Service learning as a response to community/school engagement: Towards a pedagogy of engagement

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The promulgation of the White Paper on Higher Education (1997) necessitated Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa to avail their expertise in their human resources and physical infrastructure for service learning and community engagement initiatives, in the interest of demonstrating social responsibility, collaborative partnerships with, and a commitment to the development of South African communities. Service learning as a thoughtful organised, reflective and engaged service pedagogy is focused on the developmental priorities of communities through the application of knowledge, skills and interaction among communities, academics, students and service providers to the benefit of all participants (Council on Higher Education, 2006). In response to the latter mentioned, this interdisciplinary study, therefore, reports on the results of a service learning component to teach postgraduate students, attached to the Department of Comparative Education and Education Management, to perform specific skills (management tasks) via the implementation of structured interventions at their selective schools. Class presentations, reflective journals on students' observations, experiences and actions revealed significant parallels between the implemented service learning curricular (management tasks) and the respective 'engaged' school communities.

Keywords: service learning; postgraduate students; community engagement; class presentations; reflective journals; management tasks

Introduction

Alexander, Van Wyk, Bereng and November (2009) argue that the purpose of education alludes to the development of human capital towards meeting and achieving the individual and psychosocial needs of schools and communities. In relation to this, Striano (2009) postulates that educational issues should be closely connected to the social development agenda of a state, thereby perpetuating aspects such as human capital development and social inclusion. The other important point is that education is expected to be responsive to the needs of society. The South African Council of Higher Education (CHE) admits that a university and other institutions of higher learning face multiple demands from stakeholders, especially their responsiveness to societal needs and provision of information to the public (CHE, 1996). If society expects the institutions of higher learning to respond to its needs, then it means the goal of education must be formulated by taking societal needs into account. This seems to be the vital role of a university and other institutions of higher learning.

In essence, our statement implies that discourse with regard to education in Higher Education (HE) should constantly be reflective and interrogative of the epistemological assumptions underlying its role in a transformative milieu; in other words, "how knowledge is conceived, constructed and transmitted" should be linked to broader societal issues (Hall in Report of the Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion and the Elimination of Discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions, 2008). In this respect, Striano (2009: 382) states: "Education systems are therefore required to increasingly be responsive to social needs in terms of instilling knowledge and competencies that should sustain personal and professional development".

In relation to the above, Eyler and Giles (1994) as well as Peavey and Hutchinson (1993) claim that service learning can be regarded as an effective pedagogy for developing social responsibility and change students' attitudes; thus, by participating in a service-learning experience, students learn pedagogical content knowledge and skills needed to understand issues confined to the broader society.

As a response to engage in social change from a higher learning perspective, this article attempts to engage students through service learning, operationalised as a thoughtful organised, reflective and engaged service pedagogy focused on integrating community engagement with academic goals. This article, therefore, aims to highlight the importance of service learning as experienced by postgraduate students for the module MLM 622 (Management tasks as basis for an effective school) on its engagement with their community, especially as it relates to the teaching and learning spheres in higher education institutions.

We shall briefly outline the intermesh between higher education and community engagement. In relation to the latter, we expound on service learning as a reflective and engaged service pedagogy. Our theoretical frame for service learning is further conceptualised within Kolb's experiential learning style model. In conclusion, we present the reflections of our postgraduate students' service-learning interventions as captured in their respective journals.

Higher education and community engagement

The promulgation of the White Paper on Higher Education (1997) necessitated Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), such as the University of the Free State (UFS), to avail their expertise in their human resources and physical infrastructure for community engagement initiatives, in the interests of demonstrating social responsibility and a commitment to the development of South African communities (CHE, 2006: 11). In relation to this, Waghid (2002) refers to the increasing pressure on institutions of higher learning globally, including those in South Africa, to bridge the gap between higher education and society. This then may also translate to our academic endeavours in higher education where engagement with students should not be focused on knowledge production *per se*, but in essence exposing them during the learning process to opportunities for reflection. Therefore, any form of community engagement should be viewed as a means of establishing broader collaboration between institutions of higher learning and their respective local, regional, national, and global communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, skills and resources in a context of partnership, joint ownership and reciprocity (Schuetze, 2010).

