

Enhancing the Study of Art and Community through Service-Learning

Sophia Suk-mun LAW
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Abstract

Background: In his discussion of higher education, Fred Newman (1985) explained that university graduates should “have a profound understanding of what it means to be a citizen”, and be “capable of an interest larger than self-interest” (p. xiv). “Art and Well Being”, an elective course offered by the Department of Visual Studies at Lingnan, studies the impact of art on the well-being of individuals and communities alike. Many of the theories and hypotheses taught in class are not only applicable in real-world situations, but also can only be envisaged by allowing students to engage in genuine creativities. A Service-learning Research Scheme (SLRS) is integrated into the course to enhance students’ study of art and community.

Aims: To explore the impact of a specially structured SLRS integrated into a university elective course called “Art and Well Being”.

Sample: Nine students enrolled in the scheme to serve two specific target groups of people with special needs in expression and communication. Trained and guided by professional artists, the students designed and conducted a series of creative workshops to meet the needs of their service clients.

Method: Because the scheme only involved nine students, the evaluation focused on qualitative measures, including students’ self-reflection from their presentations and reflective essay combined with feedback from the artists and organizations involved, and raw data from the pre- and post- questionnaires designed by the Office of service-learning.

Results: Service-learning is an essential component of the course “Art and Well Being” with both teaching and learning benefits.

Conclusion: A well-structured SLRS could provide “transformative learning experiences” to the students involved by making the knowledge that they have learned in class relevant to their lives.

Keywords: SLRS (Service-Learning Research Scheme), art, community

服務研習對藝術與社會教育的作用

羅淑敏
香港嶺南大學

摘要

*背景：*大學生對公民的意義應有深切而有大大於利己的理解。嶺南大學視覺研究系選修科〈藝術與身心康健〉探討的是藝術對個人與群體的關係，當中很多理論不但能夠實踐，並需要真正的體驗才能確切明白，課程引入服務研習計劃加強學生的學習。

*目的：*探討服務研習計劃對大學選修所起的作用。

*調查對象：*九名學生為兩組在表達和溝通上有特殊需要的社群設計連串創作工作坊。

*調查方法：*質性分析包括學生在報告和論文中的反思，指導藝術家和合作機構的評價，服務前後的問卷調查。

*調查結果：*服務研習計劃對本選修科的學習有積極作用。

*總結：*策劃周詳的服務研習計劃能夠提供“轉化性的學習經驗”，將學生的知識與生活聯繫起來。

關鍵詞：專題服務研習計劃、藝術、社群

Wilson Woodrow (1902), former president of Princeton University, once commented that “it is not learning but the spirit of service that will give a college a place in the annals of the nation” (p. 270). This coheres with Lingnan University’s motto - “Education for Service”. Service-learning is an important component of higher education that is best integrated into the curriculum as an enhancement (Jun & Ma, 2009). This not only provides college students with opportunities for actual encounters with the phenomena being studied, but also the chance to use what they learn to benefit others. Through the actual application of theories in real-world settings, students find learning more relevant and connected to life and society, thus promoting their sense of social engagement and responsibility.

In fact, some subjects involve knowledge that cannot be fully understood without an experiential learning component. The “Art and Well Being” elective course offered by the Department of Visual Studies at Lingnan University is one example of this. The course examines the impact of art on the well-being of both individuals and communities¹. Many of the theories and hypotheses taught in class are not only applicable in real-world situations, but also can only be envisaged by allowing students to engage in genuine creativities. A Service-learning Research Scheme (SLRS) has been integrated into the course since 2009/10 academic year. This paper reports the objectives, structure, and the outcomes of this scheme.

Many scholars and theories have suggested that art-making is an innate behavior unique to human beings (Alland, 1977; Bateson, 1973; Dissanayake, 1995). Art, as a means of expression and communication, applies to all ages and genders independent of language or intellectual ability and

has a great impact on the well-being of individuals and communities alike. The fundamental theoretical basis of art and well-being is art’s intrinsic nature as a language written in images for the purpose of communication and expression. Theories from studies of the anthropology and philosophy of art have suggested that art has a biological origin in human evolution. Alexander Alland (1977) argued that art evolved as a kind of exploratory play that demands precise visual acuity and a high level of cognitive development. This cognitive development, in particular, is believed to have equipped us with a highly developed capacity for pattern recognition and symbol association, which are crucial for the emergence of written language. Indeed, many ancient scripts, such as ancient Chinese characters and Egyptian hieroglyphics, are examples of pictorial language. Philosopher Susanne Langer (1979) pointed out that the ability to represent and transform meaning for the purpose of communication in the form of language is absolutely exclusive to humans.

