

Invited Article

Considering the Future of Higher Education for Adults: A Problem-Posing Essay

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Abstract

This problem-posing essay examines the dichotomy that generally frames discussions concerning the higher education of adults; namely, the tendency to see skills and knowledge as two distinct academic goals. It seeks to instigate a more critical analysis of why educators remain so steeped in dichotomizing instead of taking a both-and approach to their work—an approach that listens to myriad voices in the field to better inform praxis. In addition, this essay highlights the potential of the Blended Shore Framework for Education to aid in the development of adult education programs across cultures, ideologies, and nations.

Introduction

Institutions of higher education, as much as they constitute the *social* institution of education for adults, have traditionally fulfilled a mandate of producing and disseminating knowledge that claims to aim at addressing the needs of society. Tethered to each player's values and status, however, the game of defining the purpose of higher education has seen a set of balls tossed about within two kinds of playing fields: in one, we find those pitching a utilitarian approach with applied studies, and in the other are those fielding liberal arts education as primarily idea-grounded. Escotet (2012) asks us at the outset of his essay on this theme, "What is the purpose of higher education – knowledge or utility?" (p. 1) and he confirms with such a question that we tend to follow our deeply ingrained values of first seeing the world in dualities. "Such questions encourage a false dichotomy since both are needed for

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people's genuine education; never one at the expense of the other," he continues (p. 1). Yet, in the playing fields of education, we have segregated skills from knowledge, content from process, and we have mixed up concepts of teaching with those of learning, or assessment with those of evaluation. Short-sighted by deeply held assumptions and values, we vehemently support such segregation with credos and educational philosophies we have not critically examined. Are we, in our education professions, at risk of failing current and future social mandates that ought to acknowledge the realities of those we are to serve and are we ignoring the multitude of voices, which ought to inform our work?

As recently as during the 2011 conference of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) conference, keynote speaker Dr. Jamie Merisotis, CEO of the Lumina Foundation, was, however politely it occurred, drawn into a debate with university faculty members in the audience. Fundamental to the Lumina Foundation's message about a need to re-design higher education is the premise that those institutions have a crucial role in closing the skill gap to meet an international economy's need, and to provide accessible and rigorous education and training for a demographically diversifying population in a rapidly changing workforce. At the root of the professors' critique of the Lumina Foundation message was their value-driven mindset, namely that their purpose is not training and skill development, which is paralleled to workforce preparation. Not debated was what values are embedded in Lumina's message, however, and that is the urgent, global need to move away from dichotomization of the purpose of higher education for adults. Primary, secondary, and post-secondary learning of knowledge and skills is needed by the very people we are to serve, and ought we not provide access to such education and training opportunities in our institutions of higher education, too? The often-made distinction that skills belong to the training field and knowledge to that of education ignores that the short-term nature of learning skills that are practiced and applied simultaneously or in settings immediately after instruction goes hand-in-hand with the more long-term endeavor of deepening one's knowledge of theories, principles, and analysis to be applied to tasks at hand as much as to individual and community development. Does anyone remember Bloom and his associates? What is wrong with considering the variety of instructional approaches that have shown to work? (Bloom, 1956; Harrow, 1972; Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1973; Pohl, 2000). The dichotomizing of learning skills vs. learning knowledge reproduces values-based categories that do not speak of the sort of

inquiring minds and attitudes we ought to expect from *professionals* in our *profession*. A stance of not examining the values in which we ground our roles and strategies renders our profession less capable of serving the needs of learners and communities appropriately, and that is aligned to the tasks at hand.

Why would educationists argue against flexibility in delivery formats and variety of content in our higher education institutions or quarrel with providing high quality, accessible, and affordable instruction that addresses the needs of all stakeholders? Students', employers', and social and public institutions' needs, surely, can be addressed within education and training program offerings, within the academy as much as within new designs and business models in our institutions that include partners from many sectors. As a profession, we balk far less at accepting vendor-driven solutions and *learning technology* (whatever that really means) with which we recruit, mentor, and instruct students than we are willing to sit with those of differing ideologies or mandates to design fitting education solutions to our world's issues of creating and sustaining viable social systems by means of education. We do continue to discuss and dichotomize the purpose of education in this country as much as around the globe. Our profession may need to be reminded of what educational theorist, John Dewey, proclaimed in 1938, "The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile" (p. 61).

