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Presence and Positioning as Components of Online Instructor Persona

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Abstract

Instructor persona in online discussion may set the tone for a variety of course outcomes. Instructors establish persona via both presence (amount of instructor posts) and position (interaction relative to those in the student role). In this paper, three online classes were studied using positioning theory as a grounding framework to elicit ways in which instructors self-position as well as how their students position them, and the relative impact of these positions along with presence levels on persona development. Findings demonstrate that both instructor activity levels and use of performative position statements likely impact student expectations, and that students are unlikely to engage in instructor positioning that falls outside the standard definition of the traditional instructor role unless doing so has been modeled by the instructor him/herself. (Keywords: instructor persona, instructor presence, online discussion, positioning theory, speech acts.)

INTRODUCTION

Asynchronous discussion is a rather limited communication medium, with primary (and almost exclusive) reliance on the written word as a mode of expression. Participants develop impressions of each other based on their word choices, both in the moment and in the overall course context. How students perceive their instructor influences the overall learning experience, affecting motivation, communication, and perhaps effort.

Instructor persona is not a fixed construct. Even in a learner-centered class, the instructor holds key responsibilities and may take control or center stage at times, and even the most teacher-centered instructor may offer momentary control or authority to students. Thus an online instructor may have an overall persona, but within that persona may engage in a wide range of speech acts that both confirm and present a different side of the persona. One's persona may well reflect the sum or average of positions one has taken, with every speech act contributing to its development in some way.

In this naturalistic study, discussion transcripts from three online courses with varying levels of instructor presence were analyzed for evidence of instructor presence using positioning theory as a theoretical framework. Of particular interest were three issues: (1) How an instructor's self-positioning in the course dialogue affects persona development; (2) Whether or not students accept these positioning acts; and (3) How the nature of instructor position may impact subsequent course discussion. Thus, the three questions that drove this study were:

1. What positions do instructors naturally take in online discourse and how do these positions impact overall class discussion?

2. Does the relative rate of different types of positioning differ based on instructor activity level?
3. Can instructors readily engage in position-shifting within their instructor roles?

Additionally, this study provides an example of how positioning theory may be operationalized to analyze instructor presence and persona in online courses.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Positioning theory, a framework with roots in social psychology (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), provides a way of examining the dynamic relationship between conversation partners by focusing on each speaker's position relative to the other. Conversation is considered tripolar, affected by not only position, but also storyline and speech acts. Although position is a conceptual construct, it is brought to life via the utterances and gestures that comprise one's storyline and speech acts. In other words, discussion will vary based on the narrative line used to express one's thoughts, the specific words and actions used to express the story, and the momentary negotiated relationship between the conversation partners.

Position is a construct that is fluid and can change with each speech act. It is readily adjusted by discussants based on their particular situation and is always relative to others in the conversation. Position is a determinant of how each participant can contribute to a particular story (Harre, 2005), and also can convey a variety of attributes, such as power, composure, confidence, and authority (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). For example, one might take a confident position, as indicated by speech acts that convey certainty, in some story contexts and then relinquish that confidence to the same group of discussants in other contexts. Alternatively, one might initially take a confident stance and later, upon noting relative position to others, readjust.

The key dimensions of positioning theory are position order and intentionality. Position order refers to the instance in which a position is stated, whether it be an initial position, a reposition, or a position carried over from another storyline or context. Position intentionality is related to how deliberately a position is assumed, and whether it is done as a performance to influence others or as an accounting to others' expectations.

Instructor Presence

The first week of a new online course is a critical time for establishing instructor presence. In the absence of a physical instructor, students look to whatever text and image-based presence might be available to learn more about who will be guiding and assessing their educational experience. In terms of presence, positioning theory may help explain why instructor presence develops in certain ways (i.e., why one instructor is considered more involved or engaged than another regardless of participation level). The notion of presence, then, becomes not only a matter of how an instructor positions herself, but also of how learners position her and how she accepts the positions they ascribe to her. For example, in social constructivist settings learners may initially look

to their instructors to be the fount of objective truths, but instructors may respond to such positioning by declaring their own positions as more experienced co-learners.

