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ABSTRACT

Talk is central to what writers do--it is the collaborative activity that underlies most, if not all, individual acts of composing. Writers compose through inner speech while walking, by speaking aloud at the word processor, when discussing a work-in-progress, or as they share ideas during conferences in writing centers and classrooms. But this talk is often suppressed, forgotten, or left out of the dominant story of learning to write. Writing centers are places student writers come to talk, asking real and engaged questions, talk that results in encouragement and becomes a reason for many writers to continue. When writing is viewed as the work of solitary genius, talk is left out of the story. A long-term collaborative poetry project investigated the issues of talk and voice as two university writing instructors collaborated at a distance on writing poetry. This interweaving of poetry profoundly affected the instructors' ways of teaching writing. Writing is taught best and learned best in a class that highlights drafting but also includes healthy "wallops" of talk. Finished products of writing smooth over their own construction, so writing teachers have begun to include examples of student writing and drafts as classroom models and writing center directors have begun to encourage tutors and tutees to brainstorm, draft and talk together. Writing takes time, and the more time teachers and students allow for pen on paper (or keyboardist on keyboard), the more likely it is that learning will take place. (RS)

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Paper presented at the 9th Annual
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Writing from the Tips of Our Tongues:

Writers, Tutors and Talk

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Talk is central to what we do as writers and as humans. It is the collaborative activity that underlies most--if not all--individual acts of composing. Because of this, the work tutors do every day--talking about writing with writers--is valuable in a multitude of ways. Writers compose through inner speech while walking, by speaking aloud at the word processor, when discussing a work-in-progress while drinking coffee with friends, or as they share ideas during conferences in writing centers and classrooms. But this talk is often suppressed, forgotten, or left out of the dominant story of learning to write.

Tonight, I plan to offer a revised version of that too dominant story. To start, I want to say that returning to this campus to talk about peer tutoring, composition and creative writing provides me with a warm sense of coming home. I think of myself as someone who "grew up" as a teacher within the walls of a writing center as well as someone who "grew up" as a composition specialist in the Ph.D. program at IUP where I talked my way through several summers, into and out of a dissertation, and eventually into my profession.

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During the summers I studied here, I wintered in Alaska, coordinating the writing center at the University in Fairbanks. Some of my most productive learning about teaching took place in that Center. Over time, the Center developed as a writers' workshop in the broadest sense; we worked to develop methods for group tutoring and portfolio evaluation, explored computers for tutoring, and instituted a peer tutoring program. Certainly we wrote in the center but equally important we talked about writing. I remember that the predictably shabby center was always well-lighted, warm and welcoming when I entered during the winter from those longest of nights and heard the steady hum of involved discussions. That writing center--entrusted to me for three years because no one else wanted it--flourished because it was staffed by graduate students who already trusted themselves as writers since many of them were working on Master of Fine Arts degrees and were immersed in considering their own development. And when we started a peer tutoring program, undergraduate peer tutors, newly introduced to process theory, kept making important discoveries about themselves, like this tutor-in-training who confided in her journal:

My right foot is a half-size larger than my left foot. For a long time, I thought that this meant there was something very wrong with me. Then, one day, I learned that it is normal for one side of a person's body to be larger than the other side--I felt so much better! This story is a little exaggerated, but it expresses the way I felt after our class discussion on the writing process. I have always felt that I didn't like to write and that I wasn't very good at it,

because it is such a struggle for me--especially with getting started....Maybe there is hope for me after all. I'd amplify her story with the observation of poet, William Stafford when he says:

The kind of process we are talking about is native to everyone...Everyone I've ever met, everyone, has what to me is the essential element of what we're talking about. They may not write what they call poems, but they make remarks they like better than other remarks. They have that lipsmacking realization of differences in discourse" (qtd. in Bunge 115).

Like student writers, peer tutors were learning to trust themselves, and their learning, in turn, helped me see the writing center as a "lipsmacking" place in Stafford's sense. During tutorials, we talk about choices, ideas, hopes, conspiring together to capture the always elusive "differences in discourse" that make up a writing life. And these differences are part of the very make-up of our selves as writers. Novelist Clarence Major discusses the creative writing workshop in a way that seems similar to me to the work that occurs in writing centers. He claims:

Most students in college today aren't going to have an opportunity to be in touch with who they are and where they come from in such an intense way ever again as they will in a workshop. They will go into different kinds of things: business, engineering, the sciences; but hopefully, they

will remember how important it was to create a wedding of that voice that was theirs and that history that was theirs (qtd. in Bunge 67).

