London Review of Education
Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2010, 15–24

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

S(t)imulating learning: pedagogy, subjectivity and teacher education in online environments

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Australian higher education increasingly relies on flexible modes of delivery as a means of attracting and retaining students in a highly competitive global education market. While education is among those disciplines that have been most actively involved in the shift from face-to-face to online learning and teaching, the transition for many teacher educators is fraught with tensions and contradictions. For some, teaching online is seen as primarily a cost-cutting exercise on the part of universities, and has little to do with improving the quality of student learning. For others, the online environment offers multiple pedagogic possibilities that have yet to be fully explored. Yet others consider online environments as problematic, posing challenges to pedagogic and peer relationships that are generally seen as integral to 'good' teaching. This paper draws on an empirical study of teacher education faculties in five Australian universities, and analyses excerpts from interviews about learning and teaching with teacher educators, educational designers and faculty management. We argue that understanding how teacher educators constitute learner and teacher subjectivities through their beliefs about and approaches to pedagogy is crucial to the future of online tertiary education. In particular, we consider how teacher educators' attitudes toward and approaches to online learning and teaching are predicated on their perceived subject positions as either 'stimulating' or 'simulating' particular kinds of learning interactions.

Keywords: online education; teacher education; higher education; subjectivity; pedagogy

Background: contrasts, complexities and academic/teacher educator subjectivities

Online learning and teaching has significantly altered the face of tertiary education, and in recent years the field of education has been one of the most active in the transition from face-to-face to online modes of delivery (Bell et al. 2002, 68). The expansion of new technologies in tertiary education presents both opportunities and challenges for university educators. While no longer a particularly 'new' phenomenon, online modes of educational delivery continue to generate numerous debates concerning the role of technology in reconfiguring the nature, processes and practices of learning and teaching. Such debates are of particular interest within the field of teacher education, whose ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns often intersect with substantive, disciplinary-specific interests in pedagogy and curriculum.

For many teacher educators, the practice of teaching represents much more than content and course delivery, and is seen as an integral dimension of their subjectivities in both personal and professional terms. As a consequence, changes to modes of delivery, hence to pedagogic practices and relationships, pose challenges not only to the 'how' of teaching, but also to the 'who' of teaching – in other words, to the ways in which teaching subjectivities are conceptualised, experienced and produced by teacher educators. Recent research concerned with the complexities, possibilities and futures of online learning (Hedberg 2006; Kellner 2004; Klang

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ISSN 1474-8460 print/ISSN 1474-8479 online
© 2010 Institute of Education, University of London
DOI: 10.1080/14748460903557613
http://www.informaworld.com

2004; Lander 2005) provides a contextual backdrop to better understanding issues of identity, embodiment and engagement in virtual spaces. In this paper, we draw on interview data from a technographic study (Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith, and Kitto 2008) conducted in five Australian teacher education faculties, to consider how teacher educators currently involved in online education constitute subjectivities through beliefs about and approaches to pedagogy. We argue that understanding these constitutive processes is crucial to the future of tertiary online education, and in particular, to understanding the potential learning and teaching dilemmas associated with moves to flexible modes of course delivery.

Recent literature concerned with subjectivities in higher education (Devos 2004; Harris 2005; Nicoll 2007; Nicoll and Harrison 2003; Petersen 2007) offer valuable insights into understanding the multiple ways in which academic selves are produced. Much of this work is concerned with the intersection of disciplinary technologies and what Foucault (Foucault 1988, 1999) refers to as techniques or technologies of the self. Disciplinary technologies, such as, for example, institutional policies and their implementation, play an important part in the governing of academic work, and the embodied activities of individual academics. As such, these kinds of technologies are productive of the cultural practices, institutional ethos and broader educational discourses within whose terms the academic self is in turn produced. As individual subjects navigate the demands and expectations of disciplinary technologies, however, they also engage in the complex practices of governing the self according to social norms.

