Enhancing quality of student teachers' practices through reflective journal writing during school practice[1]

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This paper explores the role of journal writing in enhancing student teachers' learning during school practice. It analyses data from 22 student teachers' journals and 23 questionnaires. The study focuses on the areas that student teachers reflected on most, the nature of their reflection and the extent to which previous experiences informed their subsequent reflection and learning. Findings showed that student teachers frequently reflected on handling indiscipline issues, procedures and outcomes of supervision, but less on their own learning. Inadequate reflection on their learning suggests that journal writing has not yet sufficiently promoted student teachers' professional growth. Generally, the examination and cultural orientation in the Ugandan society influence student teachers' journal writing. Finally, the paper proposes strategies for improving journal writing in order to enhance the potential of students learning from reflection during school practice.

Keywords: reflective practice, professional growth, journal writing, school practice, Uganda

Introduction

Reflective practice has gained recognition internationally as a crucial aspect of teacher education and continuing professional development of serving teachers (Birmingham, 2004; Dinkelman, 2003; Loughran, 2002; Mueller & Skamp, 2003; Schön, 1983; Wise, Spiegel & Bruning, 1999). Reflection fosters student teachers' learning about teaching and their roles as teachers (Collier, 1999; Loughran, 2002). It also enables teachers to develop professional knowledge in practice, and in this way develop capacity to question their taken-for-granted assumptions about practice (Dinkelman, 2003; Mueller & Skamp, 2003; Schön, 1983). Further, reflective practice enables teachers to plan their activities with foresight and with outcomes in view (Collier, 1999), and to assume responsibility for their professional growth and learning (Ellsworth, 2002). When teachers become reflective practitioners, they progress from possessing knowledge of discrete teaching skills to integrating and modifying these skills to suit particular contexts (Larrivee, 2000). Therefore, reflective practice has the potential to offer student teachers self-induction into academic and professional discourse, and the ability to fuse the two.

Reflection is considered effective when it enables teachers to generate meaning from the situation in ways that enhance understanding, so as to begin to perceive their practice setting from several perspectives (Loughran, 2002). Consequently, schools offer student teachers a wide range of opportunities on which to reflect, thereby actualising the theories they are exposed to at university (Dalrymple & Smith, 2008;

Pennefather, 2008). Reflective journals, reflective interviews, peer observation, conferences and group seminars are some of the strategies for developing reflective practice among novice teachers (Collier, 1999; Mueller & Skamp, 2003; Pennefather, 2008).

Reflective journals particularly extend and clarify student teachers' thoughts and concerns, allowing supervisors to support them in their development as learners and teachers (Collier, 1999). Larrivee (2000) observes that journal writing is a reflective process that allows teachers to chart their development and become more aware of their contribution to the experiences they encounter. She further observes that academic knowledge and technical skills are the "bricks", while reflection is the "mortar". Keeping a reflective journal ensures that student teachers set aside time for daily reflection, which fosters professional discipline. Mueller and Skamp (2003) argue that whereas teacher educators commonly include some form of journal writing in pre-service programmes to promote reflection, the extent to which such written forms of reflection impact student teachers' learning during school practice as well as in future teaching is as yet unknown.

Working in an environment characterised by uncertainty and constant change, a teacher needs to be reflective, a critical problem solver, a researcher and change agent. However, judging whether student teachers have learned and how well they have learned from reflection during school practice is one of the challenging aspects of teacher education. Although novice teachers can be helped to appreciate the value of reflection in teaching and learning, Collier (1999) argues that they do not value reflection, making it difficult for teacher educators to develop this practice. Moreover, as Collier observes, student teachers are often so engrossed in the process of teaching with the aim of passing well that they do not focus sufficiently on their own learning processes during school practice.

As part of the university-wide quality reforms, the School of Education at Makerere University in Uganda in 2005 introduced journal writing with the aim of encouraging reflection and subsequent improvement in student teachers' practices both in and outside the classroom. Additionally, it was anticipated to enhance creativity, innovation, problem solving, critical enquiry skills and lifelong learning. As reflective practitioners, student teachers would be managers of change with the right attitudes and motivation to act skilfully and ethically (Hager & Butler, 1996). Journal writing would therefore enable the documentation of experiences and thoughts, and the questioning of ideas and conclusions that signpost student teachers' learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1995; Toohey, Ryan & Hughes, 1996). Reflective journal writing is covered in one of the core courses taught to the final year BA and BSc education students. It covers the concept of reflective practice and its importance in professional development, as well as the processes of reflective practice, including journal writing. At the time of data collection journal writing was not assessed, rather it was a free writing activity which enabled student teachers to reflect on, learn from, and improve their practice.