The wedding of voice and history that Major claims for creative writing students in his workshops, I'd claim for all students in writing classes and particularly for students in the writing center. And by voice I mean two things: voice in the text--that difficult to define yet often invoked voiceprint embodied in an author's writing--and the talk a writer undertakes to develop that essential wedding of voice and personal history--across all disciplines--in every draft he or she completes.

The questions a writing student brings to the center. "Is it right?" "Do you understand this?" "What should I do next?" "Can I do this?"--are important because they mirror the questions that writer has about life in general in the university. Robert Brooke asserts that in response workshops we're teaching students to negotiate identities and the identity of being a writer is one that the student might choose to assume. Part of understanding identities is working to understand selve(s): that is, a big right foot may be part of that writer and her process and she may never know this until she talks to another writer, until she shares in the community of writing talk which often takes place best in a writing center (since so many other things like performance and evaluation take place in writing classrooms).

All university students, all who partake of higher education, have voices, discourses, and stories to tell. Through large-scale testing and placement, however, students may be ranked and labeled--remedial, deficient, at-risk--and those labels may deny their already astounding literacy and fluency with language. Author and teacher Grace Paley says:

Literature has something to do with language. There's probably a natural grammar at the tip of your tongue. You may not believe it, but if you say what's on your mind in the language that comes to you from your parents and your street and friends you'll probably say something beautiful.

(95-96)

I agree with Paley even though her remarks may strike some of us as overly romantic. After all, English teachers and writing tutors hold their jobs, to some extent, because our students' language(s) are marked by class, community, and society; some speak and write the standard dialect and others less accepted dialects. It is true that those who don't speak or write standard written English fluently will need (and probably want) to improve their skills in order to succeed outside their home community--in school, at work, as they move into new social situations. But it is not true that those students lack complex language and literary heritages. In fact, our work in the writing center, as language-consultants, is transformative since these students have the potential to be the best translators of their particular communities to the standard culture at large. These students, I believe will be the ones to

really institute our much discussed multi-cultural curriculums. And, when they want to write because their writing is meaningful to them and valued by others, we always find that these students have the ability to learn editing and publishing conventions.

We know these things because writing centers aren't merely the fix-it shops they are sometimes envisioned to be; they're places student writers come to talk, asking real and engaged questions, talk that results in encouragement and becomes a reason for many of our writers to continue in an otherwise discouraging climate of testing, tracking, and sometimes misguided remediation. And it's not just in the writing center that we need to validate those authors, but in every classroom, and we can do this by listening to the stories they have to tell.

However, the type of collaborative composing through talk that we do has long been left out of the story of learning how to write because it doesn't really support traditional institutional models. Whenever we join together to form a new community as happens in our Centers, we seem to offer--intentionally or not--challenges to existing communities. Judith Summerfield, in trying to understand why she was asked to step out of her position as director of a writing center observes:

Institutions don't necessarily like little communities within their walls, for there is power in numbers. As students come together, they can ask why and why not? "Why is my reading of this poem wrong?" Why is this phrase

awkward? What does this grade mean? Why can I revise in this classroom and not in that one?...Tutors and students question together. They often conclude that teachers in classrooms take particular stands in order to keep control, in order to manage behavior. These conversations challenge the "nature" of authority and expose underlying values, politics, ideology, and epistemology. (7)

Now I've worked in writing centers enough to know that this questioning is carefully and generously done, in what many of us think is the best academic spirit. Since most of us who work in composition today believe in some version of a social or contextualized understanding of writers and writing processes, it is normal for us to investigate and discuss those contexts and the discourses of the academy. Student writers value talk in the center because it, along with their writing, helps them sort out their feelings, options, and positions.

