Thoughtful Dialogue in Relation to Other Instructional Methods

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Abstract

Thoughtful discussion in school is encouraged by methods like the Socratic seminar, philosophy for/with children, and deliberative dialogues. The paper explores how didactics (as the art and science of teaching) can be analyzed from considering how the teacher plans the product and/or process of teaching. The switching between the different didactic positions will teach students habits of mind to promote a lifelong learning process. To motivate the students to learn, the sequence in which the different didactic positions are addressed is important. The paper endeavors to explain what function the methods for thoughtful discussion have in the school curricula when integrated with other instructional methods. Thoughtful discussion might serve as a start of the learning process but might also help to challenge and integrate along the way. However, whether or not thoughtful discussion is seen as a meaningful way of teaching is dependent on the inner pedagogical theory of the teacher.

Introduction and questions

Thoughtful discussion as a school activity is being explored by methods like the Socratic seminar, philosophy for/with children, and deliberative dialogues. In these discussions, the teacher puts questions to promote inquiry and foster critical thinking, but the goal is the students' cooperative dialogue. The purpose of seminars is not to give the student an opportunity of free and uncontrolled chatting but to teach the students how to develop and enrich their thinking. If this training of intellectual habits is to take place, the culture will have to foster and promote an open disposition.

But how can the teacher's intentions when planning learning activities in general be analyzed? And what function do the methods of thoughtful dialogue have in the school curricula, when integrated with other instructional methods? This paper attempts to explore and answer these questions from what we know from the practical and theoretical experience of using thoughtful dialogue in the classroom.

The concept *didactics* could be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the cultural context where it is used. When consulting various dictionaries, one finds that it can mean something intended to instruct or inform, or something to teach a moral lesson or make moral observations. In this paper the concept *didactics* is used as connected to pedagogical research: a section of Educational Science, *the art and science of teaching*. The didactic area is by tradition addressed by asking: *What is to be taught*? *Why*? *How*? But also the questions: *Who is to learn? Who is teaching?* might help the teacher to enlighten important qualities in a planned educational activity (Pihlgren, 2011).

Pedagogical core ideas

Methods for thoughtful dialogue often refer to the antique philosopher Socrates when it comes to the *maieutic* refutation used when groups of students in dialogue explore ideas and values. But

thoughtful dialogue also has its roots in the Northern European *bildning*[1] movement and in the progressive, reform pedagogical tradition[2]. The main object of these reforms was to create a better society through education, but also to meet the needs of a different approach to learning. In the United States, John Dewey and Mortimer J Adler, in Europe Celestin Freinet (France), Ovide Decroly (Belgium), and Ulrika Leimar (Sweden) all explored different didactic approaches to promote child centered learning.

The child is in the progressive tradition seen as active, with an internal capacity to develop and learn. This viewpoint is shared with a similar educational tradition, the tradition of Friedrich Fröbel, Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Pihlgren, 2011). The "active learner" viewpoint is in direct opposite to the behavioristic view that one will learn when tempted by rewards or in fear of punishment (cf. I. Pavlov, B.F. Skinner). The philosophical differences between seeing the learner as active or passive are obvious, and so are probably the educational consequences: If the learner is seen as passive, the teacher will have to plan motivational elements during the whole teaching process. The object of learning might be obvious to the teacher but doesn't have to be so to the learner since he/she is motivated by outer rewards, not necessarily connected to the result. On the other hand, if the learner is seen as active, both the learning process and its outcome have to make sense to the learner for him/her to learn. In the behavioristic tradition, learning and maturing is more or less considered to be the same process (Carlgren, 1999). However, there are also differences between the two "active" traditions. In the Fröbel tradition, learning is taking place because the child is maturing. In the progressive tradition, the child will learn and thereby mature and develop. The Fröbel and the progressive traditions are, in this respect, each other's opposites.

Didactic positions in teaching

The educational (progressive) philosopher Mortimer J. Adler (1982) suggests that all teaching activities must involve three complementary didactic approaches to ensure that learning will take place. One might think of these as the columns in the temple of learning, where real knowledge and competence within an area rests on three equally important columns: acquisition of organized knowledge, development of intellectual skills, and enlarged understanding of ideas and values by exploring/creating.

