Facilitation is No Mere Technical Skill: A Case Study of a Small Group of 'Different' Students

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ABSTRACT: It is generally recognized that any inquiry must be sensitive to context and that facilitation is never simply a matter of following a set of rules. In this paper I list and discuss the particular challenges of facilitating an inquiry with a small group of adolescent boys, all of whom had difficulty in learning despite being of at least average intelligence. I describe some adaptations to the classic P4C model of inquiry that I found helpful and refer briefly to the progress made by the boys. I conclude that, although research suggests that children and young people who learn differently may be those most likely to benefit from P4C, we should not underestimate the facilitation challenges they present or the time it takes for cognitive and social gains to influence performance in school. The inclusive education movement, with its emphasis on accommodating diversity, implies that such children are increasingly present in regular classrooms. It is important that trainers are aware of this and ensure that teachers who are eager to create classroom communities of inquiry have sufficient quality training and support. My final comment is that, if facilitation is an art, we should not expect all teachers to become, or to wish to become, highly effective facilitators of philosophical inquiry after a brief training.

INTRODUCTION

The rationale for the initiative reported in this paper was my need to explore how and to what extent I could help some of the young people I see in my educational psychology practice by arranging for them to engage regularly in community of inquiry dialogue. I reasoned that, although they struggled at school, they were certainly not stupid, and could benefit both socially and cognitively from this type of mediated experience. The Philosophy Club is not a therapy group but an experience of thinking together in an environment very different from that of the typical classroom. Its practice is based on the assumptions of Matthew Lipman, the author of the original Philosophy for Children program. In a case study, numbers are not as important as in depth description. The intention is to illustrate a particular instance, in this case it is through work with a small number of adolescents with autistic spectrum and/or attention difficulties. As with any case study, no claim can be made that the findings are generalizable, except possibly by analogy.

Philosophy for Children

Lipman argued that, although everyone can think, it is important to enable all members of society to think for themselves and to think well. Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980) proposed more than 30 years ago that education should be structured for thoughtfulness, that children should be actively encouraged to think for themselves, and that the way to improve thinking is through dialogue with others. As he explains in his autobiography, Lipman (2009) believed that this could be accomplished if schools introduced regular philosophy classes to children of all ages. He was well aware, however, that many teachers might find this a threatening addition to their professional role. His response was to create the Philosophy for Children program as a way of making it possible for regular teachers who were not philosophers to engage their students in philosophical inquiry. He did not recommend that students in schools should learn about philosophy, but that they be allowed to *do* philosophy, using some of the thinking moves that philosophers have found helpful. The pedagogy he proposed for philosophy lessons was based on collaborative inquiry. The classroom would become what he labelled a 'community of inquiry' with the teacher as a facilitator whose task was to monitor *how* the community thought rather than to tell students what to think. The subject matter of any inquiry was to be whatever the classroom community found interesting and wanted to explore. In order to provide the best opportunities for practising both critical and creative thinking, the teacher/facilitator would nudge the collaborative inquiry towards a philosophical question, i.e. one that could not be settled by recourse to accepted facts or expert opinion.

The Philosophy for Children (P4C) program is known and implemented in many countries. Other authors and practitioners worldwide have adapted or modified Lipman's original P4C materials, or use different ways of engaging participants, but the belief in collaborative inquiry as a community remains central. Currently valued theories regarding the development of human thinking and learning (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Feuerstein, 1980; Feuerstein, Klein and Tannenbaum, 1991, together with certain important Piagetian notions) support this practice, although it contradicted some beliefs about learning and intellectual development prevalent in the 1970s when it was first introduced. There is a growing body of research indicating that regular participation in community of inquiry dialogue has many positive consequences. Common findings are growth in confidence, reasoning ability, reflectiveness, interpersonal skills, evidence of higher scholastic achievement and even gains in measured IQ. Examples are the work of Trickey and Topping (2004, 2007), Green (2009), Marsal, Dobashi and Weber (2009), Santi and Oliverio (2012), Reznitskaya (2012) and the study conducted in 2013 by SAPERE, the UK charity that supports Philosophy for Children. Studies in South Africa affirm the effectiveness of dialogic enquiry in regular classrooms, even in contexts where it is difficult to implement (Green, 2008, 2012) There is also emerging evidence of its value in teacher education, both as a pedagogy for teachers to employ in the classroom and as a means of developing their own thinking (Green and Condy 2012). Further details about research since the 1980s are to be found on the SAPERE website and on the website of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC).

