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An exploration of how the facilitator perceives that learning within VLE discussion forums is improved by facilitator-enhanced collaboration

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Abstract

Research suggests that facilitator-enhanced collaboration within virtual learning environment (VLE) discussion forums improves learning. A question is therefore posed: “How does the facilitator perceive that learning within VLE discussion forums is improved by facilitator enhanced collaboration?” It is important to answer this question to understand and develop effective collaborative learning within VLE discussion forums supported by facilitators. This phenomenological study explores the lived experience of three facilitators of discussion forums within collaborative VLEs. Data were collected through short written reports of participants’ experiences and through an in-depth semi-structured interview. Both methods involved answering open-ended questions based on participants’ experience of facilitating VLE discussion forums. Participants reported positive experiences and findings revealed that facilitator-enhanced collaboration within VLE discussion forums does improve learning. The data collected also suggested that enhanced collaboration was easy to incorporate into their facilitation. A challenge to enhanced collaboration included insufficient training for facilitators. Three themes described the participants’ experiences: a preference to enhance collaboration within discussion forums, a willingness to engage in collaboration in a proactive but non-intrusive way, and a need for setting facilitator expectations as regards student collaboration.

Keywords: Collaborative Learning, Discussion Forum, Facilitator, Phenomenology, Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Introduction

Collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning where groups of students work together to resolve problems or complete tasks (Laal & Laal, 2012). During the early days of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) education, non-collaborative learning as opposed to collaborative learning was the dominant pedagogical assumption behind the delivery of online courses. Recent advances in technology-enhanced learning (TEL) in addition to the expansion of a *social* view of learning, has powered a paradigmatic shift to collaborative pedagogy in VLEs (Elliot, 2008). The belief has become widely accepted that in order for students to learn, they must collaborate with each other (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). In this context, TEL practitioners have put great emphasis on promoting and assisting in the collaboration between students in order to honour the need to learn in an environment where the educator facilitates the collaboration. For many practitioners, it is believed that virtual learners collaborate best when the facilitator engages with the collaborative learning tasks. Engagement, defined as “student–faculty interaction, peer-to-peer collaboration and active learning” (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008), has been positively related to an improved learning experience.

In a collaborative learning environment, students have the opportunity to communicate with peers, present and discuss information, exchange ideas and actively engage (Srinivas, 2011). One such area becoming more prevalent is discussion forums within VLEs where learning is based on the collaborative learning experience. Understanding the role that facilitators play in enhancing the collaborative learning experience becomes an important issue. Given this potential the researcher asks, “How does the facilitator perceive that learning within VLE discussion forums is improved by facilitator-enhanced collaboration?”

Few formal studies have targeted this question. Ghodrati and Grupa (2011) examined the area of collaboration in relation to discussion forums, but from the point of view of the underlying technology supporting the facilitator and students rather than the facilitators’ personal experience of the phenomenon. In general, the literature has focused on the collaboration technology and the collaborative pedagogy itself, rather than on how facilitators can enhance collaborative learning and improve learning within discussion forums. The researcher believes, therefore, that a study which carefully looks at the experiences of facilitators of collaborative learning within VLE discussion forums deserves serious exploration. This research explores the lived experiences of facilitators in collaborative VLE discussion forums.

In undertaking this qualitative study, it was decided that a phenomenological approach would be taken to answer the research question (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenologists (in contrast to positivists) believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions and that the researcher should not pretend otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). In technology-enhanced education, the argument for phenomenology is that of making the researcher visible in the “frame” of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer (see Plummer, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1993). This understanding is in line with the researcher’s own philosophical position on how knowledge is perceived and constructed.

Phenomenology is particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions (Ashworth & Greasley, 2009). The researcher’s use of a phenomenological approach enables the participants to provide a view and account of their own unique experience with regard to their own facilitation and how easily this was done. As such it is powerful for understanding subjective facilitator-enhanced collaborative learning experience, gaining insights into their motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom.

