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Putting Deliberative Pedagogy in Place: How Colleges and Universities Can Help Build a More Democratic Society

Nicholas V. Longo[1]

[1] Department of Global Studies, Providence College

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Guest Editors: Patrick M. Green, Ed.D. and Susan Haarman Editor: Valerie L. Holton, Ph.D.

Abstract

Place-based education makes a compelling case that the pedagogy of colleges and universities must be re-imagined to be more relevant and engaged. This article argues for a specific approach to place-based education—what has been termed *deliberative pedagogy*—offering an emerging practical philosophy that applies insights from deliberative dialogue towards teaching and learning. The author provides principles and practices, along with examples of this method of civic education. It makes a hopeful case for having democratic practices in education undergirding the connection between anchor institutions and the broader civic mission of higher education.

Keywords: civic education, deliberative pedagogy, place-based education, anchor institutions

Introduction

Even as polarizing hot-button issues tend to get most of the attention—free speech controversies, pandemic public health policies, and identity politics—a more subterranean transformation is occurring in education: namely, a shift towards a more collaborative, participatory, and inclusive method of teaching and learning. This process creates space for dialogue across differences, weighs tensions and trade-offs, and recognizes local community assets—making real the often unfulfilled connections between learning and public problem-solving. This method of education—known as *deliberative pedagogy*—offers promise for engaging colleges and universities in building a more democratic society. This civic mission should begin in the communities where campuses are anchored.

Deliberative pedagogy is a form of place-based education that emphasizes sharing power as a way to promote the full participation of a diverse set of perspectives, especially historically marginalized voices, in constructive dialogue and decision-making. This way of teaching prioritizes meaningfully engaging students in reciprocal and civil discourse with peers in the classroom and with residents in the local community. It de-centers faculty, shifting from sharing knowledge to sharing responsibility, so that instructors become facilitators of the engagement of students and community members in a broader circle of learning. "Sharing responsibility involves relinquishing some control," as Nancy Thomas (2019) notes, "But if everyone around the table believes they are making discussion work, they may voluntarily curb behaviors that add no value, without inhibiting the robust exchange of ideas" (p. 54).

This method of empowering education is rooted in this invitation to encounter. It is an act that requires a mutual response. Deliberative pedagogy entails what Martin Buber (1947) described as "the turning towards the other" (p. 22), where basic trust and reciprocity enable genuine dialogue to occur. It can then become the basis for finding common purpose, co-creating knowledge, and engaging in joint action. Auspiciously, we see this nascent educational practice taking shape in settings across the globe (Shaffer et al., 2017).

Cultivating Knowledge at the University of Cape Town

One example is how this approach can be seen at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in *Social Infrastructure: Engaging with Communities for Change*, a course offered for South African students studying to be engineers. I joined this course with students from Providence College as part of a global service-learning course. In the course, led by UCT Professors Janice McMillan and Justice Chihota, academic assignments are grounded in place-based experiential activities such as sharing individual stories, mapping community assets and participating in off-campus classes led by community partners (McMillan, 2017). One class session, in particular, helps illuminate what this approach to education looks like. The session was framed around a perennial question for campus-community partnerships: How do we understand knowledge and power relations in collaborating with communities?

As a demonstration of the core issues of knowledge, power, and equity, students in the classroom were invited to come forward to translate the word *knowledge* on the front chalkboard into a

second, third, or even fourth language they spoke. One-by-one, students stepped forward to share the translated words with the group based on their *knowledge* of languages (literally and metaphorically): *tsebo*, *kennis*, *ulwazi*, *vutivi*, and *kitso* were scribed on the board. *Conocimiento*, *sabedoria*, *ruzivo*, and other translations were soon visibly added to the list. After the words were written, authors publicly read their translations aloud to their peers from the front of the classroom. These dozen students shifted roles to teachers as they proudly shared their language contributions.