Becoming part of a community of inquiry is particularly important for children and young people identified as educationally at risk. They are often a mystery to themselves, with little

understanding of their own thinking and learning processes. They do not automatically develop the judgements and habits of mind that facilitate school success. They need to practice thinking and become aware of both *what* and *how* they think since they have real difficulty in formulating and expressing their thoughts coherently. They frequently have had little opportunity to acquire the social skills that enable shared inquiry and need to build habits of collaboration and perceive its benefits. Their school experience has frequently been one of criticism and failure and they have little sense of themselves as competent and respected thinkers, despite their potential for insight and creativity. Ward (2015) highlights the fact that, in his experience with over 100 young people, "P4C has given a voice to children who otherwise did not have one".

The Role of the Facilitator in a Community of Inquiry

The quality of any community of inquiry, especially in the early stages, depends on the skill, sensitivity and patience of the facilitator. Haynes and Murris (2011) explain that philosophical inquiry in the P4C tradition is not a detached intellectual exercise but an opportunity for shared meaning making. The teacher/facilitator must be able to engage members of the community both emotionally and intellectually and, as Lipman said, act as the midwife of their emerging thoughts. Fletcher (2015) speaks to the importance of nurturing 'the desire to be, share and grow' –the motivation to engage authentically in a shared inquiry– and of the challenge this can be for facilitators.

The role of facilitator demands flexible movement between critical, creative and caring thinking. She is both inside and outside the community –a collaborator sharing in the construction of meaning and a sensitive leader who tracks the process of inquiry in terms of its respectfulness, focus and reasonableness. In addition, she models the cognitive and social moves that she would like the community to be making (Gregory, 2009). She encourages the expression of many different ideas yet insists that participants think before they speak or respond to the thinking of others. She may have to teach the community how to speak and listen to each other respectfully and how to step back and evaluate their own thinking.

The aim of any inquiry, as Gardner (1996) and Fisher (1998) clearly state, is to make progress towards truth in the form of the most reasonable provisional answer to whatever question has been posed. In order to advance understanding the skilled facilitator models and encourages thinking moves, gives all ideas a fair hearing, examines arguments in order to strengthen or discard them, supports minority points of view and alternative positions, normalizes disagreement and is comfortable with opinions different from her own as long as they have been carefully explored and can be justified. (Green and Murris, 2014). In other words, she is "pedagogically strong but philosophically self-effacing" (Jackson, 2002, page 465).

As the community develops the facilitator's role is, or should be, increasingly taken over by the participants themselves. She may offer her own opinions on occasion but has to be sensitive to the inevitable power differential (both real and perceived) between herself and those she works with. Every context and every inquiry is different although there are some common features. Techniques and practical skills are useful but facilitation of a philosophical inquiry, like good teaching, is an art. It requires not only a sound conceptual foundation but also the ability to reflect critically and creatively in ever changing circumstances, plus the ability to 'think on your feet'. It cannot be reduced to a set of learned practices.

THE CASE STUDY

The ongoing case study reported here is an attempt to establish what kind of practice can best mediate the attitudes and skills of collaborative inquiry with young people who are not 'typical' students. In the course of my practice as an educational psychologist I see many children and young people who find schoolwork difficult and are unhappy and/or bored in classrooms. I reasoned that, although there might be some challenges involved, many of them would benefit from being part of a community of inquiry. It could build their confidence, often destroyed by repeated failures at school. It could help them organize and articulate their thoughts and identify ways of managing what was difficult for them. It could be a source of pleasure in using their minds, something of which they had little or no experience. It would be an opportunity to expand their concepts and would, I hoped, eventually have some positive effect on their behaviour and/or their achievement in school. I chose to label the group the 'Philosophy Club' to mark the fact that this was not some form of extra lesson or learning support but a voluntary engagement in an interesting activity.