In 2012, who is to say whose values ought to prevail to determine this *worth*? In 1938, Dewey made clear that strict imposition of standards or traditions, within content or process of education and irrespective of within which playing field it fell, does not serve society well if we seek to develop into a well-educated and skilled human being, capable of making decisions within the context of deeply grasping one's own reality and that of others. And I think he would have agreed with Ozmon and Craver (2003) about the purpose of education, "Thinking about education without considering the practical world means that philosophers of education become web spinners of thought engaged in mere academic exercises" (p. 1).

The purpose of the social institution we call *education* is not an *either-or* proposition as it has been pitted in these sort of debates during professional organization meetings such as our annual AAACE conference, in the USA's public dialogue on the matter, or in international entities for that matter. In our education institutions, we all too often

segregate education into applied and practical *utility* to prepare adults for workforce participation and into education for the sake of increasing a type of knowledge termed liberal learning that is said to signal the sophistication and effectiveness of an educated and cultured adult. How such a dichotomization came about is not at the heart of the thoughts presented here. That we need to refocus on the purposes and formats of higher education for adults *is*. That we need to acknowledge the pros and cons of the business aspects of the education industry *is*. And that we need to lift our service in our profession to a higher standard than what we currently experience *is, too*.

The considerations presented here intend to offer an opportunity for critical analysis as to why, in so termed democratic systems, we seem to remain so steeped in dichotomizing instead of taking a *both-and* approach to the kind of teaching and learning we ought to do in our institutions; an approach that listens to myriad voices in the field in order to inform our praxis. And the *we* here refers to our interchangeable roles of learner and teacher, at whichever point on a spectrum of teaching or learning we may find ourselves at any given moment in time of this lifelong and life-wide learning journey. This essay intentionally stays away from framing arguments within particular political-governmental structures' value systems. It is, however, unequivocally grounded in the educational philosophy of liberatory education, seen as a means for self- and community growth and development, in its myriad dimensions and levels.

One Premise and Three Main Themes

At a time in history with its worldwide shifting economic, ecological, political, and cultural landscapes, education and training has been elevated to a central issue in the discussion of globalization, by any of its disparate definitions. Those of us toiling within institutions of higher education continue to stoically reify factions and, wittingly or not, reproduce conflict and division about our purpose as educationists without the input from those we claim to serve. We also tend to only *visit* in communities and rarely engage in partnerships with business and community leaders to inform our practices. Much of the time, we truly have no clue about the life reality and educational and training needs of our students, in spite of the many research projects we publish on such matters. Moreover, basing instructional approaches and relationships on

interpretations of standardized test scores and criteria developed without the direct input of the great diversity of students we aim to serve, and designing courses of study without the feedback from stakeholders in other sectors of society, we merely reproduce prevailing values. Honoring a colleague and friend who recently passed, allow a brief anecdote to make a point. Dr. Phyllis Cunningham and I engaged in many “dis-courses” during my studies and later team-teaching with her. During one particular faculty meeting, applications to a doctoral program were discussed by faculty. I was new, straight from my work in community-based organizations in the margins. When faculty pompously considered the “potential” of applicants, I balked at the positionality and values that drove their discussion. “Who are you to make judgments on a person and her potential in these halls? Isn’t it our job to facilitate the learning?” Phyllis understood, and stood with me on such questions. The student with “questionable potential” was admitted and went on to great work in her field. As Johnson (1993) concluded, “However defined, the function of education as *paideia* for the most part remains dominantly what it has been: preservative, culturally specific, and conservative” (p. 27). Yes, social reproduction prevails in higher education. We continue to espouse a unity of purpose for education, and that is reiterated on plaques of vision and mission statements in the halls of our institutions as much as it is writ in international declarations and manifestos. Internationally, we support *education for all* as a commonly held value. Do we know how to operationalize this and practice what we preach?