The everyday practices associated with not only doing academic work, but with becoming/being a particular kind of social subject, thus come under scrutiny. Eva Petersen, for example, shows how postgraduate research supervision actively re/produces discourses of 'academicity' (Petersen 2007) through which individuals learn to render themselves intelligible within academic discourse. Becoming an academic, Petersen argues, is less about occupation or credentials, than about 'the process through which identity is developed, negotiated and enacted' (Petersen, 2007, 477). These processes can be traced in a variety of discursive practices, as in Anita Devos's work demonstrating how academic women involved in mentoring are produced within the terms of the 'suitable academic subject' (Devos 2004). For the women in Devos's study, becoming an 'appropriate' academic subject involves both active participation in fashioning the self, as well as submitting oneself to be acted upon by others.

As mentioned above, in addition to the myriad routine practices that make up academic work, policy contexts and the discourses to which they give rise are also implicated in the production of academic subjectivities. Scholars have argued, for example, that the intensification of neoliberal governance in contemporary universities, with its emphasis on managerialism, performativity, selectivity, competition and accountability have significantly altered the roles, workplace practices and identities of academics (Harris 2005; Kenway et al. 2006; Skelton 2004). The changing nature of academic work in such climates, including changes to university teaching, can hardly be underestimated. Of particular interest, the general focus on teaching in higher education as a technical activity that can be improved through professional development, competency standards and the like 'has obscured the social and discursive practices through which a very particular sort of [university] teacher identity may be produced' (Nicoll and Harrison 2003, 24).

It is not our intention to imply that there is a single, preferable or even predominant version of academic subjectivity, and we concur with Suzy Harris's contention that 'the university is a complex and differentiated institution where different constructions of "academic" coexist' (Harris 2005, 425). Corresponding to what Nikolas Rose (1999) discusses in terms of the subjective implications of workplace techniques of governance in advanced liberal societies, it is important to bear in mind that the production of academic subjectivities is situated within prevailing discourses of the working self. In these terms:

> The worker is an individual in search of meaning, responsibility, a sense of personal achievement, a maximized 'quality of life', and hence of work. Thus the individual is not to be emancipated from work, perceived as merely a task or a means to an end, but to be fulfilled in work, now construed as an activity through which we produce, discover, and experience ourselves. (Rose 1999, 104)

Rose's description offers an interesting lens through which to consider the powerful discourses of professional practice, and the personal satisfaction, fulfilment and sense of purpose often attributed to the teaching profession. For many teacher educators, academic subjectivity is experienced at the intersection of professional identities established within precisely these terms during careers as teachers prior to entering the tertiary academic workforce. There is an extensive literature mapping the dissonances and tensions experienced by teacher educators as they negotiate the subjective demands associated with the shift from working as school teachers to working as tertiary educators (Dinkelman, Margolis, and Sikkenga 2006; Ritter 2007). According to much of this literature, teacher educators, like other professional practice-based disciplines such as nursing and social work, must continually navigate multiple and competing demands of both university and profession, or what Jean Murray (2007) refers to as the 'first order field'. Such dissonances have important implications for teacher educator subjectivities, as Murray observes of participants in a recent UK study:

> Working within university settings, the professional educators in this study were required to maintain multiple identities as academics, attempting – and sometimes failing – to conform to the norms of academic work in their universities. At the same time they were attempting to maintain identities as inductors into their professions, and as practitioners of their original occupational group, working at one 'remove' from the first order fields. (Murray 2007, 285)

The experiences described by Murray speak to the complex interrelationships between 'professional identity… professional knowledge and professional action' (Watson 2006). Among the complexities that are readily observable, perhaps most notably are those that pose challenges to accepted ways of being and doing. Our research with teacher educators highlights the extent to which policy drivers and institutionally situated initiatives within universities intersect with normative discourses of 'good' teaching. Combined, these factors powerfully shape the production of teacher educator subjectivities.

The interview excerpts discussed in the following sections of this paper are drawn from an empirical study conducted in 2007–2008. The study was concerned with the sociocultural, representational and policy dimensions of online learning and teaching within the field of teacher education. The technographic approach employed by the study draws on the work of Bruno Latour (Latour 1988, 1991) and Steve Woolgar (Woolgar 1996, 2005), for whom technography refers to studies concerned with 'the apprehension, reception, use, deployment, depiction and representation of technologies' (Woolgar 2005, 27–8). Our study was interested in exploring these aspects of online education, in order to develop new understandings of the intersecting factors at play for those who are currently learning and teaching in technologically mediated environments. In particular, we take an interest in the discursive production of online education through institutionally situated texts, talk and practices associated with online learning environments.