The group was small, consisting of four adolescent boys aged between 14 and 17 from different schools and different backgrounds in terms of race, culture and religion. Two of the boys had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), one of whom was on medication. Another was diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder and the fourth processed information slowly. All received some form of learning support, either at school or independently. The boys came voluntarily for an hour every Monday afternoon over a period of 18 months, broken by school holidays and interrupted at times by illness or the need to use the Philosophy Club time for intensive examination preparation or extra lessons.

The aim of the research dimension of the project was to discover to what extent P4C might need to be adapted for these young people and in what ways they might benefit from regular inquiry dialogues. I planned to track their development as thinkers and learners and monitor the process of philosophizing with them. The most appropriate research approach was a case study within the action research paradigm. Action research, as described by Carr and Kemmis (1986: page 162) is "a form of self enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out." This form of research involves an ongoing spiral process of planning, action and reflection. The information on which this paper is based includes session notes and observations, records of written feedback to individuals, transcripts of sessions, parent conversations and self-reports by the boys themselves.

FACILITATION CHALLENGES

Identifying Questions of Genuine Interest

At first the boys struggled to come up with questions that they would really like to explore. It seemed as if they had stopped wondering, or if not, that they did not consider their questions to

be worth exploring together with others. It also took time before they trusted that what was of genuine concern to them was appropriate for our inquiry. The first question proposed by one of them was fairly impersonal –whether to save one beloved person or twenty strangers, in the unlikely event of being presented with this choice. Although it took some work to relate this topic to familiar contexts, it was a start. I found that for several months I needed to be sensitive to the boys' likely interests and suggest at least two possible topics from which they could choose. There were times, however, when the school day had presented concerns that were too salient to ignore and on these occasions I simply allowed the boys to talk and listened for philosophical implications that we might explore in the future.

Over time Steven, Joe, Tom and Edwin (not their real names) became much more confident and creative about proposing questions, as the selected examples to come will illustrate. A strategy I found to work well occasionally was to present a question that no-one was allowed to answer except by saying 'That makes me think of another interesting question' so that we built upon and extended each other's questions. By collaborating in this way we created a bank of questions for times when no-one was feeling creative. Sometimes it was useful to encourage a conversation, or pick up on a chance remark, often about some aspect of school life, and try to tease out with the group what questions were implied.

Difficulty in Focusing and Sustaining Attention

The boys did not easily remain focused on a specific question or topic or on each other's opinions, especially, as was often the case, if these were not expressed succinctly. They had difficulty in managing their internal distractibility. Their own thoughts were often not clear to them and they sometimes needed time to identify and formulate them in words. At other times they used too many words, as if in the hope that their meaning would somehow emerge if they made repeated attempts at it.

It helped if the starting point was extremely interesting to them and captured their attention, which was something I had to learn by trial and error. I used stories, poems, pictures, various objects that they could handle, and videos/dvds. Reading, and especially reading aloud, was not popular. Texts had to be short. The wordy prose and unfamiliar context of the extract from *Les Miserables* that Fisher (2001) suggests (the bishop's candlesticks episode) did not appeal despite its interesting moral possibilities. Moreover, this group was unanimous that the bishop had erred in trusting the thief and should have handed him over to the forces of law and order. The current visibility and prevalence of crime in South Africa may have influenced this perspective. I used this extract at an early stage in the Philosophy Club's existence and at that time did not choose to challenge the boys' opinions and reasons. It was progress to have them express personal views and begin to listen to each other. Later I reintroduced the topic when it became apparent that the boys were interested in evil, as presented in the innumerable movies that they recalled in great detail.

They watched De Boton's dvd about philosophy but it did not excite them. I am not sure to what extent they picked up the main points he was making and it may be that, although they appeared to focus on the visual input, they did not pay systematic attention to the auditory information in much the same way that they seemed to focus somewhat randomly on aspects of written text. When I experimented with art (postcard reproductions) as a starting point for inquiry I found that some members of the group tended to be uncomfortable with too much ambiguity, which may have been overwhelming given the rich but confused mix of their own thoughts. It was easier for them to respond to pictures of realistic objects or events.

