Engaging Paulo Freire on deliberative democracy: Dialogical pedagogy, deliberation and inclusion in a transformative higher education online education space

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An effective education system is an environment where students feel cared for, included and are able to deliver critical dialogical input in their learnings on Learning Management Systems (LMS) platforms. The article aims to epitomizes quality education where skills, values and equal distribution of resources can be accessed by all. This includes effectively trained lecturers who manages diversity and teach effectively, to foster success, and to provide a safe and friendly classroom environment for students. This article comes from a larger work done on how to administer clear dialogical and caring aims (policy) in higher online education spaces where students grow holistically and critically. The paper focuses on the kind of space lecturers need to create online in-order to provide students the opportunity to be part of a caring teaching and learning process in order to form part of an active citizenry beyond their immediate context. This article employed a qualitative research methodology, where a questionnaire was used for lecturers at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of the Free State. These questionnaires covered 30 lecturers who made use of the University's LMS' platform. The data was analyzed through the interpretivist paradigm. The finding in this article reveal that the little to no cultivation of critical pedagogical action vis-à-vis the enactment of activism and justice in and through higher education in the context of real pedagogical action in online (LMS) higher education spaces are important. The study is significant because it emphasizes a topic that are helpful in understanding how critical pedagogical action through Freire's dialogical theory in the online (LMS) higher education platforms ought to be engaged.

Contribution: The contribution in this article is an amendment to Freire's pedagogy frame work framed with the Faculty of Theology and Religion and extending his notion of dialogical engagement to deliberative action in the online (LMS) higher education space is critical tenant for student wholistic growth.

Keywords: Paulo Freire's dialogical pedagogy; deliberation theory; Learning Management Systems (LMS); transformation; higher education; teaching and learning; inclusion.

Introduction

Several factors have affected university students, including those at the University of the Free State (Faculty of Theology and Religion), as have many other universities and faculties. These factors include the Fourth Industrial Revolution, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), and volatile and uncertain learning and teaching environments. Using LMS platforms such as Blackboard and involving students with a critical and dialogical pedagogical need to critically engage could positively impact students' academic success. Moreover, when students participate in this:

> Most people would probably agree that student success is about more than just academic performance. It relates to attributes, knowledge and skills students develop during their time in higher education. It also relates to these factors' relevance to today and tomorrow's real world. As a result of the socio-political history of our country, South Africa also entails a sense of social justice manifested by a need to close achievement gaps, diversify access, and focus on developing critical, democratic citizens. (Loots 2021:7)

Discussions of this kind can provide insights into how faculties at higher learning institutions can respond more effectively to the ever-changing external and internal worlds of learning and

teaching. Lecturers may even be able to use these insights to engage students socially and psychologically so that they can thrive in their studies. The Centre for Learning and Teaching (CTL) and the students at the University of the Free State, through the work of Loots (2021), confirm this by positing that:

> The relationship between students and their lecturers is arguably the most important factor contributing to their success. Lecturers play an essential role in assisting entering students to become accustomed to a new social and academic environment. As well as being accessible and relatable, lecturers are friendly and knowledgeable. Students often comment on the value of residences as a primary source of support, as well as the disadvantage of not having access to this resource if they live off-campus. Day residences on the Bloemfontein campus were also recognized as valuable peer support structures by students who participated actively. Lecturers, either as tutors or mentors, play an important role in managing expectations and assisting students in achieving their learning goals. In many cases, the relationship with a lecturer is a student's entry point into academic disciplines, and the careers associated with these disciplines, as well as their primary connection to the institution. There is no doubt that lecturers can create an environment in which students feel academically guided, informed about how to get help, how to deal with institutional rules, and introduced to the interesting developments in the field. Often, the 'village' of support and administrative staff develops and maintains support structures for students and lecturers that work behind the scenes. All students mentioned the value of academic and non-academic support structures that helped them succeed, even if they did not mention them specifically as contributors to their success. To ensure that students are successful in their educational journeys, all staff needs to have a profound understanding of and empathy for their students' educational journeys. (p. 45)