Writing center talk not only raises questions about institutions, it also raises questions about authoring. Lisa Ede, trying to understand the emphasis and high value that has been placed on individual authoring over time, finds writing center collaboration becomes subversive when it challenges, as it must, the "most hidden and commonsensical assumptions of our culture: that writing and thinking are inherently individual, solitary activities" (9). When writing is viewed this way, talk has been left out of the story, and it is often left out by the creators as well as by the critics of "literary" texts. Ede

goes on to explain that her understanding of the subversive nature of writing centers makes her more able to understand the threat these Centers offer to English studies:

This....clarifies what has always, for me at least, been a puzzling and frustrating mystery: the fact that those who most resist or misunderstand the kind of collaborative learning that occurs in writing centers are often our own colleagues in departments of English. Their immersion in our Romantic and Post-Romantic literary tradition, as well as their experience as students and teachers, has reinforced their often unconscious allegiance to the image of the solitary writer working silently in a garret. Though they often want--and try--to support us, their acceptance of writing as a solitary act prevents them from fully doing so. (9)

The myth of solitary genesis--a term used by Valerie Miner--is of primary utility for authors and publishers who are trying to receive payment for their work and for literature scholars trying to stake out territory and in turn produce their own single-authored and therefore marketable works.

Co-authorship--as any evaluating body--teachers, tenure-review committees, publishers know--is tricky: of several authors, who receives the correspondence, the payment, the credit? However, collaboration and the conversations that engender writing has always been with us as evidenced in the often lengthy acknowledgment notes that preface most single-authored books, as evidenced in the discussions that take place at writers'

retreats like Yaddo or Cummington Center for the Arts, as evidenced in our thinking and writing communities that range from political think tanks to science laboratories to English department colloquia to process classrooms and writing centers.

Along with literary scholars, creative writers have helped maintain the myth of solitary genesis for their own complicated reasons. Historically, creative writers have been marginalized in the traditional English department and often ranked only slightly higher than those in composition, a ranking creative writers have worked steadily to maintain. By valorizing creative texts, they distance themselves from "just writing" and become potential contributors to the literary canon--a canon that also values single authorship (think of the number of collaborative novels on your shelves whereas even the most "creative" scientific work rarely proceeds out of the contributions of a single individual). In supporting the myth of solitary genesis, creative writers have censored their stories of writing and lost ground in the writing workshop since their practice--by definition--must take place outside the classroom and their individual processes, under protection, are made opaque and resistant to intervention. These moves result in personal isolation, making creative writing conferences locations of the most manic socialization as writers relax and talk about writing in needed ways.

I've studied the political borderland between these two types of academic writing--so called "creative" and composition--for several years and learned some of my most

interesting teaching lessons there when I've looked for similarities rather than differences. For instance, during my writing center days, the composition program was also considering portfolio evaluation and was able to ask Peter Elbow to Fairbanks for a workshop and public presentation. During his talk, Elbow encouraged us to practice together as an audience his now well known process of freewriting--writing at length and continuously for ten or so minutes--as a way to discover the stories each of us had to tell. In fact, he insisted dramatically that each and everyone of us in the audience had an important story to tell. And many of us found a fragment of such a story that night.

Several days later, a creative writing faculty member mentioned Elbow's talk. He explained to me that Elbow's assertion had so impressed him that he went home and told his wife, a concert musician, about it. Finally, the writer said to his wife: "Do you think that's true? Do you have a story you've always wanted to tell?" "Of course," she said. And he marveled that someone he had lived with so long would have hidden that story from him. The rather elusive humor of this narrative, for me, has to do with the vision held by the "professional" writer; he assumed that he as a writer would certainly have many stories to tell but his "non-writer" wife would not.

This lesson in labeling and Peter Elbow's point about stories and story-tellers have continued to interest me and underline the point I was trying to make about creative writers. Like all writers, they do much thinking aloud about

their work to improve it, but they often suppress stories of talk and substitute stories of solitary genesis, inspiration, talent. These substitutions widen the gulf between writing teachers and writing students in terribly unproductive ways, keeping us from valuing student work.