I had discovered that it was important to provide variety in terms of our starting point. This need for change and new stimulation was even more apparent when we focused on a specific question. The boys would each express an opinion and attempt to justify it with reasons but they soon felt that they had said all that could be said on a particular topic and wanted a change. If, as Oyler (2015) suggests, the 'length of string' is an indicator of the quality of an inquiry, for a long time we did not do very well.

It helped if activities were structured. I followed the classic guidelines. We created 'ground rules'; we used a soft toy to signal the right to speak. I used laminated cards, each of which had one word on it, namely. AGREE, DISAGREE, REASON, QUESTION, CONNECT and CLARIFY. The boys were to pick up a card before speaking, ostensibly so that we would all know what kind of move they were making but also to help them identify their own thinking moves. However, while structure helped, there was also some resistance to it. If they were really engaged they often forgot the rules that we had agreed upon or decided to ignore them. It seemed as if they did not like this slowing down of their thoughts or the way it interrupted their attempts to focus on the content of what they wanted to say. It was a breakthrough when Joe, not I, said at one point, "I think we should go back to using the toy".

Structure in the form of a series of questions to direct an inquiry was extremely helpful. One of our early inquiries involved a brief extract from Harry Stottlemeier's discovery –where Lisa and her friends are speaking about 'mind'. We read a short passage together (the spacing and size of the font helped) and then worked through the questions suggested in the manual. This experience highlighted for me the value of a series of clear, simply worded questions in focusing an inquiry.

Those who do not easily focus their auditory attention have difficulty recalling what they have heard and tend to retain only a fuzzy sense of what was said. It helped to ask other participants to repeat what someone had said, or to check for meaning myself, and at times, but not too often, to use a whiteboard to capture the process as it happened. I found this very difficult to do because the main threads of an enquiry (and often the main point of an utterance) would only emerge fairly late and it was hard to know what was important. I tried, however, to create a brief written summary or a visual map immediately after each session. By the following week the boys had usually forgotten what we had talked about. The 'map' was useful as a starting point for continuing an inquiry, as long as it did not involve a great deal of reading.

I found, too, that after an extended period of concentration we needed a break. It worked well to introduce some kind of playful activity, such as a philosophy board game or an activity that involved answering ridiculous questions such as 'Would you rather walk on broken glass or slip your feet into shoes filled with snakes?' Another option was to introduce a simple creative task, such as the example below in which individuals completed sentences about themselves that provided a starting point.

My mind is like a computer because....

... because it stores memories in my brain and I can go back and remember things that I want to experience again.

My mind is like a calm sea because...

... my mind can make peaceful sounds that a sea makes. It can also put me on a beach.

My mind is like an empty room because...

... an empty room lit up by a candle to light the dark. An empty room because sometimes I could have nothing to think about or when I'm bored I can think of nothing.

My mind is like a grasshopper because

...A grasshopper that's wild and delicate ...because sometimes I would like to be left alone or I could be wanting to make sounds when I have nothing to do.

My mind is like a bubble bath because...

...because all the bubbles can represent things that are worth thinking about. I could be thinking many things.

Low Self-Esteem

All members of our mini-community had a history of negative school experiences. They did not expect to be 'right' and disliked taking risks. They anticipated possible humiliation if they said what they thought. Almost all those who joined the group were clearly anxious at first. It manifested as silence, or as the hesitant and apologetic offer of an opinion, or as a tendency to 'put down' and tease others, or to speak too much and too loudly. It helped to model respectful responses and, when intervention became necessary, to be very tactful about the wording of any comment that could be construed as a reprimand.

I became increasingly aware of the significance of the physical and social setting. The boys sometimes appeared exhausted after a long school day of sport and lessons. They liked the fact that they sat informally on comfortable chairs or a couch, facing each other. This was highlighted for me when we discussed inviting new members and the comment was 'you will have to get another couch'. After some months I asked for suggestions about improving the Philosophy Club. These included a coffee machine and a few more participants, especially if these could be girls. The Philosophy Club, as I had hoped, was developing an identity as a safe and comfortable social venue in which they could begin to take intellectual risks.