According to Saltmarsh (1996: 18), reflective inquiry critically connects and breaks down the distinction between "thought and action, theory and practice, knowledge and authority, ideas and responsibilities". Learning is an active engaging process in which the student assumes the roles of explorer, maker and creator as well as being exposed to meaning-making opportunities (Cooper, 2007). This implies that meaning is reflected in the social beliefs of a particular community at any point in time. The experience of human interaction significantly affects the scope and sequence of cognitive and social development (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999; Cooper, 2007).

It is evident from the above that scholars in higher education need to develop skills which students need in order to be able to actively participate in their learning environment. Exposing teachers (lecturers) and students to opportunities in which they could engage in reflective inquiry is crucial to teaching and learning. Therefore, the notion of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoLT) should be duly pursued as a mechanism in advancing community engagement initiatives.

The development of a SoT is a process comprised of reflection on experience- and research-based knowledge on teaching (Kreber & Cranton, 2000; Boyer, 1996). These scholars outline three perspectives on SoTL, namely:

- Research on teaching and learning is viewed as one important aspect: knowledge on effective strategies to represent subjects.

- Excellence in teaching: excellent teachers are identified by student ratings or peer reviews or through the recognition of teaching awards or outstanding evaluations of teaching.

•   Application of educational theory and research to practice: practice is developed through a combination
     of reflection on theory and research and experience base knowledge on teaching.

The third perspective, as outlined by Kreber and Cranton, is especially relevant to this article in highlighting
the importance of service learning by MLM 622 students on their engagement with schools/communities.
The study, using the reflective journals of four students enrolled for the postgraduate course MLM 622
(Management tasks as basis for an effective school), as part of the University of the Free State's distance
learning delivery programme, serves as a case for reflective service-learning engagement.

Towards a pedagogy of engagement – A case for service learning

The scope of the South African Higher Education Quality Committee's (HEQC) audit system includes all
nineteen criteria for institutional audit. One of these, criterion number 18, deals directly with community
engagement. At the universities, quality-related arrangements are put in place for community engagement
(CHE, 2006). The CHE explains that, in the context of higher education, community engagement can
take different forms. This is demonstrated in Figure 1 (Bringle, Games & Malloy in CHE, 2006). These
forms include distance education, community-based research, participatory action research, professional
community service and service learning. The CHE explains that, in its fullest sense, community engagement
is the combination and integration of teaching and learning (e.g., service learning), professional community
service by academic staff and participatory action research applied simultaneously to identified community
development priorities (CHE, 2006). The question that arises then is: What is service learning and how can
it play a meaningful role in enhancing community-/school-related engagement activities?

Figure 1: Forms of community engagement
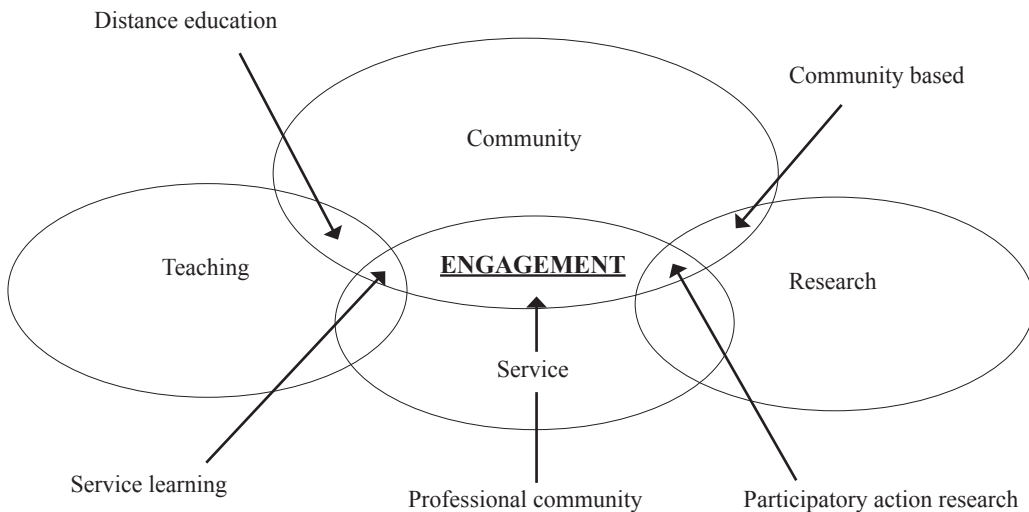
Adapted from Council of Higher Education (2006)