The article examines how well-trained lecturers and teachers are able to manage their pedagogy of engagement through teaching effectively by evaluating their Learning Management Systems (LMS) skills, values and equal distribution of resources when it comes to teaching and learning. Aside from ensuring a safe and friendly learning environment, the goal is to facilitate the success of students. The article also discusses the possibility of providing students with a learning experience that encourages them to become active citizens. The methodological framework and the theoretical frameworks of Freire and others underlying the study will be discussed. Afterwards, the article will describe the proposed teaching approaches and conclude with some conclusions.

Research methods and design

The methodology employed in this article has chosen 'an interpretive perspective' to critically engage and discuss how lecturers include students in the teaching and learning on online LMS platforms such as Blackboard. The article has utilised the 'conceptual research methodology' from which to move and understand deliberations between students and

lecturers regarding this, including how students are cared for in the learning and teaching process. Scholars who have written extensively on these issues are Paulo Freire, Jurgen Habermas and Yusuf Waghid, among others. The lenses of these scholars are foregrounded in this research in order to make critical deductions. If one considers this combined approach as one from which to extrapolate a conceptual study, the process of developing a systematic theoretical foundation for engagement becomes evident. Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) expressly agree with this paradigm of doing research. They posit that:

> Conceptual paradigms act as systems of interrelated ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. In any formal research, a paradigm confines the research and allows for structure throughout the process, from the very beginning to the conclusion. In other word, a paradigm guides the researcher's actions and ensures his commitment to a particular method. (p. 40)

This in turn will heighten the intended purpose of a critical discussion, and it lays the foundation for lecturers and students in the teaching process to come up with meaningful and impactful change.

The aforementioned scholars and their perspectives on issues of teaching and learning, deliberative pedagogy, democracy and 'care and associated work (ethics, justice) in higher education' (Joorst 2021:1) have been solicited to help in engaging the minimal effort required to put greater emphasis on the critical relationship between lecturer and student on all learning and teaching platforms, but more specifically on online LMS platforms, which have now become the norm in educational spaces in the post-COVID 19 period.

Paulo Freire's discourse of deliberative dialogical education theory

The methodology of Brazilian educationalist and to some extent theological thinker, Paulo Freire, has a strong theological frame of reference when he reflects on teaching and learning settings (Hazelton & Haigh 2010). His theory of dialogue in educational situations can be summarised as 'the encounter of men, mediated by the world, to pronounce it, not exhausting, therefore, in the I-you relation' (Freire 1972; Heidemann & Almeida 2011). For Freire, any learning and teaching setting, including online platforms such as Blackboard, needs to fulfil:

> [A] list of preconditions for this dialogue as a creative act: a deep love of the world and people, humility, an intense faith in people, in their capacity to do and create, a climate of trust, a move to hope and critical thinking. (Streck 2017:55)

Freire's (1972) modus operandi is a methodological approach that is effective, albeit not widespread. In this methodological strategy, the 'culture circle' is used, in which the teacher and facilitator and student create reflections and discussions about reality and collectively seek to unveil and identify the possibilities of learning. The 'culture circle' is a concept that

speaks to the 'critical consciousness of inequities and addresses their causes and insisting on transforming their social and their political circumstances' (Zulu 2020:252), to be able to be part of the online Blackboard teaching and learning process.