Literature Review

Few published articles address and focus on the phenomenon of facilitator-enhanced collaborative learning in VLE discussion forums to improve learning. In one article, Haavind (2006) strongly asserts that facilitator enhancement has a positive effect on the student learning experience. Haavind has raised a number of possible benefits but has not explored the topic through phenomenological qualitative research. There is also a wealth of information available for collaborative learning within VLEs (Hovorka & Rees, 2009); however these authors tend merely to synthesise the research on the general effects of collaborative learning and do not deal specifically with facilitator-enhanced collaborative learning. A review of the research focused on online networked eLearning and facilitation within VLEs helps to illuminate the current study. Mazzolini and Maddison (2007) note that the use of networked eLearning strategies has a profound influence on TEL outcomes. VLE discussion forums have come to rely substantially on collaborative learning models (Rovai, 2007).

Collaborative learning within VLEs of higher education institutions has been shown to have a positive impact on the student learning experience. McMorran (2013) suggests that if used in an educational setting, collaborative technology can enhance active participation, increase student engagement, and enrich the learning process. Fisher (2003, p. 227) emphasises that one of the distinctive requirements of an effective online course is that it relies heavily on effective collaboration to create a meaningful and engaging learning environment.

The role of the facilitator within collaborative learning in VLEs has been a research focus in TEL and explored by many scholars. Gerber, Grund and Grote (2008) found that when a facilitator adopted challenging techniques, students produced more reasoned posts. Yang, Newby and Bill (2005) also found that when a facilitator was proactively involved, students' collaboration levels increased. Keengwe, Kidd and Kyei-Blankson (2009) recommend that the facilitator's role is to support the comments of others by acknowledging and extending their thinking, extend the conversation by adding arguments that bolster an opinion, compliment a participant for a statement and persuade the more reserved students to join in. Baker (2011) believes that summarising and providing feedback at the end of a collaborative discussion is essential to the learning.

Taylor (2005) found that facilitators need to make students aware of the strengths and opportunities of collaboration and how it can help to improve their learning experience. According to Kelly (2004), the facilitator should welcome and encourage the students. Macdonald (2003) believes that students also need to learn how to interact online with peers and that facilitators have a role to play in this regard. Weaver (2005) asserts that facilitators need to provide a clear explanation of expectations.

According to Daradoumis and Xhafa (2005, p.221), the specific roles and the means the facilitator has to take in guiding the learning process for the students are fundamental to the success of any collaborative learning process. Lim (2004) says that the facilitator must ensure the students are motivated and prepared for the collaboration. Siemens (2002) states, that facilitators should ensure that students are familiar with the online environment in order to improve online collaboration.

Facilitator engagement with collaborative learning is not the sole variable in improving

learning within a VLE discussion forum. However, there certainly should be more importance placed on the exploration of facilitators' personal experiences. Knowing more about the lived experiences of those who can directly enhance the collaborative learning experience within VLE discussion forums is an important addition to the literature. In addition, when considering the results generated by the quantitative field investigations, a qualitative exploration of facilitators' experiences will further illuminate the phenomenon.

Philosophical Approach and Methodology

To understand the purpose and position of this research, it is necessary to outline the researcher's own ontological and epistemological presuppositions (philosophical approach) which underpin this study. The researcher's position is taken from a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm where the view of the world is that knowledge is based on experiences that are socially constructed (Creswell, 2009), and which emphasises the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. The research purpose has personal significance to the researcher given his own direct connection and experience of being a TEL facilitator and student.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how facilitators perceive the learning experience is improved in VLE discussion forums by facilitator-enhanced collaborative learning. This area of VLE discussion forums within TEL has previously identified the benefits of collaborative learning (Hovorka & Rees, 2009). A focus of this research was to attempt to further understand the situation from practitioners who shared this view of collaborative learning and who can directly influence and enhance the experience. The researcher also wanted to note how facilitators perceived whether they could easily incorporate facilitator enhancement of collaborative learning into their discussion forums, and the level of training which they felt was required for this. This could inform future pedagogical theory and practice.

