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A Self-Defined Professional Development Approach for Current and Aspiring Educational Developers

ABSTRACT

Professional development offerings for current and aspiring educational developers can be sparse and neither fully contextually appropriate nor personally relevant given the range of experiences people bring to the field. In the absence of suitable professionalization programs, we created a self-defined professional development approach to support us in our educational developer work. Using a framework for reflective writing, we describe our approach and the strategies we implemented, and we consider at a "meta" level what contributes to the viability or success of our self-defined professional development plan. Measures for assessing success were framed using utilization-focused evaluation. We outline implications for future practice and propose that a self-defined approach to professional development could be adopted and adapted by other current and aspiring educational developers.

INTRODUCTION

The field of educational development aims to improve teaching and learning in higher education (Amundsen & Wilson, 2012). Educational developers are among the people who plan and carry out this work, which can vary according to institutional context and needs. Since contexts range from large, research-intensive universities to small, liberal arts colleges, educational developers must take a variety of approaches to their work.

For those who are interested in working in the field of educational development, some formal professional development offerings exist. Examples include the Educational Developers Caucus' EDC Institute and the Professional and Organizational Development Network's Institute for New Faculty Developers in North America, and the Staff and Educational Development Association's fellowship program for accreditation in Europe. However, these offerings can be sparse and non-uniform. They vary in terms of depth of content and duration, and may not be contextually appropriate or accessible to educational developers for geographic, financial, or scheduling reasons. Limited offerings have prompted claims that additional formal opportunities for educational developer professionalization would be beneficial to both educational developers and the profession (e.g., Educational Developers Caucus, 2015; Wilcox, 1997).

Due in part to the limited number of professional development offerings and a lack of a common entry point into the field or a standardized path for advancement once in the field (Chism, Gosling, &

Sorcinelli, 2010; McDonald, 2010), educational developers follow varied paths into and through the profession (Harland & Staniforth, 2008; McDonald & Stockley, 2008). Indeed, in an international survey of 1,039 educational developers, Green and Little (2016) found that based on respondents' highest educational degrees "two-thirds of respondents (66%) have migrated to educational development from other broad fields . . . Developers' highest degrees are in 89 different disciplines, from 'adult and professional education' to 'zoology'" (p. 146). While the importance of purposeful professional development is well-established (McDonald et al., 2016; Schroeder, 2011), as Chism, Gosling, and Sorcinelli (2010) have stated, "there is currently no consensus on professional preparation for [educational developers]" (p. 249). A contributing factor to this lack of a formal professionalization program is that educational developers may bring varied and relevant prior experience—pedagogical or other—to the profession and can learn a great deal on the job.

While there are varied paths *into* the field, there are also various opportunities for professional development once *in* the field. Conceived broadly, these professional development opportunities may be formal or informal and can include multiple approaches, such as conference attendance, coursework, focused reading, reflecting, and creating an educational developer portfolio (e.g., McDonald et al., 2016), as well as consultation with, collaboration with and mentoring by other university colleagues, either generally or to address specific topics.

We know of one instance where an attempt has been made to integrate several of these approaches within a coherent framework: the one-year development plan for new educational developers created by the Teaching Commons @ York (2015). This framework takes a thoughtful and integrated approach to helping early career educational developers cultivate their knowledge and competencies. Such an approach seems logical as educational developers are entering the field from a number of prior disciplines. However, recognizing that a one-size-fits-all professional development model may not in fact be appropriate for all given the various paths into (and within) the field, we posed the following question: ***Could we create a customized path for together engaging in professional development that would support us in our educational developer work?***

In this article, using Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper's (2001) three-part model for reflection— "What?" "So what?" and "Now what?"—we describe the customized path we developed and implemented that allowed us to deepen our knowledge of topics of interest to us. Below, the "What?" section introduces us and our approach to professional development, noting how it was informed by principles of Patton's (2008) "utilization-focused evaluation" approach. The "So what?" section relates our reflections on the viability of our approach. The "Now what?" section addresses implications of our approach for our future practice and describes ways in which the approach could be transferable to other educational developers.

