# Multimodal designs for learning in contexts of diversity

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper aims to identify multimodal designs for learning in diverse and developing contexts, where access to resources remains vastly unequal. Using case studies from South African education, the paper explores ways of surfacing the range of students' resources which are often not noticed or valued in formal educational settings. The studies showcased here demonstrate how ethnographic and textually-based approaches can be combined. Opening up the semiotic space of the classroom through multimodal designs for learning is important for finding innovative ways of addressing access, diversity, and past inequalities. This is of relevance not only to South Africa, but a range of global contexts.*

*The paper argues that multimodal designs for learning can involve interrogating the relation between 'tradition' and 'modernity'; harnessing students' creative practices as resources for pedagogy; developing metalanguages for critical reflection; creating less regulated pedagogical spaces in order to enable useful teaching and learning practices.*

*Keywords: Multimodal classrooms, design, agency, access, diversity*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper explores ways of designing multimodal learning for access in contexts of diversity in order to inform a social justice and equity agenda. Access is both material (including access to computers, books, teachers) and symbolic, including access to particular forms of knowledge and mean-ing-making. The challenge is to facilitate recognition of students' diverse resources, whilst at the same time enabling access to the content and discourses of official curricula and formal methods of assessment. The paper offers South Africa as an instance of a multilingual, culturally diverse site in a recently decolonised country. In South Africa the connection between "research, educational practice, and an agenda for social and political change" (Jewitt, 2014, p.xvi) is emphasized and multimodal approaches pay "attention to equity, participation, and social justice" (Jewitt, 2014, p.xvi). In many ways, a multimodal approach has offered South African researchers and educators a framework within which to contest and work against the narrow, prescriptive ideas of apartheid education (Archer & Newfield, 2014). In this framework, representation is seen as the action of socially located, culturally and historically formed individuals – a view which highlights "multiplicity and multi-perspectivity [as] foundational principles of semiosis, instead of singularity and prescription" (Newfield, 2013, p.142).

With 11 official languages (Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu) and many different groupings, South Africa has often called itself the 'rainbow nation'. The diversity of language, culture and ethnicity that characterises South African educational contexts can be viewed either as productive, or as a manifestation of gaps in resources and in language proficiency. English is perceived as the language of power and of access to both local and global marketplaces, and as such, has been chosen as the medium of instruction in most educational contexts. This has consequences for the majority of students for whom English is not a mother tongue. Also, access to education remains unequal. Many schools suffer the ongoing legacy of apartheid education and are characterised by under-prepared teachers, poor student attendance, weak leadership, lack of desks, toilets and textbooks. These factors have contributed to unsatisfactory matriculation results and high drop-out rates at university level.

In this context, I examine designs for learning which recognise students' semiotic resources and at the same time enable access to curricular and disciplinary content. The aim is to explore ways of designing multimodal learning spaces in order to surface and recognise students' 'brought along'

resources. I have argued elsewhere that 'recognition' of resources is an important feature of a pedagogy for social justice (Archer, 2014). Recognition is about valuing and integrating students' resources and utilising them in a range of contexts. By resources, I mean both students' experiential resources and semiotic resources, such as colour and upcycled materials. A crucial aspect of recognition is the notion of 'design' as agency.

### DESIGN AS AGENCY AND SOCIAL ACTION

How and why people choose to represent from a range of options points to the notion of 'design'. 'Design' is the process of giving shape to the interests and purposes of the sign-maker for an assumed audience using the available semiotic resources (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 174). Design, in this sense, rests on choice and is always political, that is, it is subject to power. Kress's (2014) application of the concept of design to pedagogy gives rise to alternative approaches to questions of recognition and access. He looks at design as semiotic work which underlies every act of meaning making and points to 'recognition of the worker, of the principles brought to that work, of the materials with and on which work is done' (Kress, 2014, p.15). Recognition demands an openness: 'A generous view will necessarily be based on ethical principles and demand that we ask questions about choice, design, and their consequences for inclusion and exclusion, for access and lack of access' (Kress, 2014, p.151). The notion of 'design' recognises the large number and proliferation of resources and that meaning-making is about choosing and assembling resources according to individual desire and ideological position as well as perceptions of audience and context. In the act of making meaning 'learners produce multiple signs in textual forms across semiotic modes, drawing on different representational resources in order to succeed in that domain' (Stein, 2000, p.333). The concept of design thus inheres in all meaning-making, is central to pedagogy, and to questions of recognition and access.