Role Versus Position

In educational settings, instructor and student are the most common classroom roles. Within the instructor role there are various role functions in which one might engage. The pedagogical role function is the most commonly recognized one, but three other key functions that have been discussed in the online learning literature are managerial, technical and social (Ashton, Roberts, & Teles, 1999; Berge, 1995; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara, & Dennen, 2001). These roles represent major responsibilities of the instructor. Individual instructors may then embrace these functions in different ways.

Although the terms "role" and "position" may initially be used interchangeably by one unfamiliar with positioning theory, upon closer inspection they are quite different. Van Langenhove and Harre (1999) tend to eschew roles in their presentation of positioning theory, but in contexts such as education, roles are a core part of one's identity and tend to define social practices, responsibilities and expectations. As such, they may be unavoidable. However, it is possible to view positions in light of roles, or rather roles as the anchor points of positions (Davies & Harré, 1999). Further, the notion that both roles and one's social practices will vary by situation and institution should not be forgotten (Valsiner, 2004). The concept of social practice is expansive and adaptive, unable to be fully captured by a role label.

Positions are finer-grained and more fluid than roles. Whereas an instructor is always an instructor throughout a course, an instructor may hold a dominant or receding position in each particular speech act or instance of discourse. Between role functions an instructor may favor a particular position; for example, the instructor may take an authoritative position when dealing with administrative matters but, desiring learner-centered discourse, take a less dominant position when addressing pedagogical issues. Beyond that, a person might present himself as authoritative on one issue and novice on another. Table 1 (page 98) presents some of the roles we might expect to see in classes along with their functions and dimensions next to more flexible positions that may exist within them.

People acknowledge a contextual understanding of a given situation by accepting roles. Daniels (2006) posits that social learning theory should go beyond that suggested by Vygotsky, incorporating not just social interactions but interpersonal functions. Following the work of Bernstein (1990), he argues that our experiences in code-regulated interactions and environments prepare us for thinking and acting in contextualized ways. In other words, we inherently work within an acknowledgement of social roles that one plays. Applying these ideas to positioning within class discourse, then, it seems that some interplay between socially ascribed roles and fluid positions is unavoidable.

Applications of Positioning Theory

To date, positioning theory has received relatively little attention within educational studies. Published studies have used positioning theory as a framework

Table 1: Roles and Positions in Classroom Contexts (Based on Berge, 1995; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara, & Dennen, 2001)

Role	Functions	Attribute Dimensions	Traditional Positions	Alternate Positions
Teacher	Administrative Pedagogical Social Technical	Active vs. Passive Teacher-centered vs. learner-centered	Authority Expert Leader	Co-learner Guide Peer
Student	Pedagogical	Active vs. Passive	Learner Follower Novice Recipient	Co-learner Peer expert

to analyze mentoring relationships (Bullough & Draper, 2004); how an individual learner is defined through the relationship between assessment and motivation (Tunstall, 2003); researcher-participant relationships in the classroom (Ritchie, 2002); the impact of student-teacher positions on prospective teachers' sense of social justice (Cook-Sather & Young, 2007); and learning in a primary classroom (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000). These studies all represent face-to-face interactions among participants, examining live, spoken speech acts.

In other settings, positioning theory has been recommended as a way of understanding how people select and evaluate information sources (McKenzie, 2003); how participants in therapeutic and everyday conversations develop a sense of agency (Drewery, 2005); and how age impacts discursive expectations with regards to particular topics such as sexual activity (Jones, 2006). From these studies it becomes evident how positioning theory can provide a lens for examining a wide variety of discursive events.

Positioning theory originally was intended to examine synchronous spoken discourse. To apply it in an asynchronous and written discourse setting such as one finds in many online courses is a bit different. The asynchronous timing often breaks up the fluidity and spontaneity of speech. Additionally, online discourse may be more reflective and deliberate than real-time conversation. Whereas spoken words are somewhat ethereal, leaving one to remember the specific details and their meaning, written words linger on in archived form and may be read multiple times on multiple occasions. Intended meanings may be more easily misconstrued given the dearth of supplementary information such as one's inflection. These differences between written/asynchronous and spoken/synchronous discourse should not affect the utility of positioning theory, although one might expect differences in the nature of discursive actions given the opportunity to more carefully reflect on others' statements and compose one's own statements.