As "phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals" (Creswell, 2007, p.62), this study focuses on the "deep understanding" of the phenomenon "experienced" by the participants and the detailed description from their perspective. In alignment with this phenomenological approach, the researcher has focused on the experiences of individual facilitators enhancing learning within VLE discussion forums (the phenomenon) and not on a comparative examination of their experiences in contrast to other facilitators. It consists of an interpretivist narrative of the phenomenon based on the views of the independent participants (*emic*) as well as the views of the researcher

(*etic*). The researcher subsequently conducted an analysis of themes in order to explore “the deep meaning of individual subject’s experiences” (Rossman & Rallis, 1998, p.72).

Giorgi (2009) outlines the aim of the researcher as one of describing as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework but remaining true to the facts. Accordingly, this study relied on detailed data from individual in-depth written accounts together with a semi-structured interview to investigate the research question. Here analysis facilitates the researcher identifying/exploring themes emerging from qualitative data (Cohen, et al., 2011). The purpose of collecting data from three different informants using two different data gathering methods is an attempt to gather a diverse set of research data. That is, the researcher attempted to use diverse data to enhance the exploration of the same phenomenon in terms of person, space and time. The researcher was particularly aware of his own position with regards to the phenomenon in question, the participant facilitators and his own connection with the industry and participants themselves, when applying the phenomenological approach.

Researcher’s and Participants’ Contexts

Participants were postgraduate course facilitators, on information technology and engineering related programmes. Participants were of various socio-cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, educational attainment levels, gender identities and roles. The researcher was employed in the same institution as one of the participants and was a fellow student at another educational institution. Therefore, the researcher’s insider position, background and perspectives have influenced the rationale, operationalization and interpretation of this research. However, insider mitigation techniques proposed by others (Mercer, 2007) were employed.

Three participants were invited to take part in the study. This purposive sampling was due to the need to gather in-depth experiences of the phenomenon and also the limited time and scale of the research. It thus aligns to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.49), who advise that a small sample size is acceptable because phenomenology is “concerned with understanding particular phenomena in particular contexts”. Selection criterion was having more than three years’ experience as a facilitator of online discussion forums in VLEs of higher education institutions.

Given the nature of the data to be collected, ethical and consent issues were duly considered (Kanuka & Anderson, 2007, p.5). Ethical approval for this study was granted from Lancaster University and written permission to invite the participants was not required as they were not representing their employers. Participants were recruited through email invitation containing a link to the research-project-participant consent form as well as a participant information sheet. The course participants completing written reports were given a total of five days to complete, with a reminder email sent after three days. They were informed that they should not spend more than 60 minutes on the written report and that the data obtained would be anonymised. The one interview was limited to 30 minutes to complete the semi-structured interview. Participants were informed that participation in the research was voluntary, and participants could choose not to answer specific questions if preferred.

Data Collection and Analysis

According to Giorgi (2009), there are, in general, two ways of collecting data if one wants information about the lived experience of a phenomenon from another person: the traditional interview and a written account of the experience. Interviews can take up to two hours with each participant and written reports tend to be more concise (Giorgi, 2009). Due to the time limitations of this study, written reports of the participants' experience based on semi-structured questions were requested from two participants, each report taking approximately one hour. A semi-structured interview was undertaken with the third participant. Both the written report and interview questions were piloted with experienced facilitators and revised based on feedback. As it was not possible to conduct this interview face-to-face (the participant was geographically located in a different place from the researcher), it was considered more appropriate to use online video conferencing. This allowed the researcher to record the interview, incorporating both audio and video. It should be noted that the researcher had no input into the location of the report writing or interview but the researcher composed his written report in his place of work, whilst all other participants chose to undertake their report writing and interview in a private office at their workplace. The researcher obtained written consent to obtain the written reports (other than his own) and verbal consent to record the interview.

With the phenomenological approach taken, it was important to allow the participants to write and speak freely about their individual context and experiences and therefore data were collected using semi-structured questions for the written reports and interview. This provided

the flexibility for an in-depth exploration to occur between researcher and participants, whilst still allowing for direction to take place. What one seeks from research data in phenomenological research is as complete a description of the experience as possible that a participant has lived through (Giorgi, 2009).