This paper examines journal writing during school practice as one of the strategies that the School of Education adopted to improve the quality of teacher education. The School of Education offers a three-year Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree with Education in addition to a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). These programmes expose student teachers to professional courses and teaching subjects related to the secondary school curriculum. An academic year comprises two semesters of 17 weeks each with fifteen weeks of teaching, and two weeks of examinations at the end of the semester. In addition, student teachers undertake six weeks of school practice in their second and third years. School practice is examined and accounts for 10 credit units (5 credits in year 2 and 5 in year 3).

Conceptual framework

School practice offers student teachers an opportunity to apply knowledge, test theory and consequently modify their understanding (Christiansen, 2008; Schön, 1983; Toohey *et al.*, 1996). Further, school practice includes attitudinal changes, and not mere acquisition of knowledge and technical skills (Toohey *et al.*, 1996). In addition to classroom practice, participation in co-curricular activities and other administrative responsibilities provide numerous learning opportunities to student teachers during school practice. However, the nature and extent to which student teachers actually learn during school practice

is not yet clear. Given its evaluation stance, many student teachers do not attach much importance to the benefits of school practice in terms of improving professional growth. This perception could be a result of the emphasis placed on classroom observation as a means of judging student teachers' performance. Consequently, student teachers' views about school practice are limited to the aspects assessed, regardless of the overall learning experience.

Journal writing involves appreciation of the teaching and learning process and the ability to intervene purposefully and positively in teaching and learning experiences. It provides an opportunity for student teachers to think critically about what is done around them, what they are doing about it and why. It also enables supervisors to gain insight into student teachers' professional growth. Further, journal writing enables student teachers to evaluate their practices. Toohey *et al*. (1996) and Moon (1999a, 1999b) call for student teachers' assessment of their own work, arguing that self-assessment deserves a more prominent role in the overall assessment of student teachers during school practice. Student teachers learn from journal writing when they collect information, think about it, make sense of it and incorporate it into what they learned in theory. This is similar to the do-review-learn-apply cycle suggested by Watkins *et al*. (1998) Include all authors' names in the first reference. This reference is not in the reference list. This kind of learning enhances the "translation of learning theory into cycles of professional development" (Dietz, 1998:129). Dietz identifies four levels of learning, namely exploration, organization, connection and reflection. He describes the first level as "learning the territory", which involves inquiring about a specific focus in the learner's teaching, assessing information, observing students and listening to others. In the second level (organization), the learner starts to make sense of things in the workplace, such as practising routines, putting procedures in place, recognizing pedagogy and learning theories in their day-to-day practice of teaching. In the third level, (connection), learners begin to link one teaching situation to another. It is at this level of learning that the learner begins to modify and alter a plan in order to accommodate their students' needs. In the fourth level of professional learning, the learner makes informed decisions based on the ability to reflect on their practice and respond to issues emerging from this reflection.

Similarly, Boud *et al*. (1995) propose a three-stage model of learning: preparation for the experience, the experience, and then reflection on the experience. Boud *et al*. (1995) and Dietz (1998) identify reflection as a significant part of the learning cycle. While these models augment conceptualization of the nature of student teachers' reflection, this paper does not focus on the phases of student teachers' reflections per se, rather it focuses on whether such reflection demonstrates learning and improvement in their practice. In line with Larrivee (2000), the route to becoming a reflective practitioner is plagued by incremental fluctuations of irregular progress, often marked by two steps forward and one step backward. This implies that the process of reflection is not always linear or rule-governed, even for the most seasoned reflective practitioner. She adds that such inner struggles are a necessary and important stage in the reflective process.