This would be in line with the perception of the University of the Free State (UFS) of what good education ought to be. Therefore, it is important for transformative higher education institutions to tap into this 'action-reflection process'. This process lays bare how students positively and actively participate in an online learning process, even on a virtual platform such as Blackboard, where the stories of students and who they are as persons from different backgrounds lend richness to the learning and teaching process (Longo 2020: 1–2). This ultimately allows all stakeholders in the learning and teaching process to strengthen and modify these practices (Davids & Waghid 2018:221). Freire's methodology is an approach that encourages a 'reflective process', where both lecturers and students from university faculties, which also include the Faculty of Theology and Religion, are able to value the cultural and historical sources of individuals, which can be revealed in 'culture circles', which Davids and Waghid (2018) refer to as 'active citizenry'. Through the Journey Mapping project of Loots (2021), it has been the aim to take a step back and look at the entire educational journey of UFS students – from their first interaction with the university, to getting ready to transition out of university and into the world of work or pursuing postgraduate qualifications. Such an analysis allows us to see which aspects contribute to students' success, at which times, and how these factors interact with each other over time. This, in turn, enables the University of the Free State to align its curricular and co-curricular initiatives with students' experiences, which includes not only caring for students outside of just assessments and content, but also allowing them to be co-deliberators of learning and teaching initiatives online that would have an impact on their success.

To put this explicitly within a framework of theological and caring language, which would be important for transformative higher education institutions, I borrow from the words of Habermas (2006), who posits in an interview where he was asked his opinion on the love for education (wisdom). He asserts:

> For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk. (p. 149)

In the above statement, Habermas accentuates that any ethos, including any theological and religious ethos, climaxes ought to embrace education (teaching and learning). More importantly, the critical and dialogical and deliberative online teaching and learning platforms such as Blackboard form part of the education process, and therefore, all stakeholders in such a process should:

> … [A]lways communicate and debate to each other in order to arrive at better rationality for the community. Communication must be constant in the public sphere, an integration and inclusion of cultures and religion so that one understands each other, and one can learn from the other. Without communication, rationality and common good is impossible. (Ruga 2014:11)

The three aforementioned theories in the forms of Freire's dialogical and critical pedagogy, the deliberation theory and Habermas's educational ethic of care and inclusion all intersect within the discussion of transformative higher education institutions, in order to necessitate fair action and redress in the teaching and learning process. This means that true transformation in online teaching and learning can take place. This can be described by Freire (2018) as:

> … [R]eflection and action in close interaction are the necessary conditions for dialogical action and if one of them is prevented the word becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world for denunciation is impossible without commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action. (p. 87)

Deliberative dialogical theory application

The teaching and learning processes of a transformative higher education institution such as the UFS are based on a system that aims to produce students who are able to identify, analyse and solve everyday problems. Students must be able to think critically and creatively, both inside and outside of their discipline of study. Once they have completed their studies, they must be able to take responsibility for their own actions in life. They must be able to manage themselves and their activities effectively and responsibly. In order to successfully develop, they must be able to communicate well using language skills, either visual or symbolic (Bloch 2005:10).

The efficient administration of instruction and learning in higher education ought to consider the appropriation of the democratisation of students' learning to dialogue with their lecturers (Jansen 2005:22). Consequently, this will allow 'students to demonstrate an understanding of the world as a whole and as a set of related systems' (Mashiyi 2000) by recognising the content learned in their courses. Thus, the proper use of Blackboard can be applied to the teaching and learning process, but also to how students should conduct themselves further afield. This means that lecturers and an LMS such as Blackboard ought to be viewed as critical tools in the development and growth of UFS students in general and Faculty of Theology and Religion students in particular. The policy of the Faculty of Theology and Religion provides an example of how technology and Blackboard are critical for the learning process:

> The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting remote learning response has changed the way we think about students'

academic and non-academic experiences and how technology could support and enhance these processes. For example, using technology to get the right information to students at the right time could include video clips linking career choices with study paths, or 'how to' clips guiding students through the most important hurdles in the learning and teaching process. In addition, online platforms that can integrate technology from chatbots and other avenues to create better support, could be carefully designed to provide students with learning and teaching support and other transitional guidance. A dedicated online presence, continuous orientation page can ensure that students know where to find important information shared with them [*in the learning and teaching process*]. (Loots 2021:46)

Moreover, the lack of a strong emphasis on the importance of making connections and having critical engagement between students and lecturers in higher education institutions plays a vital role in mediating students' expectations and learning experiences. It is the experience of many students in the faculty that there exists 'a lack of communication from lecturers, as well as frustrations with a general lack of interactive communication between students, lecturers and peers' (UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning 2020:8–9). Many students find it difficult to engage in online platforms with lecturers. This ultimately creates a culture of exclusion.

