

Nurturing reflection during on-campus learning

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Abstract:

“I strongly feel that reflection skills are needed to be taught, as it is quite a skill to reflect effectively so that positive change can come from your reflections.”

This comment was made by a second year student teacher after completing an on campus curriculum course which included, as part of its methodology, regular reflective interaction between lecturer and student through email communication. As student teachers continue to tend to imitation and continuance of the status quo, the call for reflective practitioners is ubiquitous. While acknowledging that the term means different things to different people, teacher educators and students often find the actual outworking of such disappointing. Such a situation is problematic if reflection is viewed as a necessary and integral characteristic of the effective professional and therefore a critical focus for teacher educators.

Typically the process of reflection is directed solely to the practicum; a time when students are vulnerable and focussed on survival and classroom management. This paper proposes that a disposition toward the process of reflection can be nurtured during on - campus courses where pre-service teachers examine their own learning. The thesis is that pre-service teachers are better able and more inclined to critically reflect on the components of the teaching/learning relationship having identified them in their own learning process.

Introduction

Agreement exists in the literature that reflection is essential to a fully lived professional life, no matter whether that be for the pre-service teacher, associate teacher or course lecturer (Boreen, Johnson, Niday & Potts, 2000; Bullough & Gitlin, 1995). What is not available in the literature is a clear conceptualisation of reflection to guide the teacher educator’s pedagogy. There are those who avoid the use of the word reflection believing that the baggage that comes with the term may be more of a hindrance than help (Hawkey, 1995; McMahon 1999). Edwards and Collins also choose not to use the word ‘reflection’ because, in part, they believe “the use of reflection on practice in initial teacher education has suffered from oversimplification” (1996, p. 50).

So while on the one hand we have claims that reflection is necessary, on the other hand exists literature which questions whether pre-service teachers can be taught to be reflective, and if, in fact, being reflective makes any difference to their practice (Calderhead, 1989; Fletcher, 1997; Hawkey, 1995; LaBoskey, 1994; McMahon, 1997; Oser, 1994; Reiman & Theis Sprinthall, 1995; Smith & Hatton, 1992).

The recurring claim that teacher education does not make any difference to students on their journey to teaching, or if it does, then such change is unpredictable, indirect and short lived (Calderhead, 1989; Fletcher, 1997; Hatton & Smith, 1995; LaBoskey, 1994; McMahon, 1997; Reiman & Theis Sprinthall, 1995; Valli, 1992) is unnerving to teacher educators and does nothing to encourage us in the work we undertake. However, as we move through a new century, teacher educators, cognisant of the importance of their work to the health of a nation through quality learning for its young, are committed to find ways to be more effective and influential.

This conference title reminds us that Jack Whitehead’s¹ question: “How do I help my teacher education students, and finally their students in schools, to improve the quality of their learning?” still needs to be answered.

¹ From Russell and Korthagen’s *Teachers Who Teach Teachers* (1995:192), quoted in Fletcher (1997:238)

Many teacher education programmes claim to develop ‘well informed, skilled and reflective beginning teachers’ and the majority of initial teacher education programmes include to a greater or lesser degree the notion of reflection and/or the reflective practitioner. However, even after a quarter of a century of focussed debate, there is not agreement as to what this means. The key question to ask is: Is this ubiquitous reflection actually making a difference to the way school students are taught? Are pre-service teachers carefully considering the consequences of their choices, the reasons underpinning their decision-making, and, do their teaching approaches and management strategies reflect a concern for critical examination of or emancipation from dominant ideologies?

My observation is that currently, both teacher educators and student teachers find such experiences disappointing (Atkinson & Claxton, 2000).

“But too often, the calls to get teachers to engage in reflection and to study their practice are only empty slogans and boil down to nothing more than a plea that they ‘think hard’ about what they are doing and why they are doing it” (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995, p.15).

“...student teachers continue to be stubborn to change, tend to imitation in their classroom practice and, while on practicum, are committed for a variety of reasons to the continuance of the status quo” (Norsworthy, 2001, p. 2).