This study was pre-empted by an observation that despite many opportunities to learn during school practice, feedback from practising schools indicated poor overall performance of student teachers, implying that the quality of learning from school practice had not improved (School of Education, 2005). Although very significant in integrating theory and practice, school practice remains one of the problematic teacher education components in terms of judging whether student teachers learn from it. It is against this background that the authors explored student teachers' journals with the intention of analysing their professional growth during school practice. The following three questions guided the analysis:

1. What areas do student teachers reflect on most?
2. What is the nature of their reflection?
3. To what extent does student teachers' journal writing reflect learning?

Methodology

The study employed a mixed methods research design, involving qualitative and quantitative approaches and was conducted among student teachers whose school practice schools were located in Northern and Central Uganda. Only undergraduate student teachers were found in these areas, therefore PGDE student teachers did not participate in this study.

The study utilised document analysis of reflective journals and questionnaires. A total of 22 journals from two cohorts of third-year student teachers (17 from 2005 and five from 2008) were analysed because only these two cohorts had undertaken journal writing since its inception in 2005. Further, the submission of journals by student teachers for this study was voluntary; therefore only 22 journals were collected. From each journal, descriptive categories related to the study questions were developed in response to the content and nature of reflection.

Due to the relatively few journals from the 2008 cohort, data for this category of student teachers was supplemented by a questionnaire. Through convenience sampling, 40 student teachers were given questionnaires and of these 23 were returned. The questionnaire sought information regarding the student teachers' conceptualization of reflective practice; the content of their journal entries; their rationale for reflecting on particular content; the importance of journal writing to beginning teachers, as well as challenges encountered during the writing of the reflective journals. In addition, the questionnaire sought their suggestions on ways in which their journal writing skills could be improved. From the questionnaire, data was obtained on the content of student teachers' journal entries and why they write on the content identified.

Data from both sets of instruments was analysed using content analysis. Specifically, the researchers used open coding of student teachers' journal entries data from questionnaires to identify key themes and patterns (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994) relating to the content student teachers reflected on most, the nature of their reflection, and the extent to which student teachers' journal writing reflected learning.

Findings

This section discusses the findings according to the key themes in the study, namely the content of reflection, nature of reflection and the extent to which student teachers learned from the journal writing process. Data on the content of reflection and the extent to which student teachers learned from journal writing was obtained from the journal entries and questionnaires, whereas that on the nature of reflection was derived from the journal entries only. This is because the nature of reflection required insight into the processes of learning, which was not captured in the questionnaires.

The content of student teachers' reflective journals

Findings from questionnaires and journal entries show that student teachers' reflection centred on their in and out-of-class experiences. The majority of the student teachers' reflection on classroom practice focused on handling pupil indiscipline, strategies for enhancing class participation and subject content, as well as use of the chalkboard. The student teachers' reflection on out-of-class issues centred on their experiences while on weekly duty and on their social interactions. Generally, student teachers' journal entries focused on challenges they encountered during school practice. Student teachers' emphasis on challenges faced relative to their success during school practice could be attributed to their uncertainty regarding the course of action in such situations. Furthermore, because school practice is an examination, it creates tension in student teachers and anything that impedes their ability to excel is treated with concern. However, further insight into why these student teachers focused more on the negative aspects of their practice would have been best captured using interviews and focus group discussions, which this study did not undertake. Table 1 summarises these findings.

Table 1: Content of student teachers' journal entries

Content	2005 Journals	2008 Journals	2008 Questionnaires
Students' indiscipline	17	5	15
The teaching and learning process	11	3	13
Supervisor-student teachers' relations	-	3	-
New ideas and strategies learned	9	3	11
Daily school activities/weekly duties	9	4	8
Happy moments	-	-	12

(Number of journals: 17 in 2005; 5 in 2008)

As shown in Table 1, students' indiscipline featured in all the journal entries whereas 'happy moments' did not, reflecting student teachers' emphasis on the problems encountered during school practice. The three major content areas of students' reflection are discussed below.

