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Ethical Implications of Global Scientific Communication: Exploring Classroom Practices in Technical Communication Courses

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ABSTRACT: The fields of science, technology, and technical communication are increasingly international and global in nature; thus, people working in these fields must learn to effectively and ethically communicate with people from other countries and cultures. This paper explores the ethics behind teaching global communication to science and professional communication students, and preparing them for such interactions.

KEYWORDS: collaboration, communication, ethics, globalization, intercultural rhetoric, intercultural communication, international communication, global communication, technical communication, science writing

1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Friedman (2006) popularized the idea of a flat world, a world where more people than ever “collaborate and compete in real time . . . with people from more different corners of the planet . . . than at any previous time in the history of the world” (p. 8). But what Friedman calls flat, others call globalized. Globalization has numerous definitions, especially when considering how it is viewed in various disciplines. For instance, economically, globalization can refer to “the integration of the world economy into one large market” (Faber & Johnson-Eilola, 2002, p. 136). For purposes of this paper, however, I adopt Starke-Meyerring’s (2005) reference to “the increasing interdependence and integration of social, cultural, political, and economic processes across local, national, regional, and global levels” (p. 2). It is also important for my discussion to distinguish between internationalization and globalization where, as Scholte describes, “international is embedded in territorial space; globality transcends that geography” (as cited in Starke-Meyerring, 2005, p. 2). The idea behind this distinction is that globalization goes beyond physicality and conventional contexts, perhaps even allowing for new conceptualizations of national borders and creating new guidelines for effective communication, especially across cultures.

One thing globalization has brought to light is that societal problems (environmental, health, and political) are not isolated nationally; the largest societal problems we face today are global issues because of our interdependence on one another and our physical and global connections. And because of our global interconnections, there is no one discipline or even one country that can solve the problems that we face today. We must collaborate between disciplines, and we must collaborate internationally (Sa & Oleksiyenko, 2011).

When collaborating across cultures and national borders, however, establishing trust can be complicated by national and cultural issues, such as issues associated with language.
English is the lingua franca of scientific communities worldwide; however, there is evidence that non-native speakers of English are highly disadvantaged over native speakers (Cameron, Chang, & Pagel, 2011; Ferguson, Perez-Llantada, & Plo, 2011). The ethical implications of international scientists having to conform to using English and Western communication conventions are profound, and it is equally important to understand that language competence does not equate to cultural understanding or national values, which are key to building trust and creating effective collaborative relationships.

An important question to ask regarding our evolving global workplace is how are college students being prepared for international collaboration? Given that professional and technical communicators are an integral part of science and engineering communities, and science and engineering students are often required to take technical communication courses, there has been a great deal of discussion regarding global collaboration and intercultural rhetoric in technical communication curricula. Bracken Scott (2010) provides a literature review on including intercultural communication in technical communication curricula which covers complicated issues, such as determining which areas of intercultural rhetoric are most important for graduates and will adequately prepare them for the workplace, as well as controversies regarding how to teach those competencies. I would add that along with understanding and debating the issues brought up in the Bracken Scott review, scholars must also conduct research on effective global collaboration and communication. I have conducted one such study, and through my research on professional and global communication, I am exploring ways to integrate effective and ethical communication strategies into technical communication courses that serve professional writing, science, and engineering students. Putting aside the monolingual approaches to intercultural communication often promoted in many technical communication textbooks, I look at ways to challenge students to approach international communication outside of their Western-centric perspectives.