In each of five Australian teacher education faculties, we interviewed one–two teacher educators, one educational designer and/or technical support staff, and one representative from faculty management, with a view to gaining new insights into the ways that policy initiatives, pedagogic relationships and technological features of online environments both shape and are shaped by normative educational discourse. What emerged from our conversations with participants was the significance of teacher subjectivities in the design and delivery of online education. In the sections that follow, we consider how teacher educators working in online environments in three of the research sites (University A: Selby and Marty; University B: Kim, Dierdre and Rita;

and University C: Carol) make use of discursive resources, professional values and lived experience to constitute themselves as a particular kind of person, learner and educator, and their students as particular kinds of learners and social participants. We compare pedagogic approaches through which these teacher educators in our study constitute themselves within the normative terms of educational discourse, exploring contrasting views about the nature of embodied learning, relationships and values associated with online learning.

Stimulating learning: virtual spaces, embodied subjects and learning online

Online learning environments vary enormously, as do the pedagogic approaches and professional practices of educators who use them. Our research shows that despite the expansion of online learning in Australian universities, there is considerable variation in the degree of familiarity with and expertise in its use amongst teacher educators. In part, this variation reflects differing levels of institutional commitment to online education – some universities in our study, for example, deliver an extensive range of online courses, and teaching in online environments via university wide learning management systems is accepted as a routine aspect of academic work. Others, however, are still in the very early stages of developing a small number of subjects for online delivery, with academic staff often grappling with what is seen as a wide range of very new and challenging pedagogical demands.

Those we interviewed who are experienced with online teaching talked about what they saw as a range of possibilities in the online environment for stimulating learning for both their students and themselves. These participants generally commented that the flexibility and interactivity of learning online enable students to learn in ways that suit personal circumstances, lifestyles and preferences, and offers students opportunities to engage with their own and others' learning irrespective of distance, time and work or family demands. As one teacher educator explained when talking about innovation and opportunity in online environments:

> I think it has to be in the designing of the learning and the ability for that to be personalised, not just a one size fits all, and in the engagement and the interaction, both up, down, sideways. (Dierdre)

Of interest here, a number of those teacher educators with considerable experience in online education talked about themselves as innovators and collaborators, seeing learning and teaching as a process involving all participants more or less equally. For example, the flow of information and ideas that takes place within the online environment is seen by Dierdre and others as conducive to the learning of both teacher and student. Another senior academic describes an experience of mutual learning when her students created a Wiki as a shared resource in one of her online subjects:

> … the richness of what that provided and the sense of the connections and the insights, and also the sense of the ways in which they'd worked together was just fantastic, absolutely fantastic, so I'm really interested to learn more about how those kinds of opportunities can be used… I find tremendously exciting and also pretty important, the kinds of texts and the kinds of images and worlds that there are online, and we can get kids to have access to… (Carol)

For these teacher educators, there is considerable enthusiasm for learning possibilities – both those already experienced and others yet to be explored – in the online environment. Personal and professional interests coalesce around the potential for new kinds of learning experience for themselves as well as for students. Despite initial reservations and occasional challenges, there is consistent focus in these interviews on what has been and remains to be learned through engagement with learning spaces mediated by new technologies. The approaches taken to online teaching are, we would suggest, important aspects of how these

teacher educators constitute themselves as particular kinds of teachers, hence particular kinds of persons. For example:

> I think in terms of the way academics are… so someone like me, for example, I like the fact, and I do the same with my… face-to-face classes… my particular philosophy of teaching is one whereby I like the students to take responsibility for a lot of the stuff that they do. My job is to, my perception of my job is to provide them with stimulating or controversial things that they need to read and discuss. So the way I set up my face to face classes is very similar to the way I set up my online classes. (Selby)

Selby's account is situated within a lengthier discussion about the range of skills, knowledges and practices of ICT use amongst academics in his faculty. Academic practice, however, is not merely a consequence of one's technological competence or otherwise, but is seen instead as a way of being. The kind of teaching subject that one is – which in this case involves the way one structures and organises learning as a stimulating activity – is compared and contrasted with the way that (academic) others are. Critique of academic practices, in other words, requires analysis of the intelligibility of the teaching self situated within discursive and social norms and maintained by/in dialogue with others who teach. As Judith Butler argues, 'Critique is not merely of a given social practice or a certain horizon of intelligibility within which practices and institutions appear, it also implies that I come into question for myself' (Butler 2005, 23). For Selby, intelligibility as an academic subject involves working to stimulate student engagement that stimulates students to critically engage with normative discourse.