Let me connect this to the ways talk helped me as a student and developing teacher and writer. When I came to IUP to study rhetoric and linguistics, I didn't know that I had teaching stories to tell nor did I know why I liked talking about writing or taught the way I did. At that time, I probably didn't really value the products my students' produced any more, perhaps, than my "creative writer" colleague valued the story his wife was sure she had to tell. More simply, I planned to study rhetoric and I was prepared to read and to write to learn more about a field I had just discovered. Only at this distance can I see that as much of my learning came through the talk we did--teachers and peers--as through the reading and writing we were assigned in classes. Certainly I have memories of class texts and organized discussions, but I know it was through informal talk, and by sharing stories, that I was able to enter this community. I found a dissertation topic over an unappealing cafeteria breakfast and talked about it all day to anyone who would listen. I shared peach pie in a dorm room and argued theory. I drank beer at a professor's house while reading and responding to peers' seminar papers. I tried and failed to tell good duck jokes. I learned to listen to others even when I didn't agree with them. With others, I talked and

talked, morning and noon and night, trying to keep up with my new friends, to develop a base of knowledge that would let me communicate with my professors, to understand my past and predict my future. And that talking hasn't stopped. Currently, I'm enthralled by electronic mail because it reunites me with my graduate school peers and creates a "school" of new friends. Equally, I attend composition conferences with the sense that I'm going back to school--if I'm lucky--to the primal site of discussion: sharing ideas and examining my community and myself as part of that community.

In fact, the potential of this evening, I believe, is not in my text, but in the discussions that might arise out of it, afterward. The potential rests in the conference panels and workshops and the question and answer periods for each panel and workshop. And the lesson of composition talk, for me, has been that my community is broad and wide and diverse and exciting: full of language consultants, senior learners, lip-smacking realizations of differences in discourse, endless weddings as voice marries self-history. As a profession, composition studies has nurtured communities where teachers and students are co-writers in the classroom and where peer tutors are invaluable responders to writing because all writers at any level and with all degrees of fluency, share a need to explore, examine, and articulate ideas.

Over the last several years, like many individuals here, I've studied the field of composition research and redesigned my traditional classrooms as process creative writing and

composition workshops. I've written with my students, shared writing with them, and showcased their writings in articles and books. These days, when thinking about my favorite authors, I'm not likely to cite only Elizabeth Bishop or W.B. Yeats, Robert Hass or Robert Coover, Pat Bizzell or Donald Murray although I admire and have been influenced by each. Instead, I share the work of Sean Carswell and John Pelz and Pam Miller and Joal Hill and Marie Bailey and Sandra Teichmann. Joal wrote a poem in a workshop so moving that I just had to write a poem back, titled with her name. John shared his creative writing journal with me and made me wish I could return to my undergraduate workshop years and be a more conscientious student. Marie and Sandra let me into their classroom writing group as co-author and co-learner during a very productive essay writing semester.

And I've also investigated issues of talk and voice through a long-term collaborative poetry project, sharing and collaborating on poems at a distance with Hans Ostrom who teaches at the University of Puget Sound. This interweaving of our poetry has profoundly changed the ways we teach writing; currently, I ask students to undertake the same sorts of collaborative and co-authoring we are attempting, for these activities highlight the strengths of individual voices and point to the benefits of weaving voices together. In one of Hans' poems, he attests to the difficulties he experiences with "voice." I'd like to read that poem--titled "Invoice" right now":

My voice is an invoice. It speaks

most passionately when it speaks
to itself, and when unspoken to.
Its purchase on the world has been
uncertain. My voice is legally tender,
excellent for small transactions
of faith and sympathy. I, too,
like the boomy voices, the
waterfall voices pouring luscious logic
into ears. But I don't trust them.
Never have. My voice is an invoice,
an echo in a canyon, a muttering west
of power, a shadow in a cup.

In my experience, Hans's voice truly is an invoice. Quiet in public, yet a passionate writer, he seems at times the most unlikely of teachers. Still, like many introverts, he blossoms in the classroom or workshop. I think that his voice has broadened and become more sure through co-authoring (as my own has). I say this because he has been the instigating speaker in our conversation. Hans encouraged me to begin, set challenges, compiled an initial manuscript to send to potential publishers, and even more enthusiastically self-published a small chapbook of our work. By sharing the responsibilities of voice and exploring our poetry practices together, we have broken the rules of accepted academic practice that suggests poets write alone, work in isolation for years, and publish late and seldom. Instead, our collaborative conversation has enriched

our writing and teaching lives. In short, we've had an indecent amount of fun writing together.