As mentioned above, the aim of this paper is to explore ways of designing multimodal learning in order to surface and recognise students' resources. It does this by discussing how various South African researchers highlight students' 'brought along' resources'. These different studies (Stein, 2008; Thesen, 2007; Harrop-Allin, 2014; Newfield, 2013) share some methodologi-

cal tools as well as certain methodological challenges. What they have in common is a deep and nuanced sense of context. They also have in common a multimodal social semiotic approach to analysing texts and pedagogical processes, one of three approaches to multimodal research work identified by Jewitt (2009). The first approach is multimodal discourse analysis, which is based on systemic functional linguistics and aims to uncover the 'grammar' of semiotic resources. The second is multimodal interaction or conversation analysis, which focuses on the use of semiotic resources in interaction. The third approach is multimodal social semiotics. Here, the focus rests on how semiotic resources are used within particular social contexts and are governed by social practices. The social semiotic approaches taken by the South African researchers discussed here assume that meaning is made through the selection and configuration of modes in texts and through the interests of the sign-maker in a particular context.

A multimodal approach is relatively new and some theoretical and methodological tools 'remain unsettled, others need further development, while some are yet to become firmly established' (Jewitt, 2014, p. 5). The studies discussed here thus employ a combination of methods to surface students' brought along resources. Some studies combine methods from 'academic literacies' approaches, namely the notion of 'talk around texts' (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Here researchers get students to talk about and around texts in order to make sense of questions of interest, agency, identity and semiotic work, such as a lecture (Thesen, 2007) or metaphorical objects (Archer, 2008). Focus group discussions, individual interviews or written reflections are some of the methods used in this approach. Other researchers, such as Harrop-Allin (2014) and Stein (2008) combine ethnographic-type approaches with social semiotic textual analysis. In this approach, texts are seen as 'punctuations' in the process of meaning-making. The ethnographic-type approaches involve observations of classrooms and student practices over a period of time, in what Vannini (2007) has called 'socio-semiotic ethnography'. Theoretically and methodologically, multimodal social semiotic approaches and ethnographic type approaches are compatible because of their shared concern with the relationship between social context, social relations and meaning-making.

In order to explore ways of designing pedagogical spaces for recognition and access in diversity, this paper looks at the following: establishing a dialogue between 'tradition' and 'modernity'; harnessing students' creative practices as resources; developing metalanguages to enable critical reflection; creating less regulated pedagogical spaces.

### ESTABLISHING A DIALOGUE BETWEEN 'TRADITION' AND 'MODERNITY'

Acknowledging the relationship of the past or 'tradition' in relation to 'modernity' is central to an understanding of recognition and access. Tradition and modernity are not in a binary relationship but are interpenetrative and part of ongoing semiosis.

From a social semiotic perspective, meaning-making is always a process of transformation, in which cultural groupings use and transform the semiotic resources available to them to express their interests ...
What people make can be viewed as 'points of fixing' within semiosis. The points of fixing contain the past, the present, the future (Stein, 2008, p. 39).

South African classrooms contain a range of traditions that students carry with them from their homes, cultures and histories, as they move into formal and digitised learning environments. For instance, a complex, creative, traditional children's game, Xoxisa, in which young learners tell stories by piercing holes in paper (Harrop-Allin, 2014) will be discussed later. This tension between convention and change is the effect of the 'constantly transformative action of people acting in ever changing circumstances' (Kress, 2003, p. 108).

My students in a second year media course focused on typography and were tasked with developing a new font. Here is an example of how a student drew on the local resources around her, the posters outside barber shops in the black townships around Cape Town, in order to develop something new from something 'old' or retro. The aesthetic of the 'barber-shop' posters probably dates back to the 50's but they have resurfaced in contemporary signage in urban areas. The picture on the top left in figure 1 illustrates contemporary examples of these from barber shops. Peck and Banda (2014)

show how signage can be used to appropriate and reinvent space in Cape Town urban areas, and the placement of signs can signify spatial ownership, power relations and contradictions in social structure. The images on the top right and bottom left indicate the large packing craters which are often used as shops or dwellings in informal settlements in South Africa. The textured feel of the font was inspired by this surface. The designed font has a slightly uneven, hand-written feel, and a rusty corrugated metallic background over which the letters are overlayed. The primary blue and red echo the aesthetics of the barber shop posters. This 'barber shop font' example demonstrates how students' textual representations can signal an encounter between tradition and modernity, drawing on diverse knowledges and differently organized social worlds.