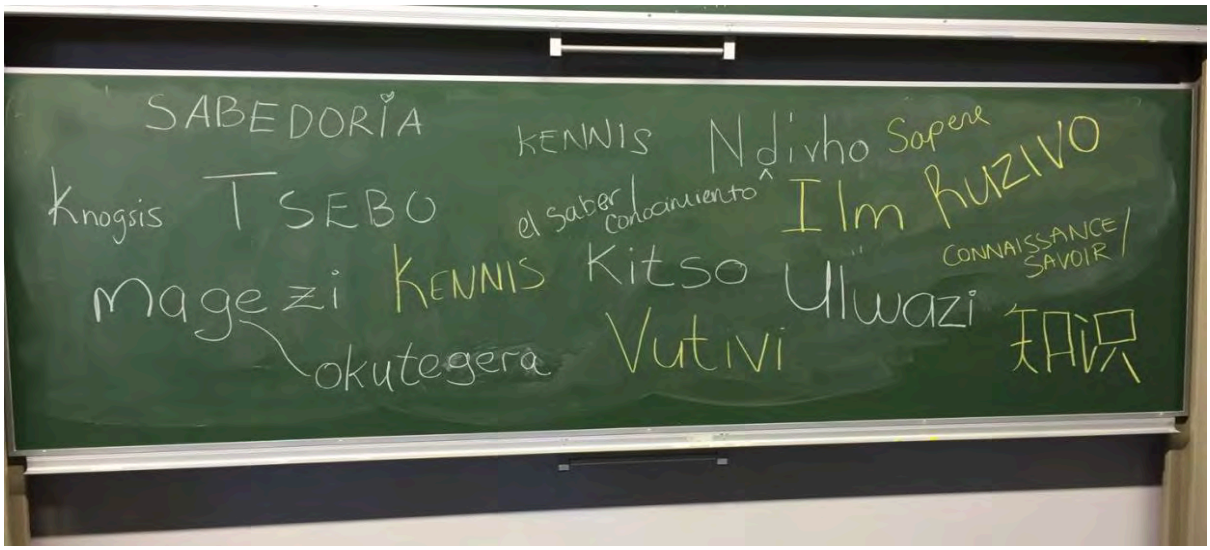

FIGURE 1. Course activity demonstrating knowledge among students at the University of Cape Town.

This lesson could have taken place in other learning spaces around the globe, which acknowledge the simple, but powerful idea: "knowledge exists in many spaces." (Longo & McMillan, 2020). But, significantly, this deliberative practice took place in the context of a South African classroom in the midst of ongoing campus disruptions around historical struggles to address segregation and structural racism. Student activists across campus were demanding the decolonization of the curriculum, and institutional transformation through the aftermath of the Rhodes Must Fall protests starting in 2015. The class activity demonstrated how democratic practice in education could tap into the power of a community and unleash its many gifts. Civic education becomes about more than introducing content into the curriculum. Instead, as Janice McMillan (2017) observes, this deliberative method of education becomes about "building new models of teaching and learning that position educators and learners in new relationships—to each other, to knowledge, and the world beyond the classroom" (p. 161).

The language translation exercise and broader approach is taken in the Social Infrastructures course help illuminate the transformational potential in democratic, place-based education. These spaces make visible the many assets diverse learning communities bring through their backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge. With acts of empowerment, we witness the civic possibilities of deliberative pedagogy.

Democracy (Not) Working as it Should

This is a vital moment for new approaches to education, as alarm bells are ringing with concern about the growing crisis democracy is facing in the United States and across the globe. The Global State of Democracy 2021 from the International IDEA shows that more countries than ever are suffering democratic erosion as countries move toward authoritarianism. It also found the largest number of countries undergoing what the report terms "democratic backsliding," including the United States— which earned the label for the first time. Research from a host of studies confirms these trends, documenting a loss of public trust, hyperpolarization, and undemocratic concentrations of power as threats to democracy (International IDEA, 2021; Levine, 2022). These developments force ordinary citizens to be pushed to the sidelines, making it harder to work together to solve public problems or even to feel empowered to try.

Especially troubling are trends among young people's views about the future of civic life. According to a recent poll of 18-to 29-year-olds from Harvard's Institute of Politics (2021), more than half of young Americans surveyed feel democracy in the country is under threat, with only 7% viewing the U.S. as a "healthy democracy." Further, the country has become so polarized that over a third of young people surveyed think they may see a civil war within their lifetimes.