I'd like to share one of my poems, written in response to a challenge "assigned" by Hans--he wrote and sent me poems about the numbers 1-10 and suggested I draft ten poems of my own. I managed five--five poems I wouldn't have otherwise written, five poems that took me into new writing territory. Not surprisingly, much of our correspondence addresses language and voice and writers' identities. And in this poem, written only days before we were intending to meet and conduct a workshop on teaching creative writing together, my writing mirrors some of the performance anxiety that Hans' poem "Invoice" touched on. This poem is titled "2--Too." T--O--O.

I'm packing my personalities for a visit
My manic red letter mornings

And my hidden swamp nights--bullfrogs
Heating up in the lower slough sound their

Malthusian numbers. I'm packing the twenty-
Six special letters that I play on the sly:

Manifestos daggered to the door of your brain,
Recombinations of thought more complicated

Than DNA. I'm packing up my necessary images
Folding up handkerchiefs of sage and flattening

Down cartons of box canyons; for the cactuses
Of my imagination, I require ponderosa pine shoe-trees,

Socks full of red dust, a scarf woven from scorpions.
When I put on a dangerous high sierra skirt

I'll douse in available eau de cologne of oceans.
Seagulls squeal out secret equations

As I sit on the suitcase. So I pack more. I'm packing
The wallop of my voices, a poet's whoopee cushion

In a carry on bag. My voices nag at your feet
In the limited stow-away space. Several want to run

Up the aisle and shout: Stop this plane.
Stop this plane. In the cargo hold

My baggage is holding dialogs, computing, sending
Engraved invitations to an endless soiree:

What tires me is this effort to convince you
This is indeed serious business, what we do,

We too.

The refrain, of asserting my voices--which I see really as our collaborative voice--reflects for me our initial insecurities at talking and writing "differently," in ways not sanctioned by our own academic histories and poetry writing training. And, I hope, this poem catches the exhilaration we have felt entering new discourses, talking to each other within our poetry, and balancing interior invoices with voices that try to wallop out ideas as they play with language.

Through this collaborative poetry effort and through the writing and discussions I now undertake with my writing students, I've come to see that writing is taught best and learned best in a class that highlights drafting but also includes healthy "wallops" of talk--I call this the transactional writing classroom where writing is the subject and process is examined. And sharing narrative rights in this classroom means not only talking but listening, reapportioning my teacher's authority, extending my wait time, making a safe place for discussions, confidences, and questioning. All such work occurs with the support and help of peers--in the classroom and in the writing center--and work groups. This type of classroom has allowed me to find teaching and participating in writing classes a renewing activity and has allowed me to value the story that is on the tip of every writer's tongue.

In this classroom, teachers as language consultants are important and necessary guides into the community. As language consultants we may encourage a writing student to take chances and to undergo the relentless discipline of writing, the

constant need to place words on a page before all else. My own experience shows students rely on the advice, guidance, and encouragement of writing teachers and remember "process" classrooms because they encourage writers to talk to other writers. That's because, all writers, as I've tried to explain, have a lot of wonderful things to say in essays, stories, poems--their experiences are the makings of literature.

And the anecdotes of professional writers support this view. Despite the prevailing myth of solitary genesis, writers often drop clues about their internal processes and the social networks that make their writing possible. Put two writers together and they're unlikely to pull out poems and say to each other, "listen while I read this." They do share drafts, but even more often they talk shop, mentioning how a project is progressing, where the idea came from, why it is or isn't succeeding, who their readers are and why those readers misunderstand them, and so on. Professional writers share the how. And much of this how is available in their published interviews, even if only by accident. Writers can't help but slip in the stories of how their ideas were borrowed, begged or stolen and how their drafts were thrown together or painfully sculpted. Careful attention to their writing narratives confirms the process classroom. And careful imitation of their talk--opportunities to discuss work in progress--gives novice writer the ability to analyze and improves their work.

Particularly, authors stories speak to a need to see writing instruction as a lifetime educational journey rather than a

temporary moment of schooling; Joy Harjo explains:

I no longer see the poem as an ending point, perhaps more the end of a journey, an often long journey that can begin years earlier, say with the blur of the memory of the sun on someone's cheek, a certain smell, an ache, and will culminate years later in a poem, sifted through a point, a lake in my heart through which language must come....(qtd. in Coltelli 68).

