

The Power of Engagement in a World without Walls: A New Pedagogical Model in Online Service-learning

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ABSTRACT The researchers explore here an alternative model for horizontal international collaboration in teaching and learning; a module incorporating service-learning and online-learning principles. *Playing the Power Game*, is a service-learning module first taught internationally via the internet from two different academic institutions: the University of the Free State (UFS) located in Bloemfontein, South Africa and the University Without Walls (UWW), Saratoga Springs, NY, Skidmore College in the United States. This paper considers the process and results of this unique international service-learning venture. By isolating power as theoretical abstraction; applying multidisciplinary approaches placing learners' experience, service and reflection at the pedagogical center; and by harnessing the enormous capacity of the internet to connect peoples, we are confident that a unique cross-cultural learning experience resulted: charting a useful new pedagogical model with value for facilitators across the disciplines in the internet age.

INTRODUCTION

The ancients believed the world was flat. The round world outlined so tentatively by Prince Henry the Navigator's Portuguese explorers is today a commonplace for the youngest of learners. Thomas Friedman introduces a "flat" world metaphor for the notion of "horizontal collaboration," a world flattened by technologies unimaginable to the ancients or even Prince Henry's master map makers (Battistoni et al. 2009: 89).

A flatter world offers new opportunities - and new challenges - to higher education as well as economics, politics and society. Contemporary higher education institutions (HEIs) confront globalization, the emergence of an open knowledge society, and the explosion of information technologies; the onus of the ethos of ac-

countability and efficiency has grown accordingly (Gibbons 1998; Bawa 2003). Collectively, these challenges and new societal demands require HEIs to complement their focus on knowledge with greater attention to competence. This historic development is marked by a shift from dichotomy to multi-pluralism, from closed canonical systems and collegial authority, to open, permeable systems responsive to social interests (Kraak 2000). These trends call for higher education to develop new pedagogical approaches: to move away from formal lectures to a variety of alternative teaching modes, to learning environments that facilitate multi-disciplinarity and lifelong learning. A flattened world, the global village world, seeks teacher facilitators to lead learners towards integration of diverse knowledge, towards problem solving, towards utilization of digital tools including the internet's potential: in short, creating global citizens for a broader horizontal world.

The researchers explore here a model for international collaboration in teaching and learning, in a module incorporating service-learning and online learning principles. *Playing the Power Game*, is a service-learning module first offered internationally via the internet from two different academic institutions, namely the

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University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa and the University Without Walls (UWW), Skidmore College, United States (Naudé and Reinhart 2004). This paper considers the process and results of this unique international service-learning venture.

Living and Learning in a World without Walls

Former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Ernest Boyer's vision for higher education's future (1996) is well known: expanding the idea of scholarship, revising academe's priorities, finding more creative ways of defining a scholar. Boyer challenged the academe to utilize the rich resources of HEIs to address today's most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems. Boyer's scholarship of engagement nurtures a climate where academic and civic cultures communicate in creative and continuous ways (Bringle and Hatcher 2004).

Michael Gibbons similarly promotes the notion that universities serve the public good; engaging civil society: town with gown. He warns against withdrawing into the ivory tower, urging the academe to enter public spaces, becoming loci of socially robust knowledge, engaging with their communities in common production of knowledge (Gibbons 2000). Coining the term Mode 2 society, Gibbons envisions knowledge production reaching beyond the walls of the academe, with communities encouraged to speak - and speak back - to the academe. These new prophets are constrained by the absence of a broader consensus across a range of social worlds. Multi-disciplinary approaches involving experts on both sides of the academy wall and the creation of transactional spaces where social worlds interact are needed (Gibbons 1998; Erasmus 2007).

To paraphrase Aldus Huxley, this new world calls for academic bravery and boldness: faculty and administrators sufficiently courageous to move beyond their personal comfort zones and their traditional classrooms; to become "public intellectuals" (Cushman 1999: 328). Such a move - from observer in the ivory tower to social engagement - involves reprioritizing higher education's canonical agenda from the production of knowledge to the production of socially robust knowledge, dovetailing teaching and research with societal needs, all shaped by the

tools and context of a flatter world (Gibbons 1998; Erasmus 2007).

