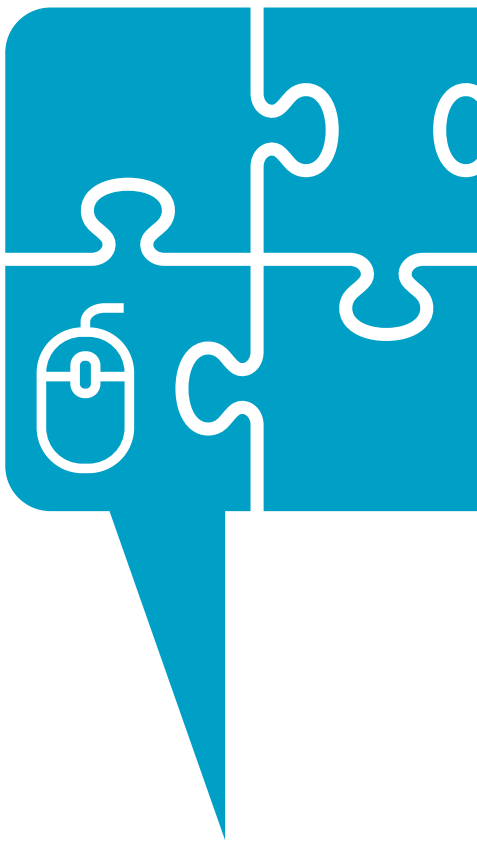
FEATURE

FOSTERING TECHNOLOGY-RICH SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCES

between School Librarians and Teacher Education Programs



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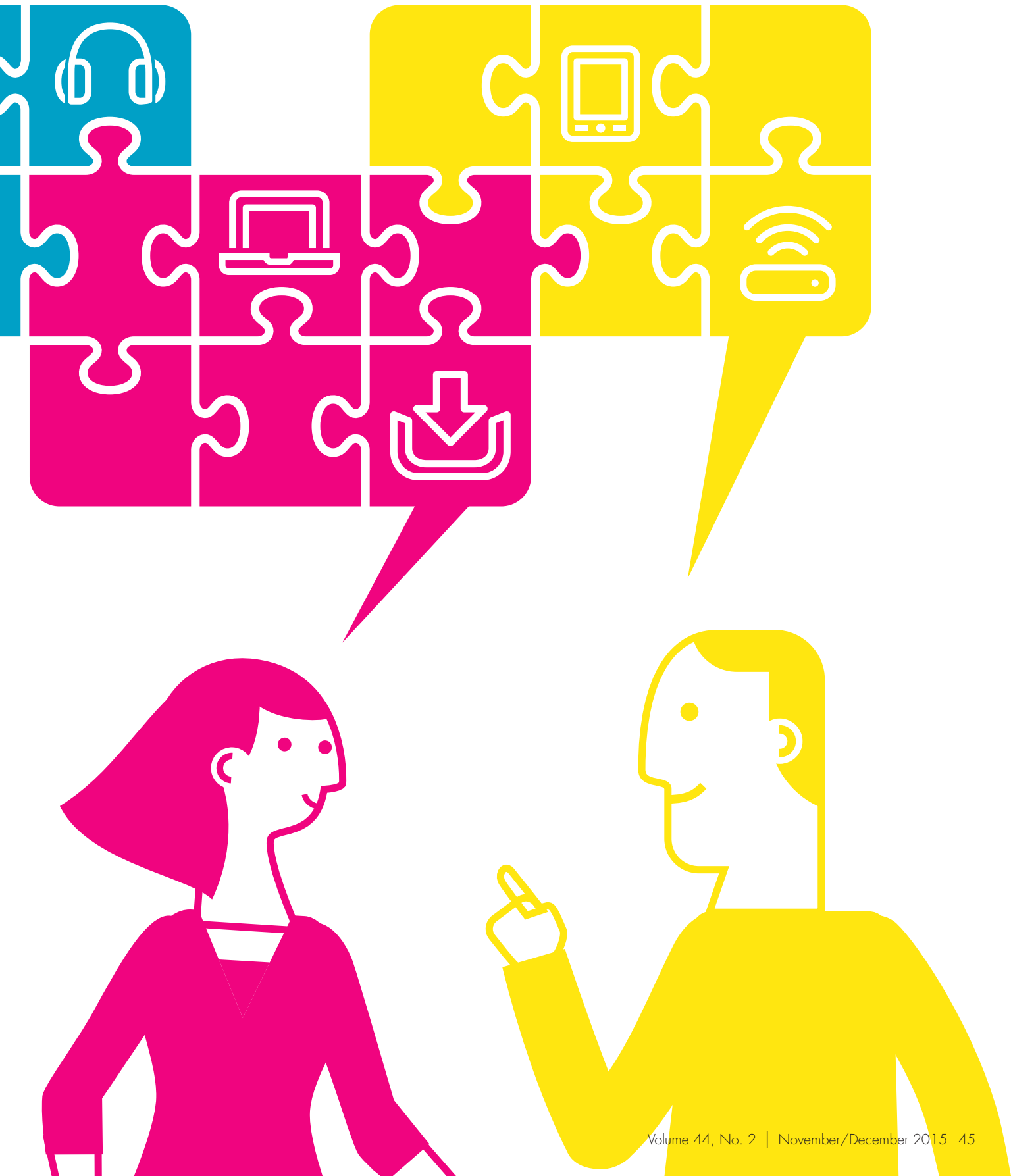