In response to the crisis of democracy, the Kettering Foundation has convened a series of diverse, multinational groups of scholars and practitioners exploring "what works" to educate the next generation to be democratic citizens. This method might be summed up as a "devotion to framing questions, engaging everyday citizens in the work of answering those questions, encouraging them to work across lines of difference and disagreement" (Davies, 2022). This began by exploring the role of deliberation in teaching and learning, a practice our research team termed "deliberative pedagogy" in a workshop in Dayton, OH, in 2011 (Shaffer et al., 2017).

The deliberative pedagogy research exchanges over the past decade helped unearth the potential for deliberative practices for teaching and learning and democratic renewal (see www.deliberativepedagogy.org). A central finding from this study area is that students learn most about democracy by how it's practiced—or, more often, not practiced—on campus. As a result, if we want to build a more democratic society, we need to create spaces where students can have genuine experiences with democracy.

Place-Based Education

Young people are not born knowing how to be democratic citizens. And as a result, our institutions of education are responsible for preparing students through real-world experiences with democratic engagement on campus and with community partners. Colleges and universities were founded with this sense of civic purpose. As anchor institutions, many colleges and universities continue to play unique roles within their surrounding communities—often having significant influence (both positive and negative) on the educational, economic, cultural, and civic lives of the communities where they are situated. High-profile reports, such as *A Crucible*

Moment from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012), further called for colleges and universities to embrace civic learning as "an undisputed educational priority." And yet, it's worth noting that confidence in higher education has decreased more since 2015 than any other U.S. institution that Gallup measures (Marken, 2019). It seems that colleges and universities remain "bit players in the project of educating a democratic citizenry," as recently noted by Ronald Daniels (2021), president of Johns Hopkins University.

Given the growing disconnect between higher education and the public, the pedagogy of colleges and universities must be re-imagined to be more relevant and engaged. This means deploying institutional resources toward addressing public problems while simultaneously tapping into the abundance of assets in local communities for learning and knowledge creation through ongoing, reciprocal relationships. As Byron White (2021), associate provost at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, explains: "Perilous trends in higher education can all be addressed by establishing a deeper, tighter interdependence between the purpose of higher education institutions and the economic, social, and cultural well-being of the places where those institutions are located" (p. 8).

This insight about the importance of becoming stewards of place has emerged in a growing number of community-based research and practice collaboratives. Many higher education institutions recognize their responsibilities as anchor institutions and their unique roles within their surrounding communities—often having a significant influence on the educational, economic, cultural, and civic lives of the communities where they are situated. Indeed, the future success of higher education institutions depends on ensuring that these places are healthy and thriving communities—and vice versa.

Place-based education is one powerful response from higher education. Defined by Erica Yamamura and Kent Koth (2018) as a "long-term university-wide commitment to partner with local residents, organizations, and other leaders to focus equally on campus and community impact within a clearly defined geographic area" (p. 18), place-based education matters, especially, for our metropolitan campuses. Bringing Theory to Practice's Partnerships for Listening and Action by Communities and Educators (PLACE) Collaboratory offers the civic experimentation of a group of urban campuses (in the cities of Los Angeles, Greensboro, Baltimore, and Newark) as examples of place-based education. Projects emerging from the collaborative include the University of Southern California working with community residents to design a public history and dialogue project about gentrification in Boyle Heights; the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, creating undergraduate PLACE Fellows to work with community-based organizations; and a consortium of Greensboro-area colleges developing a project-based course on Reclaiming Democracy (Longo, 2022).

A Deliberative Turn

These efforts to shift the center of learning beyond the campus are significant because communities can make substantial progress on complex problems when residents—as opposed to detached experts—are at the center of decision-making. Higher education can learn from the deliberative turn in communities as a growing number of public officials, policymakers, and

other traditional decision-makers realize that public problems are too complex for them to resolve alone. That's why they are increasingly reaching out and convening diverse groups of community residents and organizations to identify issues and develop and implement strategies to address them.

This process of public deliberation is undergirded by open and inclusive processes by which a range of stakeholders come together to share ideas and perspectives. This might involve a leadership team helping to facilitate the engagement of a multitude of voices so that ordinary people can be involved in making collective decisions that form the basis for public action. This method of civil discourse to come to public judgment about difficult issues has been "part of the ongoing development of democracy" (Leighninger, 2012, p. 19). More than that, it has for many centuries been at the core of giving communities localized experiences with democracy.