Service learning is advocated by many authors as a probable instrument for change. While some authors
have found it difficult to define service learning, a few of them have attempted to define it. Bringle
and Hatcher (2004) define the activity of service learning as a course-based, credit-bearing educational
experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community
goals. It is also an experience in which students reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain
further understanding of their course content. Furthermore, Sigmon (in Furco, 1996: 49) explains that it
is an experiential education approach that is premised on "reciprocal learning". This means that "because

learning flows from service activities, both those who provide service and those who receive it 'learn' from the experience" (Furco, 1996). The CHE (2006) explains service learning as "… a thoughtfully organised and reflective service-oriented pedagogy that is focused on the development priorities of communities through the interaction between the application of knowledge, skills and experience in partnership between community, academics, students, and service providers within the community for the benefit of all participants".

According to Coles (2005) and Engstrom (2003), service learning is a method of teaching in which academic subjects, as well as skills, are taught within the context of citizenship through community service. She also refers to the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 which indicates that the three basic components of teaching effectively, using this method, are to plan sufficiently so that objectives for the learned skills are included in the learning projects or activities that incorporate community service as part of the learning component and provide ample opportunity for students to analyse and mutually discuss and reflect on the work undertaken.

Since service learning is an experiential education approach that is premised on "reciprocal learning", and because learning flows from service activities, both those who provide service and those who receive it "learn" from the experience (Farco, 1996; Jacoby, 2003). With regard to the latter, Bender and Jordaan (2007) suggest that service learning is a pedagogical philosophy whereby students undergo a cyclical, practice-based learning process of concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualisation and active experimentation. To ensure that service promotes substantive learning, service learning connects students' experience to reflection and analysis in the curriculum (Bringle, Hatcher & Clayton, 2006) and also links theory to practice (Lantis, Kent, Kille & Krain, 2010). Service learning points to the importance of contact with complex, contemporary social problems and efforts to solve them as an important element of a complete education (CHE, 2006: 14).

This study also has its foundation on experiential learning theory (as advocated by Kolb). This theory proceeds from the assumption that ideas are formed and reformed through experience. In this instance, "learning is a continuous process grounded in experience" (Kolb, 1984:41). Kolb clarifies that knowledge is continuously derived from, and tested out in the experiences of the learner (Kolb, 1984). Students should engage with the community in order to have direct experiences of the 'real world', and to transform this experience in order to create knowledge and, therefore, learn from this experience. The field of experiential education is the pedagogical foundation of service learning. Service learning is rooted in the theories of constructivism – learners construct knowledge from their experience (CHE, 2006).

Theoretical framework

In grounding our understanding and highlighting the importance of reflection by the higher education sector on its engagement with the community, especially in the teaching and learning sphere, we will discuss Kolb's experiential learning style.

Kolb's learning style model builds on Carl Jung's claim that learning styles result from people's preferred ways of adapting to the world (Chapman, 1995). According to Wheeler and McLeod (2002), Kolb conceptualised learning as the fundamental human process of adapting to changing circumstances. He proposed two basic learning processes, namely the process of grasping information through the mode of either concrete experience or abstract conceptualisation and the process of transforming information through either active experimentation or reflective observation. Kolb further indicates that learning requires engagement of these behavioural modes. In this instance, the entire learning process can be modelled as a cycle moving from a concrete experience to a reflective observation about the experience; then to the development of abstract conceptualisations about the experience, and finally to active experimentation around the experience. Kolb (cited in Wheeler & McLeod, 2002) and CHE (2006) describe the characteristics of learners in each of the different learning modes. Concrete experience promotes the act of learning through direct experience. Learners, who prefer to learn through concrete experience, value relationships with other people, make decisions based on intuition and tend to be more concerned with feeling as opposed to thinking.