BY FORGING PARTNERSHIPS WITH TEACHER-PREPARATION PROGRAMS, SCHOOL LIBRARIANS CAN PROVIDE FIELDWORK SITES RICH IN TECHNOLOGY WHILE HELPING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS UNDERSTAND HOW SCHOOL LIBRARIES SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING.

Service Learning

Service learning provides an authentic outlet for learners to apply knowledge and skills. More specifically, Joseph A. Erickson and Jeffrey B. Anderson defined service learning as a way to combine community service with academic expectations (1997). Anderson later referred to service learning as both an educational philosophy and instructional method (1998). Service learning offers a wide variety of potential activities. Volunteer and community service are at one end of the spectrum while internships and field-based activities are at the other (Butin 2003).

Within the context of teacher education, however, teaching residency or student teaching may be different from service-learning activities because student teaching focuses on providing an opportunity for university students to develop their teaching skills as opposed to giving back to the community. A service learning activity should focus on the needs of Pre-K–12 partners and provide outlets for service participants to apply and refine related skills (LaMaster 2001). Both student teaching and service learning are field-based activities, but the emphasis and intent are different. "Service learning practice and scholarship is predicated on the belief that both the process and outcomes of service learning are universally beneficent" (Butin 2003, 1678). Thus, forming a partnership between the teacher education program and a service participant is a cornerstone to implementing service learning.

Library Perspective

School libraries are untapped resources for fieldwork by pre-service teachers. According to Amy Bitterman, Lucinda Gray, and Rebecca Goldring (2013), a majority of paid staff in public school libraries in the United States are state-certified teachers, and most of those school librarians provide both

technology and regularly scheduled library sessions to elementary and secondary students. Many school librarians have expertise in pedagogy and standards-based curriculum development, both for information literacy and for technology integration. Melissa P. Johnston (2012) noted that school librarians are expected to serve as technology leaders within their schools and that they are frequently overlooked in this role by researchers and academics.

By forging partnerships with teacher-preparation programs, school librarians can provide fieldwork sites rich in technology while helping pre-service teachers understand how school libraries support student learning. Service-learning opportunities in school libraries also open the door for future collaboration between school librarians and researchers. More pragmatically, pre-service teachers can provide additional support and knowledge for ambitious technology programming in school libraries. For understaffed libraries, the efforts of a few service-learning volunteers can allow the school librarian to enrich existing lesson plans or even add additional sessions or after-school clubs.