The three columns suggest three different approaches for the teacher. In the first column, the teacher introduces the students to a body of factual knowledge (didactic), in the second the teacher coaches them in the intellectual skills necessary to manipulate and apply knowledge (coaching). The third column is a creative and investigating part of the learning process. If the student is to grasp the character and soul of the subject taught, he/she must on every level of understanding be given the opportunity to explore the central ideas in the area but also to create. This can be done by activities like painting, composing, designing, and inventing. This column is where Mortimer J. Adler places the thoughtful dialogue, as a means for the student to be able to investigate and critically analyze central ideas, and as an opportunity to, with thoughts and in cooperation with others, present and evoke ideas. In the third column the teacher becomes a "mid-wife", facilitating the student's exploring or creating by asking evocative questions, but not planning the outcome of the discussion or of creativity.

[1] *Bildning* as a description of a cultural and political phenomenon became commonly used in German-speaking countries and in Scandinavia in the later part of the 19th century. The word *bildning* is equivalent to *Bildung* in German, *dannelse* in Danish, *obrazjenie* in Russian and to the Greek concept *paideia*. English texts use either "general education", "liberal education" or just "culture".
[2] Progressive education developed in the United States, the Soviet Union, and Europe beginning in the 1880s.

Illustration 1: Mortimer Adler's three columns.

As Adler, John Dewey (1997) holds acquisition of knowledge, training of skills, and exploring and creating to be important ingredients when learning. But Dewey also suggests that there is a more productive organization to which these different didactic approaches should be subjected[3]. Dewey separates skill-training from the other activities, leaving this to scheduled parts of the school day where students can choose from a variety of skill training assignments. However, the other activities should be carefully planned by the teacher. The teacher should introduce a new area of knowledge by presenting something unexpected, puzzling, or peculiar to arouse the curiosity of the students, and allowing them to experiment and discover. This should be followed by reflective inquiry, where students can elaborate ideas or hypotheses. Both these steps could be placed within the exploring/creative column, and might very well use thoughtful dialogue as method. It is not until the students have been allowed to discover and explore, with the process-support of the teacher, that generalized knowledge is presented, either by the teacher lecturing or by other didactic means (knowledge column). As a final step in the process of learning, Dewey suggests that the knowledge should be tested in new areas and matched towards everyday life experiences, once again addressing the exploring/creative column. Here too, thoughtful dialogue might be a method.

The different activities suggested by Adler and Dewey have consequences on the teacher's planning: The planning might result from having intentions in guiding either *what the students will learn*. He/she might also intend to guide *how the students learn* this. The teacher might consider it of importance to control the outcome of the pedagogical activity or the pedagogical process (strong intention) or to refrain from it (weak intention). This gives us four didactic positions:

[3] Plato and Aristotle actually suggest similar systems!

A. Didactic position, where the intention is to plan both product and process[4].
B. Process oriented position, where the intention is to plan the process but not the product.
C. Maturity position, where the outcome, product, is planned, but not the process.
D. Chaotic position, where neither is planned by the teacher.