Figure 1. Barber shop font

Tradition is not immutable, but forever changing and capable of re-appropriation for contemporary purposes. Thus, looking forward need not involve a 'giving up' of something valuable. This additive notion of change is positive and powerful in developing and diverse societies such as South Africa.

### HARNESSING STUDENTS' CREATIVE PRACTICES AS RESOURCES FOR PEDAGOGY

In designing multimodal classrooms for access, the discourse and knowledge of the discipline should be made available, while simultaneously validating students' resources. This could enable a shift in power relations from top-down imposition to negotiation and discussion. It could also enable an expansion of the repertoire of resources to create semiotically open classrooms (including multilingualism and local semiotic practices). For instance, Harrop-Allin (2014) suggests that South African township children's creative practices should be recognised not only for the insights they offer about child development and informal learning, but as practices that may be recruited in the classroom. She explores how local children integrate their home language with other modes in an oral story-telling game called 'Xoxisa'. Xoxisa is located somewhere between play, performance and artwork; an oral narrative using visual, kinetic, sound and dramatic devices.

> The classroom desks are punctured with holes that break the soft wood, leaving deep scars. They have the 'map' of xoxisa stories engraved on them – little blocks drawn next to each other, some containing pen puncture marks, and others without. The grid is carved into the desk. They are evidence of children's stories imprinted into the school furniture; traces … of children's identities and lives, which inscribe their personal agency and power onto school materials. They are a child's mark pronouncing, 'I was here, this is what I said and this is how I said it' (Harrop-Allin, 2014, p. 19).

Xoxisa is located within, and draws from, a range of cultural, storytelling, social and communicative practices. It is embedded in the micro-sites of children's play, and the broader context of township schools, Soweto and South African urban popular culture. Xoxisa makes sophisticated use of

sign systems to produce a form of narration connected to the township context and to children's lives. The narrator uses a pen to 'tell the story', making dots and lines on a piece of paper where s/he has drawn a grid outline of spaces, places and characters. Improvised in the moment, much of Xoxisa's impact and meaning is in its impassioned performance. The narrator uses theatrical role play, alternating between the main protagonists, distinguishing character by the tone and tempo of voice. The intensity of emotion is realized through the pressure and speed of the pen hitting the page.



Figure 2. Grid structure of Xoxisa

Xoxisa's grid structure enables narrative, performative and movement freedom across a horizontal plane. Firstly, visual mapping allows for a fluid rather than linear narrative structure, supporting the improvisatory nature of Xoxisa story-performances. Secondly, the visual design facilitates the narrator's freedom, enabling the element of surprise and narrative choice. Because s/he can move her pen (the 'voice' of the story) from any block to another, the narrator can decide on the plot's direction, where the story takes place and who talks when. Finally, the grid design can incorporate addition as more blocks for places and characters can be drawn quickly.

Students' ability to choose and shape available visual, verbal, material and musical resources for expressive or representational purposes can be recruited in the classroom. Harrop-Allin (2014) suggests that Xoxisa-type activities could be used to compose words for a poem or song or to reflect on musical performances. If Xoxisa storytelling became more collaborative, children could learn turn-taking in developing stories, adding to the pen markings and grid design and co-operating in the unfolding plot. By drawing on students creative practices as resources, discursive and generic conventions can be brought into focus in order to show what kinds of social situations produce them.

I now look at another example of harnessing students' brought along resources – this time in a writing centre in a university context.