The premise underlying the considerations put forth in this essay is tethered to these unexamined assumptions of commonly-shared values and needs; namely that education as a social institution intends to provide the context for empowerment and betterment of individuals and societies. The veracity of this premise is a highly contestable assumption in the praxis of our profession, and it ought to be critically examined. In the academy, we need to ask ourselves if the programs we offer do, indeed, intend to achieve what the four pillars of the Belém Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2009) declare. These four pillars of education, delineated by the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century are “learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together” (p.1).

Accepting this premise, however, three themes guide this essay and call for mindful problem-posing (Freire, 1970). These themes are at the heart of the debate of the future of higher education for adults:

1. The **purpose** of education and training and what critical knowledge and skills in this century will be the means for individual and sustainable community development
2. The **spectrum of instructional roles and approaches** of teacher and learner in institutions of higher education within the context of such a purpose and the emerging theory of Metagogy.
3. The **subject** of education and training.

Within these three themes, more questions than answers will be raised, so I hope. Yet, within the conceptual framework of liberatory education (Freire, 1970; 1998), awareness of the need for rigorous problem-posing, action research, and input from stakeholders beyond that of the educationists only in the development of relevant teaching and learning in our institutions of higher learning is precisely what this essay seeks to achieve.

What is the Purpose of Higher Education?: Who Determines the Content?

If knowledge, skills, self-awareness, and peaceful co-existence are at the root of our mandate, how do we define the purpose of higher education for adults in the decades to come? As track records in terms of enrollment, completion, and competence indicators corroborate, we tend to jump to conclusions before having adequately identified and considered the realities of learner, teacher, institution, and others in our political, economic, and social systems, not to mention the intercultural and international dimension of them. Do our educational solutions serve the needs of the learners?

Community colleges remain the *port-of-entry* for higher education and training, particularly for first generation college attendees with 42%, as seen in the 2012 statistics of The American Association of Community Colleges. Not surprising is the demographical distribution of college enrollment therein stated:

- 68% White
- 27% Black
- Hispanic and Non-Resident tied at about 1 %
- 39% Male

- 61% Female
- 13% Single Parents.

Although colleges and universities have geared up to embrace a “diverse and diversifying” student population for a number of years now, the U.S. Census Bureau (2012) predicts major changes in population growth over the next 20 years. Whites will decrease from 64% of the population in 2012 to 61% in 2032 and minorities will increase from 36% in 2012 to 39% in 2032.

The percentages of “white” versus “minority” are predicted to converge to equal proportions in about the year 2044. In the meantime, the question of the purpose of higher education becomes a multi-faceted one if we maintain that we wish to address the needs of students. What are we doing in terms of research and program design that is grounded in the daytime and nighttime realities of all potential adult students in higher education?

For example, if most students in post-secondary education institutions are women and this is a trend predicted to remain for a decade or two, what do statistics of women in the workforce tell us regarding the content and delivery format needs of education and training programs for women? According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2011) following are the workforce statistics regarding women:

Long-term unemployed:	42% White women 40% Latina women 49% Black women
Part-time employed:	20% White women 19% Latina women 18% Black women
Weekly earnings:	\$703 White women to \$856 of White men \$518 Latina women to the \$571 of Latino men \$595 Black women to the \$653 of Black men
Of these were college educated:	36% White women 17% Latina women 26% Black women

If education for all is a means for bettering one's station in life, then, given even a cursory analysis of such numbers, it can be said that college students could come from among the population of women; women who currently work part-time or are likely to have been long-term unemployed, and women who juggle childcare and other crucial obligations. We know this. We adjust our educational and training offerings to the needs of this population? Juxtaposing recruitment assumptions gleaned from this data sampling for a moment to the predicted 20 fastest growing jobs for women (Forbes, 2010), we need to wonder about the veracity of claiming that institutions of higher education are or ought to be focused on workforce preparation as their main purpose in educational/training programs. These fastest growing jobs for women are primarily in the human and veterinary health care industries ranging from home health aides to medical assistants to veterinary technologists and technicians and lab animal caretakers. Instructional coordinators, paralegals, medical secretaries and social workers join skin care specialists and athletic trainers in jobs with incomes ranging from \$18,000 to \$60,000 annually. Do traditional institutions of higher education for adults address the education and training needed for such positions? Should they? Should they compete with the plethora of proprietary schools and vendors of skill training, by many means, to provide the employees for these fastest growing jobs? Should our institutions engage in knowledge production, and analyze the current, international, socio-economic conditions and realities of those who need to earn more than subsistence incomes as means for sustainable economic survival? The intent here is not to provide data and its evaluation in rigorous manner; my intent is for us to ponder this example and ask how higher education institutions can engage in research and evaluation of the needs and realities of those we are to serve, and then move to serve them with innovative and much more flexible education and training solutions than we currently envision. Because if the purpose of our institutions of higher education is to contribute to "learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together" (UNESCO, 2009, p.1) within the context of global societal changes, then we need to learn to listen to the voices in all sectors of society to critically analyze the needs and assets of stakeholders.