Kensit (2000, p. 104) cautions that the researcher must allow the data to emerge: “Doing phenomenology” means capturing “rich descriptions of phenomena and of their settings”. Accordingly participants were initially asked to describe a situation in which they experienced facilitator-enhanced collaborative learning within a VLE discussion forum. Participants were then asked to elaborate on the examples they provided in order to elicit further perceptions. The data collected from the written reports and the transcribed interview were analysed for themes and categories. Both written reports and the transcribed interview were initially reviewed for completeness by the author. The initial review gave a closer look at the data collected and provided some familiarity with the data. This was viewed as a first step in the analysis and, once reviewed the data was re-read systematically to allow for patterns and themes to emerge.

The researcher read and re-read the written reports and interview transcription to immerse himself in the data. Subsequently the researcher began an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the data (Smith et al., 2009), which is inductive in nature. IPA does not include a single step of data analysis, but must include the following characteristics: (a) movement from what is unique to a participant to what is shared among the participants; (b) description of the experience which moves to an interpretation of the experience; (c) commitment to understanding the participant’s point of view; and (d) psychological focus on personal meaning-making within a particular context. Following the IPA process, the researcher conducted initial noting, which included descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Following the initial noting on each participant’s data, the researcher searched for emerging themes by examining discrete sections of the written reports and interview transcript and simultaneously recalling what had been learned during the analysis up to this point. The themes not only reflected the participants’ original words and thoughts but also the researcher’s interpretations. In the development of themes, the researcher supported each theme again by descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments made by each of the participants. The process produced a rich and varied description of the participants’ facilitation experience, their perception of facilitator-enhanced collaboration and its

improvement of learning within VLE discussion forums. Regarding validity and truthfulness, Vandenberg (1997) emphasises the truth-value of qualitative research and lists a number of means to achieve truth. In this study, the researcher tailored the phenomenological research design so that it contributed towards truth. The researcher consciously bracketed himself in order to understand, in terms of the perspectives of the participants interviewed, the phenomenon that he was studying. The researcher also bracketed himself when transcribing the single interview, thus further contributing to the truth.

Findings

The findings for this study were developed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) process. The findings reflect the focus of phenomenology, which is the lived experience and meaning of the phenomenon of “How does the facilitator perceive that learning within VLE discussion forums is improved by facilitator enhanced collaboration?”

The section is organised by three themes identified in the data analysis section:

- 1) a preference to enhance collaboration within discussion forums
- 2) a willingness to engage in collaboration in a proactive but non-intrusive way
- 3) a need for setting facilitator expectations as regards student collaboration.

The focus of phenomenology is on the common elements, rather than the individual (Giorgi, 2009); in keeping with this aspect of the chosen methodology, when presenting excerpts from the written reports and interview transcripts, participant names are not included. The researcher notes that the findings section also reflects the “double hermeneutic” of the IPA approach, in that these findings outline the researcher’s own interpretation of the participants’ interpretation of their experience (Smith et al, 2009).

The section below will describe each of these in more detail, and support these with extracts from the written reports and interview transcript. Written reports are identified as [W101] and [W102]. The interview transcript is identified as [I101].

1) Preference to enhance collaboration within discussion forums

The author found that all participants in this study perceived great benefit to enhancing the collaborative learning experience (by means of increased activities assigned by the facilitator for discussion by students which are formally assessed). One participant recalled the first discussion forum where they had enhanced the collaboration and noted the increased activity, higher standard of critical analysis and discourse and overall much-improved student grades.

“I could immediately see how the student activity increased. The students came alive. They began to communicate much more and their overall understanding and level of knowledge on the subject increased.” [W102]

All participants noted that the initial negative feelings associated with the extra effort required to enhance the collaborative learning gave way to some positive emotions associated with the gain from seeing the learning within the discussion forum improved.

“I initially felt that there was a substantial increased effort required to enhance the collaboration between the students. However it soon became apparent that this additional effort was worthwhile, when I recognised the improved learning within the discussion forum.” [I101]

All participants indicated a preference to enhance collaboration within their discussion forums as a primary objective of their role.