Along the same line of thought, Ellen Dissanayake (1992) also conceived of art as innately human. She redefined art, as found in rituals, as the unique human behavior of ‘making special’.

Hence ‘special’ can indicate that not only are our senses arrested by a thing’s perceptual strikingness (specialness), and our intellects intrigued and stimulated by its uncommonness (specialness), but that we make something special because doing so gives us a way of expressing its positive emotional valence for us and the ways in which we accomplish this specialness not only reflect but give unusual or special gratification and pleasure (aesthetic) (p. 54).

According to Dissanayake, art-making as the behaviour of making something special has been evolutionarily, socially and culturally important. She contended that the rituals involved various forms of artistic activity “unite participants with one another, performers with their audience, the community as a whole” (Dissanayake, 1992, p. 24). This powerful ability to create something that helps people engage with one another and its nature of inducing positive emotional valence make art an effective means of uniting a community and empowering an individual’s strength.

In addition to the humanities, modern science also sheds light on our understanding of art’s affect on well-being. Neuroscientists have investigated the ways in which art stimulates the human brain. In their study of the mirror neuron system (MNS), researchers Freeberg and Gallese (2007) found that the MNS was activated in the brain of an observer viewing a work of art, affirmation that “empathic responses to works of art are not purely introspective, intuitive or metaphysical but a precise and definable basis in the brain” (p. 199). Artistic creativity is an experience in which the senses are manifested in actions. In the art-making process, the maker experiences a dynamic intimacy with his/her medium through which images emerge. Emotion and conceptual thoughts are transformed through the senses and kinetic energy into colours, lines, forms, light and dark, patterns and rhythms. In addition, art is full of imagination and fantasy in its own right, which enables the creative process to be one that is unrestrained, personal, and naturally accompanied by pleasure and enjoyment. Art therapist Frances Anderson (1992) described artistic creativity as an “ongoing successful experience” (p. 34). The engrossing sense of satisfaction induced by art-making has been

proven to be greatly beneficial to trauma survivors on both physical and psychological levels (van der Kolk, 2006).

The “Art and Well Being” course introduces cross-disciplinary knowledge related to art and creativity, including the latest neuroscientific findings regarding our visual mechanism and memories, theories of art therapy, and those of cognitive psychology. The majority of these theories involve the dynamics of spontaneous creativity such as the flow of the creative process and the engrossing stimulation of different senses through interaction with creative media. These dynamics can only be realized through actual participation. To enhance students’ learning in this subject, a SLRS (Service-Learning Research Scheme) was first integrated into the course in spring 2010.

The “Art and Well Being” SLRS

The Office of Service-Learning at Lingnan has run various SLRSs with faculty from different departments since 2006. In 2009, the first SLRS was integrated into an art course in the Department of Visual Studies. It served as a pilot study of its effects on the “Art and Well Being” course for which an experiential component was believed to have been essential. The overall objectives of the scheme were to:

1. enrich students’ basic understanding of the biological nature of art and the practices of art facilitation;
2. enhance students’ problem-solving, social competence, communication and organizational skills; and
3. promote the spirit of mutual assistance and develop a sense of commitment to the community.

To ensure that the students were able to actualize theories in practices, it was important to emphasize that the services in this course were distinct from ordinary creative leisure activities. They were designed as well-structured artistic activities that facilitated expression and communication for people in need. Hence, the creation of appropriate partnerships, including artists and NGOs, was considered very important. It was crucial to select service target groups with specific objectives to fulfill.

To ensure a success of the SLRS, training on art facilitation for students involved prior the services were essential. The structure of the scheme consisted of twelve hours of training sessions led by professional artists and twelve hours of service sessions given to specific clients. The students, under the guidance of a professional artist, were required to design, organize and run a series of tailor-made creativities for their clients. During the course of the scheme, the students were required to complete pre- and post- questionnaires designed by the Office of Service-Learning to all students undertaking service-learning in general, conduct two reflective consultation reports and one final presentation, and write an individual reflective essay.