Rather than providing insights that might enhance their practice, the ‘reflective practice’ is often viewed as of little value, another task to complete, overwhelming or results in a lack of confidence and direction. In this paper I begin a dialogue about one possible approach – which though simple in its beginning – is challenging in its outworking. What happens when we shift the development of reflection from the practicum to what I refer to in my title as ‘on – campus’. What I mean by this phrase is ‘the pre-service course work within an initial teacher education programme’.

Reflective practitioner? Reflective learner?

Literature about reflection tends to relate exclusively to practical components of pre-service teacher education programmes. “It is during the practicum period that student teachers need to establish a reflective habit” (Malderez, & Bodóczy, 1999, p.16).

Currently teacher education courses invest much money, time and resources into organising and implementing placements for pre-service teachers in schools based on the belief, as illustrated by the following description², that such placement provides the opportunity for reflection and the integration of theory to practice. “The goal of the fieldwork experience component is to cultivate in prospective teachers the capacity to analyse, reflect, and engage in both explicit and implicit curricula linking theory with practice”. And yet, it is generally accepted that the practicum is a time when the pre-service teacher is in a most vulnerable situation – new context, new people, new and different tasks and when ‘surviving’ is one of the key goals. It is the assumption that reflection is linked to practice which itself needs critiquing. Why in teacher education programmes is the process of reflection something one does during practicum? Why is it something that is raised about practice?

² <http://www2.gborocollege.edu/facstaff/feudov/Field.htm>

Reflection and the developing professional

Over its short popularity reign, the concept of reflection has included descriptions of a wide range of processes, foci and even a range of levels of reflection. For example the process of reflection has been described as: thinking, reasoning, inquiry, critical thinking, a problem solving process, a mode of research, central to transformative learning, the heart of teaching, a mental wandering, an ability to stand apart, a critique, and even navel gazing. Similarly, in the teacher education literature, we find a broad range of descriptions relating to the focus for the practice of reflection. For example that focus may be: ‘pedagogical relationships’ (van Manen, 1991); ‘social responsibility’ (Zeichner & Liston, 1987); moral and ethical dimensions of teaching (Tom, 1984; Zeichner, 1981), and it is even possible to construe that reflective practice is the new master, the ‘preferred interpretation of teaching’ (Carson, 1997). And, while definitely not the focus of this paper, and realising the risk of such broad generalisation, it is possible to loosely group approaches to reflection, according to Habermas’ (1982) three kinds of knowledge: technical, interpretive and emancipatory. These kinds of knowledge have a ‘neat’ match with Mezirow’s (1991) three levels of reflection – content, process and premise, and van Manen’s (1977) three levels of reflection – technical rationality, practical action and critical reflection. These levels or kinds of learning are not isolated, but rather interconnected. What is *critical* in critical reflection is that the questions associated with emancipatory knowledge and premise reflection are targeted. Such a process is not easy or safe as such deep held beliefs are interconnected with our very beings, our sense of self. So when we direct a pre-service teacher to question whether something is worth being concerned about in the first place, we are asking them to question the situations in which that belief was developed.

In developing an alternative definition for reflection, (Oh no not another one) I am motivated not to add to the hundreds already recorded. The definition was step one on a personal journey toward a more effective teacher education pedagogy. The following definition is guiding my practice and I want to draw attention to three key components: the emphasis on self-awareness, the priority of considering the person who is reflecting and then finally the target for practice of reflection.

“Reflection is a process for improving practice by becoming professionally self aware through identifying assumptions in decisions and responses within the learning/teaching relationship, and judging those assumptions for their adequacy (both for suitability and sufficiency³) in the light of a developing and critiqued educational vision”
(Norsworthy, 2001, p.11).

To state that the purpose of reflection is to improve practice is not new. What is different in the route to this improved practice is my focus on the process of becoming professionally *self aware*. Critical to the process of reflection is a consideration of the person in the process of becoming a teacher (Buford, 1995; Cranton, 1996, 1998; Fraser & Spiller, 2000; Hamacheck, 1999; McLean, 1999; Palmer, 1993; 1998).

Typically reflection when viewed as a cognitive process has focused on practice, almost within a business and marketing model with clients, potential instruments, outputs and such. However pre-service teachers are people and we need to remind ourselves that

³ This is as an attempt to avoid being caught in what Brookfield refers to as “a self fulfilling interpretive framework that remains closed to any alternative interpretation(1995, p.5). By sufficiency I use the word in the sense of ‘expansive or embracing’ enough – not narrow minded.

good teaching comes directly from the identity and integrity of a complex human being (Palmer, 1998).