So who is a responsible horizontal world citizen? The researchers concur with Digeorgio-Lutz (2010) that global citizenship relates to educational outcomes that contribute to a global society, which recognizes geopolitical and economic interdependence; empowers people; understands diversity in culture and values, while acknowledging commonalities and interdependence among peoples.

Educational Philosophy

Traditional pedagogy has been slow to embrace new modes of learning (Payne 2004). "It has long been recognized," Gibbons' indicts, "that higher education institutions, particularly universities, are among the most stable and change resistant social institutions to have existed during the past 500 years" (Gibbons 1998: 1). It is ironic that in this moment of learning and teaching ferment, university academics are peculiarly resistant to pedagogical change. Didactic methods (lecturing, information dissemination and disciplinary focus) continue to be emphasized; constructivist approaches (interaction, reflection and multi-disciplinarity) are more debated than implemented.

In the past decade, learning and assessment have become the focus in discussions among educators, politicians and the lay-public; countless academic conferences have been devoted to assessment. This discussion encompasses both the pedagogical concerns of contemporary thinkers, Boyer and Gibbons especially, and the ideas of earlier progressive educators: John Dewey, David Kolb, and Paulo Freire. This paper draws its thesis from these progressive theorists: that significant learning - true learner transformation - lies in active, interactive and reflective pedagogy (Berge 2002; Payne 2004).

Active Learning: From a constructivist point of view, learning is seen as a continual active interaction between learners and their environments (Piaget 1976; Payne 2009). John Dewey, a leading educational philosopher, stressed the unity of theory and practice; that best learning occurs through the experience of real-world situations: thus, intellectual activity isolated from concrete events is a trap. Theory and abstraction must interact with the real world; real human problems are central to his educational philosophy (Dewey 1963).

For Dewey, learning is always sparked by a novel difficulty experienced in the ordinary course of events. In parallel with Dewey's ideas of learning, Kurt Lewin, a Gestalt social psychologist, regards active learning through problem solving as the focal point for learning; giving life, texture and personal meaning to abstractions (Kolb 1984). Similarly, and inspired by Lewin and Dewey, David Kolb defines learning as knowledge created through transformation of experience. In his widely circulated experiential learning cycle, Kolb identifies learning as a continuous spiral starting with a particular action, followed by attempts at understanding, drawing of general principles and, lastly, applications and actions in new circumstances. When used as a learning framework, Kolb's cycle creates excellent opportunities for the unique blending of 'hands-on' experience and learning, with reflection as the vital link (Kolb 1984). This is the essence of active learning.

Interactive Learning: Feminist epistemologies emphasize learning as a social practice, based on participation in a community of practice. Constructivist and social constructionist perspectives share the premise that knowledge and truth are socially built (constructed), that ideas are mediated by interactions and social relations (Payne 2009). In this shift towards the collective construction of knowledge, the teacher is decentered; the search for knowledge is more learner-directed and dialogic. In this active enterprise, narrative promotes reciprocity between learner and teacher: we hear the learner's voice better (Neururer and Rhoads 1998). Paulo Freire, a passionate political activist and educator, adds that effective interactive learning requires this dialogue to be a level process embedded in mutual trust, fellowship and solidarity (Freire 1968). Subject matter and information acquisition mark the initial processes of learning rather than the final outcome (Reinhart 2008). True learning requires interaction among text, peers and facilitators (Berge 2002).

Reflective Learning: In both active and interactive learning, reflection is a key practice. In Dewey's formula: *Experience plus Reflection equals Learning*, reflection bridges the gap between concrete experiences and abstract knowledge (Dewey 1963). Donald Schön, widely recognized in the field of reflective practice and learning systems, regards reflection as a continual interweaving of thinking and doing (Schön

1990). Dewey defined reflection as active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it. Dewey characterized reflection as not mere contemplation by an abstract mind but analyzing, testing hunches, observing results, offering generalizations, prizing the valuable but amending that value through critical appraisal (Dewey 1963). Paraphrasing Dewey, Freire (1973: 3) regarded reflection as the opportunity to "reach back to yesterday, recognize today, and come upon tomorrow".