### USING OBJECTS TO REFLECT ON WRITING

In Higher Education, writing as a resource tends to be valued over other modes and thus the link between the real recognition of a range of multimodal resources and writing is important in terms of access. The Writing Centre aims to assist by increasing students' understanding of writing as a process and in this way facilitates access to Higher Education. I asked the Writing Centre consultants to reflect on their writing and their own resources by thinking about an object that signifies their relationship to writing. In this exercise, I saw objects as a way of mediating the multiple gaps between home, other contexts and the specific practices of Higher Education. I hoped that by becoming more reflective about their own writing processes, the consultants would be able to, in turn, help students with their writing.

Some of the objects the consultants identified were directly and obviously associated with writing, such as a keyboard, pencil, piece of paper and paintbrush. According to one, a pencil is 'always quite short, chewed up at one end, eraser used up or broken off, very much worse for wear and ugly'. For this consultant, writing is a process that is difficult, stressful (bite marks), slow (pencil rather than computer), requires constant breaks (to sharpen pencil), but also is reassuring, old fashioned, and personal. A blank page is seen as 'possibility and a space to write', like a promise of change and exploration, but also perhaps a bit like a mirror.

A paintbrush symbolises 'the relationship in my mind between image and text, and the leap I made at a certain point when I conceived of writing as "painting with words"'.

Other objects identified were not directly associated with writing and were more particular to the individuals' socio-cultural milieu. One of these was a botanist's herbarium. The herbarium files function as a hybrid book form. They are somewhere between 'reality' (the actual plants from the field) and the textual representation thereof. They have a particularly tactile quality and also engage the sense of smell. These material aspects of the herbarium serve as a reminder of the ways in which the concrete becomes abstracted into writing. Another consultant spoke about a woven basket as an object that signified writing for her (see figure 3). The basket is made up of individual strands of reed which have little use on their own as they are fragile and not very attractive. This changes when they become the 'stuff' of the basket, which is not only beautiful and logical, but also useful. They can be of various sizes, shapes, uses and colours, as can different genres of writing. This metaphor echoes the etymology of the word 'text' which in latin means 'to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build' (Online Etymology Dictionary). The consultant sees basket weaving and writing as a social activity, but also as an individual activity; there can be single or multiple authors. She draws analogies between weaving and cohesion in writing, and points out the patience involved in both.



Figure 3. Writing as weaving

This exercise on symbolic objects in the Writing Centre draws on both cultural and personal experiences. Objects are given meaning through the 'narrativisation of broader discourses of self, identity and biography' (Woodward, 2007, p. 6). The use of objects as metaphors serves to draw on the student consultants' resources in order to enable a highly personal sharing of the common experience of writing. It also enabled the group to think through different aspects of the complexities of text-making, developing a kind of 'home-grown' metalanguage. These kinds of metalanguages for critical reflection are what I turn my attention to in the next section.

## DEVELOPING METALANGUAGES / METAFORMS FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION

It is useful to be able to describe and theorize resources using a metalanguage in order to design an environment of recognition. A metalanguage can 'identify and explain difference between texts, and relate these to the contexts of culture and situation in which they seem to work' (New London Group, 2000, p. 24). However, complex metalanguages can be daunting for many students and could hinder rather than enhance the learning experience. Rather than propose an entirely new vocabulary, a metalanguage should serve as 'an index of discourse – ways of verbalising what you know in relation to other ways of knowing' (Thesen, 2001, p. 143). For instance, Salaam (2014) is developing a metalanguage of reflection and assessment for jewellery pedagogy – ways of talking about scale, texture, light and movement in jewellery design. And Simpson (2014) outlines a metalanguage for talking about civil engineering drawing in Higher Education. These kinds of studies are vital in making visible certain conventionalised practices in order to design pedagogical interventions and assessment criteria and inform teaching practice.

Although it is more common to use the written mode to reflect on the visual, it is possible for an image to reflect on another image or on writing (as in satirical cartoons and various kinds of culture jamming). Using these kinds of metalanguages or 'metaforms' for reflection in the classroom can ignite critical thought and dialogue – drawing attention to social boundaries and inequality. Critical metalanguages enable access to understanding and debunking of dominant discourses, rather than seeing these as fixed

and natural. They can be employed to interrogate which texts are valued and why, thus highlighting relations of power. In culture jamming, for example, the tensions between competing discourses is foregrounded in order to pass critical commentary on a social issue. The following are produced by a group called 'Laugh it off' in South Africa.