WHAT?
Our context
We work at Teaching and Learning Services at McGill University, a large Canadian public research-intensive university. A teaching and learning center has existed at McGill University in some form for approximately 50 years and is well-established in the institution, with educational developers holding academic positions. We have come to Teaching and Learning Services from different career

paths. In conversation at work one day, we discovered that we both had professional development goals that we were interested in addressing systematically. Jennie's academic background is in education, and library and information studies. After working at Teaching and Learning Services as a graduate student assistant, she was hired in a management position to support a variety of teaching and learning projects. Her work in the unit has stimulated her interest in becoming an educational developer. To that end, she has intentionally involved herself in projects that allow her to gain knowledge and develop skills that could lead to working in that role. As an aspiring educational developer, Jennie seeks to develop relevant competencies by staying up to date with a fast-growing body of literature, but she recognizes challenges. She knows it is important to keep up with the literature, but finding the time to do so is another matter. There was a gap between her idealized image of professional development—reading regularly, participating fully in online discussions and listservs about educational development—and the actual amount of time she was devoting to it. Jennie's goal was to chip away at the never-finished project of professional development in an ongoing, intentional, and *manageable* way.

Carolyn's academic background is three degrees deep in education, with her PhD in second-language education on faculty who teach in their second language. While a faculty member at McGill University, she attended many events offered by Teaching and Learning Services and over time, she co-designed and co-facilitated several of them. After more than two decades in her discipline—teaching, observing peers teach, mentoring colleagues, and publishing—she chose to become an educational developer. She is now in a liminal space: while expert in her field of second-language education and well schooled in the field of education generally, she feels somewhat of a novice in the field of educational development, partly due to a lack of knowledge of the foundational literature that she believes "every" educational developer has read. She worries that phrases such as "According to the literature . . ." or "Recent studies suggest . . ." no longer comfortably roll off her tongue. To address this lacuna, she asked educational developer colleagues to recommend foundational readings. Yet despite disciplined reading, without opportunities for discussion, the content did not seem to stick. Carolyn's goal was to enhance her familiarity with educational development literature.

We recognized that there was no formal professional development program suited to our context and needs. In the absence of a formal program, we undertook our own informal professional development by creating a self-defined plan. Thus the idea of our self-defined professional development plan was born. This endeavor was facilitated by the fact that we fortuitously share an office and have many opportunities to collaborate on projects. Furthermore, this collaboration was a welcome resumption of working together in a quite different setting: we had participated in a small, self-run group of doctoral students in education who met weekly over several years to provide feedback on one another's writing. We decided to reestablish a regular meeting time to engage in professional development. Though the professional development activities we engaged in were driven by our interests, it was important for us that our self-defined plan be structured, feasible and evidence-based.

We discussed the need to be realistic about the amount of time we were prepared to dedicate to our professional development. We decided on the frequency and duration of our meetings, and then determined a schedule: we met for one hour every two weeks either before the start of our work day or at lunch time. We scheduled a few meetings at a time for efficiency's sake. In the event that our discussions were unfinished at the end of the hour-long meeting, we never exceeded the allocated time but rather carried the ideas forward to the following meeting. To keep ourselves organized, we prepared for our

meetings in writing. At the meetings, we wrote down our questions and actions for follow-up with corresponding follow-up dates. We kept a written record of our activities, including action items.

Our approach: Overview of activities

Our approach involved four activities: developing our knowledge through reading and synthesizing, searching the literature, recording and storing, and learning a skill.

Synthesizing reading

We agreed that reading broadly on different topics related to our educational development practice and engaging in discussion about these topics would help us develop our knowledge. While reading texts is a good start, we believed the reading itself would likely fall short in helping us retain the information we had read unless we had both a meaningful way to synthesize and a structured way to share what we had learned from the texts. We therefore implemented an activity that we anticipated would be helpful for making anything we learned from our reading "stick," namely Van Gyn's (2013) 3-2-1 reading synthesis activity. This activity calls for reading with purpose: readers identify main points and areas of confusion, and articulate a question they would want to pose to the author. Discussion of these points ensues. We chose this activity because Carolyn has used it many times in her teaching to get students engaged with course readings so that they might better retain the content of those readings. Carolyn has perceived the activity to be successful with her students based on the quality of in-class conversations; we were, therefore, hopeful that it would be effective for us. (We describe the implementation of the reading synthesis activity below.)