PEDAGOGICAL ARCHITECTURE (METHOD)

Mindful of global civic imperatives for education, as well as the constructivist educational philosophy (active, interactive, and reflective learning), the researchers designed the *Playing the Power Game* module to encourage and support active learners while engaging in online activities and service. Online discussion forums encouraged peer-to-peer and peer-to-faculty conversations; elevating learning by the sharing of individual experiences. To ensure reflection they built in opportunities to relate new experiences to past ones, to apply the totality of this learning to their daily lives; offering learners liberty to create and revise their mental models.

This module incorporated a combination of features: international exposure, multidisciplinary interaction, service and online learning; a new online pedagogical architecture. Learners and facilitators from different parts of the world engaged in online discussions to reflect on service-learning experiences through the lens of power relations as theoretical abstraction.

International Participants

Both the UWW program at Skidmore College, USA and the Bachelor in Management Leadership Degree (BML) of the School of Management, UFS, South Africa are learning programs for working adult learners. These programs afford adults open access to educational opportunities that recognize prior learning and are embedded in experiential learning practices. While the UWW program has a broad liberal arts focus, the BML aims to deliver a new generation of formally qualified and innovative man-

agerial leaders equipped to contribute to today's corporate and business environment.

Approximately eighteen adult learners from various social, cultural and economic backgrounds, living in diverse locations of the world participated in this module. The UWW learners were located in scattered locations in the USA, as well as Mexico. UFS learners were primarily situated in Kenya, Africa. This diversity created an exceptionally fertile environment for cross-cultural conversations. The previous diverse practical experiences of these learners made it possible to better articulate their multiple perspectives on the common theoretical abstraction: the dynamic of power.

Power as Point of Analytical Departure

Acknowledging the prevalence of power relations in contemporary society, as well as the international universality of power dynamics to every citizen's experiences, the module *Playing the Power Game* was developed. Each of us, as we live our lives, engage the dynamics of power and power relations. Aimed to equip learners with competence in the identification and application of key issues implicit in the concept of power, this module explored the differing bases and sources of power dynamics. The module offered learners opportunities to identify and evaluate their own strengths and challenges when using power. It provided a space to respond to local and international cultural tendencies while employing ethical and responsible uses of power (Naudé 2004).

Learners were urged to use their own prior learning experiences, as well as those of fellow learners, as important resources. Their specific service-learning environments yielded another rich source of information. For theoretical context, learners were strongly encouraged to peruse included reading materials (articles, books and websites) with sociological, political, leadership and psychological perspectives on power. This follows Reinhart's (2008) social constructivist principle, that acquiring this information marks not the final outcome, but only the beginning of learning. The sharing and discussing of acquired information (new or old) accomplishes the notion of constructing knowledge. Learners were encouraged to share with each other and their facilitators, reflections on com-

mon theoretical readings, grounded by their unique service-learning experiences. These experiences, and the resulting conversations, were vital to unfold the subject matter (and the world) while encouraging attitudes of active learning. Activity 1 and 2 (depicted in the following text boxes) offer two examples of activities designed to facilitate the exploration of power issues while looking through different lenses.

Activity 1- Defining Your Context

To get our conversation going, we ask that you introduce yourself to the group. Reflect on yourself and your context through the "lenses of power" and provide a description mentioning your power bases and sources, as well as the power plays you perceive in your personal and professional environment. Also mention who you regard as a truly powerful person and explain why you hold that opinion.

Multi-disciplinary Approach

Because we, the facilitators, had backgrounds in psychology, cultural history, and political science, the interaction was markedly multidisciplinary. From these perspectives, we marvel at the world's enormous array of cultural traditions, social institutions, and personal and historical experiences. Yet, we also affirm our sense of a shared collective humanness (behaviors, traits, rituals; social and individual) that underlie our common human inheritance. The researchers believe that power, its acquisition, its social location, its influence and effects, identifies one such human characteristic. The multi-disciplinary lenses used brought different theoretical perspectives to a common theoretical abstraction: the dynamic of power.

Service-learning

Mindful of the civic responsibility of education, we designed the module to include a service-learning component. This provided learners with an opportunity to learn in an authentic experiential learning environment where they could actively participate in problem solving, addressing a priority issue identified by the community: learning through doing.