Reflective observation promotes the act of learning through reflection, thus according to what the experience means to the individual, and requires observation, examination, analysis and interpretation of concrete experiences. Learners who apply this learning mode have the ability to consider and appreciate a variety of different viewpoints and perspectives and use observations when making judgements. Abstract conceptualisation promotes the act of learning the logic and systematic planning when analysing ideas and solving problems, thus giving meaning to discoveries by relating them to other discoveries and other forms of knowledge. Active experimentation promotes learning by doing, thus making connections between learning experiences and the theoretical grounding of these experiences to the real world. Kolb's experiential learning cycle theory provides a conceptual framework for the unique blending of 'hands on' experience and learning with reflection as a vital link, e.g., real-life simulations (case studies), role-plays, fieldwork, internships and many more (CHE, 2006).

The implication in terms of reflection as it relates to the above may imply that educators enrolled for the MLM 622 course may acquire and demonstrate adequate knowledge and understanding so as to engage their communities/schools through a service pedagogy. We argue that the repertoire of skills acquired from MLM 622 students (practising educators) may provide a fruitful platform for reflection, thus motivating them through service learning as a pedagogy of engagement.

Research methodology

Participant selection

As indicated earlier, this study is grounded in the theoretical framework of experiential education. A B.Ed. Honours group of 100 students attached to the Department of Comparative Education and Education Management were involved in the study. These students attached to three distance-learning centres in the Free State province attended classes for the selected module.

Procedure

In an attempt to foster collaborative partnership with the community, the University of the Free State involved its students from the Faculty of Education. While it was the students from the Department of Comparative Education and Education Management who participated in this endeavour to form collaborative partnerships with the community, the study was conducted from an interdisciplinary stance. The Departments of Comparative Education and Education Management and Psychology of Education, in the Faculty of Education, collaborated in preparing and guiding students through the process of service learning. During the final stage, both the lecturers and the students reflected on the whole process in which they had been involved.

A cyclic reflective teaching approach, proposed by Pollard, was applied by both the lecturers and the students (see Figure 2). This idea was propelled by Heiselt and Wolverton's definition of service learning, which they put forth as "… a teaching and learning method that combines community service with academic instruction and which as such focuses on critical and reflective thinking and civic responsibility" (Hennes, 2001: 9).

Figure 2: Pollard's cyclical process of reflective teaching
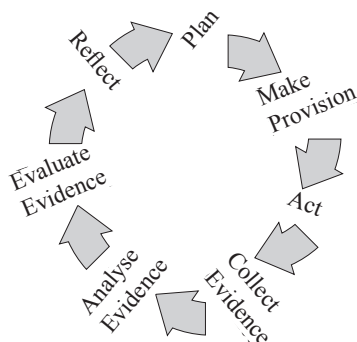
Adapted from Hennes (2001)

First, there was a reflection (reflection before community service) process in class so as to reflect on, and discuss current issues in society and their relatedness to broader challenges influencing education and schooling in South Africa, but more specifically to school communities at large (Eyler, 2002).

In our discussion with students, we reiterated the need for a community engagement approach that would indeed develop partnerships and emphasise participatory, collaborative, and democratic processes which, in turn, may provide benefits to all constituencies (Bringle & Hatcher, 2006). The expectation was that students, via their service-learning interventions in various school communities, would realise the potential to enhance their engagement with the educators, learners, school management members and other relevant stakeholders. The reflection process was facilitated by a cyclic reflective teaching mode suggested by Pollard, whereby students first acquainted themselves with the content of the course module MLM 622 in class. According to this mode of teaching, reflective teaching is applied in a cyclical process, in which educators monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continuously.

In this study, both the lecturers and each student had to do a cyclic reflective teaching in their participation in the project. The lecturers completed their own cycle (see Figure 2) as the one running on the outside. The students individually followed the cycle (see Figure 2) as the one running on the inside. These were not two different cycles, but one cycle that was followed by two groups of people (lecturers and students). While the students were basically reflecting on their participation in the project, the reflections of the lecturers focused more on the whole picture; especially on their own way of handling reflective service-learning classes. This became, in essence, the lecturers' self-interrogation on their roles as facilitators of such reflective lessons. Both cycles would stop running once the stage of reflection had been completed. The students would record their reflections in journals. The entire process of their engagement with the community was recorded. During report-back sessions in class and entries made to their respective journals, educators were tasked to specify how their interventions with the community effected some change towards developing the school community. They would also have to explain what they learnt from the community while they were serving it. The reflective journals were then submitted for evaluation. The lecturers would, in their turn of completing the cycle, listen to the students' presentations in class and read their reflective journals, and then reflect on the wholeentire process based on students' service-learning project interventions.