“... and I now have a preference to enhance the collaboration in my discussion forums and see this as a primary goal of my facilitation role.” [I101]

This indicated that they had consciously made a shift towards a collaborative pedagogical approach to their facilitation.

2) Willingness to engage in collaboration in a proactive but non-intrusive way

What was highlighted by the three participants was that although they had a preference to enhance the collaboration, they wished to do so in a proactive but at the same time non-intrusive way.

“To be honest, I will very rarely intercede in the conversations unless it is to tease something out which could be for the benefit of the wider group. “ [W101]

“I don't like to be seen to take over the forum throughout the weekly discussion.” [W102]

“The discussion forum is primarily theirs and I just perceive my role as contributing where necessary in order to provide sufficient stimulation to students so that the understanding and learning is maximised.” [W102]

“It is not beneficial to the collaboration to overly intrude on the discussion forum.

I find that I can sufficiently enhance the collaboration by contributing posts that promote, assist and reward the students for the effort and value of their discussion posts.” [I101]

One participant recalled an occasion when they had facilitated in a more intrusive way and this had caused the students to reduce their level of collaboration and in turn their learning within the discussion forum suffered.

“On one occasion, I posted too much and too intrusively. The students felt I was constantly watching them with an over critical eye and this I learned discouraged them from collaborating. In turn their discussion learning experience suffered.” [W102]

These participant perceptions seem to support the idea of how facilitators must consciously restrain their willingness to post and must find ways to stimulate student-to-student learning collaboration (Swan, 2004). Swan recommends that the facilitator set the standards of the discussion forum early on and then participate less and less in the discussions. It is interesting that to ensure the students know that the facilitator is still active, although not intrusively engaged and reviewing the posts, Swan suggests continued weekly contacts through individual feedback mechanisms such as email.

3) Need for setting facilitator expectations as regards student collaboration

In addition to perceiving the preference to engage in collaborative learning and in a proactive and non-intrusive way, all of the participants in this study indicated their need for setting facilitator expectations at the beginning of the discussion forum as regards the expectations on behalf of the student for collaboration.

“I have found that the best way to achieve a high level of collaboration among the students in discussion forums is to set my expectation of them in the whole process at the very beginning of the discussion.” [I101]

Another participant further identified this need in the context of clarifying preconceptions students may have as regards the role of facilitator in aiding the discussion forum learning. As this participant put it,

“once the student read and understood the expectations on their part and the purpose of my role in enhancing the collaboration, they were quite at ease with my presence albeit in the background.” [W102]

Discussion

This study shows that facilitators have a preference to enhance collaboration in a proactive but non-intrusive way. This affirms the belief of Yang, Newby and Bill (2005) which had previously identified that the students' collaboration levels did increase when a facilitator was proactively involved. In addition the study shows that facilitators also see the benefit of, and wish to set the requirement for student collaboration. This agrees with Taylor (2005) in that facilitators should make students aware of the opportunities of collaboration and how it can improve their learning. It also strengthens the view of Siemens (2002) who believes that facilitators should ensure that students are familiar with the online environment in order to improve the collaboration.

The findings show that facilitators have embraced the move towards a collaborative pedagogy and this practice is aligned to Macdonald (2003, p.390) who emphasises the importance of the facilitator including the practice of such skills in a discussion forum assessment activity. Facilitators appear to experience benefit from enhancing the collaborative learning experience in that the student learning within the discussion forum improves. This finding supports Haavind (2006) who asserts that facilitator enhancement has a positive effect on the student learning experience. Facilitators also seem to have the objective of intentionally enhancing the collaboration as part of this pedagogical approach as previously outlined by Rovai (2007). In addition, facilitators recognise the danger of being over intrusive in their attempts to enhance collaboration.

In contrast to the opinion of Keengwe, Kidd and Kyei-Blankson (2009), the findings do not recommend that the facilitator's role in enhancing collaboration is to support the comments of others by acknowledging and extending their thinking, extending the conversation by adding arguments that bolster an opinion, compliment a participant for a statement and persuade the more reserved students to join in. There is a clear requirement by facilitators to set expectations at the outset of a discussion forum in order to enable the facilitator enhancement to have a suitable effect.