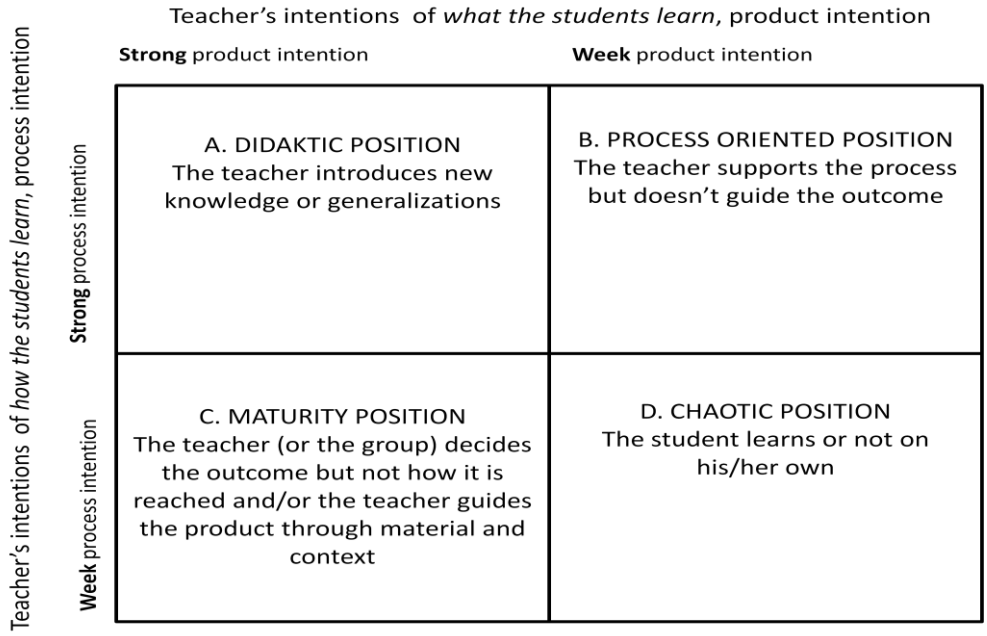

Figure 1: Didactic positions when planning

Comparing Adler's temple to figure 1, presented above, one might conclude that position A. (didactic) describes the planning for activities in the "knowledge column". The "skills column" and position C. (maturity), where the students work to master skills, also seem to match, and so does the exploring/creating column and position B. (process oriented). The consequence of the above said is that didactic planning would have to address all three columns and positions A., B, and C. for learning to take place, and starting with B, going on to A and C, and ending in B.

Adler's and Dewey's theories lack the forth position, D. (chaotic). Position D. is a problematic didactic position. Obviously a lot of learning takes place outside the classroom or other planned pedagogical activities or contexts. People learn from own experiences, without this being planned didactically. This type of learning should apply to position D. However, in a curricula governed activity, the learning is supposed to be directed towards specific goals. In this sense the position is to be considered as "chaotic" – the activity or the outcome is not planned by the teacher, there might be learning, or not.

Four classroom examples

To illustrate my point, I invite the reader to visit four classrooms and to consider the activities taking place there[5]. We start by participating in:

[4] Although all four positions can be considered didactic, informing us on the teaching intentions, I have called position A. "didactic" since it displays strong intentions to plan both *what* and *how* the students will learn.
[5] I have visited all four presented classrooms recently in my work as a researcher and pedagogical developer.

A class in Religion at the North Parish High School

Mr. Stefan introduces today's lesson by telling the class that they will talk about the transition from Jewish religion to Christianity in ancient Jerusalem, and specifically about the events connected to Good Friday. He shows a short instructional film, where the main information is presented. Mr. Stefan then organizes the class in groups of four students. The groups are asked to discuss some of the information in the film:

- What were the main causes of the transition?
- How can they be explained in a historical context?

The students discuss for 10 minutes while Mr. Stefan passes among the groups, answering questions or shortly participating in discussion. He then introduces a short lecture on how the construction of the Jewish temples supported the underlying assumption that only the rabbi could enter the inner part and meet God. He presents some pictures of the temple as illustration and then asks the students to read a text and bear the following question in mind during the reading:

- What are the consequences of the earthquake, when the tombs break open, and the curtain in the temple is torn from top to bottom?

The students work in silence for some time and the teacher circulates to help and to observe how they cope with the task. At the end of class Mr. Stefan asks the students to recapitulate some of their answers to the question. He finally summarizes the answers, repeats the main information, the torn curtain opening a channel to God for all, a new way of looking at the relationship between man and God. The class is then given the text as homework.

Mr. Stefan's plan displays the common elements of **ITIP**[6], Instructional Theory in Practice, didactics influenced by behaviorism:

- Learning **objectives** are set on an appropriate level, determined by diagnosing the students.
- **Motivation** – the film is used to motivate the students to learn.
- The lesson objectives are stated to the students.
- **Input** – the short lecture and the pictures of the temple help the students to understand the complicated issue of the torn curtain, and **activity** – the students are activated by the discussion, so they will focus their attention to what they are about to learn.
- **Check** for understanding – The students work individually to strengthen their learning and to show the teacher that they have understood what was taught.
- **Guided practice** – The students cooperate when discussing in groups and at the end, when presenting their answers, to motivate them to proceed in learning.
- Assign **independent practice**– the homework will help students to solidify skills and knowledge.