Upon completion of the scheme, the students were expected to have attained six intended learning outcomes.

ILO1: A new experience and learning dynamic.

ILO2: The actualization and better understanding of art as a language for expression and communication.

ILO3: The ability to apply knowledge of art and well-being in a real-world setting.

ILO4: The acquisition of better flexibility and problem-solving skills.

ILO5: A greater sense of social awareness and commitment.

ILO6: Improved social communication skills and team spirit.

Nine students enrolled in the first scheme serving two selected target groups. After three training sessions, two teams were formed, each with a leader selected from among the students. Five students in Team A served 16 to 18 intellectually disabled adults² who live in the Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council Harmony Manor. As these adults have very poor language and communication skills, the specific goal of the team was to let students experience the role of art in facilitating expression and communication among these people. Another four students in Team B served 15 to 20 South Asian primary school children at the Hong Kong Industrial Evangelistic Fellowship Wai Kwan Land. These children are the ethnic minorities and they speak very little English. The specific goal of this team was to allow the students to experience the role of art in enhancing self-identity and fostering community growth among these children.

Each team was supervised by a professional artist who was experienced in art facilitation. The students were expected to apply theories of art and well-being in addition to the skills they had gained from the training to conduct four series of creative workshops. They had to design each workshop by proposing a detailed session-plan that had been vetted by the artist beforehand, prepare all the materials, lead the workshop, and conduct post-session reviews to improve the planning of following workshops. Team A focused on painting such as sculptural drawing and circle painting, whereas Team B used more diverse media including painting, games, singing and drama.

Evaluations and Outcomes

Because the scheme only involved nine students, the evaluation focused on qualitative measures, including students' self-reflection from their presentations and reflective essay combined with feedback from the artists and organizations involved and raw data from the pre- and post-questionnaires designed by the Office of Service-Learning. The questionnaires were structured to indicate skill change in the following domains: subject-related knowledge, communication skills, organization skills, social competence, and problem-solving skills. The questionnaires ended with six open questions.³ Raw data from the questionnaires indicated that the majority of the students gained knowledge and ability through the scheme, especially in skills building. All of the students expressed interest in continuing their service with the agency and indicated that they intended to serve the community in the future. In regards to whether the service had enhanced their understanding of course materials and whether the scheme had met their expectations, the majority of the students gave an affirmative answer.

Because this was the first SLRS to be integrated into the course, it acted as a pilot study of how essential the scheme was to the course, how best to structure a scheme that successfully balanced the service workload and course requirements, and how to attain the best benefit to the students' learning. Although the scheme could improve its assessments and evaluations, it has certainly indicated that service-learning is an essential component of the course with both teaching and learning benefits. What follows is a descriptive report on the details of the two services and the outcomes of the scheme.

Team A

None of the five students in Group A had had any previous experience with intellectually disabled people. They admitted that they were initially scared by some of the obsessive compulsive behaviours exhibited by their clients, and that they found it difficult to communicate in the beginning. Having learned that human beings process verbal, textual, and visual material using two different mechanisms, and that the iconic communication serves what language is unsuited (Bateson, 1973), the students designed a series of creativities, from drawing to sculptural drawing, that culminated with circle painting, a collaborative painting activity (ILO 3). The purpose of these creativities was to rectify theories of art and the human mind in relation to our sense of vision and the brain mechanisms underlying the act of drawing. As indicated by advanced neuroscientific findings, art-making is an effective form of self-expression among people whose language skills are deficient or still developing (Gardner, 1982; Gilinsky, 1984; Frith & Law, 1995). The workshops were structured to apply this knowledge to real-world practices.