When reflection focuses on notions of efficiency or effectiveness alone, the process denies the very nature of the teaching process which is intensely personal, and in fact, moral because teaching is directed to 'the pursuit of desirable ends' (Tom, 1984, p. 80).

What is sought is not someone with reflective skills, but rather one who is, by disposition, reflective about all components and influences in the teaching/learning relationship. Consequently, the definition which currently guides my practice, places the process of reflection inside the learning/teaching relationship – and therefore I am interested in investigating more of the learning component of the learning/teaching relationship. I am arguing that for initial teacher education to be more effective in developing beginning professionals who are not beholden to the status quo, some components in current paradigms require revisiting and changing either in extent or in kind – the approach to the development of the reflective professional being one of them.

Why the focus 'on campus'?

We know, that at least in part, people become knowledgeable by thinking about and making meaning out of their experiences (Brookfield, 1987; Cranton, 1998; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). From this understanding, teacher educators have consequently, and I think correctly, concluded "critical reflection on teaching is a key component of gaining knowledge about our practice" (Cranton, 1998, p.18). This is a place where the change needs to be fundamental, in kind. It is argued that as pre-service teachers come to understand their own learning, they will better understand the relationship between teaching and learning. The process of reflection is ideal for this purpose. In fact, I would argue that our first target for pre-service teachers is to develop a commitment to the process of reflection. Unless pre-service teachers have developed such a commitment before practicum experience, it is unreasonable to expect them to be reflective during the practicum experience. They may complete the tasks, but it is unlikely that they will target the beliefs and assumptions undergirding their decisions and responses.

Learning to teach is not a clinical, technical event but rather a complex experience of personal, professional development with multiple viewpoints and accumulating influences. In such a course, the process of reflection needs to occur in all components – practicum and institutional teaching. If reflection remains rooted in particular practical experience, then its implications for the notion of teachers as professionals are significantly different from when pre-service teachers are systematically provided with opportunities to engage with other forms of professional knowledge (Boreen et al, 2000; Hill, 2000).

Earlier in this paper I noted that some aspects of initial teacher education programmes need to change – either in degree or in kind. One of these is the development of teachers with reflective dispositions, rather than those with just a collection of reflective techniques. This is deemed a change in kind, not just because of the repositioning of reflection as a disposition rather than a skill to be developed, but because of what such a change does to teacher education pedagogy.

What I am not arguing for at this point is a *course* which studies the idea of 'reflection' or 'the reflective practitioner'. Rather, that we as teacher educators take the risks involved in modelling a reflective stance; both in our own teaching and relating with students and in the expectations we have of and for students. In the same way, it is as significant and

true to conclude that critical reflection on one's own learning is a key component of gaining knowledge about our practice – as learner, student and teacher educator. Typically, teacher educators ask the question, “What beliefs about learning do pre-service teachers bring with them when they enrol in a programme of preparation for teaching?” We also need to ask the question of ourselves. “What beliefs about pre-service teachers’ attitudes to learning do we bring to the initial teacher education programme?”

In regards to pre-service teachers, my observation suggests that learning is seen as task or assignment completion. How this develops through our current education system and the types of assessment tasks we set is an important factor, but not for discussion in this paper. Lecture material written on a white board gains attention and is written down to be regurgitated at some later time. It is not so much that this is the case, which is viewed as problematic, but rather that pre-service teachers are unaware that this is the case. “It is a matter of being unaware that we have made an assumption and being unaware that that assumption could be questioned that constrains our vision” (Cranton, 1996, p.103). It is these very basic assumptions about learning that the process of reflection must be used to identify, to seek and critique. This approach does presuppose a seeking rather than a knowing attitude to practice (Fish, 1995).

Pre-service teachers often seem not to be aware of the assumptions about learning they bring to their initial teacher education programme, nor the fact that these assumptions themselves can be critiqued (Norsworthy, 1998; 2001). By valuing reflection on learning experiences, teacher educators send an important signal about the learning process itself. I draw attention to two ways this is critical; one relating to what is valuable in their own programmes, and one that impacts their own understanding of learning.