This kind of democratic engagement goes beyond voting or asking residents for "input" in decision-making processes. Instead, it is intentional about seeing community residents as active and productive partners in all facets of planning, implementing, and assessing efforts to solve problems. Right now, a growing number of local experiments in urban, civic, and environmental planning are exploring and advocating citizen-centered approaches to a wide range of public problems, from community revitalization to clean air campaigns. In several states, groups have convened citizen-led deliberations that have produced a set of public priorities that local communities are now taking steps to enact. In addition, participatory budgeting processes are growing as a way to make decisions on the use of funds, spreading to more than 7,000 cities around the world since its inception in the late 1980s in Brazil. Leading funders, such as the Ford Foundation, have even begun to develop deliberative processes to involve citizens and stakeholders in every aspect of funding decisions through participatory grantmaking (see www.peoplepowered.org).

The efficacy of deliberative approaches in grappling with complex issues has prompted its incorporation into domains beyond public policy or the political sphere. One of the most prominent areas is education, where dialogue-based methods have emerged as a distinct pedagogy (Longo & Shaffer, 2019). In contrast to deliberative *politics*, which couples deliberative decision-making with public action, deliberative *pedagogy* integrates these deliberative processes with teaching and learning—practices that transcend the boundaries of the classroom.

What is Deliberative Pedagogy?

Deliberative pedagogy is simultaneously a way of engaging in civil discourse about complex and divisive issues, as well as a reflective method of education in which students develop democratic skills by working to address wicked problems. It is an asset-based approach that encourages students to encounter and consider multiple perspectives, weigh trade-offs and tensions, and move towards purposeful action. Ultimately, this work of deliberative pedagogy is about space-making: creating and holding space for authentic and productive dialogue, a reflective practice that can ultimately be both educational and transformative.

Some examples of deliberative pedagogy in practice:

- Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation offers dedicated coursework for undergraduate "student associates" who learn the art of facilitation in deliberative techniques and then serve as facilitators of dialogues on community-identified local issues.
- IUPUI (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) hosts a Democracy Plaza. This student-led effort provides prominent physical spaces on campus for what is known as "democracy walls" for civil discourse and social issue programming.
- Greater Good Science Center's Bridging Differences Community of Practice leads a learning community of faculty, administrators, staff, and students, along with staff from national organizations working in higher education, to teach an evidence-based approach to "bridge differences" on college campuses using civil discourse.
- Simon Fraser University's Centre for Dialogue sponsors a Semester in Dialogue Program, in which a cohort of students take an immersive semester-long course that uses dialogue and community engagement on timely topics to engage in problem-solving in collaboration with local community leaders.

Deliberative pedagogy can be situated within the broader educational movement toward a more collaborative learning paradigm. With this shift, educational institutions recognize their responsibility to "create environments and experiences that allow students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves and to become members of communities of learning that make discoveries and solve problems" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 15). As such, deliberative practices can serve as touchstones for learning in our adaptive and networked society, where information is no longer the exclusive purview of experts and gatekeepers.

Deliberative pedagogy can be defined as an underlying set of principles and practices which work towards democratic outcomes in teaching and learning (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Deliberative pedagogy: Principles, practices, and outcomes

Principles	Practices	Outcomes
"Knowledge is co-created."	Choice Work	Public Judgement
"Education should respond to wicked problems."	Asset-Based	Purposeful Action
"Active citizenship is learned through practice."	Civil Discourse	Democratic Skills

Knowledge creation is not a one-way street. As such, the first principle of deliberative pedagogy is that *knowledge is co-created.* This epistemology occurs through the sometimes-messy process of engaging with others in a mutual exchange of ideas and perspectives. Through these

constructive conversations, students work through differences in respectful and productive dialogue. As educators facilitate civil discourse about contentious issues, they help students learn about the stories and experiences of others, as well as the complexity of difficult public problems. This deliberative process, called "choice work," involves recognizing competing values, multiple perspectives, and tough trade-offs to potential solutions. It encourages empathy and respect for the views of others, even in the face of disagreement, and leads to better solutions as a community of learners seeks informed public judgment.

