

## **“Don’t walk the plank, build a bridge!” Helping students span the divide between University and the Workplace.**

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### **Abstract**

The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia offers a course that provides students with an opportunity to be involved in an experience of professional work. This course, *Field Placement*, has been designed to provide a structured framework within which students are encouraged, and expected, to develop independence and professional attributes. It provides opportunities for the students to articulate their learning and present a developed personal framework of integrated academic knowledge and practice knowledge. This paper attempts to address the questions raised in Professor Hövels background paper and takes the position that knowledge development is limited without action but for active knowledge development to occur it is essential to understand and foster the social learning relationships. Particular attention is focussed on developing a greater understanding of how to best create opportunities and relationships that will assist students to walk confidently across the bridge as a professional contributing productively within the community.

### **Introduction**

In his preparatory background paper for this conference, Professor Hövels (2003) canvases the current state of our knowledge about the integration of learning and work in higher education. He asks us to concentrate on the underlying principles, explanations and consequences of integrating learning and work and to reflect upon three key questions that he believes will illuminate our understanding of what is actually occurring in higher education and in industry. He asks us to explore

- What forms such programs take in different national contexts and to what extent these are demand led;
- What are the consequences of such programs for all of the potential stakeholders, both individual and institutional; and
- What opportunities educational establishments have to create proactively a knowledge economy that addresses the need for combinations of learning and work?

I am approaching this from the point of view of an academic (my primary qualifications are in social work) who has become responsible for the design and implementation of a field studies practicum program for students in The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. The program was a collaborative idea developed by the Head of the School, Professor Ross Homel, and I in response to the loss of an action-based police-training program that had previously given the School a reputation for having a sound base in practice as well as in theory. We had broadened our undergraduate program so that it became a Bachelor’s degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice. We found ourselves preparing professionals who were to work in numerous different agencies throughout Australia including law enforcement, correctional services, other areas of the criminal justice system, compliance and risk-management, and various other human service and welfare organisations. It was clear that the preparation should have a sound basis in practice as well as in theory.

The *Field Placement* program involves 50 students per year who are placed in approximately 40 selected institutions under the supervision of practitioners in the field. Academic staff

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Paul Stevenson who has spent time listening and discussing with me many of the program issues highlighted in this paper.

members augment this supervision and the students' learning is structured according to a constantly renegotiable learning plan. Students attend the placement organisation for one day per week for a semester in their final year and keep a detailed personal journal that records their learning experiences and their responses to them. Every student also attends four three-hour compulsory workshop seminars at the University, which focuses on the practicum experience during the semester. In the semester prior to the practicum itself, students are also required to attend three two-hour compulsory workshop seminars that focus them on the particular skills and cognitive processes essential for achieving graduate employment. The topics address job searching, resume writing, and developing skills for the interviewing process. Group sizes for both sets of seminars are generally between fifteen and thirty students per semester.

We find the process of reflecting on action is very important to the learning reported by the students. For this reason we ask that students negotiate, and when necessary renegotiate, with the agency and the university a learning plan that specifies the specific learning objectives they want to achieve during their practicum. Students are also asked to maintain a thoughtful reflective journal throughout the semester that concentrates on the practicum learning. The spaced nature of the placement days enhances opportunities for reflection, discussion with peers, and discussion with university staff. The group workshops are also very important for the sharing of experiences, the telling of anecdotes about personal learning and about problems encountered. These sessions are client (student) centred and task focussed: students are expected to provide detailed responses at the feeling level to the practicum. They are then encouraged to objectify these experiences in discussion with their peers.

Before describing the impact of the curriculum in this program it is necessary to explore a number of value assumptions that seem to permeate the literature in this field as well as the discourses occurring between those involved in the design and implementation of work based programs. Firstly, as Professor Hövels (2003) indicates, the development of work-placement programs in higher education tends to be demand led. Often as Alderman and Milne (1998) and Garrick and Kirkpatrick (1998) note this demand comes from institutions, industry and employing authorities. Because those making the demands are the potential employers of graduates, and also sometimes even benevolent benefactors of our tertiary institutions, we academics tend to listen to them very attentively. I am not suggesting that this is at all inappropriate, but sometimes we can find ourselves accepting rhetoric and value assumptions we might otherwise find somewhat one-sided. As Professor Hövels indicates, we must take into account the fact that our students need a wider perspective and we will also increasingly have to offer programs that can cater for new groups, particularly if we are to serve those from non-academic backgrounds.