While most tertiary online learning and teaching is mediated by university learning management systems, some tertiary educators in our study have created opportunities to explore online virtual worlds such as *Second Life* (SL) for learning and teaching activities. SL is a 3D virtual online world in which participants or 'residents' interact socially by means of customised avatars. Residents can meet, chat, travel, shop, attend events, purchase land, run businesses, collaborate on projects, participate in education and training, to name but a few of the possible options. To date, SL is the most widely used virtual world within higher education (Baker, Wentz, and Woods 2009), with universities from around the world renting or owning land, maintaining virtual lecture theatres, labs, clinics, libraries and, in some cases, entire campuses. There are numerous options for individual educators to teach in SL, including maintaining office hours, delivering lectures, holding tutorials and collaborating on projects, either in rented or owned SL spaces or, alternatively, in public SL spaces that may be accessed free of charge.

Virtual worlds and the avatars through which participants interact in educational, as well as in other social situations in SL, raise a number of questions about the intersection of experience, identity and embodiment. The teacher educators in our study who are currently utilising SL as a pedagogical tool talk about the virtual environment as a 'discovery place' for both educators and students, noting the potential for both exchanging ideas and experimenting with identities. Marty, for example, endeavours to stimulate learning by breaking down what he sees as traditional representations of learning as requiring set spaces such as lecture theatres and classrooms. He sees his teaching in virtual spaces as:

> … trying to break down that very notion that learning occurs in this set space, you know, learning occurs in the classroom or in the lecture theatre, you know that there seems to be an assumption that learning doesn't happen outside that, in a formal sense, that you know, everything else is just 'stuff'… (Marty)

Marty's comments reflect conceptual and ideological tensions between learning as contextually bounded, on one hand, and as exceeding the limitations, conventions and constraints of physical space, on the other. By shifting his teaching into the virtual world of SL, he challenges discursive norms of spatialised pedagogic practice. In so doing, he notes how learning takes place

in the interstices, or interconnected conceptual spaces, between the embodied subjects of teaching and learning and their avatars in the virtual environment. In the following description of an SL-based learning activity designed for his students, for example, Marty demonstrates for the interviewer a series of hierarchically arranged on-screen stages or 'platforms' upon which avatars move upward from platform to platform as they progress through a series of learning tasks. These platforms are used as a visual metaphor that represents student's progression through a series of learning tasks:

> … to do a three dimensional representation, and by the way, part of that is also that, as you move yourself bodily from platform to platform, there's also a certain reward structure there, because you're working your way up, and you want to get to the top, so it's like a challenge, you know, and your body is there, and your identity is there, and you've made success, and other people can see you are there, it's not like a piece of paper where you're at your table and you've got 20 other people in the classroom with you, and no one knows where each person is, you know, this is, and you can give each other help. (Marty)

In this description, the spatialised movement of avatars from platform to platform on the screen is reconfigured as a spatialised movement of embodied selves from accomplishment to accomplishment. In the way that Klang (2004) describes the relationship between avatars and their creators/users, the avatar in Marty's account is 'seen as a reflection of the offline self' (Klang 2004, 390). The success of the avatar/self in the learning activity is seen as socially situated, 'not only the physical representation of self within the online environment but also a social being within its own social circle and a corresponding position that follows this social position' (Klang 2004, 391). Of particular interest is the way that the materiality of physical learning environments is placed under erasure and rendered irrelevant in Marty's account. Because the embodied subjects present in the classroom are seen as bounded by its normative constraints, the students in the face-to-face setting are constructed as unable to contribute to the learning of others. In contrast to the concerns expressed by some of the other participants in the study, who feared that learning relationships would be diminished within online/virtual environments, here the proximity of bodies in the classroom is seen as irrelevant precisely because the potential for recognisability and intelligibility is over-ridden by the seeming impossibility of traditional modes of face to face classroom participation.