METHODS

Participants

The participants for this study were three online instructors and their respective students. These classes were part of a larger study, and were chosen for this

Table 2: Overview of Participants

Class	Topic	Number of Students	Instructor Activity Level
A	Library Science	19	High
B	Communication	25	Medium
C	Communication	25	Low

analysis because they met three criteria: (a) they were similar in enrollment size; (b) they were similar in course content and focus (concept-focused courses that encouraged students to relate course materials to their own lives and experiences); and (c) they each represented different levels of instructor activity. High activity level was defined as more than 25% of the all class messages authored by the instructor. Medium activity level was defined as 5–25% of all messages authored by the instructor. Low activity level was defined as less than 5% of all messages authored by the instructor (see Table 2).

Data Collection

Data collection primarily consisted of collecting all course discussion threads at the end of the semester. Additionally, the courses were observed *in situ*, with field notes written to document the sense of flow at various periods of time. All course instructors were interviewed via telephone to learn more about their courses, prior online teaching experience, and teaching philosophies.

Instructors and classes were solicited for the larger study via an e-mail sent to online learning coordinators at public universities. This e-mail asked the coordinators to forward the request for participation to faculty who were teaching online at their university. Instructors who responded to the e-mail, volunteered to participate, and whose course met entirely online were included in the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis focused on two elements of the discussion threads: (1) determining instructor involvement in discussion via count measures (e.g., number of posts, number of threads) and (2) assessing the nature of the instructor's position. A coding scheme based on von Langenhove and Harre's (1999) work was developed and used to support data analysis. The codes were then used descriptively, to indicate the relative frequency of different types of positions within the data set. Field notes and interviews were used to triangulate the discussion findings and to provide a fuller description of the course context.

Creating the position coding scheme. The coding scheme was created by iteratively examining the critical dimensions of positioning theory—positions, intentionality, and positioner—and online discussion transcripts. Specific instances of each code were developed to facilitate the coding process (see Table 3, p. 100).

Applying the position coding scheme. All messages written by the instructor, to the instructor, or referring to the instructor either implicitly or explicitly were coded for the first two weeks of each course. These messages included the course introductions and initial discussion topics. In recognition of how positioning is

Table 3: Coding Scheme (based on von Langenhove and Harré, 1999)

Code	Description	Example
Position		
First Order	An initial positioning statement	*You're the expert.*
Second Order	A repositioning of an initial positioning	(In response to "You're the expert.") *Actually, I just started learning about this topic two years ago.*
Third Order	A positioning statement carried over to another conversation.	*In last week's discussion, you said you know a lot about this topic.*
Intentionality		
Tacit	A positioning statement that occurs naturally and implicitly in the course of other conversation.	*Please reply by Tuesday.*
Intentional–Performative	A deliberate positioning statement	*I've taught this class for the past ten years.*
Intentional–Accountative	A forced positioning, in response to someone else	*(In response to "Have you graded our papers yet?") I'm very busy right now with administrative tasks, but hope to have them completed soon.*
Positioner		
Self	A positioning statement about oneself	*I've taught this class for the past ten years*
Other	A positioning statement about another person	*You're the expert.*

a truly discursive act (Torronen, 2001), messages were considered in context of the overall flow of the discussion thread in which they appeared. Student posts that were not coded did not refer to the instructor in any way and only tacitly positioned the instructor in that they served as a response to the instructor's assignment or request for participation.

Two coders were used for initial analysis of a subset of the data (200 messages from each of the three classes) to ensure reliability of the coding scheme. The unit of analysis was the message, and each message could be coded for multiple positioning elements. Although it was theoretically possible for a message to contain multiple differentiated acts of self-positioning (e.g., positioning as expert in one sentence and novice in the next), in practice the messages were internally consistent in position. Inter-rater reliability was calculated by determining the percent agreement between raters for each individual rating (multiple ratings per message were possible) and was 93.4%, demonstrating the ease with

Table 4: Overall Posting Trends

Class	Total Student Messages	Total Instructor Messages	Total Messages	Percent Instructor Messages	Instructor Activity Level
A	510	537	1047	51.3%	high
B	903	106	1009	10.5%	medium
C	244	6	250	2.4%	low