Searching the literature

While we sometimes had readings in mind for the 3-2-1 activity, at other times, we began with a topic in mind but without a specific reading. In such cases, we looked to the literature to find what we would read next. We did this by establishing a strategy for conducting literature reviews related to our professional development. We call this strategy the "search party." The search party takes one hour and involves 5 minutes of jointly creating a list of search terms or parameters and dividing the list between the two of us; 35 minutes of individual searching with our respective lists; 15 minutes of sharing our findings; and 5 minutes to address next steps. When searching, we consulted sources such as Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar.

Recording and storing our work

We wanted to keep track of the results of our search parties and decided to do so with Google Docs. While we were both familiar with accessing material in Google Docs that had been shared by others, neither of us had previously created or maintained a collaborative space like this. Creating a reference list of our readings in Google Docs was therefore an authentic professional development task. We have since made extended use of Google Docs by creating a shared folder to store documents related to our professional development. While the 3-2-1 activity was a familiar one that we were interested in applying within the context of our professional development, we chose this approach and the next particularly because they were unfamiliar to us, and we were interested in learning more about them.

Learning a skill

Thinking about different spaces and ways of sharing information inspired us to consider other ways technology could support our educational development work. This led us to an exploration of webinar design and implementation. Our shared interest in acquiring the skills necessary to offer webinars for an instructor audience then led us to establish and act on a plan for developing these skills. First, we read about best practices for facilitating webinars. Then, we watched several teaching- and learning-related webinars during which we took notes on features we observed to be effective or ineffective for a viewing audience. In other words, we paid attention to form rather than content. Afterward, we compared notes and identified the features we wanted to make sure we paid attention to when offering our own webinars. We also sought input on webinar skills from educational developer and educational technologist colleagues who had experience offering webinars to instructor audiences.

Reading synthesis activity

Our reading synthesis activity, the 3-2-1 (Van Gyn, 2013), illustrates the feasibility and transferability of our professional development approach. It has four steps:

1. Read an article.
2. Identify three main points, concepts, or takeaways.
3. Identify two areas of confusion.
4. Write one question you would want to pose to the author(s).

We planned the implementation of the activity using the same approach we teach instructors to use when designing a course: backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), including the development of learning outcomes aligned with assessments and instructional strategies.

After having established the content we wished to address through an informal needs analysis, we articulated our learning outcomes. Outcomes are often phrased as "By the end of this course/unit/module/activity, students will be able to . . ." However, to reflect our vision for ongoing learning, we used the phrase "make progress toward" (which has appeared, for example, in Hurney, Brantmeier, Good, Harrison, & Meixner, 2016, p. 71). The learning outcomes we set for our 3-2-1 readings were that we would make progress toward being able to

- draw on foundational texts in the field of educational development to inform and provide rationales for the work we do; and
- identify themes in the literature that strike us as intriguing, thought-provoking or "sticky."

After articulating our learning outcomes, we determined assessment measures. We would know we were making progress towards attaining these outcomes when we were able to:

- capitalize on opportunities to articulate how the literature informs our work (e.g., in conversations with educational developer colleagues); and
- incorporate what we had learned into the design and implementation of our projects at work.

Our framing of these assessment measures was in keeping with the underlying principles of Patton's (2008) "utilization-focused evaluation" approach. That is, the decisions we made about evaluating our progress (both what we would evaluate and how we would evaluate it) were informed by how we imagined the evaluation could specifically be of use to us—as participant-evaluators and as the

evaluation's primary intended users (Patton, 2008). Utilization-focused evaluation has been used on a number of occasions in educational development to support or inform the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g., Matthews et al., 2015; Roxå, Olsson, and Mårtensson, 2007). We were interested in determining whether our self-defined approach would support us in our work as educational developers. This interest was consistent with the criteria for a utilization-focused evaluation question in that it is an empirical query with more than one possible answer that is important to us for our own work (Patton, 2008). Furthermore, by framing the assessment measures as we did, we could ensure that the evaluation would inform our work going forward.