The lesson plan follows the same structure every time, but with different contents: The teacher introduces and motivates today's subject, then introduces new knowledge that the students practice individually and/or in groups. The lesson ends by the teacher summarizing, handing out homework and presenting what will be the topic for next week. The didactic plan starts with presenting the new

[6] The model for instruction was introduced in the Uniteds States by the psychologist Madeline Hunter (www.hope.edu). In Swedish this approach is called MAKIS – Motivation, Aktivitet, Konkretisering, Individualisering, Samarbete.

area of knowledge to the students, and then gradually strengthens their understanding of this presented knowledge. Let us now visit another class:

A class in Physics in grade 6 at the Freinet school

When the students arrive after recess, the teacher Mrs. Kristina has filled the room with balloons. They float over the tables and fall to the floor. Mrs. Kristina encourages the students to experiment with the balloons and they start to throw the balloons up in the air and to each other, stepping on the chairs and tables to find out how long it takes for balloons to fall. Soon, someone sticks a balloon to the ceiling by rubbing it. This inspires the students to try to stick the balloons onto different surfaces, while they laughingly discuss the results and potential explanations to why it works or not. Mrs. Kristina observes the process, sometimes supports by handing out material, sometimes coaches to further explorations by asking questions, or comments on some results that the students might have missed. The playful activity goes on for 20 minutes. Mrs. Kristina then asks the class to be seated. Guided by the teacher's follow-up questions, the class now together summarizes their experiences with the balloons. Each experience will result in a question:

- The balloons stayed "glued" to the ceiling when rubbed but not otherwise. They didn't stay there forever though. Why do the balloons stick and why do they eventually fall down?

The questions are then noted by the students and in groups of two the students choose a question that they are interested in. They will now use some of their "personal choice" classroom work time to try and find answers to the question.

Mrs. Kristina uses a plan inspired by progressive ideas. Learning starts with the students "tentative experiments", to arouse the curiosity of the students, help them to question and to start a rethinking process. The balloon experiments serve this purpose. The next step, the summarizing, is done to elaborate ideas or working hypotheses through comparison and contrast, the process ending in definition or formulation. The didactic plan starts in the experience of the students, and gradually takes them from their own everyday assumptions to generalized knowledge.

A class in Mathematics in grade 1 at the Montessori school

Miss Maita has gathered the students in a circle on the floor. She introduces a material of beads – single beads, bars of tens and squares of hundreds – and introduces cards, on which the beads can be used to add and subtract. Miss Maita shows how this can be done and then asks one of the students to repeat the actions. Then everyone in the group is asked to try. The students try different ways of performing the task while discussing the results, and helping each other. Miss Maita then informs the group that they now might work on their own, with their personal choices. Some of the students restore the bead material to its containers and go on to use other material; others continue working with the beads.

Miss Maita's plan is connected to the Fröbel tradition. The gathering of the group in a circle is part of signaling to the students their connection to the whole, the world. New material is shortly presented to the group or to individual students when they have reached the maturity to make use of it. Whether or not they choose to work with it is not up to the teacher. She will observe to be able to serve each student with the right input at the right time, but she will not interfere with their ongoing maturity process. The didactic plan starts in the teacher observing, and goes on to present a learning

opportunity to the student. The student will make use of this opportunity if he/she is ready. The context and material is of vital didactic importance to support the development of the child.

A thematic project class in the Conrad Mountain Secondary School

Finally, the reader is invited to "teacher team 1" and their first day of the thematic project "Systemae Necesse Est", focusing man made systems in general and the periodic system in chemistry in particular. The week before starting, the students have been getting "clues" in their e-mailboxes: Pictures of the card game "Funny families", their own schedule for the week, and finally Tom Lehrer performing "The element song".

The first day the teacher Mrs. Sofia starts with a thoughtful discussion, where students are asked to analyze and compare maps over the same area: of the pipes underground, the electrical cords over ground, and where the Halloween pumpkins were placed one Halloween. Mrs. Sofia then invites the students to a table, where a lot of measuring instruments are presented. They will now, in pairs, solve the following task:

- Create a "class" with "categories" where everyone in our group is measured
    - Decide what will be measured/analyzed/valued and how
    - Measure
    - Display your results so that everyone can use them

The students work intensely for 15 minutes and the task results in a host of different "classes": color of hair, of eyes, body length, foot length, hand width, sex, weight, and hair volume (!). The teacher shortly asks the students to reflect on the choices they had to make while creating the categories and the difficulties they experienced. They are then presented to the task that will be their main assignment during the rest of the thematic project:

- Find as system (in groups of 3-4 students):
    - The system must have 3 classes
    - It must be displayed graphically/digitally and be possible to interpret for anyone
    - The system must make claims to explain more than the classes do…

A slide show with examples of different systems is shown: subway systems, systemae naturae, a symphony orchestra, family von Trapp. The groups of students are asked to discuss their first tentative ideas of systems. After half an hour, Mrs. Sofia asks them to construct mind-maps on what they know so far. They will revise them during the project. Together the group now formulates questions they now have about systems, and particularly about the periodic system. Some of these questions are asked during the next session, when Mr. Håkan, the chemistry teacher, lecture on the periodic system. When the day ends, the students are given homework to prepare for tomorrow's thoughtful discussion on the periodic system. They are informed that they also will meet Miss Ulrika in a drama session, where they will dramatize the periodic system.

This plan is in ways more complex than the others; the teacher team uses longer time slots, and integrates different subjects. The plan is inspired by progressive ideas, where the main purpose is to teach the students habits of mind, helping them to learn and develop their thinking. The clues are intended to raise the curiosity of the students and to motivate them to engage in the project. The didactic intention of the thoughtful discussion is to puzzle and intrigue the students to inspire them

to learn, and to give them a notion of the complexity of systems. Constructing their own systems will give them hands-on knowledge of how systems work, and will make their knowledge manifest. The didactic plan starts in puzzling the students, and then gradually forces them to different experiences, and to generalize these experiences. It also will give them opportunities to create and investigate on different levels of knowledge and understanding.

Didactic analysis of the examples

All four observed classes are thoroughly planned and well performed. The didactic consequences of what is displayed in these examples result in an analysis, displayed in figure 2.