The first two sessions had a focus on simple sensory drawings. The students prepared music associated with sounds from nature such as birds singing, a river flowing, and wind blowing for the first session, and a video of fireworks from past festive celebrations. They encouraged their clients to respond to the sounds and images by drawing their visionary imaginations and feelings (ILO 3). To facilitate better expression, different media including colour pencils, oil pastels, and markers were available to the clients. At the end of the session, each client was encouraged to tell the story of their drawing. Observing the actual art-making process allowed the students to note that the clients, with the help of the images created,

were able to articulate their ideas with greater ease and fluency (Figure 1). One student reported that “one of the participants [the intellectually disabled] cannot speak clearly..., his drawing visualized his thought and he could talk about his idea more clearly after the drawing” (ILO 2). In organizing and conducting the workshops, the students witnessed Rawley Silver’s (2001) findings that children and adults with language impairment have no difficulty using symbols to represent and express their inner thoughts. “Looking at their images is like entering their world of thoughts,” another student wrote in her report (ILO 2). After the first two workshops, the students started to establish real communication with their intellectually disabled clients, learning how they felt, what they thought of the world and others. “They [the drawings] are very different from those I saw in ordinary life... The important thing in appreciating these works is to understand how they [the intellectually disabled] see the world and how they think,” one student shared in her reflection (ILO 2 & 3). The same student concluded that the clients were sweet and simple people. This conclusive comment indicates that the experience helped her to gain a better awareness and acceptance of others (ILO 5).



Figure 1. An image created by one of the intellectual disabled clients. It helped him to articulate his thoughts with greater ease and fluency.

In the third session, the students designed self-portrait and body sculpture activities. The clients were each given a mirror and encouraged to draw their own portraits. They were then asked to use aluminum foil to “sculpt” a body part, such as an arm or leg, by molding the foil to the body part and then carefully removing it so that it retained its shape. Observing the process gave the students the opportunity to see their clients fully engaged in appreciating their facial and body features, and thus exploring and expressing themselves (ILO 2 & 3). One student’s observation of one of the clients prompted her to note that “the participant is old and deaf, and he was very passive in the last session. But during the process of making body sculpture, he became very active and totally engaged.” The experience clearly helped the student visualize how art can engaged people and facilitate inner expression (ILO 2).

During the process of planning and conducting the workshops, the students found that to ensure that the workshops ran smoothly and enough assistance was given to clients in need, they needed to identify the different levels of attention required by each of the clients and allocate the duty division among themselves (ILO 6). “Different unexpected situations arose in each session, and we needed to re-adjust our plan,” one student reported (ILO 4). Throughout the workshops, the students worked closely together as a team, helping each other whenever a matter demanded immediate attention. The experience gave every indication of having enhanced the students’ problem-solving flexibility and delivered the enjoyment of working with a great working team (ILO 4). The students also noticed that different clients were sensitive to the stimulation of different senses such as colours, form, and touch. This recognition helped them envisage the theory that art-

making stimulates various senses and provides great satisfaction (ILO 2). The kind of reassuring pleasure induced by art can incite comfort and satisfaction within one's psychological well-being (Edwards, 2001).

The last workshop was intended to unite the group as a whole through a collaborative painting activity. To ensure better guidance, the clients were divided into four small groups that each had one student as its assistant. The fifth student observed the situation as a whole. Given an extra-ordinarily long paper, the clients of each group were encouraged to paint circles of all kinds. Circles are easy to draw and bear a symbolic meaning of fullness and perfection. The spontaneous creative atmosphere that resulted from this exercise was revealed in a student's report, which stated that "we only provided them with materials and colours, they drew freely of their own will" (ILO 2 & 3). The students witnessed the joy that their clients expressed during the painting process (Figure 2). Once the papers had been filled with circles of various sizes and colours, the students and the attending artist linked all of the circles to compose four large and brilliant "circle paintings". The groups then appreciated their final "great works" together. The vivid images induced genuine pleasure in the groups (Figure 3). At the end of the session, both the students and their clients expressed reluctance to end the service. All five of the students wished the service could have been longer, indicating that they had developed a greater sense of commitment (ILO 5).



Figure 2. The circle painting workshop.



Figure 3. Students and clients of Team A appreciating the vivid, large and brilliant circle paintings.

The artist commended the students for having shown respect and great sensitivity towards their clients when designing the workshops (ILO 4). They began the workshops with great energy, and by the end of the last session, they were able to use personalized ways of communicating and encouraging clients on a first name basis (ILO 5 & 6). The organization was also pleased with the positive responses of the clients and welcomed further collaboration in the future.