In this paper, I discuss how globalization is changing the workplace, and I identify new skill sets needed for effective global collaboration and communication. I cover ethical concerns behind various approaches to teaching these new skills, and I share what I learned from my own research on the Bologna Process. One of my overarching goals for this research is to help students in my technical communication courses understand the ethical implications of international scientific collaboration and communication in a global environment.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to a 2006 report from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), there are “more than 77,000 TNCs [transnational corporations] in the world, with more than 770,000 foreign affiliates [that generate] an estimated $4.5 trillion and employ 62 million workers” (p. 3). Additionally, Schmidt, Conaway, Easton, and Wardrope (2007) reported that “100,000 U.S. firms are engaged in overseas ventures valued at over $1 trillion; foreign investment in the U.S. has now surpassed the $2 trillion mark . . . [and] $1 trillion of business is done on the Internet” (p. 3). A global workplace is not only the consequence of increased economic collaboration across countries and among cultures; migration rates have dramatically diversified the workplace as well. In the United States, twelve percent of its total population is foreign-born, and Canada, Switzerland, and Australia have nearly double that figure (Suárez-Orozco, 2007).
In regards to science and technology, Wagner (2011) conveyed that according to the “United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), since the beginning of the 21st century, global spending on R&D has nearly doubled to almost a trillion dollars, accounting for 2% of the global domestic product” (p. 77). Other trends in scientific communities include the contextualization of scientific endeavors in that scientific studies must now show benefit to society and be linked to “users, problems, institutions, and industries” (Jiménez & Escalante, 2007, p. 571). Mirskaya (2007) mirrors that claim by noting that traditional science often had national agendas attached to it, but now researchers must put aside national interests when working collaboratively with other countries. National funding also becomes an issue as no one country can or will bear the entire costs of a collaborative venture (Mirskaya, 2007). Along with trends in economics and public scrutiny of scientific endeavors, Melkers and Kiopa (2010) stated that scientific collaboration has increased and is also increasingly global in nature. This increase is due to a desire to expand the scientific knowledge base of certain projects as well as share the funding.

As a consequence of our now globalized and highly diverse workplace, intercultural collaboration and communication skills must be addressed in higher education curricula. Such skills include being able to effectively communicate and negotiate across cultures and engage audiences in a way that allows stakeholders to contribute to documentation efforts (Starke-Meyerring, 2005). The question for educators, then, is how to best teach these skills without privileging one country, culture, language, or rhetorical approach over another. To begin this process, students must critically analyze the many meanings behind the word culture and how stereotyping is instigated and promoted. For instance, one traditional view is that culture is static and that certain groups of people or geographies have common traits that are easy to depict and which define individuals. This static view of culture reduces individuals to some sort of trait list. In many textbooks, trait listing has evolved into two approaches to teaching about culture: the universalist and particularistic approaches. Generally, the universalist approach looks for “communication universals” and has been used as the basis for Simple English or wording that avoids idiomatic language. One problem with this approach is that there are no culture-free texts or images because culture cannot be categorized into universals, and this idea of Simple English infers that “our” way of communicating is superior, and “we” even have the recipe for how to communicate with other cultures by stripping away certain words to make our message clear and understandable to others. The particularistic approach is a search for static traits that are assigned to certain groups and result in a list of dos and don’ts. This creates a strong us-them mentality, or viewing culture as a “study of others,” which, once again, reduces individuals to a list of traits. It regards culture as something “unchanging and congruent” (Starkee-Meyerring, 2005, p. 8).

Along with helping students realize that various communication styles exist and that one is not superior over another, they must also address issues of culture in relation to trust. Groups that are comprised of multilingual and multinational members are challenged in building trust with each other, especially when a group is working virtually (Henderson & Louhiala-Salminen, 2011). In order to build trust, teams will generally try to find some sort of common ground, which in many instances is a common language. Henderson and Louhiala-Salminen (2011) report that a common language, however, does not always equate to common ground because trust and expertise are often erroneously linked to linguistic competence. In other words, one may have a grasp of the English language, but this does not mean the individual has the technical expertise often attributed to him or her based solely on language
competence. Likewise, a monolingual individual may not have the ability to work with others in multilingual settings, which can affect trust and comfort within a group. It is interesting to note, too, that trust among multilingual members is often achieved as they work together on the challenges of communicating in the shared language. Even making an effort to speak more than one language is viewed as an act of goodwill towards other group members and has a positive effect on trust within a group.

Along with issues associated with intercultural communication, technical writing has a reputation of being a type of writing that is objectified so that scientific concepts are conveyed clearly and accurately, without any bias or interpretation, and that any audience, even non-native speaking readers, can understand the science being conveyed. There is tremendous debate within the professional and technical communication and scientific communities about whether or not this is even possible. I cannot possibly cover the whole debate in this paper, but the central issue is generally about whether or not technical and scientific writing is rhetorical and humanistic or whether it is positivistic, a type of writing where ideas and content are separate from language (Allen, 1990; Dobrin, 1983, 1985; Miller, 1979; Moore, 1996). Thus, this debate is often the basis for some scholars who wish to make the argument for scientific English.