The realities of stakeholders bear on *why, what, and how* an institution of education ought to function if it is to fulfill the roles expected of it by those it intends to serve. Whose expectations and needs this business of educating and training is to address is a question that ought to be identified and analyzed interdependently among stakeholders if education is to optimize the assets of a society and lead to that promised better

life, proclaimed locally and internationally as the premise underlying our profession. *That* we must uphold high standards of skill and conduct ourselves as educationists ought to be a given and toward that end, we must carefully examine our practices of teaching too.

**Blended Shore Framework of Education (BSFE):
Toward a Metagogy in the 21st Century Education Professions**

Blended Shore Education is a concept of an approach to developing and implementing adult education programs across cultures, ideologies, and nations (Strohschen, 2009). Essentially, it is a framework for interdependently blending instructional practices to implement contextually appropriate education programs within a “culturally reflexive consciousness” (Gergen, 2009, p.x)

Four Pillars

How can we identify, amplify, and listen to the great variety of voices that speak of stakeholders’ realities? How do we get to the roots of our own meaning-making and that of those other from the self? During the research for the *Handbook of Blended Shore Education* (Strohschen, 2009), themes described by education practitioners from around the globe emerged recurrently enough to form a pattern, and these themes I termed pillars have been traditionally and internationally controversial in the education discourse, particularly within our environment of globalization and commodification of education (Jarvis, 2001; Chen, 2003), by any definition for these concepts (see Figure 1). These pillar themes intend to frame the discourse and are representative of key concepts, which ought to be examined in the context of program design and delivery: development, lifelong education/learning, standards, and spirituality.

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Concepts for (re)Consideration of Assumptions and Values</u>
Development	Hegemony/Neutrality/Intentions
Standards	Professionalism/Collaboration
Lifelong Learning/Education	History/Constructs/Reality/Research
Spirituality	nterdependence/Indigenous Wisdoms

Figure 1: Four Pillars

The four pillars were selected based on the exploration of these themes by Brookfield (2009, pp. 27-43), Daun (2009, pp. 45-61), Lynch (2009, pp. 63-70), and Sambuli-Mosha (2009, pp. 71-83). Each author details their perspective on the theme, which bears considering and re-considering. In the handbook, readers were implored to bracket their prevailing perspectives in order to examine their assumptions and to embrace realities and viewpoints espoused by these authors for the duration and purpose of thorough reflection and analysis. Because education philosophies and cultural values and assumptions vary, disparate definitions will and should emerge during such reflection, or such (re) consideration. The intent is to clarify the varied definitions and meanings of the concepts and principles within each pillar theme because we use lenses that are based on culture, personal narratives and histories, and experiences.

These themes, categories, and descriptors, identified and fleshed out by the findings of the action research for the handbook, were not hugely surprising or innovative. When education is seen as a human right that has as its purpose the emancipation of disfranchised people (and franchised people, actually, too) to gain access to the knowledge and skills needed to participate in developing and implementing sustainable social, economic, and civic/political communities for the ultimate betterment of their lives, then education programs fulfill the mission of higher education institutions.

The main and hoped-for outcome of inquiry into and critical reflection about the concepts and definitions inherent in these themes is a deeper grasping of self-awareness and clarification of one's own values and assumptions. The Blended Shore Education approach considers this a prerequisite for becoming and being an educator. Clarity on the roles and approaches in our profession is essential for the development of education and training programs for adults.

