise between the readings of her supervisors and her commission.

The difference between scientific articles and the monograph as genres also involves more practical dissimilarities, such as the presentation of the argument, how evidence is displayed, and the extent of the involved literature reviews and research. The slicing and sharpening of evidence and the arguments used in these two formats are so different that the one would need to learn the other's strategies and vice versa. However, strategies can be learned. The most important difference that Sam and Sara elaborate on, again entertaining the notion of identity formation and learning through the writing, is that the gradual process of monograph writing differs substantially from the more immediate and constantly critical self-evaluation used in an article-based thesis.

Conclusions and implications

Drawing on the discussion above, knowing about these diverging experiences of dissertational writing must be of great importance in doctoral education. The aim of writing a doctoral thesis is, to a large extent, to understand methods, conceptual and theoretical representations, previous findings, and how to apply them in order to contribute creatively to an academic field. We also believe that most fields benefit from a variety of genres and that both article-based dissertations and monographs should play a role. What is important in our view, is that supervisors and organizers need to be aware of the differences these pathways represent concerning academic identity formation. Awareness of these differences should be reflected

in supervision and steps should be taken to foster insight and knowledge about how these dissertational formats and their struggles are experienced by their authors. This is crucial to providing good supervision and support for the doctorate, as well as being beneficial to the development of knowledge in the disciplinary field. The role and competence of the supervisor is especially important in this respect. In our view, this is a matter of faculty development.

Finally, we wish to underline the importance of self-construction as an author while writing within an academic genre. We started this paper by asking about the differences in the experience of writing a monograph versus that of writing an article-based thesis and what these differences entail. These questions have, to some extent, been addressed in the discussion above with respect to temporality, learning, genre conventions, and identity formation. We can also conclude that despite their work being placed in similar disciplinary fields, Sam's process of collective assessment contrasts deeply with Sara's more solitary production of a monograph. One feature we have not discussed regarding identity is how the writer asserts his or her ownership to the text. What we point to here refers not so much to the community, but more to finding one's own "voice and pitch" as a writer (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010). At this point, through the more lengthy process of monograph writing, Sara might have a different feeling and confidence than Sam. To end this paper with a bit of speculation, with respect to finding one's own "voice" as a writer, Sara might just benefit quite a bit from her experiences in the long run.

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