The following guidelines were given to students to complete their service-learning project:

- To have a full knowledge of the content. With regard to this aspect, students were compelled to have sufficient background knowledge of all four management tasks (planning, organising control and leading/guiding) as prescribed for this B.Ed. Honours module.

- To partner with members of their community (any aspect in the community with which they felt comfortable to partner, e.g., colleague, learner, SGB, soccer team, etc.) for three weeks. With regard

to this aspect, a student had to choose one management task which s/he had studied thoroughly. In relation to this, they could engage with an aspect in a community with which they want to partner, for mutual learning.

• To intervene by putting content into practice (e.g., planning, organising, controlling and leading). Students could then encourage their partners to deal with the activity or event with which they were busy more effectively. Furthermore, they had to explain and demonstrate how to execute the management tasks (planning, organising, controlling and/or leading) in relation to the activity or event in question. Students then had to apply a selected management task in their intervention for further development of the activity or event.

• To reflect on the activities and the impact of their interventions in the situations. Having followed the *cyclic process of reflective teaching and learning*, the students finally came to the stage of *reflection*. Students had to look back and see how far they had come with the project. They had to reflect on the impact of their interventions within the community at large and possibly notice their role and importance within their respective communities, and the duty that awaits them after completing their studies.

• For the purpose of presentation, students had to explain their experiences, interventions and their impacts. Furthermore, they had to reflect on what they had learned from their interventions and from the communities and to report back to the lecturer and fellow students in class.

• To submit a reflective journal for evaluation. With regard to this aspect, a PowerPoint presentation was encouraged and preferred. After the students' presentations, all journals had to be submitted. Students could work as individuals or within groups. One mark was given to the individual or the group. One or more members of a group could do the presentation.

Since this was an interdisciplinary study, in which two lecturers from separate departments were involved, the students' reports had to refer to some aspects related to one or more of these departments, namely the Department of Comparative Education and Education Management and the Department of Psychology of Education.

Data-collection instruments

The lecturers selected four reflective journals, based on the four management tasks (planning, organising, controlling, and/or leading) for MLM 622 and relevant to a common challenging school/community issue. In this respect, we identified 'academic performance – improvement of Grade 12 results' as one of the issues cutting across the designated management tasks.

The contextualisation of the common service-learning intervention was informed by an analysis of the national and provincial (Free State Province) statistics for Grade 12 final results for the period 1999-2011. Students taking MLM 622 analysed these Grade 12 pass rates and then, via the four management tasks, reflected on the lecturers' suggested approach (problem identification, intervention, results and reflection) in intervening in schools within their respective communities with very low Grade 12 pass rates.

Findings and discussion

In our findings and discussion thereof, we have attempted to summarise the students' reflections on the learning content they mastered, the experiences they gained via the interventions they had, and the observations they reported in their journals (see Table 1). Table 1 also indicates the results of their interventions and their reflections on the entire process of their engagement with the community, in this instance, the schools where they implemented their respective service-learning projects.

Table 1: Summary of four journal portfolios representing the management tasks intervention on a common issue (academic performance - Grade 12 learner results)

Task	Partner	Problem	Intervention	Results	Reflection	Theme
Planning	School	High failure rates	Planned strategies: Support team Control and monitor Catch-up programmes, afternoon classes and vocational schools Grade and subject meeting Motivational talks	Improvement on test and examination results	The need for various strategies and planning initiatives for implementation	Optimal learner support
Organising	School	Work not done as allocated Monitor learner absenteeism Disorder during running of examinations Wasting of teaching time during school re-opening periods Poverty and socio-economic issues affecting school attendance and achievement	Allocation done based on expertise Design work programme for examinations Structure in organisation of activities Organise food-gardening projects with assistance by Free State Department of Education	Enthusiasm among teachers and learners Poverty limited Order during examinations	Organisation creates order and structure Teachers to be placed according to their strengths and training, qualifications in teaching	Strategies in enhancing school improvement
Guiding/ Leading	School	Educators have limited support from subject heads, HoDs with regard to subject teaching methodology Insufficient content background of subjects No opportunities for team teaching, co-planning and information sharing	SWOT analysis Development of action plans to prioritise development activities for teachers Attend continuing professional development courses	Improvement in class teaching methodologies Confidence in transmitting content knowledge	Effective leadership capabilities needed by HoDs and subject heads Guidance needed in terms of the interpretation of subject content and pedagogical teaching methods for different subjects	Capacity-building and empowerment initiatives