Teacher Education Perspective

Locating service-learning activities can be challenging for teacher education programs. Because local school districts are frequently asked to participate in research, residency programs, and other initiatives, they may be reticent to commit to new activities. The focuses of courses also influence needs and contexts for service learning. For example, pre-service teachers in diversity-focused courses are best served by experiences involving multicultural and ethnic expectations. How a teacher focuses lessons in a culturally homogenous setting can differ greatly from lessons in a culturally diverse setting; e.g., lessons at a public school on a Native American reservation may focus more on local events than lessons at an urban school that takes a more regional approach. Similarly, those in technology-integration courses need experiences that include exposure to common classroom technologies and the literacies, policies, and procedures associated with their uses. Yet Marlene Asselin (2000) found that few teachers knew about information, media, and technology literacies or how they related to the role of school librarians. Teacher educators should seek opportunities to connect pre-service teachers with in-service librarians and address this gap. Rebecca Hunt and Lara Luetkehans noted "by initiating library-classroom collaboration early in a teacher's development it is possible that student teachers will embrace the school librarian as an instructional partner throughout their career" (2013, 14).

Partnership Development

Based on these needs, faculty at the University of Wyoming began conversations with school librarians about the feasibility of pre-service teachers volunteering in authentic settings to gain technology-integration skills. Because pre-service teachers in a technology-integration course were beginning their degree programs, they were not at a point where they could assume primary instructor responsibilities. Since stakeholders wanted pre-service teachers to be actively involved in lesson implementation, they focused on informal, after-school programs.

To examine feasibility, test curricular ideas, and explore available resources, university faculty volunteered in after-school clubs during one semester. During this experience, school librarians and university faculty determined the experience would be mutually beneficial. Pre-service teachers would gain authentic technology-integration experiences, and librarians would receive consistent help. Pre-service teachers would need background checks prior to entering local schools; to allow for processing time, stakeholders decided to start the experience eight weeks into the university semester.

Next, one section of the course pilot-tested the experience at two elementary and one K–9 school. Pre-service teachers signed up for after-school experiences based on their availability and their subject and grade-level interests. Pre-service teachers were asked to sign up for an hour a week and volunteer for a minimum of eight weeks. No more than five pre-service teachers were allowed to volunteer for the same timeslot in each program. School librarians evaluated pre-service teachers' professionalism (33 percent of the final grade) during the experience. By default, pre-

service teachers received full points on this criterion, but librarians were asked to take attendance and report problems.

During the pilot test, librarians indicated that they also taught regularly scheduled technology-related courses (e.g., word processing, library and Internet research, typing, digital story production) and wondered if future volunteers could help during those school times. Including these technology courses provided more openings for volunteers and better accommodated university schedules.

Following pilot tests, additional schools were invited to participate, and the experience was opened for all sections of the technology-integration course. However, fine-tuning of the experience continued. School librarians suggested allowing fewer volunteers (two or three) during in-school courses to better ensure that pre-service teachers actively participated in the lessons (as opposed to observing in the background). They also recommended reducing the minimum number of visits from eight to six to accommodate planning days, assemblies, and field trips.

What Worked

Library Perspectives

School librarians welcomed the influx of pre-service teachers for a variety of reasons. The program provided regularly scheduled, reliable extra staffing support, lowered the teacher/student ratio, and allowed the exploration of new technologies and faster testing/reviews. The experience allowed school librarians to share the value and impact of school libraries with pre-service teachers who might not have seen a school library in action. It also led to conversations about practical use and challenges with technology in schools. Each of these benefits aligned with library goals for curriculum development, collaborative instruction, and the promotion of school libraries as 21st-century learning environments.

Depending on the pre-service teachers' locations, they volunteered for library/technology classes and/or after-school technology clubs. Although extra support during regular school days was useful to troubleshoot issues, help first-graders log into computers, or navigate websites and databases, the greatest impact occurred during after-school clubs. As clubs grew in size, it became necessary to have extra staffing to help students program Bee-Bots, test Snap Circuit designs, use LEGO Robotics and Windows Movie Maker, and so forth. Regularly scheduled, reliable volunteers made these technology-rich experiences possible for students at the hosting schools. Elementary students were also excited about the opportunity to share their knowledge and play with the "big kids," which contributed to the popularity and growth of after-school programs. When clubs were not in session, parents and students constantly asked school librarians when they would start again.