First we need to ask ourselves if the way we set up courses, and course outlines gives the message to pre-service teachers that the valuable part of the course is the assignments. Discussion with student teachers and lecture attendance patterns suggests they view the important part of their preparation courses as the practicum, and successful assignment completion as the necessary part. All else unless an exact model of what they can do in a classroom is viewed as unhelpful.

Student teachers bring to their initial teacher education committed beliefs about teaching which are resistant to change (Furlong, 2000; Hattie, 1999; Jessup, West & Throssell, 1996; Mayer, 1999). Feiman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melnick & Parker (1989) argue that due to the influence on initial teacher education programmes, component courses need to find ways to support student teachers in the examination of their initial beliefs and assumptions. Pre-service teachers are keen to learn about how to teach, and too often ignore deep-seated beliefs, and build on shaky and indefensible conceptions of effective teaching. As already indicated the process of critical reflection is not clinical or neat. These deep-seated beliefs are inextricably connected to their identities and “profoundly influence their practice and how they receive knowledge” (Furlong, 2000, p.26). One process involved in this will be the process of reflection, a learned process. The place where the vulnerable dialogue so much part of effective critical reflection can occur, and occur in a manner which will challenge the already held conceptions of learning and teaching, is away from the classroom, in course papers (Hattie, 1999; Norsworthy, 2001).

As part of the methodology for a ‘Teaching Science and Technology’ course, Year Two pre-service teachers reflected on their learning experience through the electronic medium

of email, using an adaption of Hoban⁴'s four foci categories which influence student learning: personal factors, teaching factors, peer factors and situational factors. This structured framework for reflection is not restrictive, but provides students with starting cues for their thinking. I would respond to the emails depending on the content, often adding probe questions to help the student think more deeply about the point being made. I was particularly interested in encouraging the students to ask, not just what and how they had responded, but why they had responded in a particular way, and how the reflection made might inform their teaching of science and technology. In other words, where appropriate, I endeavoured to support the student in taking their reflections and drawing a principle or general insight from that. At the end of the course, the students used these records to write a meta-reflection about what they had learned about the process of teaching science.

What needs to be in place for a 'nurturing environment' for developing reflectivity

Reflection is a risky and vulnerable business and I suggest that for reflection to be possible, teacher educators need to attend to their own pedagogy, expectations and beliefs. In the institution where I work TEAM is used to encourage the learning community to value each others' contribution. Posters around the buildings display the words **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore. This applies to the following components identified as necessary for supporting the development of reflective dispositions. While identified separately each is not sufficient by itself to gain the desired result. Each must work together. For example – it is as we, as teacher educators, develop and **model** reflective practice, that we become more aware of the presence and influence of power and consequently, **listen** to our students seriously and attentively with a desire to learn rather than react ; they **explain** their pedagogy, checking constantly to find out how students are experiencing their classes (Brookfield, 1995).

A TEAM approach

Trust - listening and dialogue

Personal experience, supported by the literature tells us clearly that ideal learning conditions promote a sense of safety, openness and trust. Learning is a risky business and takes courage to be vulnerable and open to change. "For faculty, as for students, trust necessarily precedes the risk of learning something new" (Svinicki, 1996, p. 4). All teaching and learning occurs within 'a space', an atmosphere, a milieu. Parker Palmer's quote: "to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practised" (1993, p.69), reminds us of the importance of the listening ear. You might find yourself reacting to the notion of obedience but Palmer points out that the word obedience itself comes from the Latin root *audire* meaning 'to listen'. Thus he views obedience as requiring "the discerning ear, the ear that listens for the reality of the situation, a listening that allows the hearer to respond to that reality, whatever that may be" (1993, p.43). This listening ear is critical in the developing of an environment in which pre-service teachers will take risks.

In understanding the process of learning, the assumptions which student teachers bring to their own initial teacher education sit 'below the surface' in the iceberg metaphor Fish

⁴ I am indebted to the work of Gary Hoban (1997, 2000) for a model to work with

(1998) and Malderez & Bodócsky (1999) use to understand the nature of professional practice. It is these beliefs under the surface that need to be engaged if initial teacher education is going to make a difference. The process of supported critical reflection has a role to play here (Cranton, 1998; Mezirow, 1991); not as a clinical cognitive task, but rather as a means to support student teachers as they confront the validity of their own perspective.