Student indiscipline

Responses from the questionnaires and journals indicated that students' indiscipline in and out of class is a major area of concern to student teachers. The following extracts from student teachers' journals illustrate this concern:

> *I was on duty and I noticed that indiscipline and time management was challenging to students. Students understood what was expected of them but went against the rules and regulations, e.g. coming late, refusing to sweep, shouting in class and fighting. I punished some by making them sweep the compound and some I took to the head teacher. However, not much action was taken and this gave me hard time.* (Student Teacher 10, Journal Entry, 2005)

> *The lesson in S. 2 really made me lose my temper ... I was writing the spelling 'Mirambo' on the board then one student angrily said, 'we know' yet the rest had asked for the spelling.* (Student Teacher 3, Journal Entry, 2008)

Emphasis on students' indiscipline may be attributed to the student teachers' anxiety about classroom management and control, given its spontaneous and highly contextual nature (Samuel, 2008). This is consistent with the observation made by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2004) that beginning teachers tend to be anxious about handling indiscipline problems. This is further complicated by the inconsistency among schools in the approaches employed in handling indiscipline. Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf and Wubbels (2001) in agreement with Samuel (2008), observe that beginning teachers often complain that when in schools they meet many problematic situations for which they are not sufficiently prepared. Similarly, Stronach, Cope, Inglis and McNally (1996) comment that reality is often felt to conflict with the version of teacher identity promoted in initial teacher training, and many of the teachers come to dismiss training as 'idealised'. They argue that training is a 'vacuum', unconnected to the reality of survival in sometimes difficult schools (Stronach *et al.*, 1996:80). Consequently, Cohen *et al.* (2004) suggest that student teachers need to find out from schools the behaviour policies and required procedures to follow when handling indiscipline.

Relationship between student teachers and supervisors

Another dominant theme in the student teachers' journals was their relationship with the supervisors during school practice, as illustrated by the following extracts from the student teachers' journals:

> *The supervisor caught us unawares (sic). Indeed she arrived at the school before any of us and requested us to organize lessons. After the lesson, the supervisor was talking to me ... I was arguing*

and the supervisor told me to keep quiet. I kept quiet but it was mistaken to be annoyance. The supervisor told me that she could no longer talk to an annoyed person. She gave me my form to sign and left. I learned to always keep quiet, take time and listen to others before speaking. (Student Teacher 3, Journal Entry, 2008).

School practice was a very stressful exercise to me especially in class. This made me think that maybe it is the reason why some lessons are boring. It made me think that supervisors if possible could hide somewhere and see how interesting our lessons are when they are not seated at the back of the class (Student Teacher 2, Journal Entry, 2008).

I discovered that supervised lessons are prepared for supervisors and when they do not come to our classroom, most of us tend to teach according to our own style (Student Teacher 5, Journal Entry, 2008).

These extracts suggest that the relationship between student teachers and their supervisors was characterised by anxiety. This may be attributed to their perception of the supervision process as assessment rather than as a learning opportunity. According to role theory, actors within a social system behave with reference to sets of expectations that they perceive are held for them by significant others (Parsons & Shils, 1968). Similarly, Cowan and Westwood (2006) observe that in assessed courses in which the learning journal features, there is risk that journal writers will write what their teachers hope to read. Although journal writing at the School of Education is a free writing activity, it is possible that student teachers are hesitant to reflect on their relationships with supervisors, given the broader cultural influences in Uganda that discourage people from commenting openly on their seniors.

The teaching and learning process

Table 1 shows that in more than half of the journals, the teaching and learning process was another major area student teachers reflected on. This was corroborated by the findings from the questionnaires. Specifically, student teachers commented on the following areas: teaching methods, students' participation in the lesson, achievement of lesson objectives, time management and handling difficult topics. The following extracts from student teachers' journals and questionnaires are illustrative:

I write about unusual experiences that I go through as I teach – the good and bad – mainly in the classroom. I think they directly affect my teaching. (Questionnaire data)

I write about time management because it is always a problem. Secondly, I always find it hard to link up the previous lesson to the day's lesson especially if the topic is totally different. (Student Teacher 14, Journal Entry, 2005)

My first lesson was interesting but I failed to make the class lively. This is because it was towards lunchtime and the students were hungry. Next time I will try to make the class lively by narrating some interesting stories and integrating teaching with note giving such that I keep students alert and lively. (Student teacher 4, Journal Entry, 2008)