Team B

When they first met their clients, the four students in Team B observed that most of the children had been born in Nepal and a few in India. They looked shy, dared not speak in public, and were reluctant to play with peers of the opposite sex. Having learned that art plays a significant role in igniting human feelings and consciousness (Langer, 1982), the students' first workshop had the children make "cards for loved ones" (ILO 3). The children were asked to create a card for someone they love back in their native town. The activity aimed to release any hidden emotions and promote the children's sense of national identity through emotional linkage to their loved ones still living in their countries of origin. As these children came from middle-lower classes,

their parents were often busy working and trying to integrate themselves into the local society. Many of them might not have had the chance to express how much they missed their relatives such as grandparents who were now separated from them. At the end of the session, each child was encouraged to share his/her work with the group (Figure 4). This not only helped the students learn more about their clients, but also allowed the children to share similar backgrounds with each other, thus promoting their minority identity (ILO 2 & 3).



Figure 4. After making their “card for the loved ones”, the South Asian children shared their wishes with the group.

The second session used games and music to build a better group cohesion. The students organized games that encouraged the integration of the group and the mingling of the two genders (Figure 5). Working as a team, the four students moved around, adjusted the session plan and the rules of games to promote their goals and avoid potential conflicts (ILO 4). They took every chance to praise good team-work among the children (ILO 6). In her reflection, one of the students stated: “I realize that sometimes a minor change of a planned activity can facilitate a better and more interesting experience for the whole group” (ILO 4).



Figure 5. Through games, the boys and girls were integrated as a group.

In addition to games they also taught the children how to make their own rattling musical instruments out of recycled plastic drink bottles. With the instruments they made in hand, the children were asked to pick a song and perform in groups. “I love the children’s innocence and directness. They wear all their emotion on their face,” one student reported, indicating her newly-acquired perception of the children (ILO 5). The fun and joy prompted by the workshop provided a heightened sense of group spirit among the children.

With the success of the second session, the students discerned that the children preferred active creativities to reserved ones. Therefore, they structured drama and singing performance for the last two sessions (ILO 3). Art therapists have asserted that drawing, acting, dancing, and singing are all effective ways of getting youths to engage in and express their inner feelings (Buchalter, 2004; Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005). Nearly all of the South Asian children enjoyed the processes involved in the performance and many of them showed great imagination in planning and acting out their parts. With genuine engagement, the children expressed themselves freely and confidently on the stage (Figure 6). In the two

workshops the students directly experienced how creativity can enhance self-esteem and confidence in a real-world setting. “They [the children] are so creative and engaged in their act on the stage,” one student recalled (ILO 2 & 3). In the last session, the children were no longer shy or restrained as they talked about their own nations (Figure 7). The four students concluded in their final presentation that they have become more aware of South Asian society as a result of the service. They agreed that these minority groups are people not unlike themselves and the boundary of “us and them” faded from their perceptions (ILO 5).



Figure 6. The South Asian children showed great imagination and confidence on the stage.



Figure 7. Team B at the end of the last session.

The attending artist for this group found that the students were mostly able to keep the momentum up during the activities, and managed to observe the responses of the children and adjust the content of each creative workshop accordingly (ILO 4 & 6).

She encouraged the students to be less conservative when designing children’s activities in the future. The organizer’s feedback was also very positive as the children showed great interest in the workshops.

As for the promotion of new experiences and dynamics in learning (ILO 1), the students’ comments in the course evaluation and the post-questionnaire explicitly stated that the service gave them a new kind of experiential learning that made the knowledge they had learned in class relevant to their lives. Many of them thought that the SLRS should become a mandatory component of the course. As the subject teacher, I had great expectations and anticipation to see whether the students could execute knowledge transfer from classroom to reality. I am convinced that the students actualized and successfully applied their knowledge of this course to help others. Moreover, I am impressed by the impact that service-learning has had on these students. They have demonstrated a sense of ownership for the programme they designed, and have developed a sense of commitment to communities of underprivileged groups. They have found strength while filling various positions on their team, either as material handlers, instructors or assistants. These actual experiences have shown them the dynamic natures of real-world situations and reinforced the spirit of mutual help. The service has enhanced their problem-solving abilities, social competence, communication and management skills. After the scheme, four students came to me and said that they would like to join an NGO if given the chance in the future.