Learning-Teaching Spectrum

With examination of values within the context of these pillar themes, the Blended Shore Framework of Education (BSFE) offers a learning-teaching spectrum (see Figure 2). The spectrum upholds an interdependence among the relationships, the role of the instructor, and the instructional approach as an opportunity for inter-subjectively selecting the most suitable combination of the most appropriate approaches to a given learning task at hand. It is a metagogy (Strohschen, 2009) that encompasses education content and instructional process considerations

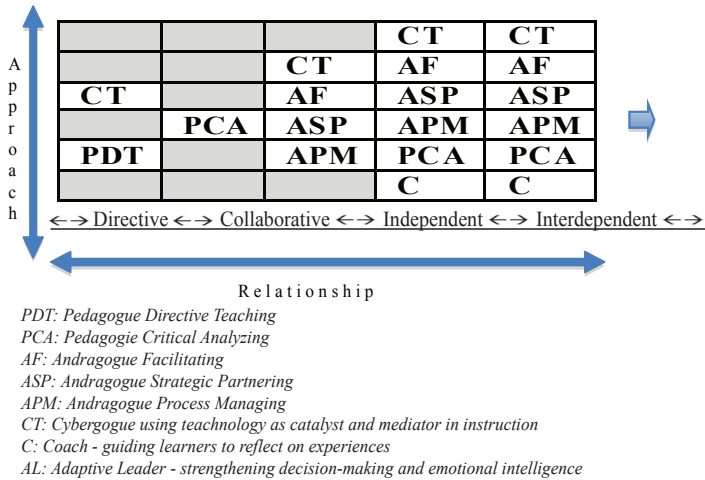


Figure 2: The Learning - Teaching Spectrum, from Strohschen & Elazier, 2005; Strohschen, 2009. Graphic rev. 2012

that align with clarified and made-transparent credos and educational philosophies. The spectrum’s intent is that of guiding the selection process for content and process of instruction to avoid the *either-or* manner of education program design and delivery. The axes are defined by the learner-teacher interactions/relationships and the instructional approaches, which, after the examination of values and assumptions, offers a matrix within which to discern the contextually most appropriate approaches to education program development and delivery. Needless to say, this includes the input of both student and teacher:

**Instructional Relationship
X Axis**

- Roles of Learner and Teacher
- Direction of the Learning-Teaching

**Instructional Approach
Y Axis**

- Educational Philosophy
- Purpose of the Educational Offering

Once the purpose of education or training is based on identified needs for educational offerings and transparency between student and teacher on the varying instructional approaches, both engage in a reciprocal dance of teaching and learning. The BSFE guides decision-making about appropriate, dynamic, organic, and adaptive approaches

of program development and delivery, for programs to provide fungible, proactive, and immediate responses to the changing demands on and of today's adult student and educator, *irrespective* of culture, location, or context. These relationships and approaches are *universals* for discerning and informing the process and content for what is to be taught and learned and how.

The “?” indicates the yet to be completed theory of “Metagogy,” which foments a *both-and* approach to the design and delivery of education and training programs, embracing all “gogies.” Currently, educators from several countries, from a variety of educational institutions and settings, are engaged in the Metagogy Project (see <http://www.linkedin.com/groups/Metagogy-Project>). Fifteen chapters are under review and analysis to build out this theory. Essentially, metagogical development and delivery of education programs:

- Will be grounded in values of social interdependence
- Espouses interdependence as the guiding value in any collaboration
- Respects indigenous wisdoms and sees “indigenous” as any one particular groups’ ways of knowing and ways of doing that are contextually relevant and meaningful
- Blends such indigenous wisdoms and local knowledge with established global standards and good practices, if and when confirmed as appropriate by stakeholders, to synthesize varied approaches
- Co-constructs educational programs based on critical reflection to make socially responsible choices
- Embraces universal standards and competencies in the professional practice of educating adults as deemed appropriate when vetted with stakeholders
- Acknowledges the spiritual domain of learning and incorporates delivery strategies into those geared to address traditional cognitive, affective, and psycho-motor domains.