I went to S.2 D for a Geography lesson. My topic was the Tennessee Valley Authority with a focus on the problems faced by the seven states. Good as they were before, the students started answering (sic) and the lesson was moving in the right direction and smoothly. However, one student asked me a serious question that: 'Sir, can you please explain to us the relationship between the conditions that were existing in those states in reference to any one area in Uganda and how best they can integrate to overcome the problems identified'. I had no immediate on-spot answer. After a moment of brain refreshment, I sensed out (sic) some areas like Katanga, Kalerwe, Kawempe, Bwaise and Kazo [These are low lying slums on the outskirts of Kampala City in Uganda] coming together to form a similar entity. Now the task was to explain the relationship between these areas and the Tennessee Valley Authority. (Student teacher 1, Journal Entry, 2008)

These extracts demonstrate these student teachers' ability to identify problems in the teaching and learning process and alternative ways of addressing them. In line with Watkins *et al.* (1998), student teachers 1 and 4 related new meaning to existing meaning, reflected on their current experiences and proposed to modify their subsequent practice.

The study further explored the student teachers' justification for reflecting on the particular areas identified. Findings from the questionnaires showed that the areas they identified for reflection were perceived to contribute towards the success of their lessons. In addition, the content they reflected on was considered crucial, as it enabled them to share with colleagues so as to improve their practice. It is evident that student teachers appreciated the role of journal writing in improving their teaching and their relationships with students and staff.

Valli (1997) identifies student learning, the instructional process and subject matter as possible areas of reflection. On the other hand, Zeichner and Liston (1996) categorise aspects teachers reflect on into five traditions, namely the academic, social efficiency, development, social reconstruction and generic traditions. Whereas Valli (1997) limits reflection to classroom practice, Zeichner and Liston (1996) suggest a variety of encounters beyond the classroom. Student teachers' reflection in this study is consistent with Zeichner and Liston's (1996) categories.

On the whole, student teachers' journal entries focused primarily on challenges that they experienced during school practice. This is consistent with the observation by Larrivee (2000) that learning experiences emanate from seemingly negative events, and that such events call for productive repositioning in which the teacher seizes the opportunity to discover the potential in a situation by looking for openings to learn. Larrivee (2000) further observes that conflict presents an opportunity to be uncovered, confrontation energy to be re-channelled, defiance a request for communication, aggression a cry for help and attention-seeking a plea for recognition.

Nature of student teachers' reflection

The nature of student teachers' reflection as portrayed in the journals varied greatly. For instance, while reflecting on students' indiscipline, some student teachers commented on their action and what they had learned, while others mentioned the problem and action, but did not document what they had learned. This is illustrated in the following extracts:

> *When the bell for ending the lesson had just rung, one student shouted that 'we go'. I became embarrassed and could not understand why this student all of a sudden had to say this. I turned back and asked who had said so. The 'backbenchers' pointed at the girl but she denied. I told her to move out but she refused. I did this three times but she continued to sit. I told the class that I would not teach again when she is still in class. Despite this, she remained seated. I then told the class that when I move out I would not come back. At this time the students were shouting at her to move out but she continued sitting. The last measure I took was to sit at the desk and keep quiet. When she saw this she moved out. This gave me a lesson (sic) ... I think it [class control strategy] does not work for higher classes.* (Student Teacher 1, Journal Entry, 2008)

> *I have been able to learn more skills on composure when a student acts out of step in the classroom. For instance, I had to control an undisciplined student in S. 5 whose objective was to disrupt and prevent others from learning as well as put a halt to the lesson that was going on. The fact that I controlled him; I gained firmness in handling indiscipline cases.* (Student Teacher 14, Journal Entry, 2005)

These two extracts depict different approaches to the reflection process. Whereas student teacher 1 mentioned the problem, her feelings, action taken and the effects, student teacher 14 mentioned the problem indirectly but did not write about the steps taken to handle it and why that control measure was adopted. Further, whereas student teacher 1 provided details about what and how learning took place, student teacher 14 did not. Although both student teachers were able to take action and reflect on it, they did not document the alternative strategies considered in addressing the problems identified. This was

common in most journal entries. This is consistent with Valli's (1997) observation that during reflection, common processes that take place include describing the situation, surfacing and questioning initial understanding and assumptions, persisting with an attitude of open-mindedness, as well as responsibility and whole-heartedness. However, analysis of the student teachers' journal entries in this study shows a discontinuity in the reflection process in terms of the do-review-learn-apply cycle as conceptualised by Watkins *et al.* (1998).