Some students actually verbalised this sense of exclusion from their teaching and learning process. Their responses can be summarised from a UFS Institutional Report called 'Emergency Remote Teaching at the UFS'. When students were surveyed, they said things like:

> Lack of communication from lecturers: We don't get clear communication from the offset from lecturers, I still haven't received any emails from lecturers for 3 modules second semester so I have no clue what the plans going forward is. Some of the lecturers barely responded to concerns and would not reply to our messages. We would wait 2–3 days for a reply from them and some were very helpful. (UFS Centre for Teaching and Learning 2020:9)

The proliferation of students feeling excluded from the online (Blackboard) teaching and learning process can also be particularly ascribed to lecturers' lack of effective use of, and development and training in, the UFS Learning System, Blackboard. Consequently, this then adds to the lack of creating and enabling an online environment that delivers quality students.

Deliberative and decolonized implications in teaching and learning

The work of Freire (1972) can be used to summarize the concepts of dialogical and critical engagement, care, and socially just pedagogies, who notes that:

> … [*D*]ialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the participants in a discussion. (p. 61)

According to Freire's idea, educators and facilitators cannot simply consider themselves as people who force their opinions on those who are less educated or as passive recipients of information waiting to 'digest' it without question. This would be the result of deliberately ignoring the voices of the students on the online teaching and learning Blackboard platform. This should never be the case, even if it means drawing stakeholders such as students out of their comfort zones (Freire 2000).

The following quotation serves to clarify the fundamental point stated by Freire et al. (2005), which is truly the goal of this article:

> Without humility, one can hardly listen with respect to those one judges to be too far below one's own level of competence. It is indeed necessary, however, that this love be an 'armed love', the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator and that people must all learn. Tolerance is another virtue. Without it no serious pedagogical work is possible; without it no authentic democratic experience is viable; without it all progressive educational practice denies itself. Tolerance is not, however, the irresponsible position of those who play the game of make-believe. The act of tolerating requires a climate in which limits may be established, in which there are principles to be respected. That is why tolerance is not coexistence with the intolerable. (p. 15)

Moreover, lecturers have a lot of responsibility for ensuring that all parties involved in the process of any online education platform are included and that, they also need to be progressive in how they use and perform teaching and learning tasks on teaching and learning platforms like Blackboard.

Adams and Waghid (2005), in relation to the critical theory of dialogue of Freire, use dialogical pedagogy to frame critical engagement of the teaching and learning process (Dhungana 2021). In other words, students, as well as lecturers, add value to the learning and teaching process of LMS platforms such as Blackboard, and their input must be considered of primary importance.

Teaching and learning is a process of education. However, it is also measurable. According to Peters (1966), for proper education to take place on any platform including LMS platforms such as Blackboard, being measurable must be central if teachers and facilitators are to be impactful. Peters (1966), suggests:

> [*T*]hat 'education' implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it; (ii) that 'education' must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert; (iii) that 'education' at least rules out some procedures of transmission, on the grounds that they lack willingness and voluntariness [*on the part of the learner*]. (p. 45)

Peters' view that it is critical for a teacher and lecturer to also foreground the dialogical and deliberative pedagogies is noteworthy, and also that teaching and learning and

education in general are transmitted by teachers and lecturers and that these also translate into how prepared they are in the use of learning tools such as Blackboard. Not only this, but also critically important is how students perceive the actual use of such tools in the knowledge and understanding process.