Simulating learning: classroom practice, pedagogic relationships and subjective in/stabilities

In this section of the paper, we turn to a consideration of ways in which professional values and practices are inserted into discourses of the teaching self amongst participants in the study who had only recently begun teaching online and/or were reluctant in its use. For a number of teacher educators in our study, the move from face-to-face classrooms into online teaching is relatively new, and poses considerable challenges to strongly held views and commonplace practices implicated in the production of teacher subjectivities. From our own perspectives as teacher educators whose work involves a range of teaching modalities, we are mindful of wanting to avoid constructing an either/or binary around online and face-to-face teaching. It is not our intention to overlook the multiple models of blended and flexible modes of teaching and learning that are currently in use in Australian higher education, including in the university departments where we conducted this research, nor to imply that our participants are unfamiliar with or unaware of such models. What we found particularly interesting in the full data set, however, was the extent to which participants' accounts so frequently rely on and reproduce such a binary, irrespective of the multiple contradictions in which either/or binary is implicated. Their accounts highlight the subjective demands experienced by teacher educators who are

simultaneously positioned as learners of new technologies, as demonstrators of idealised (online and face-to-face) classroom practice *and* as managers of new forms of pedagogic relationships. For these participants, the tensions between multiple subject positions are managed, at least in part, by constructing their own teacher subjectivities as stable and enduring. Some of these educators, we argue, maintain a view of face-to-face classroom teaching and learning as an authentic way-of-being – in other words, as the conditions through which stable, responsible and enduring teacher subjectivities are forged and maintained.

Teacher and student subjectivities are for these participants constituted primarily in terms of what they perceive as embodied, co-present pedagogic experiences, interactions and relationships. Even though teaching and learning in higher education quite often occurs independently of the physical spaces of classrooms and lecture theatres, and is less reliant on co-presence than school-based classroom teaching, a number of our participants rely on a model of co-presence in constructing meanings about what teaching entails. In turn, while these teacher educators' subjectivities are undoubtedly shaped by their emerging technological skills and new roles within their workplaces, their approaches to online teaching continue nonetheless to be mapped onto what they see as firmly held professional values and entrenched pedagogic practices. In a number of cases, concerns about potential detriments to pedagogic relationships have considerable disciplinary currency, with some departments actively encouraging the formation of geographically designated workshops, study groups and/or peer mentoring programs for students in online subjects or programs, in order to encourage the cultivation of face-to-face encounters and pedagogic engagement through physical co-presence. For a number of teacher educators in the study, this approach is important in supporting their contention that the online learning environment should ideally simulate existing classroom practices and replicate pedagogic relationships according to face-to-face models of teaching and learning.

Rita, for example, discussed her transition from initially resisting the possibility of learning and teaching in online environments – which she at first saw as 'inappropriate' and 'completely ineffective' – toward taking an active role in the implementation of online delivery within her department. Rita sees her initial resistance as being primarily a consequence of her preferred approach to developing relationships with students, and the vigilance she felt was required in order to maintain relationships with her students in the online learning environment. Her comments speak to the considerable tension between what she values as important to good teaching, what she sees as possible in the online environment. She describes her early encounters with online teaching and learning, which occurred shortly after completing her undergraduate qualifications, as something that she thought of as 'entirely inappropriate and would be completely ineffective'. When asked to explain, she commented:

> Because I thought, 'How can you possibly teach the skills that teachers require without being face to face? How can you possibly explore and understand and benefit from written information in a correspondence type course if you want…when there is so much to be gained through the interactions that you have in tutorials and with lectures and that sort of thing?' I just couldn't see it working. (Rita)

In this account, the qualities that Rita associates with being a good teacher are seen as skills that must be learned through the immediacy of face-to-face pedagogic encounters. Acquiring the necessary techniques and dispositions of normative classroom practice is seen largely as a consequence of didactic transmission. The effectiveness of teacher education – 'teaching the skills that teachers require' – is predicated on the teacher educator's creation and maintenance of normative classroom environments and activities. Thus it is hardly surprising that for Rita, maintenance of a teacher subjectivity that is intelligible to herself and others requires a commitment to the discursive norms of classroom practice. Although she comments favourably about

her more recent involvement in online teacher education, and having taken on the challenge of mastering necessary technological skills in order to make the transition to online teaching, she is careful nonetheless to disavow any perceived departure from an already established teaching subjectivity:

> Interviewer: So has the experience [of shifting into online teaching] changed how you think about yourself as a teacher?
>
> Rita: No, I don't think it has because I think in everything I do I try to simulate the classroom environment as best I can so any support I would offer students, any ways of working with students, are very similar in the online environment to what they are face-to-face.