Harjo speaks to a life of writing that our students may not all undertake, but one they need to understand as part of the real demands of the process: commitment, time, contemplation, journeys of the self, culminating in discussion, writing, revision and onward movement. We articulate ideas to the air, to others, on paper. Learning to write is learning to think. It's also learning to learn.

During interviews, writers frequently mention the ways they discover meaning and direction through their writing. It is exactly a writer's sense of discovery and exploration that is missing from the final products found in anthologies and published collections that we all read; and there lies a danger for writing students whose discourse, whose language, whose home community may not be validated within the dominant culture or by a curriculum that only encourages the writer to emulate "great" and "canonized" texts. Writing students need to temper the greats with the not so greats. Like the peer tutor with the large right foot, student writers need to discover that there is hope for them after all. They need to see writing as possible.

Donald Murray explains this better than I can when he says: "Process cannot be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage." That is, when our students read finished novels, they don't learn much at all about the endless discoveries made in novel writing. The novel's author, in fact, hopes that none of her sidetrips, her talk, her drafts and reweavings, shows. By their very nature, the products of writing offer a deceptive sense of inevitability and intentionality. And, unless we examine these assumptions together in the workshop and the writing center, we limit our understanding of the generative nature of drafting.

This very problem--that finished products smooth over their own construction--nowdays leads writing teachers to include examples of student writing and drafts as classroom models and writing center directors to encourage tutors and tutees to brainstorm, draft and talk together. Given models that are transparent enough writing students can extract effective writing strategies. They do this when they are allowed to read each other's drafts in progress. The same learning occurs when students compare two versions of a professional writer's work or when they are provided with samples of a teacher's or peer tutor's writing-in-progress. Samples become transparent when we can see and talk about writers' choices and changes--on the word, sentence, paragraph, and full text levels.

Next, since most of us view revision as a step on the way to finishing, as a preparation for closure, it is essential to rethink revision. Poet Clayton Eschelman sees revision as "a

way to open up material and draw more edges into the material, as opposed to sanding the material down so that you end up with something smooth, polished, and featherless" (56). Revision is a much needed opportunity to take risks. Risks often aren't rewarded in the writing classroom when a teacher too often feels pressured to rank and grade. But risks can take place in the writing center. Writing centers provide a microcosm of a professional writer's life and allow students to try on writers' identities when they offer audiences, discipline, excitement, challenge, response and support.

A final thought, writing takes time, and the more time we--teachers, students, schools--allow for pen on paper (or keyboardist on keyboard), the more likely it is that learning will take place. We know about invention, about getting started, about following hunches, about being ready, but we don't always allow the necessary time to conjure the writing that rests on the tips of our tongues. As Grace Paley points out:

I have a basic indolence about me which is essential to writing. It really is. Kids now call it space around you. It's thinking time, it's hanging-out time, it's daydreaming time. You know, it's lie-around-the-bed time, it's sitting-like-a-dope-in-your-chair time. And that seems to me essential to any work. Some people will do it just sitting at their desks looking serious, but I don't. (qtd. in Todd 50)

For many of our students, this sitting-like-a-dope-in-your-chair

time can't take place in the noisy dorm room or the distracting apartment complex; for some, as it did for me, for tuttees and tutors in centers I've worked in, it may take place in the Writing Center. It may take place in writing groups, hang out groups, or peer groups convened for a writing class but continuing long after that class has ended. In helping writing students set up networks and communities, our practice is at it's most benevolently subversive. We help to explode the myth of solitary genesis simply by being there for writers as conveners, reflectors, responders, senior-learners, coaches, language-consultants co-writers and overall interested listeners.

Each of us traveled to the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing with questions to ask and with important stories to tell. As the conference ends, we will return home with the new ideas and new stories that will inform our own writing centers and classrooms and lives. Because of that, I want to close with my opening sentences. Talk is central to what we do as writers and as humans. It is the collaborative activity that underlies most--it not all--individual acts of composing. Because of this, the work we undertake--talking about writing with writers--is valuable in a multitude of ways.

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