Paradoxically, there is also a need expressed by employers for the vocational preparation we offer to be even more local and context-bound than it already is. A recent study conducted by the Griffith Institute of Higher Education (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, & Cragolini, 2002, , 2004) indicated that employers wanted graduates who had a more practical (they expressed it as 'less theoretical') attitude to their professional work. Their demand for what have become known as 'generic' skills (i.e. the ability to communicate with others, the ability to understand instructions, the ability to solve problems, and so on) is now tending to pressure academic institutions to offer what is essentially training rather than educational programs. The demand is for skills (the ability to do) and these are seen as more important than knowledge (the ability to talk and write about doing).

Many academics tend to find this pressure almost offensive and anti-intellectual. They are threatened by descriptions of higher education institutions as 'ivory towers' and often tend to see work-placement programs as a necessary evil. Students, however, tend to see things a little differently. When the placements work as planned, they often refer to them as the most significant part of their undergraduate program. Although the view of both students and prospective employers is thoroughly valid, I think it is a mistake for academic institutions to abandon their educational values and to succumb to a view which assumes that specific jobs pre-exist and that it is their task to fit individuals to them. It also seems to me that the demand pressures from the workplace for identikit employees who 'fit in' should not become the grounds on which we argue that workplace experiences are educationally desirable. Nor should the fact that such programs (particularly when they involve unpaid work) be seen as a happy consequence of the application of economic rationalism. If we are to properly address the questions raised by Professor Hövels we need firstly to articulate the value assumptions from which we are working when we design, implement and advocate workplace based education programs.

### **Work and Learning Programs in Australasia**

Despite the fact that workplace based learning appears to meet a number of pressing needs from various stakeholders, and as such is demand driven, we need to be careful not to assume that all such experiences are necessarily a good thing. The placement experience is very different for each student and what may suit one may not suit another; some placements simply do not work at all. Some Australian research, notably that of Jane Maidment, Janet Patford and Gwen Ellis, indicates that many workplace-learning experiences may be for better or for worse.

Patford (2000) collected data on fourth year students at the University of Tasmania undertaking work placements in a number of different of urban and rural human service settings. She attempted to identify what types of learning experiences students deemed to be significant and also drew conclusions about how students develop what she calls 'a sense of professional competence'. She outlines several categories of learning experiences that she bases on the students' reflections of their own ability to function in various contexts during the practicum. She compares and contrasts these and concludes that the most important fundamental problem that confronts the practicum is the burden carried by the supervisory relationship. Patford draws attention to the fact that tensions in the supervisory relationship are predictable but that little is known about the way students cope with interpersonal tensions. She draws particular attention to ambiguities that can occur in the power relationship. For example, the fact that the supervisor's role of assessor is often seen as being in conflict with the student's need for support means that the student experiences ensuing tensions and consequent anxiety – sometimes they feel that a request for help is an admission of incompetence.

Patford (2000) also notes that supervisors themselves are not always well supported and often receive very little extra training or resources either from the employing body or the educational institution. This claim confirms that of Brodie (1993) who reports similar findings after studying the content of supervision sessions. Patford (2000) notes too that the professions seem to be uncertain about what students can be expected to learn on practicum: not only what they learn, but how they learn. She notes that teaching strategies need to become a part of supervisors' competencies and performance standards. She also lists a number of 'lessons' reported by the students as being 'learnt' from particular experiences

during field placement: for example, students report learning to operate solo, learning to work under organisational constraints, and in certain cases, students' reappraise their commitment to the profession. We might add that whether or not deciding to opt out of the profession is a positive or a negative learning experience is a moot point.