Table 5: Overall Positioning Trends

Code	Class A		Class B		Class C	
	I	S	I	S	I	S
Total posts coded	537	429	106	87	6	3
Percent Overall Student Posts	n/a	84.1%	n/a	9.6%	n/a	1.2%
First Order	531	426	102	86	6	3
Second Order	6	0	4	0	0	0
Third Order	14	3	0	1	0	0
Tacit	199	269	76	75	0	0
Intentional–Performative	276	98	23	0	5	0
Intentional–Accountative	62	62	7	12	1	3

which the coding scheme could be consistently used by trained researchers. The areas in which disagreements occurred were either determining to include or not include a student post in the data set (such posts were uncoded by one code and marked tacit by the other) and distinguishing between tacit and performative positioning in a few instances. These few inconsistencies indicate the points where one category begins to overlap with another in everyday language use.

FINDINGS

Overall Trends

Participation levels in the classes varied. Classes A and B generated a similar overall number of messages; however the distribution of instructor and student messages was quite dissimilar between the classes (See Table 4). Class C had about one-quarter the overall posting level of the other two courses, with very few instructor contributions.

First order positioning was by far most common across classes, with only one instructor engaged in second order positioning (see Table 5). In other words, instructor self-positioning speech acts appeared to be readily accepted by students, and students further reinforced this acceptance by not positioning their instructors differently from how they had seen the instructors position themselves.

Students engaged in instructor positioning at rates that paralleled the instructor's posting levels. In both Class B and C, the percent of student posts that

position the instructor are close to the percent of instructor messages. In class A, a much higher percentage of student posts positioned the instructor; this increased rate was not surprising because much of the interaction in that class involved direct communication with the instructor.

Students were most likely to position their instructors tacitly. They made use of third order positioning sparingly, and did so to recount something that the instructor had said in an earlier message. Students in Class A were the only ones to engage in performative instructor positioning, and it seems likely they were following their instructor's lead since he had engaged in a great deal of performative positioning himself. Specific details of this course and the other two follow in the next section.

Class A

In Class A there was a high level of activity, both overall and by the instructor. Dr. A opened discussion boards for four days each week, and during those four days appeared to almost always be online. In most cases, a student post would not exist for more than a few hours without a reply from Dr. A, who contributed 51.3% of the messages to the discussion board. Many threads were two-person dialogues between Dr. A and any one of the students initiated by the student but with Dr. A most often posting the last message.

Dr. A established himself as the expert and disseminator of knowledge early in the course, and students readily accepted this position. Dr. A's initial messages to the class were performative in nature, expounding on his experience in the course area. As the course continued, his degree of performativity lessened, but was nonetheless present from time to time. In its place, a tacit agreement developed between instructor and students so that students could post either ideas or questions and the instructor would reply in an authoritative manner, either answering the student's question or providing feedback on an idea or comment. The feedback was frequently substantive, either adjusting or expounding on the student's comments.

Students put Dr. A in an explicitly accountative position in this class by calling on him to address questions and issues. Thus, when Dr. A was being accountative, he was reinforcing the notion of instructor as expert. Given this expert persona he had developed so very strongly in the early weeks of the course, it might have been difficult for him to experience many position shifts for as long as the course discussion stayed on topic. In fact, one week his participation levels dropped noticeably because of personal commitments, and the nature of student discourse shifted uncomfortably as a result. The students clearly were used to a particular pattern of course interactions and found Dr. A's absence quite noticeable. The timing between posts was longer than usual, as students awaited Dr. A's replies, and the discussion archives include questions as to where Dr. A might be.

Instructor repositioning was not common this course. Only six instructor messages, less than 1% of the overall total, demonstrated second order instructor positioning. Those particular instances all were cases in which Dr. A was not outright rejecting a position students had given him, but rather clarifying or re-

fining it. Only slightly more common was third order positioning (14 instances), in which Dr. A reiterated a self-positioning act from an earlier post (e.g. "As I believe I wrote in a post to someone last week, when I used to do work for [organization] …"). Thus, the students seemed to readily accept Dr. A's consistent self-positioning to the extent that one could say he truly maintained a role throughout the semester.