Students’ Reflection on the Difficulties Encountered

Both teams faced communication challenge with their clients in the beginning as the result of

language disability in Team A and different languages in Team B. Both teams also encountered unexpected complications with the running of their workshops. By applying their knowledge in practice and working closely as a team, both teams solved the problems in ways that displayed a profound understanding of the required knowledge and the importance of team spirit. “Creativities break the language barrier between us [students and South Asian children]” (ILO 2 & 3), a student from Team B commented. Another student from Team A wrote in her reflection: “I have learned many social skills through the service such as communication skills and the importance of teamwork spirit” (ILO 5 & 6).

Another difficult encounter for the students stemmed from the differing backgrounds of their clients, specifically obsessive behavioural problems in Team A and cultural differences in Team B. Both teams resolved these challenges through the direct observation that acceptance, understanding and respect are crucial to building trust and communication. “They [the intellectually disabled] are just like us” (ILO5), one student shared in her second report presentation. “My personal goal is to know them [South Asian children] well one-by-one, starting with remembering their names which are quite difficult to pronounce and memorize” (ILO 5), a student from Team B said in her first report presentation.

The last two difficulties were time-management and proposal writings for the session-plans. The scheme demanded lots of time planning, writing proposals, preparing materials, running the workshops and reviewing the procedures. Over the course of the scheme, the students realized that good planning, great team work, and efficient meetings are crucial to effective time management that upholds the quality

of the service. For Team B, the attending artist required high quality, precise, detailed proposals for their session-plans. The students were required to clarify exact details and use of all materials, even sizes of the scissors and cellulose tapes. Although the students experienced frustration when re-writing and amending these details, by the end of the service, they started to see the value behind such specificity. Their clients were children with a high level of kinetic energy, and each procedure in the workshops had to be well thought through with detailed documentation to screen for any potential dangers. Their interaction with the attending artist enabled them to see the requirements of professionalism and the importance of taking full responsibility.

The difficulties encountered by the students have enriched them with confidence in problem-solving. One student explicitly stated, “I am now more confident in facing new challenges and being able to adopt changes for problem-solving” (ILO 4).

Conclusion

Education for service in higher education is important in preparing university graduates to see the profound meaning of being a citizen - one who is able to give and contribute to society. Art with its intrinsic nature as a language is an effective tool to connect people in need. The SLRS for the “Art and Well Being” class was integrated into the course to enhance the students’ understanding of the relationship between art and well-being and present opportunities to apply their knowledge to help others and connect with society. It aimed to realize a real-world application of the power of art and to provide “transformative learning experiences” for the students involved (Seifer & Connors, 2007). The “transformative” kind of learning experience was

hinted by the following student reflections:

“This is my first experience serving the disabled. I realize that nothing should be taken for granted.” (student from Team A)

“We all live in Hong Kong, and shall care for each other. By doing so, we shall unite the society as a whole.” (student from Team B)

There are many rooms to improve this first SLRS for the course. Yet the scheme has clearly demonstrated that a well structured SLRS with clear objectives, identified service groups, a close partnership with NGOs, and a good monitoring scheme can enhance the study of art and community.

Notes

1. “Community” in this paper refers to groups of people sharing similar background and specific need such as the ethnic minorities, persons with physical/intellectual disabilities, people with chronic illness, children and women suffering from family violence etc.
2. These are mentally retarded adults who have poor language and communication skills. Some of them have obsessive compulsive behaviours that make them even more difficult to communicate with others.
3. The pre-and post-questionnaires had a set of 34 questions on a 10-point scale measure and 6 open questions at the end. Because of the small number of the students, quantitative analysis of the answers was used by the Office of Service-learning for the purpose of studying findings with other SLRSs. This particular scheme only focused on the open questions on the questionnaires. And the six open questions were: 1) “What have you learned through joining the SLRS?”; 2) “Do you plan to continue your service with the agency?”; 3) “Do you intend to serve the community in the future?”; 4) “Did your participation in the service enhance your understanding of course materials?”; 5) “Did the service-learning components meet your expectations?”; and 6) “Do you have any suggestions for SLRS improvement and for the SLRS in the next semester?”

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Author

Dr. Sophia LAW
Associate Professor in Visual Studies, Lingnan University
[sophialaw@ln.edu.hk]

Trained as an art historian with years of nursing experience, Sophia has started her researches on arts and health, art and trauma, arts in community, and service-learning since 2007.

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