A broad survey of the literature on social work field placement programs in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America was conducted five years ago by two researchers, Anna Spencer and Catherine McDonald, located at the Queensland University of Technology. They noted that the literature '...explicitly acknowledges that professional practice occurs within organisational contexts and that these contexts are diverse in terms of purpose, structure, size, legal identity, goals, culture, rules and service delivery systems' (Spencer & McDonald, 1998, p15): they cite the work of Jones and May (1992) and O'Connor, Wilson and Setterlund (1996), also working in Queensland, as evidence. However, they also point out that lines of accountability and mechanisms of management vary significantly across agencies and a range of managerial and often managerialist strategies results in a situation in which practice may be defined and structured in quite different ways than is assumed in the professional literature. They claim that there is very little discussion in either the Australian, American or British literature about the operation of field education at the organisational level and how the organisation impacts upon the field education.

Noting that a student is often not allocated to a single worker but rather to a work team or to a section of an organisation, Spencer and McDonald (1998) pose a number of questions that appear to remain unexplored and unanswered in the literature and it is these questions that my current research is attempting to address. They ask: 'Who is the best person/s to facilitate the learning objectives for this particular student at this particular time, given the workload and tasks, skills mix, and demands on the organisation? Where can a student best be utilised? What impact will this placement have on the work-team and the organisation? How might undertaking a student assist in professional development goals that managers have for staff? What are the benefits and costs to management associated with student placements? What resources are needed to physically accommodate a student? What parties should be involved in the negotiation of placements? The field education literature, however, gives the impression that the only parties involved and who need to be involved are the student, the prospective supervisor, and the university' (Spencer & McDonald, 1998, p15). A review of the literature since their work indicates that this has not changed over the last five years.

My own work also raises the question of whether or not field placement experiences are necessarily constructive in all cases. I am interested in exploring the kinds of interventions the educational institution can make that will ensure that what otherwise would have been negative learnings are turned to the student's advantage. Jane Maidment (2003) considers some of the problems faced by students at Deakin University in Victoria as they complete field placements across a number of different human service organisations. She concentrates on the factors that tend to induce student stress and pays particular attention to stress that has what she regards as deleterious effects on the learning of the student. She outlines a number of causal factors from students' own reports of their field experience: these include student reports of verbal abuse from clients and inadequate '...access to preparation and integration material that was less about what they might do on placement and more about the processes of the learning and managing stress in a contemporary agency' (p56).

Maidment also considers the stresses and conflicting demands placed on supervisors by agency management on the one hand and by the educational institution on the other. Often

supervisors are unable to meet all of the demands and, at best, feel unappreciated and at worst exploited. Such feelings often result in inadequate or even negative modelling of the vocational role. Maidment draws attention to the fact that ‘...economic rationalism and the accompanying managerialist approach...has impacted greatly on the provision of student field learning’ (2003, p54). Hughes (1998), who also works in an Australian context, laments the difficulties of locating placements within agency environments that are conducive to constructive student learning. Maidment comments that this is due to feelings of disempowerment on the part of supervisors and colleagues who are working with inadequate resources and that inadequately planned managerialist decisions that put supervisors and colleagues under unnecessary stress have the greatest potential for negative learning on the part of the student.

The findings outlined above support the claims made by Slocombe (1993) that there is still much more that can be learned about field-based education for professionals and how it can become more important as a base for learning. Slocombe surveyed a number of field educators over a period of years and found that the lack of intrinsic rewards for supervisors meant that many of them felt ignored and even exploited. This, she claims, often leads to questionable commitments and effectiveness of supervisors and to inadequate or even inappropriate learning on the part of students. All of this tends to support that the practicum experience may be ‘for better or for worse’.

There is one more issue that is problematic in any consideration of field placements, particularly when vocational training arguments are used to support the practice. Because the very nature of the experience needs to be a lot more than a superficial introduction to the workplace (the student is invited in as a peer rather than as a visitor) it needs to be both intensive and extensive over a reasonable time period. This means that even when students are placed in agencies or institutions they might aspire to work in, only a very few placements are possible in a tertiary education program. In the case of the program for which I am responsible each student is only able to have one intensive work placement experience. This raises the issue of whether or not students can be expected to acquire what have been termed ‘generic skills’, which are transferable across many potential vocational contexts in such a workplace-based experience. Or, to put the question in another way, which does not assume the existence of reified ‘skills’: can students learn enough about themselves, their strengths and capacities, and even their weaknesses for the narrowly contextualised experience to be useful across a wide range of potential careers? Before we can answer this, we must first ask another question: what kind of world of work are we attempting to prepare these professionals for?