As a tool to move pre-service teachers beyond their own experience as pupils, they need help and support in ‘unpacking’ the way different types of knowledge held by a professional make a whole (Pearson & Selinger, 1999). In fact, Cranton suggests that ‘it is probably not possible to articulate assumptions without the help of others’ (1996:83). This seems a task that needs the advantage of the ‘privileged outsider’ (Bakhtin, 1986) making reflection for the student teacher a collaborative rather than individual task. This is the role I played in responding to the emails with supportive comments or probing questions or suggestions about an article the student might like to read.

Explain pedagogy

In my experience as a teacher educator one of the surprising insights which has dawned upon me is that student teachers do not necessarily understand my pedagogy. They often do not even think about why I do what I do the way I do it. One example of this was during the Teaching of Science and Technology course last year when students ‘reflected’ back to me about their learning experiences each week according to preset categories. After a very carefully crafted teaching session, a student reflected to me that he could not see how what I had done ‘had anything to do with teaching’. After an initial reaction of disbelief and questioning of my own assumptions about this response, I determined to listen to what was being said. Treating him as an intentional learner – I wrote back to him at length of my plans, my hopes and how the chosen pedagogy supported those. Thus began a helpful dialogue.

Sometimes I despair at the mismatch between the approach to learning I am taking and the message from students for a more ‘banking’ approach. For example one thing I found for sure in the Teaching of Science and Technology course was that not everyone appreciated my commitment to active learning. When pre-service teachers ask for a more ‘notes on the board’ approach, I found myself in a dilemma, a war of competing ideologies – do I give them what they want (because they paid for the course and if I don’t they might complain to the Dean), or do I stay true to my pedagogy and seek to ‘win’ them with pedagogical reasoning? A situation such as this was indeed rich for reflective reasoning and exploration. Deep at the heart of this situation is discovery about myself, answering questions such as: Who am I? What do I believe/ and Why do I believe that? So do I give them what they want or stay true to myself? I came to a better question: – Can we both have what we want? Unpacking the pedagogy in use may open and continue professional dialogue. My belief is that if we want teachers to teach Science and Technology differently to the way they learned, then they need to experience the learning of Science differently. What they wanted was a list of ‘ways to teach science’ to learn and regurgitate in the end of course examination. What I wanted was for them to teach through investigation, to think about and focus on the development of questioning skills, and the nature of the learning that would result from this approach. I have learned much from the experience and will be even more open with my pedagogy in 2002, pre-empting some of the dilemmas and bringing them into the open, into what I hope will be a safe and trusting dialogical environment.

Analyse assumptions

In 1998 while conducting a pilot study, I observed a student taking a mathematics lesson. She was committed to ensuring that the students understood what was going to be discussed so she began with an activity at the whiteboard, focusing on the meaning of some key terms. After a few minutes, the Associate Teacher approached her and said something like, “Is this a maths lesson or an English lesson?” Immediately the student teacher skipped her well-planned introductory stages and went to the computation. Discussing this event with her I asked why she had *chosen* to change her approach? A very enlightening discussion followed in which she talked about the fact that she was not aware that she had made a choice. Here is an excerpt from the transcript.

Student teacher: I think that I am a people pleaser and I have to work through that. I didn't want her to .. I don't like rocking the boat, to have someone upset with me. “

Interviewer probes a bit more: so if you had to make a choice (as you did in mathematics) between causing learning with what you thought was the best way and pleasing her, at this point in your life –you chose not to rock the boat?.

Without hesitation came the answer: “yes”

Interviewer asks: Under what conditions do you think it would change?

“Number one realising that it was a choice I made. I didn't realise that was a choice I made, that that was the situation I was in, so I didn't realise I had that choice even though I made it – so how would that change. Being more confident with what I know, being able to support what I know, owning what I know,

Consequently by drawing attention to our assumptions, we truly provide a freedom to change or not change.