Activity 16 – Creating Social Identities: International Leaders

Our challenge in this activity is to begin to build (discover, uncover) the identities of Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela. Our purpose is to learn about these individuals as we search for the source of their power, their ability to influence others and to change fundamentally the course of global society. The issues they confronted in their own lives and in their own locales came in time to be the issues that confronted nearly all persons on this globe in the last half of the twentieth century: colonialism, racism, poverty, human rights violations, war and sexism to name only the most obvious.

The challenge to you is to reach out to the internet to discover the details of these individual's lives; but then, more importantly, to begin to use the ideas you have been introduced to so far in your earlier discussions, to explore what specific attributes, what abilities of personality and psychology contributed to make these persons global leaders. Tell us who these individuals were, identify the ideas that shaped each of them, explore with each other and for us all what traits they displayed that made them influential, made them powerful. We can all use these word portraits (build your characters with images, text, and links to excellent primary and secondary sources, as word documents or even web sites) to discuss the interconnectedness of global ideas and traits of power and influence. If anyone would like to add a leader to our small list, please feel free to nominate additional leaders—especially women who have played similar roles of power, greatness and influence. Let's learn together while having some fun!

Service-learning was conceptualized as an “educational approach involving curriculum-based, credit-bearing learning experiences in which students a) participate in contextualised, well-structured and organised service activities aimed at addressing identified service needs in a community, and b) reflect on the service experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of the linkage between curriculum content and community dynamics, as well as achieve personal growth and a sense of social responsibility” (Bringle and Hatcher 1996; UFS 2006)

Service-learning, a form of experiential learning is congruent with the general movement away from teaching to learning. Philosophically grounded in a participatory worldview, service-learning is informed conceptually by situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) and an epistemology of connected knowing (Noddings 1984; Tarule 1996). In these worldviews, learning is emphasized as a social practice based on ideas of connectedness, an ethic of care and the importance of community (Neururer and Rhoads 1998).

Every learner who enrolled for this module was expected to identify a service-learning site serving as the context for learning. Some of them had already been involved in service-learning internships or volunteer experiences in public or private community agencies. Learners who were not already engaged in a specific environment were encouraged to enter sites where they could respectfully negotiate involvement with a priority identified by the community. Examples of such engagement include a preschool situation where teachers were facing the challenge of bullying amongst the children; improving staff relationships in a non-governmental organization and encouraging motivation amongst a volunteer group.

Experiential learning techniques as proposed by Kolb (1984), and subsequently Bringle and Hatcher (2005) formed the cornerstone of this service-learning pedagogy. The learners designed and implemented concrete experiences around a working relationship with the community, such as facilitating activities and discussion groups between the children in the preschool where the dynamics of power were explained and demonstrated in an age appropriate manner. Reflective observations included facilitated online discussions where learners shared these experiences. The abstract conceptualization of philosophy, theory, values and assumptions (in this case regarding power dynamics) informed further activity and application in the community. In this process we thus cohered with the E-service concept proposed by Strait and Sauer (2004).

Online Learning

Educators at all levels, including higher education, are discovering the enormous potentiality for learning inherent in web-based pedagogy

gy. This is partially true due to the newness of the technology itself, but more so because of the need to redefine both the classroom and the pedagogical paradigm that has for so long underlain the traditional face-to-face institutional environment. The web alters completely, literally transforms, the architecture of the traditional learning space (the classroom) dissolving the institutional imperatives of time and space (such as synchronous physical space, rigid schedules) and the necessity for lecturing in large halls; making the comfortable reliance on the didactic lecture format itself obsolete. The internet offers facilitators opportunities to open their classroom to the world, to create enormously rich encounters between people of diverse cultural traditions never possible before to talk directly with distant others, to explore, discuss and compare the nuances of their cultures, to discover the widely diverse institutional arrangements of their common human experience. Creating a space for recording learning experiences, but concomitantly sharing life experiences, the online classroom ironically personalizes and communalizes, building camaraderie by sharing (Reinhart 2008), despite lack of physical closeness.