Class B

Class B had a medium or moderate level of instructor activity. Dr. B stated at the onset of the course that he hoped to engage in discussion alongside the students rather than lecture at them via the discussion board. Thus, he desired to have a more learner-centered type of class discussion. In most of Dr. B's messages his self-positioning was tacit and supported his anticipated peer-like interactions. He shared in his own thoughts and experiences with the class with the assumption that they were relevant, but not authoritative.

However, Dr. B did engage in performative positioning that made clear his official role in the class and what might be expected of him as the course instructor. About one-half (12) of his performative statements were related to administrative details such as when particular assignments would be due and his availability for communicating with students (Dr. B had a busy travel schedule). In turn, all seven of his accountative messages were on the same topics in response to student queries about communicating with him and when to expect grades and feedback. Thus, while Dr. B may have tacitly positioned himself as a more experienced peer engaged in a sharing and exploratory discussion, it was not possible to leave the expectations that come with the instructor role altogether behind. His administrative-oriented performative positioning statements indicated his awareness of the bounds of the assigned role, as did the accountative ones that students triggered.

Dr. B was effective at position shifting within this class, supporting the way in which he wanted to define the instructor role. He used second order performative positioning to remind students that he considered himself a learner, too, in response to certain student questions that supposed he would have an authoritative answer. Thus, second order positioning messages are examples of how this instructor negotiated the conflict between his desire to not take authority and the expectations that he would fulfill a traditional teacher role.

Class C

Class C had a low level of instructor activity, with only six messages posted by the instructor throughout the entire course. Thus, instructor self-positioning was not common. Five of the instructor messages were performative, in which Dr. C provided administrative information and encouraged students to post. These messages put Dr. C in a fairly traditional instructor role, designating himself as the watcher of the students and the person to whom they are ultimately accountable.

Given Dr. C's low presence on the discussion board, it is not surprising that there was very little student positioning of the instructor. Instead, all but three

student messages focused on responding to the discussion assignment with no reference at all to the instructor. The three student messages that referred to Dr. C positioned him accountatively as the instructor who should be able to answer their questions. Two were from the same student, wanting information about deadlines and his grades. Dr. C indicated in an interview that he responded to those messages privately, via e-mail. The other student who positioned him accountatively had a question about a course concept. In that instance, a peer gave the reply before Dr. C, who later entered the discussion and thanked the student who replied.

Class C experienced a generally low level of interaction on the message boards, and students did not meet the minimum posting requirements. In most instances, students seemed to be posting merely to meet the stated requirements, with very surface-level references to others' posts if any acknowledgement was given at all. Additionally, the timing of messages within threads indicates that discussants were not engaged on the same topics at the same time, another potential factor in low interactivity.

Given the low level of positioning in this course, instructor position shifting was not an issue that could be explored. Dr. C had virtually no presence in the course based on discussion board interactions. Whether or not students had a strong sense of their instructor from e-mail interactions and course materials remains unknown.

Dr. C explained in an interview that his low level of presence in the discussion was intentional. He felt that the discussion board was a forum for the students to express their thoughts and ideas and worried that if he posted many messages there the attention might become centered on him as disseminator of knowledge instead. It was his preference to engage in discourse with students privately, via e-mail, and even encourage them to post to the class forums that way. However, he indicated that he did not do much prodding in the background during the semester of the student because of overloaded responsibilities, and he felt that the low levels of participation and discourse were a result.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Positioning, Presence, and Persona

Of the three instructors, only one fully used positioning to the desired effect. Dr. B's interactions with his students and fairly deft position-switching allowed him to fulfill his expected duties as instructor while asserting and displaying his desire to engage in learner-centered discussion. Dr. A stated that he wanted to be a rather facilitative instructor, but his heavy posting presence coupled with his consistent self-positioning as an expert undermined such desires. Dr. C's overwhelming lack of presence meant he had little opportunity for performative positioning. His limited course interactions fit within the standard expected teacher role, and did not inspire students to interact via the discussion forum.

Dr. A's case is an interesting one in that he engaged in a lot of performative positioning, but his positioning did not have the desired effect. His class demonstrates just how powerful position can be, and why it is important for

instructors (a) to be aware of how their words and the words of others can confirm, disconfirm or shape one's contextual expectations or a role; and (b) to position themselves in a manner that is consistent with how they wish to be perceived and the classroom climate they hope to foster. Presence, too, played a role in the evolution of Dr. A's persona. Students readily learned that he would respond quickly and definitively to their posts, and began to post with an anticipated response in mind as indicated by their performativity on Dr. A's behalf.