While considering, examining, analyzing, and then re-considering one's values and the values of those *other than self*, one's own values and assumptions are seen more clearly. Collaborative program development and delivery across any boundary can now be created, wherein educators can transparently select appropriate approaches to reach identified goals. Teacher and learner now have a more common grasp of goals, being able to view them from multiple angles. We can now

consider self and others-in some ways outside of a preconceived self or image of self. This type of collaboration is one gained when being in relationship with other such “selves,” and it is tethered solidly to the action needed by those in whose benefit and for whose reality both decide to take a particular action. Most importantly, this approach at least offers the opportunity for leveling skewed power relationships within the context of instructional/learning relationships. Of course, such opportunities are possible only when the premise underlying this essay is the shared value, which regards education as a means for individual and community development by means of collaboratively developed and delivered education and training.

The Subject of Education is the Adult

In the education and training profession, we may need to rethink what the *subject* in our instruction or in our programs really is. When we say that the subject of education and training is *the adult* (or *the student*), our work and values are guided by a whole new meaning than when we focus on content and process alone. This is an instrumental consideration to add to our theme in this essay. If *the adult* is the focus of our work and *all* we do in the context of higher education institutions pivots on doing our part in the leading forth (lat. *educere*) of this adult, then our roles, structures, relationships, and approaches cannot function unless informed by and with these *adults or students*, and unless designed to address those stated purposes and needs of the *subject* of our teaching.

Understanding one’s values and those of others, which may be different from one’s own, happens within constituted awareness of self, or what Stanage (1987) termed person (i.e., read this as “person underlined”). Person is who one has become when one has gained clarity of self. Person is what one has become, self-aware, after having arrived at the capacity to understand self and others *at the intersection of* universal mutuality or common ground. According to Stanage, such common shared intersection or mutuality is intuitively ascertained (in a phenomenological sense of intuiting) and after having been engaged in the deliberate “educative” process that is teaching and learning. This “education” is an interdependently conducted deconstructing and subsequent co-constructing of values and assumptions one holds, and about consciousness of the self one is or believes to be. Within this “education” process, this mutual leading forth, learning is not only mind-centered

but cognition and intuition are reflexively paired and analyzed to bring about clarity of person (Strohschen, 2012, pp. 207-221). Such are considerations grounded in phenomenology. (Like many of his mentees, I am grateful for the awesome opportunity to have worked with Sherman Stanage during my studies at Northern Illinois University and urge us to revisit the landmark guidebook for investigating education he left us [1987].)

Simply put, it is my contention that only within such constituted awareness, such state of becoming and being person that emerges during learning, can an individual then interdependently deconstruct and subsequently co-construct education program development and delivery approaches with others. As an educator, one ought to be person before one takes on the task of guiding, mentoring, instructing, or leading others.

Conclusion

Examining and clarifying values, assumptions, and stated premises about the purpose, content and process of education and training, then, is tantamount to what Freire insisted be a precursor for any educational activity, namely “problem-posing.” In the USA as much as internationally, the discourse about higher education centers on preparing adults for what we now term the *international knowledge society* and about how our programs have, will or ought to become the means for developing vocational, professional, cultured, civic, and political skills in order to create and sustain healthy, prosperous, and peaceful societies. Such sentiments are debated during strategic planning and when crafting vision and mission statements that are to guide our institutions. The betterment of individuals and societies by means of education is, after all, what educationists claim is at the heart of our profession. Improvement of one’s station in life; grasping the meaning of one’s existence; becoming a sophisticated, educated, and engaged citizen; and elevating social interactions to align with respective (often democratic) ideologies because of increased knowledge and skills are internationally sanctioned core values by the powers-that-be, promoted within institutions of higher education. Toward *values*, the disfranchised and the haves alike strive in all corners of the world. Statements of noble and humane sentiments cut across countries’ socio-political structures. The problems to be posed and the questions to be identified focus largely on who gets to be at the decision-making table and who gets to define the prevailing values that guide the actions of the social institution we call education.

This essay hopes to have presented initial questions to begin appropriate problem-posing that also leads to amplifying the voices not in the mainstream so that they also inform the discourse about: “What is the content of higher education? Who gets to define it? How does it differ from training? What do adults in the 21st Century need to know and be able to do? Should this knowledge and these skills be taught and validated by institutions of higher education? For whose benefit do we produce and reproduce systems of education and schooling? What ought the professional in an education institution know and be able to do? Toward what are we accountable in our profession?”

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