Pre-service teachers were also encouraged to explore and review new technologies during their scheduled volunteer hours and on their own time. Obtaining reviews and test results from pre-service volunteers helped school librarians allocate more time to teaching and curriculum planning. Additionally, with the help of volunteers associated with the university, school librarians were able to borrow, test, and integrate technology tools and devices available from the university's curriculum collection. Recommendations for school technology purchases were then more easily made with documented classroom use and hands-on experience with the tools.

Participating in the volunteer program also gave school librarians the opportunity to share with pre-service teachers the value and importance of school libraries. Many college students were surprised at younger students' agility with online catalogs, amazed at the busy-ness of the library, and impressed at the number of roles the school librarian was expected to fill. Since the local university offers neither degrees in library science nor a school library endorsement for educators, this was a singular opportunity to market the school library and its importance to soon-to-be K–12 teachers. Numerous conversations before and after volunteer shifts allowed school librarians to impress upon pre-service teachers the benefits of and challenges to technology use in schools.

Teacher Education Perspectives

Teacher education faculty identified a number of positive outcomes from this partnership. First, technology-integration tools and strategies often differ between university settings and school contexts. Placing pre-service teachers in authentic settings helped both students and faculty manage expectations and confront common misconceptions in a safe environment prior to high-stakes student teaching.

Second, the partnership with school libraries afforded extended exposure to Pre-K–12 students without encroaching on existing partnerships and resources. Pre-service teachers often reported surprise and amazement at the skills and knowledge displayed by Pre-K–12 students, including

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navigating the Internet, creating digital stories, and collaborating by means of apps. The placement made use of community resources without further taxing classrooms and teachers already accommodating student observations, practicum teaching, and other field experiences.

Third, the experience allowed pre-service teachers to observe and apply course theory and content. Time spent in libraries, classrooms, and after-school clubs exposed pre-service teachers to technology tools, apps, and resources discussed in class as well as the pedagogical techniques associated with their uses.

Lastly, the service-learning experience extended educator modeling beyond traditional classroom settings. Part of teacher preparation includes helping students adjust to the many expectations they will face as teachers, including dress code, language, and policy requirements. Requiring students to model these expectations during service learning further stressed their importance.

Challenges

Library Perspectives

School librarians hosting the volunteer program learned quickly that they needed to provide orientation and hands-on training to pre-service teachers prior to volunteering. Very few volunteers arrived with in-depth understanding of classroom technology, which was not a surprise but required training. In the absence of a formal orientation during pilot programs, volunteers took disparate and sometimes unacceptable approaches to communication, dress code, and participation. Written guidelines and expectations were established after the pilot programs and agreed upon by all participating libraries. Each school librarian also offered an in-person orientation for volunteers with site-specific expectations. These training sessions were recorded and made available to volunteers unable to attend in person. Librarians shared school rules and expectations, communicated how volunteers should participate in technology activities with children, and asked students for contact information. The ability to contact volunteers in a timely fashion was crucial after the first round of fire and lockdown drills during technology classes. Most pre-service teachers preferred text messaging to e-mail for last-minute notifications, and the librarians adjusted their habits to accommodate this preference.

Once training occurred, it became evident that some pre-service teachers were more prepared and engaged than others. For some volunteers active encouragement and reminders of expectations were required on a regular basis. Others demonstrated a high level of technological competence and pedagogical experience. When planning for a new semester of pre-service teachers in the school library, each librarian built in flexibility and extra time for supervision of volunteers. Sometimes the extra time was needed. At other times, volunteers were self-directed and required minimal guidance.

Another challenge in planning technology lessons with pre-service teachers was attendance. Sometimes background checks of volunteers took longer than expected, requiring participants to find make-up times or complete make-up assignments. Absences were not a major problem, but one that required flexibility when volunteers were sick or otherwise unavailable. This circumstance resulted in some sessions hosting multiple volunteers while other sessions had only one or two. Varying availability across sessions required librarians to build adaptable lesson plans. However, having the volunteers increased the complexity and ambition of lessons and technological experiences in all participating school libraries. When volunteers completed their time, the librarians moved back to working solo, and lesson plans were adjusted to reflect the staffing level.