Position has an accumulated impact on persona development, which can be seen when in the intentionality of posts by Drs. A and B. When instructors take a strong performative stance, whatever it may be, that stance will shape the expectations of others, particularly when the relative social position of those others (i.e., students who look up to teachers as those with power) suggests their ready acceptance. By contrast, Dr. C's presence level was too low to have a sense of accumulated position from which a persona or expectations other than those of an assumed role might be extrapolated. Thus, instructor positioning in online discourse has the ability to not only shape interactions within each storyline, but also to form to one's online identity over time across storylines.

Instructional Implications

Positioning theory has instructional implications for how teachers interact with their students via discussion boards and facilitate class discussion. Greater instructor attention to how position impacts discourse can help instructors more effectively teach in a manner consistent with their own teaching philosophies. For example, Drs. A and C might have benefited from a heightened awareness of positioning, whether the end result would be changing facilitation style to have the desired effect or realizing that their stated or claimed intent was somehow different from their real intent.

Position's impact on learning outcomes has yet to be studied. Positioning itself is not an intervention, but rather a very natural human act that takes place in all discourse. However, a skilled facilitator can influence positioning of both self and others, and thus may use positioning in the performative sense as an instructional intervention. How well students receive instructor actions may well be related to the intentionality of instructor positioning, which is not to say that tacit positioning is inherently ineffective but that it should be deliberate. Tacit positioning indicates implicit agreements about one's position, but in the absence of intentional positioning tacit acts may go unnoticed or seem unsupported.

Many questions remain about how student positions and learning experiences are related. For example, should students who believe themselves to be expert when really they are novices be repositioned? And should such repositioning be performative, or tacit? What about in the case of those students who falsely believe themselves less able than they are? How might student position-taking and repositioning affect learning for both the individual student and for the group? The negotiation of student position may well be a contributing factor to not only the nature but also the quality of the learning experience.

Roles, Positions, Shifting, and Fluidity

Instructors and students do not necessarily escape or transcend their designated roles in the classroom, nor perhaps do they escape role functions and attributes they might wear. These are contextually bound social positions with deeply rooted expectations developed over several years (Bernstein, 1990; Daniels, 2006). However, attribute descriptors such as teacher-centered or passive may be based in part on cumulative position taking and accepting. Alternately, one might use positioning to defy roles in which one has been placed.

Positioning is not an act of the instructor alone. Students play a clear role in instructor positioning in that they must accept the instructor's position. These three classes tended to exhibit a ready acceptance of the instructor's chosen position, although a few storylines in Class B involved instructor second order positioning in cases where students entered a story with a different instructor expectation. The negotiation that took place across speech acts was demonstrative of how students may need explicit indicators that an instructor is or is not intending to fulfill a traditionally expected role.

The ability to position shift or, in other words, to use position to fluidly negotiate and renegotiate one's relative status in a conversation or series of conversations is something that we all do naturally and often unconsciously in our everyday life. However, doing so effectively in scenarios such as class discussions may require some degree of intentionality, with the realization that as positions, potentially in flux, shift around, the type of contributions that each discussant may make to the conversation also will change (Harre, 2005). Thus, it often will become the responsibility of the person in the teacher role, who starts with the more central and powerful position by merits of contextual expectations, to initiate class-based position shifts.

Operationalizing and Extending the Theory

Positioning theory served as a useful analytic framework in this study, readily supporting the description and differentiation of discursive acts focused on the instructor's actions and responsibilities within the class. A major strength of using it as a coding scheme is its simplicity; coding occurred without interpretive difficulty, and a second coder was readily able to affirm the initial coding accuracy.

Although not addressed in this paper, positioning theory might be applied in a much broader context. For example, it could be further used to help explore structural relationships between types of messages, looking for trends in positioning and repositioning based on demographic characteristics of discourse partners. Additionally, it could help explore changes in participant actions over time, looking at whether performative positioning might be faded with one's position maintained or how truly fluid positions can be within the structure of a formal education setting.

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