Our implementation of the activity follows a procedure. We take turns being responsible for selecting a reading. The one who selects the reading presents the content to the other at the beginning of the meeting. This presentation includes one or two typed pages with a full reference, the article abstract or a (self-written) summary of the reading (in lieu of an abstract), and the 3-2-1s. There is then time to read the abstract or summary and pose clarification questions. After that, we address the 3-2-1s, (see Text box 1), which form the basis of our discussion. In our discussions of the selected readings, we are intentional about making connections with our existing knowledge and experiences, sometimes bringing in previous readings, conference experiences or projects that we are currently working on, whether together or individually. We end each meeting with a plan for the subsequent one.

Text box 1. Example 3-2-1 activity

> Sievers, J. (2016). Educational developer 2.0: How educational development leaders will need to develop themselves in the era of innovation. *Journal of Faculty Development, 30*(2), 107-115.
>
> **3 main takeaways for my practice**
> - The language we use reflects the changing landscape of what we value in educational development, e.g., more teaching and learning center names or affiliations have "Innovation" in their title in recent years.
> - It's good that we've begun meeting regularly: In 2010, Knapper asked "What is the appropriate skill set for a developer?" (p. 4). Sievers notes that "Today, the question is not merely intriguing, but is critical. The skill set, surely, is growing, the literature is rapidly expanding, and the technologies keep iterating" (p. 108).
> - The idea of learning through play (p. 111) is one that I'd like to explore further.
>
> **2 areas of confusion/uncertainty**
> I realize that assessment units are sometimes distinct from (or sometimes within) teaching and learning centers, particularly in the US. The sentence "We increasingly collaborate with educational technology and assessment experts" (p. 109) brought up two areas of uncertainty for me:
> - What effect would the institutional placement of an assessment unit have upon how assessment is carried out or what is assessed?
> - What message might the placement of such a unit send to internal and external audiences?
>
> **1 question I would want to pose to the author**
> - I appreciated that Sievers framed educational development as being worthy of a curriculum in itself. She asks, "How, then, might we design a curriculum for ourselves? If we were to conceive of our own learning as a set of goals, then what would be the student learning outcomes for twenty-first-century educational developers?" (p. 109). I would like to ask Sievers whether she has developed new insights into addressing this question since the publication of her article.

The 3-2-1 activity is a way for us to synthesize our thinking by drawing together our notes from the margins of articles in an intentional, focused manner. In addition, while this structured approach to reading and understanding texts effectively grounds our self-defined approach, the activity also affords us the flexibility to adapt it to our needs. For example, we do not always have areas of confusion to address or we sometimes have more than one question to pose to the author(s). In some instances, we write questions for ourselves rather than to the author(s) so as to guide our own thinking. These questions often inspire further reading.

While the specific 3-2-1 activity affords us flexibility, so, too, does our self-defined professional development approach more generally. It is customized: we decide what we want to learn (content) and how we will pursue that learning (activities). Our choice of content and activities is informed by what we believe will help us achieve our goals. We do not claim that our approach is one-size-fits-all; however, we do suggest that its customizable nature allows for transferability to other educational developers' contexts. Some educational developers might choose to engage in the activities we did and others might opt for activities that they deem more pertinent to their professional development.

SO WHAT?

Reflection on our efforts to date suggests the viability of our approach. As we had hoped, the 3-2-1 activity has allowed us to retain key information from our readings, in part because our implementation of the activity involves writing responses to questions about the readings and then discussing the readings. Indeed, research has demonstrated that writing in response to specific questions posed for the purpose of comprehension or synthesis has value in helping students to retain those concepts being considered, as does sharing ideas in discussion with peers (Divoll, Browning, & Vesey, 2012). Furthermore, the "production effect" helps explain why discussion, the oral element of the 3-2-1 activity, has been effective for us. The production effect suggests that information read and then articulated orally is more readily retained than information that is only read silently: saying something aloud makes it distinct, which supports retention (e.g., Forrin, MacLeod, & Ozubko, 2012; MacLeod, 2011; MacLeod, Gopie, Hourihan, Neary, & Ozubko, 2010). While research on the production effect has largely been done with word lists rather than longer passages, we propose that the idea of retention due to the distinctiveness that comes from saying something aloud can likewise apply to longer passages.