Insistence on Relativist Views

Opinions were expressed and often apparently strongly held. It was encouraging, however, that occasionally someone changed his mind as a question was explored. Nevertheless, there was a very general tendency to insist that any viewpoint was 'just my perspective' and that other perspectives, whatever they might be, were equally valid. This attitude might be related to the emphasis on accommodating diversity in the very diverse context of post apartheid South Africa but I was interested to learn from international colleagues that it was common in other contexts as well. It may also relate to a reluctance to take a stance in case it is proved to be 'wrong'. I suspect now that it may take some time before these boys, whose experience of the world so far has tended to be fluid and inconsistent, are fully convinced of the value of reasoned justification.

I can think of only one occasion when someone committed to a position. I had pushed the group about whether all perspectives were equally valid and after considerable discussion he said, "I think where the catch comes in is that if your perspective would put anyone else in harm or put yourself in harm that's where the line is crossed between it's OK and not..."

Group Size and Composition:

The size and composition of the group limited somewhat the number of perspectives to which we had access. This was exacerbated when there were the inevitable absences from time to time. It also at times made individuals more 'visible' than they would have liked. I had never intended that the group should consist of less than six members, which would have allowed for the occasional absence. I had also anticipated a more or less even gender balance, but it did not happen this way. Reasons may include the fact that conditions such as ADHD and autism are more frequent in boys than in girls, but the main reasons for the group's size and composition seemed to be either the priority given to extra lessons or sport, or difficulties with transport. The challenge for me was to have a range of options available for every session since attendance was unpredictable.

Opportunities for Facilitator Growth:

In the early months I was forced to think creatively, to experiment with starting points that might engage the boys and to find ways of making questions the norm. I think I have become better at nudging thinking step by step towards philosophical questions, for example from 'Why do we have to learn about Romeo and Juliet' to 'What is the purpose of education', about which the boys had a great deal to say. Being unable to generate questions is one outcome of schooling that focuses almost exclusively on answers. Lack of confidence about answers gives rise to lack of confidence about questions. Generating more and better questions and becoming more confident went hand in hand. I became more alert to occasions when someone had taken a small step forward, and made comments such as 'I notice that today you have been very careful not to interrupt Tom –this is really helpful' but I took care only to do this when it was justified and did not praise indiscriminately.

Although I was aware of the importance of a self-esteem, I learned from this group just how easily a belief in oneself as a person capable of worthwhile thoughts can be damaged by negative school experiences and how this perception of the self can interfere with the social interactions that are a necessary part of growing up and learning. I learned, too, that the *process* of sharing thoughts appropriately sometimes has to be explicitly taught. Because the group was small it was possible for me to observe carefully the thinking strengths and challenges of each individual, to notice small signs of growth and to feedback my insights to each individual in the form of a brief written report every six months.

Although managing attention and retaining focus remain challenges, I value the occasional rewarding glimpses of the unusual 'takes' on life and the rapid creative connections of which this particular community is capable. I have become more aware of each individual's store of knowledge, both useful and extraordinary, and better able to link it to our enquiries. I have a much better idea now of what will NOT work in this context, although I still make mistakes. I am not yet sure how best to address the insistence that all perspectives must be treated as equally valid but I consult with colleagues and have found Gardner's recent update of her 1996 paper helpful.

Progress to Date

I have observed that the boys have become more confident and creative, more able to generate philosophical questions, and more able, at least at times, to remain focused on a particular question. They have begun to develop insight about themselves and understanding of the inquiry process, as the quotations below illustrate.

- ... I think the number one thing I've learned is self-control for example when I first started coming to Philosophy Club I would interrupt people to say my answer...
- ... I think what I find difficult in particular is because I'm worried I'm going to forget something while I say it...
- 0 ... I think I have become more open to other ideas...
- ...I like the discussion in philosophy on points of view your point of view why you think this is wrong and this is right...you can have many answers...
- ... I think that the difference between philosophy and a conversation is that philosophy usually poses
 a question that doesn't necessarily have a definite answer but more challenges your perspective....ja
 so I think that it's more in depth than a conversation and we have to talk longer and we have to
 search in ourselves to get the answers while talking and I think a conversation would just be...I
 don't think that it's lesser but I do think that it's different...

Some of the questions generated by the boys over a period of approximately one year were:

- What is evil?
- Can we know the real truth?
- What is the right kind of education?
- Does everyone see the same?
- Are conventional ways (of bringing up children) still the best?
- Do human beings have free will?
- 0 If you speak about/acknowledge race does that make you a racist?
- Would it be a good idea if human beings could start life with old age and become younger?