Along with a review of the literature on ethical approaches to global communication, it is important to have firsthand experience with this type of writing, especially when teaching others. In order to achieve this goal, I conducted a study on the Bologna Process that provided me with tremendous insight and has led to further study and a more culturally sensitive and ethical approach to teaching global communication in my technical writing classes. In the next section, I provide details about my study, and then expand on lessons learned in the Discussion section.

3. AN INDEPENDENT STUDY ON GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

To gain insight into what I might teach students regarding communication in evolving global contexts, I chose to study a contemporary global event that is comprised of 47 countries and even more cultures, but who also chose to use English as the lingua franca of the organization. It was my goal to study the documentation of the Bologna Process to understand how such a diverse membership collaborated and worked toward the common goals that they have achieved in the last 14 years.

3.1 The Bologna Process

The Bologna Process is an international effort where 47 countries are working together to reform higher education to improve employment opportunities and boost economies across Europe. It is a voluntary initiative among European countries to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is not a physical place, but rather a European higher education structure by which member countries have transparent and comparable degrees. The Process is completely voluntary and involves the cooperation of multiple stakeholders including higher education ministers, governments, employers, students, faculty, staff, European organizations, and quality assurance agencies (EHEA, 2009). The Process is also promoted as being a democratic membership that has distributed authority. What this means is that there is no one central authority governing the Bologna Process, but rather, positions of authority are rotated
among members. From a rhetorical perspective, and in regard to professional and technical communication, the Bologna Process is a supreme example of global communication that embodies the following characteristics that demand further study.

- **Complex and hierarchical documentation structure:** The Bologna Process has several levels and branches of documentation that have an intricate web of connection to one another. There are guiding documents, also called ministerial communiqués, but there is also a tremendous mass of working documents produced by various working groups.

- **Common or shared goals:** The Bologna Process is comprised of 47 European countries that have committed to strengthening Europe as a whole economically and technologically through necessary reforms in higher education. Thus, no one member state or set of countries will benefit over others; success can be achieved only if all members work together.

- **Diverse membership:** The 47 member countries are but a count of national diversity; this does not include the multiple cultures and languages spoken in each country that also must be considered in every decision.

- **Multiple stakeholders:** Higher education reform cannot be achieved at the institutional level only; the type of reform called for through the Bologna Process involves the active participation of governments, employers, higher education institutions of all kinds, faculty, students, staff, and other European organizations and agencies, such as credit and accrediting organizations.

- **Collaborative nature (completely voluntary membership):** There are no legally binding contracts for being part of the Bologna Process. Some changes in educational policy do require legislative modifications at times, but those changes are implemented at a national level.

- **Members with strong historical connections:** Because of the close proximity of European countries, there is a long history of conflict and then periods of cooperation. After World War II, there have been numerous efforts and treaties designed for Europe to cooperate and operate as one unified continent. The Bologna Process is part of that effort toward unification; however, the history the member states have with one another cannot be ignored when analyzing Bologna documentation.

One of my goals in studying the Bologna Process was that I wanted to explore the rhetoric of the Bologna documentation to see how collaboration took place between these 47 countries. Thus, I conducted a rhetorical analysis of two levels of documentation: the ministerial communiqués which are the guiding documents of the Bologna Process and the result of a formal conference by the ministers of higher education every two years, and a selection of working group documentation for one of the Bologna objectives (the qualifications framework). My guiding research questions were:

1. How were the common goals of the Bologna Process rhetorically developed in the ministerial communiqués, and did the language used to define those goals help this group move closer to what Kenneth Burke (1966) calls identification?
2. In what ways was the goal of democracy or equal representation demonstrated in the documentation?
3. How did members negotiate between self-interest and the best interests of the group?
3.2 Results