We have integrated ideas from our readings into conversations with educational developer colleagues at our university and in consultations with instructors. Readings have also informed our conversations with educational developer colleagues from other institutions. In addition, focused reading has informed our development of pedagogical materials. We also advanced with regards to the other activities of our self-defined professional development approach (see "What" section above), such as locating resources and developing a webinar. We have subsequently shared the "search party" strategy with other colleagues as a means for jump-starting the process of finding resources for several different projects. Although we began using Google Docs, we have since gone on to explore the advantages and disadvantages of other collaborative virtual workspaces, such as OneDrive and OneNote. As we developed our understanding of what went into offering an effective webinar, we intentionally applied our learning by creating an opportunity for ourselves to develop and co-facilitate a webinar for an instructor audience.

Our self-defined, flexible professional development approach has proved valuable for us. Our reflections have led us to consider at a "meta" level what contributes to our progress so that we can be intentional about ensuring ongoing progress. In essence, we adopted a self-directed approach to our professional development, where self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation—attributes of self-directed learning (as proposed by Garrison, 1997)—have supported our progress. Having the agency and flexibility to decide on our goals and how we would go about attaining them has been quite compelling. Once we had committed in principle to our approach, we knew we had to self-manage, self-monitor, and sustain our motivation if it was to remain viable. Recognizing that these attributes can be challenging to maintain, we carefully considered possible obstacles and strategies for addressing them. We now provide examples of choices we have made to preemptively address circumstances that might negatively influence our self-directed learning, especially our motivation to pursue a self-defined approach.

We have chosen to work together rather than individually. We value engaging in professional development with a colleague. Our regular exchanges allow us to articulate ideas and get feedback on them, thereby bolstering our learning. Furthermore, being accountable to a colleague safeguards against those moments when we may be tempted to procrastinate or move professional development down the list of workday priorities. Thus, we motivate one another, which is especially important when intrinsic motivation flags.

We have chosen to work as a pair rather than in a large group. We knew we had common professional development goals and were both willing to respect a commitment to the endeavor. Furthermore, at a practical level, the physical proximity of sharing an office has simplified logistics as it is easy for us to schedule and reschedule meetings by talking across the room. This ease is particularly helpful in the midst of busy workdays. A larger group may pose logistical challenges that could be demotivating if scheduling meetings is inconvenient or if colleagues participate sporadically. That said, a potential benefit of a larger group might be increased knowledge sharing with colleagues.

We have chosen to design a flexible approach to help maintain our motivation: we implement learning strategies that are not only feasible for us, but also appealing. Were they unrealistic or tedious, we might not persist in our efforts.

We have chosen to keep written records of our activities because these records are artifacts that foster our accountability and serve as motivators when our intrinsic motivation flags.

NOW WHAT?

We have reflected on the "Now what?" question with respect to two audiences: ourselves, and aspiring or current educational developers. For ourselves, given that we work in educational development, we explored the extent to which our self-defined approach is consistent with principles that guide the field of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Bélanger (2010) makes a compelling case for the role of SoTL in informing educational developers' practice, particularly concerning the integration of research in practice, and ultimately contributions to the advancement of discipline-specific knowledge. We referred to principles of good practice in SoTL as articulated by Felten (2013, p. 122):

- *Inquiry focused on student learning*
- *Grounded in context*
- *Methodologically sound*
- *Conducted in partnership with students*
- *Appropriately public*

Our self-defined professional development is largely consistent with these principles. Its inquiry-guided approach allows us to focus on areas that are of interest to us as learners. These areas are well-grounded in our educational developer context. For our purposes, *we* are the students and we partner with one another. Indeed, the accountability of working with one another to advance our professional development is an important element in this approach. While our approach does not involve working with a traditional student audience, research such as the extensive Tracer Project (Condon, Iverson, Manduca, Rutz, & Willett, 2016) has demonstrated a link between instructors' engagement in educational development and subsequent changes to their teaching that positively influence student learning. We thus expect that our approach has the potential to not only inform our discussions with colleagues and instructors, but also tangentially have an impact upon the student learning experience. We have since publicly shared elements of our approach to self-defined professional development at a conference and now in this article. While we have used a reflective framework (Rolfe et al., 2001) as our methodology for writing this article, and our framing of assessment measures is in keeping with underlying principles of utilization-focused evaluation, we would like to identify or develop an overarching methodology for the approach. Inasmuch as our approach reflects the principles of SoTL, SoTL has also functioned as a *tool* for professional development, as we have taken a collaborative approach to enhancing our practice (Fanghanel, 2013).