Figure 4. Culture jamming as a metalanguage of social commentary (http://www.laughitoff.co.za/)

Here the resources of brand names and logos are drawn on to evoke a familiar product through the size, shape and colour of the font. Slight changes to the words of the logos are made, but the rhyming evokes the original word, namely 'stealing' instead of 'feeling' and 'fat' instead of 'black'. Both the T-shirt and the image enable critical reflection on corruption and self-enrichment by government officials and are wonderful texts for critical engagement in the classroom. Parody and satire have long been forms of resistance in oppressive regimes, and have a long history in South African popular culture. The resources drawn on in these kinds of 'visual arguments' can be utilized in the classroom in developing metalanguages of critical reflection.

## CREATING LESS REGULATED SPACES

In multimodal designs for learning, it is important to create less regulated spaces in order to increase students' choices and allow scope for reflection. These spaces can be physical as well as virtual, such as online chats. In these

spaces, students can experiment with multimodal representation, draw on a range of discourses and employ humour or irony. Less regulated spaces can enable students to draw on a range of genres and modes. They can also open up opportunities for exchange of cultural and personal knowledge, and allow students who may have been marginalized to find a voice.

### *Lecture theatres*

By way of illustrating the power of less regulated spaces, I look at work by Thesen (2007) on lecture theatres. This may seem contradictory – that lectures are highly regulated spaces. However, Thesen, using ritual theory, picks up on what she calls the liminal moments of these performance spaces. In postcolonial settings, like South Africa, there are resource constraints and lectures continue to persist. Thesen offers new ways of thinking about lectures that highlight embodiment and performance, as well as multivocal and distributed meaning. She argues that lectures highlight the modes of orality rather than writing. They embody a tension between 'the strong coding of authority, single expertise and routine transmission on the one hand, and performance that introduces meanings related to physical presence and students-as-audience on the other hand' (Thesen, 2007, p. 35).

Convention tells us that the lecturer as the authority will present a coherent view of something worth knowing in the lecture space. This expectation may be shifted or challenged, resulting in liminal moments, when the lecturer's authority is questioned or subverted. Thesen describes such a liminal moment when a lecturer analyses a powerful and controversial text of Xhosa initiates watching a game of cricket. When describing the image, the lecturer refers to the 'immaculate forward defensive shot' and at the same time, acts out the gesture of a batsman. Later, he refers to the boys 'wearing their blankets, and clayed in the white clay of initiation' (Thesen, 2007, p. 44). On saying this, he moves his open hand across his chest as if identifying with the boys' experiences. In these gestures, he signals insider status to two rituals of manhood – the game of cricket and initiation into manhood in particular social groupings, which involves going 'into the bush' in isolation and undergoing circumcision and other rituals.

Thesen argues that what drew audience attention to this as a liminal mo-

ment, was the way the initiates moved from 'backstage' (as objects for analysis) to 'frontstage' (as judges of cricket). She looks at the students' reactions to this lecture. One student finds the lecturer's style 'exposing, but enabling'. She saw this moment as 'encouraging of how things have transformed' (Thesen, 2007, p. 45) in post-Apartheid South Africa. For her, a white South African male giving ownership to the initiates is progressive, a sign of respect. Another student, however, resented the way the image was presented. He found the lecturer's commentary "a bit offensive":

> The initiation ceremony is controversial. There are lots of people who fight over this stuff. Like that picture was showing the bad side of what's supposed to be done, showing people not respecting their culture [watching cricket during initiation]. (Thesen, 2007, p.45)

The comments indicate how students make distinctions based on their readings of symbols. 'While appearing to promote consensus and buy-in at an institutional level, ritualized action lends itself to struggles over the symbolic terrain, and potential ways of acting in the world' (Thesen, 2007, p. 45).

Thesen argues that for students arriving at university from such different backgrounds, 'there is some value in being able to experience symbolic access, and to be able to observe and receive, as one can in a lecture, rather than having to produce language in spoken or written forms, where your accent, control of the English language, handwriting, or familiarity with technologies such as ICTs, will immediately mark you' (Thesen, 2007, p. 40). She argues that the rise of the 'new media' may strengthen, rather than weaken, the potential of lectures: 'As the online environment gets drawn into pedagogy and assessment, and with the increased "textualisation" of academic work … this performative face-to-face aspect may be kept alive' (Thesen, 2007, p. 49).