Moreover, Biesta (2013) highlights what the underlining antithesis to the teaching and learning process is:

> The dialogical approach, both approaches ultimately rely on the possibility of truth and, more specifically, truth uncontaminated by power… this truth is learned from (and thus given by) the teacher; in the dialogical approach, this truth is discovered through a collective learning process. That the monological approach relies on the idea of truth uncontaminated by power has to do with the fact that emancipation is seen as a process of overcoming ideological distortions. Here, emancipation operates as a process of demystification. In the dialogical approach, emancipation is the process that restores true human existence – or, in Freirean language, true human 'praxis'. (p. 11)

Therefore, the relationship between student facilitator or lecturer and how they relate and collaborate in the aforementioned process needs to be carefully considered, especially if the powers of lecturers and students are different from a power relation perspective (Joorst 2021:6). The attempt to achieve this can be summarised by Greene (1986:430), when she asserts that '[*teaching and learning is a*] joined to justice or equity process'. This process ought to prompt students, as well as lecturers, to question meanings and ideas, to imagine alternative possibilities and outcomes, to modify practical judgements and to develop respect and critical engagement in their field of study. In this way, critical assignation and deliberation is 'unhindered communicative liberty that involves both rational opinion' and wilful allowance of information, 'which can almost always potentially lead to a transformation in people's preferences and perceptions of their learning' (Adams & Waghid 2005:28).

Before going any further, it is important to justify why and how the research problem arises out of this study. In other words, what are the factors that contribute to the research problem? Because my experience is based in the Faculty of Theology and Religion, I believe that the research problem unwittingly forms part of the UFS, and the UFS, like many transforming higher education institutions, also unwittingly forms part of an unevenly distributed education and training system that has too many barriers to growth. It is my conviction that quality education ought to be evenly distributed and should be available to all South African students regardless of background or location. Therefore, educational entities such as the Faculty of Theology and Religion, and many other transforming higher education institutions, need to set equitable teaching and learning standards for every student coming through their halls, and they also have the responsibility to create teaching and learning outcomes that are achievable in students 'becoming', as a means to empower students to be part of their own learning process. And, when setting the content and standards

for teaching and learning online programmes such as Blackboard, it should be kept in mind that all students need to be developed to reach their full potential as persons, not just for academic brilliance but also further afield (Bloch 2005:9).

Factors that sustain excellent dialogical outcomes for a transformative higher education institution's teaching and learning plans ought to include the views of students in the LMS process such as Blackboard, particularly when it comes to indigenous knowledge, as their views form part of their educational formation. If this is done well, students will feel that they have been included, and this will create depth and meaning. Thus, higher education institutions would have wholly developed students that are both globally and locally engaged and not restricted by geographical borders (Bloch 2005:10). This problematisation can only be addressed by lecturers reviving the 'eventalization of the intentional emancipation of education [*online teaching and learning systems such as Blackboard*]' (Foucault 1991:41). And the way this could play out can be explained by Foucault (1991) as follows:

> Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes this then is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays in refusal. It doesn't have to lay down the law for the law. It isn't a stage of programming. It is a challenge directed to what is. (p. 12)

This discourse does not allow the possibility for any individual or group of students to be excluded from critical and dialogical and deliberative educational matters that interest them and that determine their future; this means they critically engage in the teaching and learning process. After all, the rights of students to participate in deliberation and critical and dialogical engagement are legally institutionalised and should be measured against the effective use of teaching and learning tools, such as Blackboard. This means that 'each individual student has an equal opportunity to be heard during the deliberative and dialogue process' (Adams & Waghid 2005), which in turn means that the viewpoints of the minority are heard, and the domination of the majority is limited. However, in order for critical and dialogical engagement and deliberation to be effective and truly beneficial, certain crucial aspects need to be constantly monitored from the perspective of the lecturer when using a teaching and learning platform, such as Blackboard (Bloch 2005:10).