This "Now what?" reflection has furthermore affirmed our resolve to continue our efforts and consider other ways of developing our knowledge and skills to further our practice as educational developers. We plan to maintain our regular hour-long meetings, and we are already discussing how we will spend that time. Since the 3-2-1 reading synthesis activity has been so effective for us, we are considering how we might apply it to other professional development activities. We intend to revisit the one-year professional development plan offered by the Teaching Commons @ York (2015) as inspiration for expanding our vision of what professional development can entail. We are also interested in exploring how educational developers articulate their work in professional documents, such as curriculum vitae and educational developer portfolios, so that we can develop our own, informed by existing examples. This activity may include reflection on how existing artifacts from our 3-2-1 activity and other notes from our records could be integrated into our educational developer portfolios.

We have also reflected on the "Now what?" question with respect to an aspiring educational developer audience, as well as a wider educational development audience. These reflections have allowed us to see potentially transferable elements that can inform a creative, flexible, and sustainable approach. The self-defined professional development approach that we created was customized to address our goals and interests but can nonetheless can be transferable to others, as it offers flexibility depending on one's interests: activities (e.g., synthesizing reading, searching the literature, tracking our work, and exploring educational technologies) provide leeway for educational developers to choose topics and technologies that speak to their areas of interest and responsibility. We would, therefore, like

to share the approach with the educational developer community. One means for sharing is through publications, such as this article. Over 82 percent of educational developers actively conduct research either within (55.1 percent) or outside (27.2 percent) of their educational development role (Green & Little, 2016), and we hope our reflection will contribute to the evolving literature on educational development professionalization. In essence, we have engaged in a "meta" approach to self-defined professional development that has allowed us to yet further engage in professional development through both reflection and collaborative writing. While our focus has shifted from reading to writing, we have maintained a disciplined and structured approach to this new endeavor by scheduling regular meetings for writing and revising, with each meeting having predefined outcomes. While we have seen that moving from reading to writing activities within our own context is possible (and perhaps a logical next step), we also expect that our overall approach can be moved to other educational developers' contexts. To support its potential transferability, we offer some questions to consider when planning self-defined professional development:

- Who would you be interested in working with to pursue self-defined professional development?
- What do you seek to achieve through self-defined professional development?
- How much time are you prepared to devote to self-defined professional development?
- What strategies will you implement to promote your professional development?
- How will you know you have progressed in your professional development?
- What are potential obstacles to sustaining your plan, and how might you preemptively address them?

Another means for sharing our approach is through conference presentations. To date, we have presented it at one conference, with a specific focus on the 3-2-1 activity. Our work was received with enthusiasm, and we benefited greatly from session attendees' questions and suggestions. Suggestions for adapting or extending the 3-2-1 activity included envisioning it as

- an effective means for promoting discussion between graduate students and their supervisors;
- a novel alternative to traditional reading groups where group members typically read and discuss the same text;
- an activity that could be implemented with materials other than readings, such as videos; and
- an inclusive practice, given its flexibility: individuals can choose the content and format that is meaningful to them and adapt the activity in ways that are meaningful to them.

These suggestions offer concrete examples of ideas educational developers might draw on when working with their target audiences.

CONCLUSION

Rolfe, Freshwater, and Jasper's (2001) "What? So what? Now what?" framework for reflective writing has been a useful reference for presenting our approach to professional development ("What?"), its viability ("So what?"), and next steps and potential for transfer ("Now what?"). When we first

considered options for engaging in professional development, we sought an approach that would allow us to pursue topics of the greatest interest and relevance to our work while limiting any geographic, financial, or scheduling obstacles. We believe our approach has succeeded on all counts: we pursued our professional development in our own office space, with no out-of-pocket expense, and within the limits of the time we were willing to allocate. When we set out to assess the extent to which self-defined professional development allowed us to make progress towards supporting us in our work as educational developers, we did so in keeping with a key principle of Patton's (2008) utilization-focused evaluation: the assessment measures were meaningful for us and framed in such a way as to inform our next steps. Thus, while this process has been personally useful, given the flexibility of our approach for self-defined professional development, we hope that readers will be inspired to adopt it in and adapt it to their own contexts.

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