In professional and technical communication, there is heavy reliance on the specificity of language similar to what Burke (1966) would term “scientistic” language. Such language relies on definition or naming and tells us what something is or is not (Burke, 1966). Likewise, American textbooks on professional and technical communication stress clear, concise, direct, and specific language, free of qualifiers, redundancies, trite phrases, and ambiguities, as desired characteristics of professional communication (Boveé & Thill, 2006; Britt Roebuck, 2006; Goodall & Goodall, 2006; Kreuter, 2013; O’Rourke, 2007). These ideas, however, contrast with the rhetoric found in the Bologna Process documentation, especially in the ministerial communiqués, the guiding documents of the Process. Vague and interpretive language dominates the ministerial communiqués and was one of the most common criticisms of participants. The vagueness of the communiqués led to what students claimed were overstated accomplishments in implementation (European Students’ Union, 2007), as well as “sometimes optimistic and sometimes self-flattering tone of national reporters” (European Students’ Union, 2009, p. 6). Additionally, it was evident from the working group documentation that the rhetoric of the communiqués impeded progress on reaching consensus among group members because working groups had to constantly debate what may seem like common terms in higher education, but, when considering these terms in relation to 47 countries, multiple cultures, and in historical and traditional contexts, became highly complex and sometimes controversial. In fact, some languages did not have an equivalent translation for certain words and some countries and institutions did not have equivalent concepts either. An example of the terms debated included:

- Accreditation
- Degrees
- European dimension
- Joint degrees
- Employability
- Two-tier system
- Workload-based credits
- Lifelong learning
- Qualifications
- Mobility
- Quality assurance

These debates, while frustrating for the working groups, appeared to serve as a means for bringing this highly diverse group closer to what Burke (1966) calls identification because in their interpretation of the abstract and ambiguous language, the group had to focus on commonalities among the 47 countries and not on differences. While Burke says it is difference that allows us to see our similarities, the documentation showed that the group acknowledged and highly regarded their diversity, but they were extremely motivated to work toward common or shared goals for the benefit of the group. Thus it may be that the rhetoric of the Bologna Process documents may have helped this group make the progress they have over the last 14 years without dissension or the group disbanding. Furthermore, the abstract and ambiguous language may be seen as a rhetorical strategy to empower group members, dispel
fears or concerns of politics and power associated with historical tensions among European countries, and promote the ideas of a European community and democracy among group members. Consequently, the discussions and debates may very well have been one way of encouraging democracy and connection among Bologna members.

The ministers made it clear from the beginning that they wanted the Bologna Process to take on a democratic form of governance. To determine how democracy and equal representation were demonstrated in the Bologna documentation, I considered if the vague terminology of the Bologna documents was a deliberate communication strategy called strategic ambiguity. According to Eisenberg (1984), strategic ambiguity is where “individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals” (p. 7). The use of vague language to define organizational goals, especially, has been found useful in cultivating creativity and flexibility because it allows for multiple interpretations, which can be useful, especially among diverse groups. And while vague language certainly can create problems in communication, it also can have a positive effect on strained relationships and reduce conflict (Eisenberg, 1984). Considering the historical and political tensions among European countries, the ministers may very well have used strategic ambiguity to foster agreement without mandating specific actions or standards among a membership that would most likely resist such an approach due to historical and current political tensions among countries.

According to Burke (1950), a lack of explicitness where indirect rhetoric is used to “protect an interest” (p. 36) may be a strategy for misanthropic purposes or for being cunning. Certainly, when one views the ministerial communiqués in light of their role in the global image of the Bologna Process, the vague rhetoric may serve the purpose of protecting ministers and other Bologna participants from being held accountable for the progress reported as mentioned by the students; however, when one views the purpose of the ministerial communiqués as being guiding documents of participants, the vague language serves a couple of different purposes that result in positive outcomes for the group, most especially in terms of promoting democracy. In this respect, the cunningness of the rhetoric serves the purpose of protecting the interests of members as a whole, which further results in stronger unification and closer cooperation of group members; thus, it cannot be classified solely, or even primarily, as being deceptive.

It is also possible that due to the historical connections among member countries, the general language of the ministerial communiqués actually empowers members. While the working documents indicate frustration and sometimes criticism of the language of the ministers, one has to wonder what members’ reaction would be to a top-down approach where ministers tightly controlled the Process to the degree that they did not leave room for the development of objectives by allowing members to interpret and define certain terms according to their own country’s and cultural needs. This is an especially important consideration given the multinational and multicultural makeup of Bologna members. Instead, the fact that the vague language led to working groups debating and negotiating the terms of Bologna can be seen as a bottom-up approach, where members are given a sense of power and ownership and a way to negotiate between self-interest and the best interests of the group.