“I perceive that my proactive enhanced collaboration in setting my expectations, which I try to do in a way that is not invasive for the students, has a direct and definite positive effect on the students learning within the discussion forum” [W102]

This substantiates the need to provide a clear explanation of expectations as asserted by Weaver (2005). The results are particularly exciting because, as this comment indicates, the lived experience of facilitator-enhanced collaboration within VLE discussion forums seems to lead to improved learning, which facilitators perceive as worth the additional facilitator effort. The results further scaffold those found by Mazzolini and Maddison (2007) and show that the use of collaborative learning strategies by facilitators have a profound influence on TEL outcomes.

Limitations

This study represents an initial exploration of the experiences of facilitators of discussion forums within VLEs on enhancing the collaborative learning experience. It was beyond the focus, and therefore, the limited scope of the study to examine students' perceptions of the facilitator-enhanced collaborative learning within the VLE discussion forum. However, knowing how typical these experiences were for recipient student learners would offer more of a comparative opportunity that is not afforded by the focus on the lived experience of the facilitators themselves. Additional research is needed to test the efficacy of the suggested facilitation styles (proactive but non-intrusive) to enhance collaboration and learning within discussion forums. Additionally, further investigation is required to better understand and test the interactional effects among these styles.

The sample of participants was limited to three. Given the time constraints with this short study, it was only possible to interview one participant for a short time and ascertain written reports from two other participants. Future research will include a larger sample size, and a greater number of interviews as opposed to written reports. In addition, all three facilitators (one being the researcher himself) were known to the researcher and were based at educational institutions of university status within Ireland and England. International and cross-sector studies with larger sample sizes are required in order to perform further analyses to confirm whether facilitator-enhancement makes a significant difference to learning within VLE discussion forums.

The researcher acknowledges the possibility of researcher bias within this study given his involvement as both a participant and author of this paper, and the professional relationships that have been sustained over time with the other selected participants. Where the source of bias could have appeared in particular was in conducting the interview (Cohen et al., 2011)

and soliciting written reports. It is the professional relationship with the participants which should be highlighted here, since the researcher shares and has knowledge and insight into the practice and style of each participant's facilitation. Because of this, every effort was taken to ensure questions were phrased in an open manner, without pre-empting responses. Opportunities were also offered for participants to elaborate on experiences that the researcher would not have knowledge of. The short time available for this study did not enable the researcher to explore the level of effort required by facilitators to enhance the collaborative learning or to explore the need for facilitator training to acquire the skills for enhancing collaborative learning.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

This qualitative study, as an attempt to explore how enhanced collaborative learning can improve learning within VLE discussion forums, through the lens of facilitators, is an important complement to the existing literature in the area of collaborative learning and TEL. Although the study had its limitations, the findings are compelling. From a practical standpoint, the findings can inform other facilitators of collaborative learning within discussion forums and other areas of VLEs about the experiences they may encounter, and how they can enhance the collaborative learning experience. Learning more about how one can enhance the collaborative learning experience is important for any such facilitator. Therefore it may be possible for trainers of facilitators to communicate to all, the benefits and means of enhancing collaboration within discussion forums in order to improve learning. Perhaps the most important implication of this study is to inform facilitators of collaborative learning within VLEs that by enhancing the collaborative experience, the discussion forum learning will without doubt improve. The key thing to take from this study is to be aware of the need to proactively although non-intrusively enhance the collaborative learning experience as facilitators continue as practising professionals. This alone may go a long way towards helping to improve learning within discussion forums. The research also found that setting expectations as regards student collaboration at the start of discussions is also highly important. Based on these findings, it is vitally important for the facilitator to promote the value of VLE discussion forums for enhancing the collaborative learning experience.

Definition of Terms

VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
Collaborative Learning	Active engagement in a joint intellectual effort
Facilitator	Helps the student group understand the discussion forum activities
Experience	Wise and skilful through doing
Enhanced	Increased
Discussion Forum Learning	Discussion activities assigned by the facilitator for discussion by students which will be formally assessed
Improve	Make better

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