In my definition of reflection referred to above, I posit that identifying and critiquing the assumptions that underpin the decisions key to a particular practice is fundamental to successful reflection. While both Brookfield (1995) and Pyle (1995) would also agree with this, I would argue that they do not go far enough as nothing happens with the action or assumptions after they are identified and clarified. It appears to me that it is very important to critique the identified assumptions, to judge them for their adequacy and encourage the students to use questions that also focus on the contexts of learning. If each memory is remembered in connection with the initial experience and location, then we need to encourage students to think about the characteristics of the social, political and cultural contexts that are part of the memory.

Mezirow (1991) views the first step to transformative learning (though I believe he limits this to cognitive or rational transformation) as the “process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world...” (cited in Taylor, 1998, p. 42). I am interested in my own assumptions and to this end in 2002 will focus on the potential for positive modelling and mentoring within an approach that addresses the question. “What is it about my practice that might help or hinder critical reflection for students? For example when students first indicated that they were not connecting with my pedagogy, my thought reactions were more linked to “these students don't want to think”. Why did I make that assumption? Surely that does not make sense when they were committed, mature students. I needed to think more about the reasons behind their responses and consider how we could get a win/win situation where they connected with the potential learning and I could stay true to my pedagogical beliefs.

I am asking the students to invest quality time in the reflection process, but their response is likely to be, “Will it be in the test?” According to Svinicki (1996) motivation to learn is influenced by two factors – the degree to which the task is seen to be “worthwhile to the learner” and secondly “expectancy for success”. This accounts for some of the disappointment for the level of ‘buy in’ to reflection. Student teachers appear to not be convinced of either the worthwhileness of reflection or confident that they can expect to be successful at it.

Model

The reflection literature presents ‘a capacity for reflection’ as a necessary, integral characteristic for a professional educator. (Appleton, 1996; Brown & Vossler, 2000; Boreen, Johnson, Niday & Potts, 2000; Bulllough & Gitlin, 1995; Day, 1999; Korthagen, 2001; La Boskey, 1994, 1997; Treagust & Harrison, 1999). If this is the case then as teacher educators we need to model reflection, to make our reflective practice explicit so that “the work in the university classes also needs to be guided by the same set of ideals” (Richert, 1997, in Loughran & Russell, 1997, p.83).

When I suggested this to some tertiary lecturers I was greeted with responses such as “there’s no way I am going to make that kind of thinking available to my students”. At this point I found myself facing a dilemma, a crossroad. Either reflection was what was being claimed and therefore needed to be part of my life and being and consequently needed to be made explicit for students – or I threw away the concepts I had been working with (and at that point in time eighteen months of PhD study).

The process of having students reflect about their learning experiences makes one incredibly vulnerable as described in the experience above. I could have withdrawn to a safe place and to a banking process, giving up my ideals; but my goal remains that each student develop into the best teacher possible and therefore I chose to use this opportunity to model the vulnerability that the process of reflection requires of them. This whole experience resulted later in that student writing: “Thank you for this opportunity to reflect. I have always said it takes a brave person and a secure one to allow those that they teach to have this type of direct feedback” (Personal communication 6 Nov.2001)

Without powerful intervention, beginning teachers teach as they were taught – not as proposed and argued for in initial teacher education courses. Students entering the Teaching of Science and Technology course often described their attitudes to these subjects in the email reflections – what would be the natural outcome for teaching in these subjects if these attitudes and beliefs do not change? All the theory in the world will not influence, unless we can influence the person.

Challenge for teacher educators

As we build our initial teacher education programmes with the intention to have more authenticity in our pedagogy, we will face challenges that come when we are committed to pre-service teachers’ *learning* and *development*, rather than course completion. If we take seriously that to teach differently our students need to have learning experiences that are indeed different to those they bring with them, then I believe that nurtured, supported reflection during on campus courses has a significant contribution to make. My personal journey in this area has just begun, but I have seen enough growth, development and ‘aha’ moments to continue with this methodology and researching both my own practice, students response and the impact the experience has or does not have in the student

teachers' practicum experiences. Such an approach requires a closing of the gap between our practice and the practice we are encouraging in the students learning to be reflective teachers. Such an approach has the potential to radically effect every part of our course development, particularly when we consider our pedagogy including assignment design.

We must not give up and settle for the comfortable. One challenge for teacher educators is to address the mismatch between attributes of good teaching presented to students and the learning experiences which we provide for them. I have suggested that nurturing reflection during course work has some potential for this.

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