Likewise, historical connections may have played a role in using a bottom-up approach as well. From the beginning of the Process and well into 2009, members indicate a wariness of the “harmonisation” called for in the Bologna Declaration, which, to many, represented a reduction in and lack of respect for diversity. Europe is grounded in its diversity, as is the Bologna Process with its equally diverse membership, and it is doubtful that the ministers
alone would have been able to capture such diversity. But more important is how would members interpret that type of direction when they are already concerned about standards (or harmonization) being imposed upon them? Instead, while a more time-consuming and lengthy process, it was a far more democratic gesture to allow discussions to take place among working group members for the sake of ensuring and reassuring members that the group was indeed democratic and that all nations involved owned the Bologna Process individually and collectively.

4. DISCUSSION

The Bologna Process gives professional and technical communication scholars and teachers reasons to consider when vague language is needed, possibly inevitable, and actually quite effective in professional, and, most especially, global communication, without the stigma of it being cunning rhetoric. As an American, I caught myself reading the Bologna documents, which are written by and for Europeans, with a monolingual and American-centered view of the rhetoric. When viewed from this perspective, initial readings of this type of documentation can bring about false criticisms, especially when little or no knowledge of the rhetorical situation is known. By learning more about the historical and current political background of the Bologna countries, as well as understanding more about the concept of the “European dimension” that is an approach to higher education that makes sense for all of Europe and not one that would simply replicate the US structure for Europe, I was able to broaden my perspective on what characterizes effective professional and global communication. I use my own personal experience with this research as an example of how globalization demands new approaches to and perspectives on the communication practices of the 21st century. This is not an entirely new concept. For instance, Paul and Strbiak (1997) mention that strategic ambiguity allows people to agree only in the abstract, which preserves the plurality of voices, a necessary approach to reaching consensus among Bologna members. And Jarzabkowski, Sillince, and Shaw (2010) state that modern organizations often have ambiguous contexts characterized by multiple constituents, diffuse power, and diverse interests—all characteristics of the Bologna Process—and because of the ambiguous contexts of modern organizations, they argue that classical rhetorical approaches that involve one identifiable speaker to a specific and co-present audience is ill-adapted to modern organizations. I am not arguing to do away with previous definitions of professional and technical communication that call for precise, direct, and concise language or for classical approaches to professional communication in some instances, but we may now need to expand our definition of what effective professional and technical communication is, especially in global contexts, by drawing on precise language when appropriate, and using ambiguity when dealing with decentralized power situations that allow for problem-solving, consensus, community building, and democracy, especially among diverse, multinational, and multicultural groups. Additionally, more research is needed to help American teachers and students learn how to step outside of a monolingual-US-centered perspective when working in global contexts in order to allow the communication to take on a truly global nature.

Other studies have similar conclusions to my study. For instance, Starke-Meyerring (2005) addresses the ideologies of power that result from globalization and the economics behind it. Just as my study examined the approaches Bologna members took in order to achieve equality and democracy among all group members, Starke-Meyerring contended that
the economic power behind TNCs is a force that shapes the “global order,” and it is imperative that students learn how to critically analyze corporate ideologies. But power is not only an economic issue; as mentioned earlier, power is also seen through linguistic competence. Thus, power struggles also result in scientific communities where expertise and knowledge are often mistakenly placed in the hands of native English speakers (Jiménez & Escalante, 2007; Ferguson et al., 2011).

While globalization affects each of us in one way or another, and evidence of it continues to grow in all areas of our lives, Americans are still relatively protected from the influence of other cultures. As I attempted to make clear in the beginning of this paper, the workplace is increasingly global, and American students in our classes today need to learn new skills to not only compete in today’s workplace but to collaborate and cooperate with colleagues from all over the world. This is definitely an ethical issue. In this next section, I discuss ways that teachers can, at the very least, make students aware of global issues in professional and technical communication in global contexts.