Task	Partner	Problem	Intervention	Results	Reflection	Theme
Controlling	School	Lack of coordination and leadership by Head of Departments and School Management teams	Workshop duties and responsibilities Continuing professional development and in-service training	Better prepared teachers Increase in learner class attendance and participation	Immediate action needed Principal to facilitate process Opportunities to enhance professional development and personal growth of HoDs and school management teams Senior staff and SMT to execute constructive control Improvement needed in principal's control of professional management tasks	Control of professional management tasks

Furthermore, relating to Table 1, the problems they identified vary from the outcomes of high failure rate in schools, absenteeism as a result of poverty and related socio-economic issues, insufficient content background of teachers and ineffective leadership capabilities by senior teachers and the school management team.

Students' interventions in such situations reveal some themes of interest. The following **themes** were realised under each management task:

- **Planning:** Optimal learner support is emphasised as a school improvement goal to be established via the implementation of various strategies. The student indicated that the planning task, as outlined in the structure of the course, gave him a sense of what actions should be initiated in assisting the school in enhancing academic performance (Van der Westhuizen, 2010). In this regard, he indicated

  Through this exercise I'm now much more empowered to assist my school with assisting our grade twelve learners in obtaining better results. I can really say that the way in which the course is structured gave me the opportunity to see how the theoretical aspects of our module content could be applied in a practical manner.

- **Organising:** Strategies for the enhancement of school effectiveness to be organised as a means of creating opportunities for structure and order. This can be done in practice to demonstrate how teachers can organise their activities for academic success (Mullins, 2008). A female student who is part of the school management team came to the conclusion that the organising task challenged her to explore creative means in rendering support to Grade 12 teachers, but also to the staff in general. She declared:

  I started to think different about my role as a management team member in doing an intervention that became meaningful and one which I thoroughly enjoyed – now I could see the need why there should be direction and structure in my school's activities in supporting the scholastic performance of our learners.

- **Guiding/leading:** Capacity-building and empowerment initiatives are emphasised to enhance the school management team's effective leadership capabilities (Evans, 2001). A student (high school principal of 60 teachers and 1500 learners) lamented that the service-learning component of the module gave him the skills to apply theoretical aspects relating to his key job responsibilities in a person-centred and practical manner. He also alluded to the shortcomings of the rest of his management team in not providing adequate guidance and pedagogical support to the teaching staff. Responses from him were noted as follows:

  When I applied the guiding/leading management task, I came to understand that as principal I was also lacking in the execution of some of my key responsibilities. Getting good matriculation results is the main priority and as school we get benchmark against it. I had a serious discussion with my management team colleagues – we spoke about what capabilities are needed to make our learners obtain good results and how this should be done.

- **Controlling professional management staff:** The need for opportunities to structure professional development and personal growth opportunities as a means of improving the principal's control of professional management tasks (Van der Westhuizen, 2010). In this regard, a student engaging with the control task held the view that the principal needs to play a proactive role in facilitating and taking control of professional management tasks – this could encourage staff members and the school management team members to execute allocated responsibilities and tasks more constructively. The student articulated the latter position as follows:

  The principal acknowledges that things are a bit loose and that he needs to exert control over what is happening in his school. If heads of departments and subject heads have an idea of how they should manage and help us, our learners will perform better at a grade twelve level.

Conclusion

We contend that an understanding and application of service learning is detrimental in transforming school communities and gauging educators and school management teams to think differently about supporting learning and teaching. Service learning as a pedagogy of engagement could elicit reflective processes whereby educators through the acquisition of knowledge, skills and resources may facilitate the implementation of authentic community-engagement initiatives.

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