Generally, journal entries were primarily descriptive rather than analytical. In the majority of the journals, students merely described their daily experiences and activities but did not analyse these to show the lessons inferred. This is contrary to Zeichner and Liston's (1996) and Schön's (1983) argument that reflection moves beyond simply questioning whether or not the action taken is working, to understanding how it is working, and for whom. Despite these shortcomings, some student teachers were able to examine the inherent values in their practice critically. There is evidence that they gained confidence in handling particular issues. Furthermore, some student teachers were able to use knowledge learned from lectures in their reflections.

Student teachers' learning from journal writing

The study explored the extent to which student teachers' journal writing reflected learning. Student teachers' learning was inferred from the extent to which they drew from their previous experiences to inform their subsequent action. The findings in this study show that there was generally minimal learning from the journal writing process. The student teachers' journal entries did not reflect continuity, as there was hardly any linkage of issues discussed the previous days or weeks, which hindered learning from previous experiences. In all the journals, recommended action denoted the end of further reflection on a particular issue, and yet systematic reflection requires that the conclusion of one reflection experience is the inauguration of another one (Larrivee, 2000).

Further, student teachers' minimal learning from journal writing was corroborated by the questionnaire findings regarding their challenges in writing reflective journals. For instance, student teachers reported limited time to make journal writing a regular practice, fear of constant reminders of distasteful experiences in their practice, and fear of disclosing their perceived weaknesses. This is illustrated in the following extracts from the questionnaires:

Sometimes I feel too much pain especially when the incident deeply hurt me and I feel I should never reflect on it in future.

I always had fear of sharing my journal with other people because others might take it as a great weakness that is in me (sic).

Such challenges suggest that the potential of journal writing in facilitating the student teachers' learning was not fully exploited. Findings from the questionnaires show that student teachers lacked clarity about the role and process of journal writing in professional development. This was evident from their request for more clarification on these issues.

Although there was minimal learning by student teachers from the journal writing process, there was evidence in all the journals that the student teachers had learned from the school practice experience in general. Student teachers indicated that they had learned classroom control and management, the handling of students' questions, creating a participatory learning environment and relating to other teachers in the school. This is illustrated in the extracts below:

The first time I entered class, I feared but in the fourth week of school practice life changed. I was almost like a permanent (sic) teacher. I knew my class and teaching was easy. I mixed freely with the teaching and non-teaching staff. (Student Teacher 2, Journal Entry 2005)

At midday, all reports were completed apart from S. 5… so every teacher was given at least 10 reports and mark sheets to finish up … Poor me, I had never made any report in my life but had to do it for the first time. Because of this, I ended up writing reports with a red pen, and by the time the

teacher saw me doing this I was remaining with two reports to finish. (Student Teacher 1, Journal Entry, 2008)

Whereas these extracts describe the student teachers' experiences during school practice, they lack the continuity in reflection, which would foster learning. Systematic reflection enables one to reflect on what happened, why it happened, how one went about it, the feelings generated and how it can be done differently, rendering reflection a continuous learning process. Assigning new meanings to classroom situations confronted promotes the transition from surface to deep learning, thereby translating learning into cycles of professional development (Dietz, 1998; Larrivee, 2000). This leads to emancipation, which in turn enables student teachers to gradually develop a personal conception of their pedagogic role.

Conclusion

On the whole, this study shows that journal writing has the potential to promote student teachers' learning during school practice. However, this study has shown that student teachers' reflective journal writing process lacks continuity, raising questions about the quality of learning from reflection during school practice. In addition, the study has shown that the aim of using journal writing to improve creativity, innovativeness and problem-solving skills among student teachers has not yet been fully achieved.

Tapping this potential would require the School of Education to further strengthen the teaching and assessment of journal writing**.** For example, student teachers could be encouraged to keep journals throughout their teacher education programme rather than only during school practice. The teacher educators could also use these journal entries to establish the extent to which students have benefited from the reflection and how these findings can inform improvement of the teacher education programmes more generally. Further, the School of Education could re-introduce micro-teaching during the methods courses so as to provide student teachers with more opportunities to develop their reflective practice skills and to appreciate the realities of school settings prior to their actual school practice.

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