5. STRATEGIES

Globalization and global communication are still fairly new concepts that have taken hold in contemporary society. While much research has already been done in these areas, more studies are needed, especially in terms of finding the most effective strategies for teaching about these issues in college classrooms. While there is no overall consensus about how to teach effective international collaboration and communication, some strategies are less problematic than others in that they are more culturally sensitive and are aimed at moving students away from stereotypes and toward a more inclusive approach in professional relationships. In order to identify effective strategies, it is helpful to first identify the challenges or obstacles to teaching intercultural communication. Cardenas (2012) cited DeVoss, Jasken, and Hayden’s five main challenges:

1. Moving students beyond the characteristics of their own cultures;
2. Replacing notions of cultural stereotypes (positive and negative) with fluid, dynamic understandings of tendencies;
3. Limiting the guidelines for good intercultural communication to guidelines for good technical communication in general;
4. Developing a more sophisticated sense of the design considerations necessary for intercultural communication; and
5. Encouraging students to move intercultural communication beyond the classroom (p. 147).

To move students beyond the characteristics of their own cultures, it is important to help students understand that North American conventions of technical writing are not universal (Bracken Scott, 2010). This can be achieved through a study of cultural values that are communicated or implied in documentation from other countries and cultures. For instance, when I show my classes documents from the Bologna Process, we discuss the ambiguous language and the importance of using such language with the Bologna members. Their understanding of the value of such an approach was enriched when we discussed the historical tensions among European countries and how they were working to overcome those tensions.
through democratic rhetoric that normally would be replaced by more concrete or direct language in American documentation per our conventions.

In order to help students understand stereotypes, it is important for them to understand the various connotations associated with culture. In my classes, this is brought about by first analyzing what it means to them to be an American, then a southerner, then a person from a small western town in North Carolina, and finally, an individual. By discussing the list of traits that began at the higher level, students were able to see that such traits do not necessarily trickle down to specific locales and certainly not to individuals.

Many students come into my technical writing classes thinking they are going to learn formulas for how to write clear, concise, and objective scientific reports. They are shocked when I tell them on the first day that is not the case. Good technical communication is good global communication because there has to be an understanding that language is highly rhetorical and “facts” do not speak for themselves. There is no Simple English that can be stripped of all idioms so that “others” can understand “our” meaning, and to subscribe to such ideas is ethnocentric and implies a sense of superiority. Students can, however, be taught how to critically analyze ideologies of power and public policies to “see how particular identities, interests, representations come under certain conditions to be claimed as universal . . . and thus achieve dominance” (Starke-Meyerring, 2005, p. 16). This can be achieved in several ways depending on the focus of the technical writing class. In my classes where I emphasize the rhetoric of science, I often ask students to analyze how scientific information is used to inform public policy. To do this, we analyze the rhetorical conventions found in certain scientific documents and then analyze the way science concepts are incorporated or being used to persuade or mandate certain actions.

Cardenas (2012) stresses that intercultural communication should not be presented to students as a problem to solve, but rather as “opportunities to engage with audiences/clients in creative and reflective ways” (p 155). In order to help students move intercultural communication beyond the classroom, I find that in many ways this happens naturally when some of the other challenges have been addressed in the classroom. What I mean by this is that once students are shown how to critically analyze a particular power structure or ideology and it is discussed to the point of them being able to explain their understanding of such concepts, this usually has a cascading effect in that such analysis begins to take place outside of the classroom, such as when they conduct research for other courses, most especially in their majors. Many students report back to me how I’ve “ruined” them in the way they read or view professional documentation because now they see how power structures or other agendas are being constructed or maintained through the use of language.

And last, it is important to stress to students that while language competence does not equal cultural understanding, the importance of them learning a second language can build a great deal of rapport between them and others in multicultural and multinational settings.

6. CONCLUSION

Some may view globalization as creating new challenges, but as an educator, I see globalization as presenting opportunities for students to learn valuable skills that are long overdue. The Internet and global economics have paved the way for greater awareness of our multicultural world, and due to the interdependence that many countries around the world have with one another, future generations from all corners of the world must communicate and
collaborate with each other. Many previous attempts to educate students about such strategies have proved to be problematic; thus, this dilemma provides opportunities for scholars to discover new approaches that will facilitate equality, goodwill, and trust among highly diverse groups that must collaborate and cooperate for the good of all involved.

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