As the facilitators of this module, the researchers confronted the necessity of transitioning the existing face-to-face module, *Playing the Power Game*, to a web-based learning experience. To them it was important to incorporate the pedagogical elements that contributed to the effectiveness of the original face-to-face module (drawing on previous experiences, exploring real life experiences, reflection opportunities and interactive discussions). In agreement with Payne and Reinhart (2008), who concurred with Dewey and Vygotsky in their rejection of a curriculum that facilitates individualistic, fact-driven, rote learning, they designed an alternative classroom experience that encouraged learner interaction and conversations. To achieve this, they designed a unique website (without benefit of any learning management system). The site created links to the module outline, details of facilitators and learners, readings, assessment procedures and, most importantly, discussion forums.

The asynchronous discussion forum (as well as two synchronous chat sessions) created opportunities for learners to actively, interactively and reflectively participate in their own learning. By allowing learners to create new conver-

sational threads, the forum encouraged them, as well as us as facilitators to share individual experiences with one another in order to construct common meaning from individual experience. The socially constructed knowledge realized through these interactive conversations synthesized our module's objectives.

RESULTS – LESSONS LEARNT

“How has ‘technology’ transformed the learning process itself?” (Reinhart 2008: 13). Reflecting on this question and on our journey, the researchers were reminded, but also discovered, the following principles of effective transformative learning: the power of a classroom that is not bounded by space and time; the utility of the online platform to sustain learner reflection and construct knowledge; the importance of maintaining a presence to facilitate horizontal interactive learning while ceding instructor control; and how the powerful notion of local community service-learning can and should be framed in a global context. In the following discussion we will explicate these ideas, while referring to other voices in this field.

The Power of a Classroom that is not Bounded by Space and Time

Online learning transcends the walls of the physical classroom to multicultural, location free spheres. Unchained from the confines of time and space, we witnessed how learners reflected not only individually, but interactively on the online platform, with the discussion invigorated by their service-learning experiences. The researchers were very aware that, without the power of the internet, this interaction between learners and facilitators whose worlds will likely never meet, would not have been possible. The immense power of bringing diverse worlds together was witnessed in conversations that would be very unlikely in other circumstances:

American Learner: Do other nations have the impression that the US has assigned itself the role of global police?

Kenyan Learner: Global prefect is more appropriate.

The researchers want to highlight here the importance of including both synchronous and asynchronous forums for discussion. While synchronous chats provide immediacy and a

feeling of conversing in the here and now, it is challenging when considering that learners in various time zones are invited to the conversation. The asynchronous forum overcomes this time zone challenge, while affording reflection opportunities for individuals to organize and articulate learning.

The Utility of the Online Platform to Sustain Learner Reflection and Construct Knowledge

Throughout, the researchers witnessed rich and continuous conversations in the synchronous and asynchronous online platforms. They became increasingly aware that active service-learning experiences provided students with immediate real life experience, adding substance to their exploration of prior learning and prescribed readings.

The researchers concur with Sharma (2010) that the online learning space has the potential to chart, build and structure learning. Like Augustsson (2010), the researchers witnessed the value of online reflections to develop awareness of self, others and the task; while supporting and creating interactive working groups. They agree with Purmensky (2009) that an online platform offers learners a 24/7 opportunity to transform their service experiences into reflective learning: connecting service with module content and outcomes.

The Importance of Maintaining a Presence to Facilitate Horizontal Interactive Learning while Ceding Instructor Control

As facilitators the researchers evaluated each session, finding from the outset the discussion forum marked by a valuable interactive free flow. The researchers concluded that this free flow, this sense of collegiality arose in large part because they facilitated - not dominated. The researchers share with Berge (2002: 181) the notion of instructor as “co-explorer and co-discoverer.” To not stifle creativity and learner-centered independence, we ceded much control to learners to initiate discussion threads – allowing for integrated participation and self-constructed learning.