- Would it be a good idea if someone invented a chewing gum that knew everything?
- o If other people could read our thoughts would we have different thoughts?
- Is love at first sight possible?
- If you cloned yourself would your clone have your memories?

DISCUSSION

In the case of this group the key facilitation issue was flexibility. I frequently could not use what I had prepared. The reason might be a pressing issue that was brought to the Philosophy Club or the energy level and mood of the group and of individuals. Variety and structure were always important, as was careful attention to each individual and the management of interactions between them. In the sessions the boys involved became more confident, and more aware of the content and process of their thinking but I have no evidence of any direct transfer to school related tasks. Parents reported that their sons liked the sessions but did not pinpoint any specific changes.

At the start of the project I had hoped to be able to track improvements in academic achievement but I became aware that this was unrealistic for several reasons. If there were improvements in school grades it would be impossible to exclude the influence of factors such as extra lessons, good teaching, and the nature of school and home contexts. I might have chosen to 'bridge' more explicitly to schoolwork but this would have reduced the Philosophy Club to a special form of 'extra lesson' -and not a particularly successful one as each individual had different needs. Even had I done so, cognitive interventions that make a significant difference to school learning tend to require at least two years of regular input, generally for more than one hour per week. It should also be noted that the South African curriculum, which pays lip service to critical and creative thinking, is becoming increasingly prescriptive and assessment driven. There may have been effects on thinking and behaviour both in and out of school in the form of confidence, attitudes to knowledge and to the ideas of others, of which I was unable to gather evidence. The main purpose of this paper was, however, to illustrate the challenges and time involved in making progress within this particular community. It may be 'normal' to expect progress within the community but communities vary in terms of the ease with which progress is accomplished and in terms of the extent to which such progress manifests itself in other contexts.

Lipman and his colleagues made very explicit the connection between experiences of dialogue and scholastic achievement. They questioned the assumption that, because the outcome of education is the ability to read and understand text, and to produce meaningful written text, the process of education should offer practice in such activities without the prior experience of dialogue. The skills acquired in dialogue, they argued, are a necessary prerequisite for the skills required in the classroom. Many educationists now believe in the importance of talk prior to reading and writing. However, they tend to justify this practice as a means of activating existing schemas about a topic and often fail to recognize that dialogue also has a much more important function. It is through dialogue with others that children acquire the tools to think. Listening to others and teasing out shared meanings prepares them to seek and find meaning in what they read. Articulating, structuring and defending their own ideas in collaboration with others becomes over time a way of thinking in private that can direct their written work. The thinking moves that are encouraged and practiced during dialogic enquiry create a growing repertoire of reflective skills and habits that enable thoughtful judgements. Making thoughtful judgements is particularly difficult for children who are inattentive and frequently impulsive and they need many experiences that not only build habits of thoughtfulness but make them aware of the value of this kind of thinking. These are persuasive arguments. This small case study highlights the need for early and ongoing experiences of inquiry and suggests that we should be realistic about the time required for change to manifest itself in school contexts.

There is nothing new in saying that all schoolchildren can benefit from P4C or that facilitation of an inquiry is not easy. It does need to be said, however, that schoolchildren who learn differently and/or need special accommodations may be those who most need the experience of dialogic inquiry in the P4C tradition and are at the same time those who present facilitation challenges that we would be unwise to underestimate. Given the international move towards inclusive schools and classrooms every regular classroom is likely to be a diverse community and teacher training in P4C needs to take this into account.

It would be pleasing to believe that education worldwide could be transformed if philosophical inquiry were inserted into every school curriculum and all teachers were trained to facilitate collaborative philosophical inquiry. It would also be naïve. Facilitation of a philosophical inquiry, like teaching itself, is an art. It is not a competence to be acquired but a way of thinking, an ongoing learning experience which is only possible if one is comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. Not all teachers are likely to be, or wish to be, effective facilitators of inquiry, even if they have received some training. This is particularly true in contexts where teachers themselves have not been encouraged to develop as thinkers and where there is not the possibility of regular collegial mentoring and support.

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Websites

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