New Zealanders Parker and Inkson (1999) note that the concept of career is currently undergoing a major change. Careers constructed on a logic of loyalty to an employing organisation and the ascent of a hierarchy of status and responsibility, or those constructed on a logic of increasing competence within a specific occupational frame of reference have been referred to as either bureaucratic or professional. Agencies have come to rely on predictable career behaviour built about stable organisational and occupational institutions to ensure a stable workforce. However, in recent years restructuring, downsizing, outsourcing, flexible forms of organisation, and the rapid growth of new technology have resulted in the obsolescence of many occupations and the shifting of occupational boundaries. New careers are becoming inter-organisational and even inter-occupational.

Individuals develop their career assets through cumulative learning across organisations: this reflects a major shift from long-term to short-term commitments from non-contingent to contingent rewards and towards individual ownership of the career and temporary opportunistic alliances with employing organisations. From this perspective, organisations are resources for people and career actors reverse the assumptions on which much human resource management is grounded. They argue that ‘...managers whose job tends to be to ‘fill the gaps, typically see career mobility...as a *problem to be solved*’ (p8). But they note that such mobility should be seen as an *opportunity to be grasped*, so that organisations can build their competencies in the long term. Managers are becoming promoters of new, flexible types of employment relationships where the job becomes tailored to the professional’s expertise rather than vice versa. In fact, they note that as professionals become more and more expert ‘...in a single organisation’s competencies and idiosyncrasies, they may progressively disequip themselves for alternative employment’ (p4). We appear to be moving into a century where the idiosyncratic ability and potential of each individual to deal with a range of career situations is becoming increasingly important for the emerging society. Increasingly, the social capital of any community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be dependent upon the individual capacities of individual people.

This brings us to an important question about the values that underlie our educational endeavours. To whom do we owe our first allegiance – our own educational institutions, the industries and agencies for whom we are preparing future professional employees, the society at large, or the individuals who at the moment happen to be our students?

In their survey of the professional field education literature, Spencer and McDonald claim that ‘while there are a number of articles...discussing assessment and evaluation criteria, fundamental pedagogical issues such as what it is that students learn on placement, or the *process* of learning are largely missing’ (1998, p16). Another observation is that there is another key omission from the literature that is perhaps even more important: the voice of the students. They note that ‘students are talked about rather than talked with (and)...are the objects rather than active participants in the design of the field education’ (p14). The remainder of this paper is an attempt to outline some of the ways in which this imbalance can be redressed. It will also outline some basic values that we at Griffith University believe workplace based programs need to adopt if they are to be effective.

I must at this point acknowledge two key facts about myself and my own value assumptions. Firstly, I do have a vested interest in the success of the program I am responsible for. It occupies my time and attention, and of course, I know I am likely to portray it in as favourable light as possible. Secondly, because as I have already noted my professional training and background are in the field of social work, I have a strong investment in the concept of ‘empowerment of the client’ as a prime professional value. It is perhaps because of this that I place such a high value on the experience of each individual student and upon his or her capacity to act and to grow.

Empowerment occurs in a social context. That social context is always one of *relationships*. Our task as experience providers is to extend each individual learner’s social context beyond limits that have so far been experienced. Specific work related *skills* are not the issue – it is the ability to act effectively in the specific social context of the workplace that matters. It is our contention that *this* is the learning that becomes transferable: students learn how to learn by learning how to act. They need to be able to act in order to be able to learn. Thus, a

program's structure must be developed so that it provides a framework in which opportunities for learning (empowerment) can arise.

### **The Bridge**

Such a *structure* needs to be designed so that the relationships are clearly defined. The student may still have to guess what the expectations of others are but this needs to initially occur in a safe and structured situation.

One of my students had an excellent supervisor who set the student the task of evaluating a new system of assessing and intervening in the treatment of juvenile justice clients. The supervisor who had already completed some postgraduate studies in criminology had taken an applied theoretical framework of intervention founded upon justice principles rather than welfare principles and introduced it into the agency. The professional staff group in the agency were educated in, and had been operating on, either a welfare model or a social justice model of intervention. The supervisor who had asked for the program evaluation had indicated that the research section of his government department would be interested in the student's findings because the intention was to implement a revised version of the program in other offices throughout the state. In addition, because she was working so well, the supervisor had indicated that there would be an employment opportunity for her when she had completed her studies.