Another face-to-face environment that operates very differently to lectures and on a much more intimate scale, is the Writing Centre space. In looking at these two spaces, it becomes clear how strong the link is between a particular learning space and the creation of an academic identity.

### *Writing Centres as transformational spaces*

As a learning space that embraces its sense of liminality, the writing centre is in a unique position situated on the fringe of the university, whilst at the same time functioning as an integral part of the university's centre of academic activity (see Archer & Richards, 2011). Writing centres are process-oriented spaces equipped with the task of changing writers. Bawarshi and Pelkowski's (2003) proposition of postcolonial writing centres as sites that welcome and foster multiple styles, processes and perspectives in writers is one that acknowledges the idea of an unregulated space. The writing centre is empty of a fixed content – there is no curriculum and no assessment, and the commitment is thus to a space rather than a particular agenda. This leads to a different conceptualisation than conventional teaching and, for this reason, writing centres can function as change agents, contributing towards changing the dominant attitudes to language and culture by shifting authority.

Unregulated spaces such as the Writing Centre serve to highlight that discursive practices are always ideological in the ways in which they serve to maintain existing relations of power. One of the consultants stated that she felt writing was an 'instinctive' process, that she just knew how to write without any direct thought about the process and what it entails. Her training as a consultant gave her insights into the conventions of academic writing and consequently enabled her to give voice to these conventions in a rigorous and logical manner.

> I realised that I had not been aware of the subtle 'rules' underlying good academic writing practices. My experience at the Writing centre helped me to become conscious of those 'rules' and...apply them in my own writing and in teaching students to write.

Here, the writing centre experience offered a language in which to communicate tacit knowledge to students thereby unmasking the hidden conventions of academic writing.

This links to the discussion about the value of metalanguages in making tacit practices overt in order to critically reflect on them.

One consultant revealed that he always had a desire to work with 'disadvantaged' students, that is, those he perceived to be on the fringe of university life. The writing centre as a space occupying border residency in the grand scheme of academic citizenship provided this consultant with his impression of who comprised the margins. However, the reality was much more complex that he had imagined.

> The mentoring space of the writing centre also got me out of that idea of 'it's only this type of student who struggles'…it's not just …township students, it's not just second language students who are struggling. Most students struggle at university with writing.

Writing centre consultants are in a liminal space, somewhere between students and professionals. The power structures become apparent in these kinds of liminal spaces, between students and between lecturers. In their vision of the postcolonial writing centre, Bawarshi and Pelkowski (2003) conjure up the idea of a mestiza consciousness as one that is 'marked by the ability to negotiate multiple, even contradictory, subject positions while rooted in the dominant discourse' (p. 90). One of the goals of the writing centre is to help marginalised students and writers achieve this consciousness.

One of the underlying premises of writing centre pedagogy is that a critical way of being develops through discussion and argument. Writing centres are thus dialogic spaces, which embrace the complex relationship between the spoken and the written, and how the written is understood by a reader. Transformation results through engaging in dialogue. Unfortunately, changes in academic life such as shifts towards performative practices and accountability have increasingly resulted in a reduction in dialogic spaces. It is thus imperative to recognize the value of such unregulated spaces where contesting knowledge and subject positions are foregrounded, and where interrogation within and across disciplines can occur.

## FINAL COMMENTS

Fundamental to the notion of multimodal designs for learning is the concept of transformation, that meaning-making is not so much about the use of a system, as the transformation of available resources. Design refers to the 'very process of engagement, transformations and sign making to explore the world' (Kress & Selander, 2012, p. 267).

This paper has argued for the value of multimodal designs for learning in approaching questions of recognition and access. It has argued that a multimodal approach is in the interests of access and educational equity in contexts of diversity. Although the examples showcased here derive from South African educational spaces, they are applicable to other contexts too, wherever teachers wish to implement and strengthen semiotic practice and democratic culture. I have shown how tasks that work across disciplines and defined domains of knowledge, as well as across a range of modes, media and genres enable more semiotically open pedagogical spaces. Widening the possibilities for representation in this way is important for finding innovative ways of addressing access, diversity, and past inequalities.

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