Rita is working diligently, as she describes in considerable detail, to maintain a teacher educator subjectivity constituted in stable and enduring terms within a significantly reconfigured teaching and learning environment. Managerial drivers within her own university, and within the higher education sector more broadly, place increasing demands upon her (like others in the study) to produce herself as a flexible, globally-oriented, techno-savvy academic. Such pressure is brought to bear in multiple ways, not least of which is the growing view of university management that online education is increasingly important for ensuring the viability of Australian tertiary programs, driven by the 'allure of technology's economic promise and by the fear of being squeezed out of an increasingly competitive global marketplace' (Kenway et al. 2006, 38). The working out of such pressures is described by one senior administrator in the following terms:

> … leeway was given this year for people saying 'No, I don't want to do it [teach online]', but in the future there's just not going to be that out. If you won't do it, I think to finish that sentence would be, we'll find someone who will. And so it will become a performance issue. I mean, it is that strategic, this decision. (Kim)

While teacher educators may respond to such institutional expectations with regard to online teaching, there is nonetheless considerable tension between externally imposed demands and internally maintained beliefs and practices. For Rita, aligning herself and her workplace practices without compromising her deeply held views about herself as an appropriate teaching subject is managed by incorporating notions of persistence and determination into her narrative of the teaching self:

> … for me though, I'm the sort of person that once I get through that initial sulking about what's not working, it gets the better of me and I think, 'No, I'm not going to let that get that beat me' so I keep at it. And I managed to get through all of that. (Rita)

Rita's initial frustration with acquiring necessary technical skills and overcoming her personal misgivings, is reconfigured here in the terms of both self-censure and self-mastery. She momentarily steps away from the discourse of self as educator to take up a position of self as self-managing learner and worker. Compliance to the changing, and at first unwelcome, demands of her workplace is reconfigured as agentive, autonomous and personal achievement through which she is able to preserve a teaching subjectivity that is both discursively intelligible and institutionally viable.

Conclusion

This paper has considered some of the complex and contradictory ways in which the subjectivities of teacher educators shape their engagement with online teaching and learning. We have argued that the attitudes toward and approaches to online learning and teaching of the teacher educators in our study are predicated on their perceived subject positions as either 'stimulating'

or 'simulating' particular kinds of learning interactions. Importantly, it is not our intention to imply that one mode of delivery is better than another, nor to overlook the multiple possibilities for blended or flexible delivery, nor to suggest that the preferences and orientations to pedagogy preferred by some are more or less valid/valuable than those of others. Rather we are interested in here in the extent to which teacher educator subjectivities actively shape the decisions and practices involved in the transition from one pedagogic modality to another. Indeed, while the dilemmas and tensions in online and face-to-face teaching and pedagogic relations may differ in certain ways, we note with interest that teaching subjectivities are never free from the effects of such dilemmas and tensions.

Understanding the subjective challenges and possibilities negotiated by teacher educators such as those considered here, we would suggest, is central to understanding the complexities of successful online delivery of tertiary programs. In particular, we contend that understanding the subjective dimensions of tertiary educators' involvement in transitions to and continued involvement within online subject/course delivery is crucial to understanding the potential learning and teaching challenges associated with moves to flexible modes of delivery. The significance of teacher subjectivities to the everyday pedagogic practices, as well as the willingness to innovate and explore new pedagogic possibilities, suggests a need for new approaches to university staff development in the area of online teaching and learning. Such approaches need to incorporate opportunities for teacher educators to reflect upon the ways in their subjectivities are shaped by existing models of pedagogic practice and relationships, and to actively engage with the challenges of online teaching and learning as opportunities for renegotiating not just teaching practice, but also teacher subjectivities. Ultimately, we would argue, the site of teaching subjectivities is crucial in determining the potential for online pedagogies to either stimulate or simulate learning in teacher education.

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