The supervisor then left on holidays leaving the student to continue her evaluation with the rest of the staff. She quickly found that the staff group could not see the relevance of the innovation and were refusing to work with it. Caught in this dilemma between meeting her supervisor's expectations and maintaining a constructive professional relationship with the staff, she returned to the University for help. My task was to help her see beyond her own personal investment in the situation (the opportunity for employment) and consider her professional responsibilities to the whole staff group, including her supervisor, and the organisation's client group. She needed to be able to tease out three philosophical frameworks that were in conflict and to be able to consider these with some objectivity in her evaluation report. Her evaluation clearly needed to consider the issue of in-service training for the staff group before anything could be done about implementation of the intervention program. I also had to help her face her own anxiety that her report would not be able to please all of the stakeholders and that these relationship issues needed to be addressed before she could move on. I needed to reassure her that I would be available to assist her in the wording of any difficult sections of the report, but that the interpersonal tasks were up to her.

In our program the students are given an opportunity to create their own learning through the decisions that they make. This means that a prime focus of the experience needs to be the offering of implicit choices and the program needs to be congruent with this in all respects. A principle of procedure for the program that covers this might be 'that one experience is better than another in a workplace learning environment if it places the learner in a position where a real choice *must* be made and the consequences of that choice carried as a responsibility by the learner'. Thus the structure will provide, as far as is possible, challenges that stretch and extend the learner so that he or she can act in the social world in ways that have not yet been attempted. The effect of providing an environment that continually demands choice inevitably demands that a student will expand his or her worldview. At the same time, a student's own experience of success or failure will increase the depth and definition of his or her self-concept. There is a direct relation between the making of choices and ego strength.

All of this occurs within a social context: the students are learning about themselves in relation to others. Some of these learnings may appear to be quite mundane: learning how to use different language registers (both spoken and written) in order to be understood by a particular individual or audience. Learning that behaviour itself can be regarded as a form of non-verbal language which communicates in ways that are often more obvious to the receiver than they are to the sender, and there are many others. These learnings often mean that a student must revise drastically his or her preconceptions of what the workplace experience will provide.

One of our students, who was allocated to a criminal intelligence agency actually spent the first nine weeks of the placement greatly disappointed that he was not given a black hat and coat and sent out on dangerous missions. He then became engaged in a research project that examined the potential for drugs, used to manage behaviour in children, to have injurious effects later in life. His change from high expectations to disappointment and then back to a realistic excitement and commitment to his task is typical of the emotional responses many of our students have to the placement experience.

In an unpublished study we completed a few years ago we found that the expectations of students were actually exceeded by the reality. Ninety four per cent of students commenced the placement with extraordinarily high expectations (on a Likert scale of 1-7 the expectation was at a level 6 or above), but in a post test their level of satisfaction was even higher. However, our own observations, and the student's reports, indicate that the journey is not quite as simple as these results suggest. In the course of the experience not only did the levels of expectation fluctuate dramatically, but at the end, the actuality of the experience, while satisfying, was often totally unexpected by the student.

Our experience indicates that by exploiting what are first perceived as negative experiences for the student can lead to opportunities to explore the learning that is occurring. Real learning depends on 'problematizing' the negative experience and then working collaboratively on it. This means that there should be more than one supervisory figure to whom the student can turn: as a bare minimum there needs to be one supervisor from the workplace and another from the educational institution.

Spencer and McDonald's (1998) request that we should identify *what* is learned in a workplace based practicum is difficult to answer. The learnings are multiple and interconnected and seem to all share the fact that they are learnings about the self (i.e. one's identity and capacity) in social contexts. We would assert that these learnings about the self are not so much 'transferable' to the contexts as they are deep and fundamental learnings about how to go about solving problems in different social contexts. We tend to be in philosophical agreement with the interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz when he emphasises the fine-grained nature of contextual learning and research. He contends that the kind of theory (or propositional knowledge) that is learned is grounded in empirical experience (observation) and couched in a language that is both close to the learner's experience (in that it is as empirical and jargon-free as possible) and distant (in that it is at least to some extent 'generalisable') at the same time. In his words '...theoretical formulations (should) hover so low over the interpretations they govern that they don't make much sense or hold much interest apart from them' (cited in Schwandt, 1994, p125).