The following exchange illustrates the collegiality achieved in a chat room:

Learner: *C*, thank you very much. You are a true politician. You should give our leaders here some tutorial.*

Facilitator: *Hi C*!! You are just too good...*

Learner: *Believe me C* I have learnt a lot from you, please give us your email.*

Facilitator: *C* - you have a fan club.*

Learner: *Sign me in!*

Learner: *C*, you need to run for office right here in the US!*

In the safe space created, learners felt free to openly express their opinions, and also be open about their insecurities:

Kenyan Learner: *M* [former Kenyan leader] was like a giraffe. Very clumsy but seeing very far!!*

American Learner: *I have to admit to feeling ignorant about the reality of living on under a dollar a day. I can't comprehend how difficult that must be, and how much suffering is associated with such poverty. I don't feel qualified to even offer an opinion about that.*

Furthermore, they also felt confident enough about the relations formed to challenge each other:

American Learner: *P*, I don't buy your "ordinary African" point.*

Dixson (2010) found a strong correlation between learner-learner and facilitator-learner communication. While the researchers support active and independent learning, taking care not to dominate the classroom, they recognize the crucial importance of maintaining a definite facilitator presence - to encourage participation, to support and challenge when needed and to sometimes offer context. Although the researchers recognize the strength in diversity, they were also aware of the potential for misunderstanding among far flung worlds and viewpoints. The learners engaged in this experience were very diverse, not only in terms of their prior experience; some were more articulate in English, and some more confident in the use of technology. Sometimes the researchers needed to explain context in which learner statements were made to facilitate mutual understanding. Indeed, this is a crucial function for an instructor facilitating an international service-learning module. They recognized the importance of providing safety and guidelines, to foster trust (Payne and Reinhardt 2008; Sharma 2010).

The Powerful Notion of Local Community Service-learning and How it can be Framed in a Global Context

In an increasingly interconnected world, the powerful notion of local service-learning can and should be framed in a global context. Bringle

and Hatcher (2011) propose international service-learning as a distinctive, robust and transformational pedagogy with potential to provide a broad array of deep and permanent learning across a variety of conditions for a range of learners. In implementing *Playing the Power Game* these same transformational values emerged, suggesting that a properly designed online service-learning module is equally effective. Study abroad programs are valuable, yet their cost limits their potential to a very few. *Playing the Power Game* demonstrates that online learning can create an international platform for dialogue—for exploring and sharing—unique, local, service-learning experience; adding global perspectives to local learning. With Harrison et al. (2010) the researchers propose a *study e-broad program* as an alternative to conventional *study abroad programs*. While acting locally, service-learners must increasingly approach cross-cultural issues as global citizens; connecting to local spaces can facilitate insight into global forces (Battistoni et al. 2009).

Merging these two pedagogies bridges the divide between the technological environment and the community, offering collaboration between service and online learning; service-learning is enriched by the power of the World Wide Web, online learning infused with global civic outcomes (Guthrie and McCracken 2010). Online learners benefit from engaging with their own communities (local rather than international service-learning) and from long-term commitment, rather than the short-term nature of study abroad programs; benefitting from online participation with geographically dispersed peers, while engaging unique, local and accessible communities (Guthrie and McCracken 2010).

Service-learning experiences offer students opportunities to acknowledge commonalities and interdependence among peoples, while questioning geopolitical interference and sensitive power relations:

Kenyan Learner: *There is too much interference in Africa by the West. They come along with such conditions as privatization of public enterprise to gain aid when they actually selling public companies to global multinationals*

Kenyan Learner: *C* I think the problem with America is they are not sensitive to the opinion of the people they try to "help".*

CONCLUSION

This module, designed purposively with an active, interactive, and reflective pedagogical

architecture offered insight into the power game – as it is played in different countries and cultures. The dynamics and relationships of power were explored from a multidisciplinary perspective. The researchers believe that local, community-based service-learning experiences, mediated by learners' sharing their reflections via the internet, allowed the construction of common meaning and cross-cultural understanding from otherwise solitary endeavors.

The module moved learners and facilitators beyond the comfort of traditional classroom rituals, establishing a supportive space within which preconceived ideas and unconscious values could be interrogated. Creative exchanges among learners and facilitators during the module's implementation demonstrated the learning value of stretching individual boundaries. By isolating power as theoretical abstraction; applying multidisciplinary approaches; placing learners' experience, service and reflection at the pedagogical center; and by harnessing the enormous capacity of the internet to connect peoples, we are confident that a unique cross-cultural learning experience resulted: charting a useful new pedagogical model with value for facilitators across the disciplines in the internet age.

The researchers conclude with last words spoken in our chat room:

American Learner: *I'm having a great time! This is distance learning at its best*

Kenyan Learner: *Hakuna Matata, E*!*

American Learner: *No worries!*

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