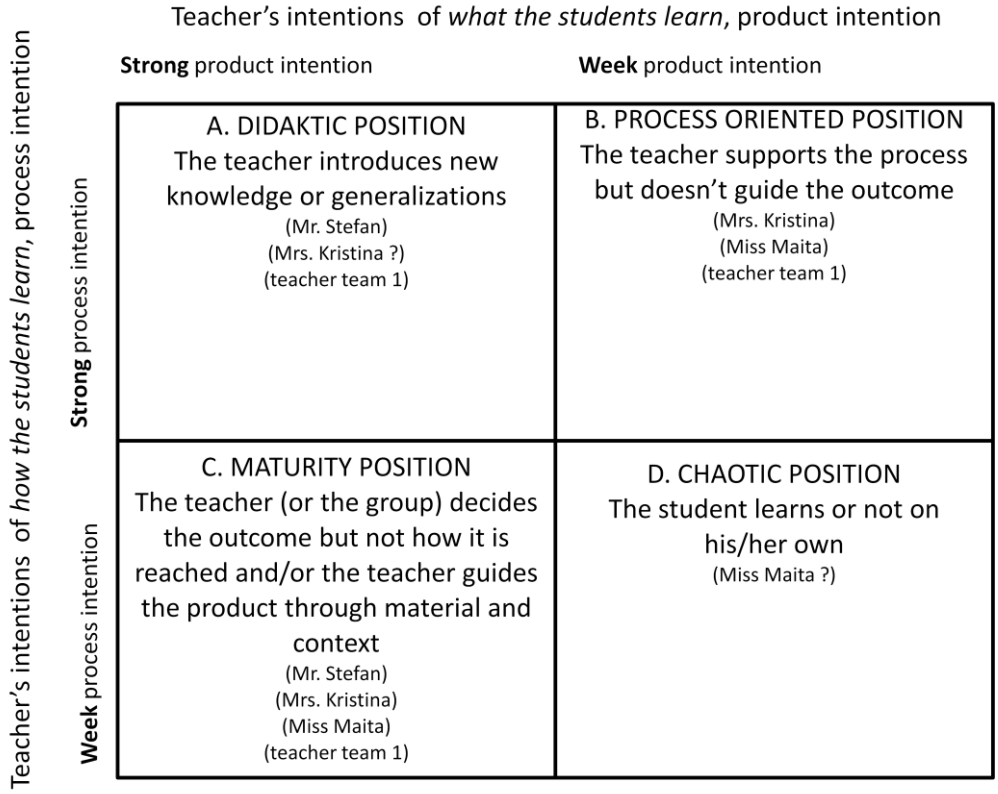

Figure 2: Didactic analysis of four different educational theories

From the above examples we might conclude that Mr. Stefan reaches to control the content of what is to be learned and does so by planning the student process closely, by using several different tasks and methods (position A). At some point (the group discussion and the individual reading) he leaves some of the process to the students (C.) but soon returns to lecturing, position A. He also attempts position C. in the home assignment. Mr. Stefan's intention is probably to evoke a complicated understanding of new knowledge, and then gradually strengthen this. He uses short motivational elements during the whole teaching process. This is probably necessary to keep the students attention, since the object of learning is obvious to him, but not to the students. Mr. Stefan's plan might improve on students' interest by starting the lesson with a thoughtful discussion from the Bible text about the events on Good Friday, letting the students explore and formulate their own questions and hypotheses. He might also conclude the session with a thoughtful discussion, where the students choose the questions to discuss. Adding these activities Mr. Stefan's plan will address the three positions A, B, and C above.

Mrs. Kristina starts in position C. by leaving the exploring to the students but reassuring that the outcome will address the subject of electricity by controlling the material and the context. She then goes on to position B. when coaching the students to analyze their findings and posing questions. When letting the students answer the questions on their own she addresses position C. Mrs. Kristina's class is similar to Dewey's suggestions: She separates skill-training from the other didactic activities. The lesson starts in students' exploration and goes on to systemize the reached insights with help of summarizing. On the other hand, we cannot tell to which extent she will attempt to teach the students new knowledge and habits of mind. This might be part of the next lesson. If not, Dewey's generalization and Adler's knowledge column (and position A.) is not addressed enough to help the students to develop their thinking.

Miss Maita starts in position C. She is introducing new material that will help the students to develop. The activity might continue there, when students use the presented or other material as intended. It might also go on to position D - the students explore their own areas of interest in whatever way they choose. Miss Maita's didactic plan centers round the activities of the students, leaving the teacher to observe and present a context that will inspire the students to develop on their own. The students will actively explore their personal interests (Adler's skills column), but will there be enough challenges to go on to new areas of knowledge? The explorative and creative reflection, where the teacher is supporting the student to further understanding and discovery is not addressed at all, neither is Adler's knowledge column nor Dewey's generalization reached for sure. Thoughtful discussion could here serve as means to challenge the students' mathematical ideas about adding and subtracting. On the other hand, this would probably oppose the Fröbel belief that learning is maturing – if the students are mature enough, they will explore this on their own…

The thematic approach of teacher team 1 makes it possible to address the different didactic areas needed in learning. The "clues" address position C, the map-discussion B, the forming of "classes" C, the analysis of choices and problems B, the system-assignment and the slideshow C, the lecture A, and the thoughtful discussion on periodic system and the drama session position B. The integrated subjects will help the students to understand how different areas of knowledge are related.

Some concluding remarks

Productive didactic planning is a question of being conscious of what is to be taught and how. The switching between the different didactic positions A, B, and C. in figure 1, where either the product or the process (or both) are planned, will, as I see it, teach students habits of mind to promote a lifelong learning process. The students will have to address situations where they are to reach a specific goal, where they can explore their own goal, where the method is specified, and where they can choose their own method. In the search they will need, and ask for, the new knowledge presented by the teacher and they will be given opportunities to experiment and explore old and new ideas. The sequence in which the different positions in figure 1 are addressed is important for the outcome of teaching. The students have to be motivated early in the learning process. Starting in position C. and then passing on to B. will help the students to relate to their own experience but will also challenge them to look for new knowledge (A). Thoughtful discussion might serve as a start of the learning process but might also help to integrate and challenge made assumptions and ideas along the way. And together with other methods give students tools to explore the chaotic world outside the classroom (D)…

However, one of my points in this paper is that whether or not thoughtful discussion is seen as a meaningful way of teaching is dependent on the inner pedagogical theory of the teacher. Thoughtful discussion is without doubt possible to integrate with the progressive ideas and with the behaviorist to some extent, but harder to integrate with methods that stem from a pedagogical belief that students learn as they mature.

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