Professor Hövels in his paper notes the importance of metacognition in any discussion about workplace learning; he quotes Weehuizen (2000) who argues that ‘...the essential question is *how to handle knowledge*: knowledge about knowledge (Hövels, 2003, p2) Perhaps it is not the ‘what’ is learned that is important, maybe it is the ‘how’. If we are to specify the *curriculum* of a program that is based on workplace experience, we cannot do so by actually specifying particular content – generic or not. The kinds of curriculum formulations that make the most sense are action-based: they are best thought of as a set of ‘principles of procedure’ that are specified for all of the agents involved in the student’s learning experience. As such they amount to statements of values. Lawrence Stenhouse in his discussion of process models of curriculum cites the work of James Rath who developed such a set of principles for the teaching of primary school children (Stenhouse, 1975, pp86-87). The principles are couched so that they become criteria for determining whether one activity is ‘better’ than another in an educational setting. They all have an interesting stem: ‘All other things being equal, one activity is better than another if it ...’.

What follows are some principles I find worthwhile as I continue to work with students designing learning experiences with them. The first, which emphasises choice, has already been offered earlier in this paper; the rest are an incomplete list in no particular order with some more tentative than others.

All other things being equal one activity is better than another if it:

- Permits students to make informed choices and to reflect on the consequences of their choices.
- Involves the student in a real situation with a real problem that challenges their intellectual processes with problem solving, either personal or social.
- Demands that the student engage in the risks of attempting something new.
- Provides opportunities for students to engage in a range of relationships that either support or challenge their worldview and their current and future professional frame of reference.

This approach of drawing out the values that underlie action in the learning encounter can be extended, and principles of procedure can be developed not only for the program designers but for the academic supervisors, the workplace supervisors, and the students as well. The list of questions that Spencer and McDonald (1998) saw as so important for placement organisations and agencies are best answered in the same way.

As can be seen, the structure of the program requires action, which in turn creates learning. The structure includes interaction with others, so that the richness of data available for reflection is enhanced. The active learning provides a way of ensuring reflection is a part of social learning (Frank 1997) and Habermas (1973) advocated therapeutic dialogue (i.e. talking with others) as the way to ensure higher quality reflection because self-reflection alone can be misleading. Understanding the complex interactive relationships between the social aspects of the active learning and the process of effective reflection for the development of new concepts about problematic situations has been an important consideration in the development of our program.

Action is learning when a problem is being addressed and problems of communication in professional relationships are associated with the implicit rules under which we operate. Dick and Dalmau (1992) coined the term ‘undiscussability’ to refer to some topics as a barrier to successful communication. Their work in organisational and professional development has

led them to observe that it is ‘undiscussable’ to reveal gaps observed in what others say they believe and what is observable in what they do. Another observation is related to the fact that it is rare for people to discuss assumptions about the motives of others and any associated feelings. This is where the structure of the program enables appropriate permissions to be given to the learner so that he or she can experiment with new responses. As convenor of the program I act with the protective authority of the University when I support the students in their risk-taking. Similarly, the workplace supervisors need to be able to see that this permission granting role is also there in the institutional setting.

## Conclusion

I believe that education took a wrong turn when knowledge became reified and made into an objective ‘thing’ that can exist apart from the knower. Knowledge without action is not knowledge at all – after all, even thought could be regarded as mental ‘activity’, which exists only in a temporal dimension. Relationships are the very foundation of learning and are central to self-perception and the acquisition of competencies. There is a certain timelessness about the central relationships in a learning environment. Education as we know it is a relatively recent invention but pedagogy – the relationship between the master (in the original sense of ‘one who has mastery’) and student – must be preserved at all costs, and anything that impedes it (be it assessment, inappropriate power relationships or narrow preconceptions) must take a lower priority. Paradoxically, when high value is placed on choice, opportunity, ego strength and reflection the benefit flows not merely to individuals but to the society at large and the real social capital of the community benefits. What ultimately stands the test of time is the collaborative relationship in which two (or more) individuals act together to make the world a better place.

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