Jürgen Habermas's epistemic affirmation of the deliberative dialogical theory in education

One essential element pointed out by Jürgen Habermas, who offers great insights into the dialogical theory, from the perspective of how the theory of deliberation adds to the discussion. Using Habermas as a theorist juxtaposes the dialogical and deliberation pedagogies because they both

foreground the conversation between the transformative higher education institutions and Freire, because both entities' 'purpose of education is to serve and help develop a civilised and just society, through the development of well-read, thoughtful, scholarly individuals with a well-developed capacity for independent critical thought' (Gray & Collison 2002). Dialogical 'consensus ought to grow out of deliberation' (Adams & Waghid 2005), in order for it to be effective in learning and teaching. Susen (2018) accurately summarises the Habermasian view when she posits:

> Every time we engage in the co-existential exercise of seeking mutual understanding (verständigung), we anticipate that we are capable of reaching agreements (inverständnisse). Put differently, our communicative ability to understand one another equips us with the deliberative capacity to reach agreements with one another. Thus, the emancipatory potential of communicative action manifests itself not only in our 'weak' orientation towards intelligibility (verständlichkeit) but also in our 'strong' orientation towards consensus-formation (konsensbildung). Language use, irrespective of its quasi-transcendental features, is embedded in the pragmatics of interaction. Symbolic forms emerge in relation to spatio-temporally contingent modes of existence, whose political constitution is reflected in the socio-ontological significance of discursively motivated practices, which are vital to the construction of democracy. (p. 43)

According to Habermas (2006), harmony should not be a qualification for dialogue, but rather it should reflect the autonomous treatise of knowledgeable discussion responsive to the weights that are responsible for vigorous community. Habermas (2006) also states:

> [*Critical and dialogical theory*] necessitates the deliberative paradigm as it offers as its main empirical point of reference a democratic process [in teaching and learning], which is supposed to generate legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes. (p. 314)

Consequently, an expansive explanation of 'democratic citizenship' pursues enduring 'deliberation' so that it is able 'to identify the better argument between majorities and minorities after the parties have temporarily reached a compromise for the sake of progress' as they learn and participate together (Waghid 2005). Habermas's perception of democratic citizenship in online teaching and learning (education process) has important implications for an institution such as a university (Warren 2016:309), in particular the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the UFS.

Conclusion

Students today have been impacted by their external environment, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and COVID-19, which has led to a volatile and uncertain learning and teaching environment. Transformative higher education institutions' use of an LMS platform such as Blackboard and the inclusion of students from a dialogical pedagogical point of view may serve as a valuable conversation with Freire's approach and Adams and Waghid's theory of deliberation.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic 'emergency critical dialogical changes in teaching and learning but has also created rare opportunities to think differently about the assumptions and processes that have become the norm' (Higher Education and Training 2020:10), for the interaction between the lecturers and students on online LMS platforms such as Blackboard. The necessitated move to 'remote learning' (Akuffo & Budu 2019:1) in higher education institutions should allow differentiation, but has also precipitated a relationship of dialogical, critical, deliberative care, as well as an ethics of care, in the online teaching and learning process, where student and lecturer are involved. For us at the UFS, it may help to acknowledge that these themes go together, and that they appropriate the purpose of this research in seeing the importance of identifying 'how students are accessing and using different forms of learning materials, and to explore how students' experiences' of inclusion and exclusion during the current context (Higher Education and Training 2020). Lecturers need to think about including students more from a dialogical and critical perspective, around 'policy and practice in more digitally advanced teaching and learning spaces' such as what Blackboard and other LMSs may offer, because this is not negotiable if we are to remain in the business of creating quality, growing and successful students and graduates (Higher Education and Training 2020:10).

It is also important to note that student success at universities has increased significantly in the past few years. Together with the surge in this research, with a particular focus on the lens of deliberation and creating relationships in the online space, it is also important to reflect on the efforts of institutions to help students transition, and successfully navigate their studies, into the future and far afield. However, what this research reframes is an invaluable contribution to our contextual understanding of student success and lecturer relations, which in turn will create the transformation of higher education spaces.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

D.P. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of the Free State and Research Ethics Committee (UFS HSD2022/0045/22).

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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