Teacher Education Perspectives

The challenges faced by teacher educators came from different planning aspects. First, participating school libraries varied in terms of technology use and expectations. Students placed at libraries that included regularly scheduled technology-enhanced activities reported a much higher level of satisfaction overall than those who served in a setting that only occasionally used technology. Generally, elementary schools integrated library instruction into regular school practices more frequently than secondary schools.

Second, working to create an aligned schedule between the school libraries and the university semester calendar posed challenges. School assemblies, bad-weather days, and other events required alterations to weekly schedules, further complicating pre-service teachers' course and work schedules. Volunteer sessions were also complicated by varied school schedules. Although after-school programs and a few block schedules lasted one hour or more per session, most were thirty to forty-five minutes long. Thus, meeting the eight-hour (and later six-hour) requirement didn't always correspond with the number of school visits. These differences complicated attendance tracking (reported by school librarians) because some volunteers had to attend more frequently than others during the experience to meet minimum time requirements.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Multiple Benefits

Despite challenges, school librarians, teacher education faculty, and pre-service teachers found the service-learning opportunity valuable. Exposure to technology integration in authentic contexts helped pre-service teachers learn the multiple roles of school librarians as well as the literacies associated with effective integration (Asselin 2000; Hunt and Luetkehans 2013). Volunteers also provided valuable support during school programs, allowed librarians to focus more specifically on their curricular responsibilities, and provided valuable reviews of technology and curricular materials. Thus, consistent with perspectives expressed by Dan W. Butin (2003) and Jeffrey Anderson (1998), volunteers provided direct benefit to community entities. The following recommendations are for those interested in developing similar service-learning experiences between school libraries and teacher education programs.

Identify Purposes

Before approaching teacher education faculty about service-learning opportunities, clearly articulate your goals and purposes for the partnership. What programs or courses might align with these goals? Locating this information will help identify potential contacts and partners. How might this partnership benefit your organization? How might it benefit the college or university? Identify overlap between your goals and the mission of the college or university.

Initiate Conversation

After identifying common goals/purposes, initiate contact. If particular courses or programs align with one or more of your goals, speak with the course instructor. State your interests and discuss whether or not there are possibilities for collaboration. Don't get discouraged if opportunities are not immediately clear. Try approaching another instructor or program within the college. Additionally, remember that initial conversations will increase awareness of desired partnerships and may lead to future opportunities for collaboration. Be prepared when setting up meetings. Indicate your purpose and maintain the time commitment you scheduled (scheduling additional appointments as needed).

Keep It Simple

As you discuss ideas with college and university faculty and other school librarians, keep activities simple. If the collaboration is successful, it can grow during later implementations. Simple policies and procedures allow stakeholders to focus on the feasibility of collaboration and its benefits and limitations without becoming encumbered with burdensome procedures. Simplicity also helps identify implementation policies and procedures. Identify key stakeholders. Who has a vested interest in the collaboration? What permissions are needed for the partnership to take place? What training is needed for stakeholders to enter the conversation? Regularly refer back to your list of goals. Use these to guide activity creation and avoid project bloat. University faculty may want to collect data on the project or conduct research. What permissions are needed to collect data? Identify procedures and policies within school districts and university settings to which you must adhere during service-learning experiences.

Pilot Test

Pilot-test partnership activities. Taking the time for smaller initial implementations will help collaborators fine-tune partnership details, policies, procedures, and curricular materials. Pilot testing will also identify strengths and weaknesses of your plan so modifications can be made prior to large-scale

implementation. During the pilot test, ask for feedback from involved stakeholders. Insights from various stakeholders provide invaluable information regarding the effectiveness of planned activities.

Celebrate Small Wins

Establishing lasting partnerships takes time and commitment that often involve setbacks and redesigns. Do not get discouraged when setbacks arise. Focus on your goals for service-learning partnerships. Take time to identify and celebrate small victories as the process moves forward. To maintain stakeholders' commitment to the partnership and help them realize their contributions have a positive effect, remind them of the progress being made. Ultimately, enjoy the experience as you see it emerge over time.

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