This method of education further recognizes the connection between learning and social purpose. Educational institutions are not islands apart; instead, these places of learning are inextricably linked to the world beyond the walls of our classrooms. Thus, the second principle of deliberative pedagogy is that *education should respond to society's most pressing problems*—from addressing climate change and systemic racism to global poverty and economic inequality. These topics are wicked problems because they are adaptive challenges that can't be solved with technical solutions or the usual way of doing business. A commitment to addressing wicked problems needs to be built into all aspects of planning and educational decision-making, especially in teaching and learning.

This is best done using an asset-based approach, as demonstrated in the opening example from the University of Cape Town. This shift of mindset is also a practice for engaging with learners inside and outside the classroom. Education working on joint problem-solving spends time cultivating assets in the communities most affected by a problem and then using those gifts—which can range from good public spaces to a multitude of languages spoken—to engage in purposeful action to address adaptive challenges. "All change, even very large and powerful change," Meg Wheatley (2009) observes, "begins when a few people start talking with one another about something they care about" (p. 13).This process of "turning to one another" in education is grounded in the belief that people learn best not from simply reading books or learning abstract theories but through real-world engagement. As such, the final principle is that *active citizenship is learned through practice*. A core practice becomes engaging in civil discourse in campus and community settings. When people are invited to engage in productive dialogue, they develop a set of democratic skills, including sharing a public narrative, listening eloquently, naming and framing community issues, collaborating with diverse stakeholders, facilitating constructive conversations, engaging in public work, and reflecting on community practice, as described in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Democratic skills

Democratic Skill	Practice
Sharing Public Narrative	Crafts stories of *self*, *us*, and *now*, offering insight into identity and values to compel people to act
Listening Eloquently	Seeks common purpose through encounters with others that embody presence and empathy

Naming and Framing Issues	Uses language to discuss issues that resonate with people, makes them feel like they belong, and values diverse perspectives for potential solutions
Collaborating with Diverse Stakeholders	Finds mutual interests in working with people to address problems
Facilitating Constructive Conversations	Leads dialogue to bridge differences
Engaging in Public Work	Brings people together to build things of lasting public value
Reflecting on Community Practice	Learns through exploration and analysis of real-world experiences

Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy at Providence College

There is an increasing desire to tap into dialogue-based practices—which has only become more pronounced since the pandemic. Young people are especially yearning for social connections and building genuine relationships across differences. As described above, this entails engaging in civil discourse, the co-creative process of sharing stories, associating and organizing, learning across differences, participating in decision-making, and planning for collaborative action. The challenge has often been that most people are not sure how to get started on constructive dialogue. And there is too little practical knowledge about creating spaces to bridge differences and make community decisions together. The inability to even discuss complex and divisive issues permeates our public life. We might shy away because we don't want to offend people or say the wrong thing. Or we might be concerned that we don't have "all the facts," so we feel unprepared or uninformed. Even when we want to engage in these conversations, it's difficult to know how to get the "right people" in the room or structure deliberative processes when we have so little practice talking across differences.

An added challenge is that society is now riddled with partisan sources of information and "alternative facts." Through this disinformation and, in turn, mistrust, interactions can lead to alienating and counterproductive relationships among people on different sides of an issue. And those who do get engaged must grapple with the role of powerful special interest groups and bad actors who deliberately sow the seeds of divisiveness in pursuit of a narrow agenda, further isolating members of a community from working towards a common purpose. The resulting failure to engage in meaningful dialogue or sustained collaborative work means that public challenges go unaddressed.

These issues take on real-life relevance at Providence College, where I am a professor. As a faith-based institution, we should especially recognize the importance of creating a culture of respectful discourse across areas of disagreement. And yet, the sometimes-competing demands of free speech and the harm caused by hate speech, alongside understandings offered by Catholic

social teaching, can lead to complicated tensions. Providence College has dealt with the controversy surrounding "hot-button" issues such as gay marriage, racial justice, and gender identity. These experiences make real the need to look more deeply at "problems beneath the problems." It has also led us to develop a set of practices to ensure sustained dialogue instead of reactionary responses organized as one-time events.

As a result, we all see the need to create public spaces for deliberative conversations—on campus and in the community. In 2014, in response to protests around racial injustice, an ad-hoc committee of students, staff, and faculty proposed to create a "democracy wall" with the goal of "helping students develop civic skills and create a culture of civil dialogue." While the proposal was stalled because of administrative concerns about potential free speech/hate speech controversies, especially in dealing with anonymous comments, the need intensified after a controversy surrounding a posting about gay marriage on a bulletin board in a campus resident hall. As a result, the first democracy wall was launched in the fall of 2018 to create healthy and respectful conversations on campus that go beyond the usual participants. These physical spaces, called *Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy (DID) Walls*, are designed to "create a safe space that supports the development of well-informed and engaged citizens through civil discourse."

As a practical matter, the DID Walls pose regular questions on topical issues that are named and framed for constructive community conversations. The DID Walls use students' and community members' lived experiences and localized knowledge to develop timely and relevant questions regarding current events. Once a question is posted, any member of the PC community can respond with their personal experiences and opinions.

FIGURE 2. Dialogue, inclusion, and democracy wall at Providence College

While conversations on controversial topics are often polarizing, they can also be liberating when facilitated with thoughtfulness and respectfulness. For instance, one question on the DID Wall quoted Frederick Douglass saying, "Education is emancipation, light, and liberty," and then asked people to reflect upon their own personal experiences with education by asking, "How is

education YOUR liberty?" One written response helps see why these spaces are so valuable, with someone writing: "Education allows me to empathize with those I thought I could not."

Further, as an urban campus, we also see the need to create spaces for deliberative conversations in the local community. These experiments began in several courses on civic engagement, along with a signature off-campus site for community members to come together in conversation at the PC-Smith Hill Annex, a 1,000 square ft. storefront property located in the adjacent Smith Hill neighborhood. The Annex was founded to foster "mutual understanding and opportunities for collaboration" between campus and community members. This has created a space of hospitality for a diverse group of people.

The Annex emphasizes the importance of fostering co-creative conversations between campus and community, not moving toward "predetermined ends, or having one perspective take ownership" (Morton & Hernandez, 2019, p. 221). With inspiration from leaders such as Margaret Wheatley, Jane Addams, and Myles Horton, the Annex points to a particular strategy for learning in community that focuses on sharing stories, building trust, and emphasizing relationships. The Annex offers a small-scale, community-based model with a larger vision for higher education in demonstrating the value of creating civic spaces between campus and community where people can share what they care about and learn to work together.

FIGURE 3. PC-Smith hill annex

The DID Walls and Annex re-conceptualize public spaces to give people experiences with connecting learning with deliberative conversations. They provide tangible, civic spaces for what Robert Livingston describes as "the conversation." For Livingston (2021), we need to start talking with one another, especially those "outside our social circle." Drawing on social science research, he concludes that "conversation, when done the right way, can be a powerful tool for bringing people together and developing support for enduring solutions" (p. xv11). As student

leaders learn the craft of naming and framing issues, asking strategic questions, and exploring how diverse communities can find common ground through deliberative pedagogy on campus and in the community, they gain public participation from a broader and more diverse group of stakeholders. These sites then become small-scale experiments for making democracy work as it should.

Conclusion

To be responsible stewards of democratic change in local communities, higher education must continue to create spaces to facilitate these kinds of campus-community conversations. Higher education should also recognize how the many institutional resources within their purview can positively impact communities. This entails seeing the benefit of purchasing local products, investing endowment funds equitably and sustainably, hiring nearby residents, making facilities open and available, creating educational opportunities and pipelines to college for local youth, and being genuinely responsible neighbors around local issues like affordable housing, quality education, and municipal government funding.

But good stewardship also includes being intentional about the core educational task of colleges and universities: teaching and learning. Civic engagement in higher education should help colleges and universities think more holistically about what and where students learn and *how* we teach. This means taking insights from place-based initiatives about the rich assets and local wisdom in communities and committing to more democratically doing this mutually educative work. With a deeper commitment to deliberative practice in education, anchor institutions can be the seedbeds for educating the next generation and putting in place a pedagogy that can strengthen democracy.

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