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Adventures in Web 2.0: Introducing Social Networking into My Teaching

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Author(s): [Honor Moorman](#)

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"As new technologies shape literacies, they bring opportunities for teachers at all levels to foster reading and writing in more diverse and participatory contexts."

—"A Changing World for Literacy Teachers," 21st-Century Literacies: A Policy Research Brief, National Council of Teachers of English

Five months ago, I introduced Web 2.0 technology to my students, and already, there is a story to tell. Integrating a social networking site into my teaching has been even more challenging and will prove to be even more beneficial than I could have imagined. By sharing my story, I hope that I can provide a road map for educators who are new to Web 2.0 and challenge those well-acquainted with it to take the Web 2.0 adventure to the next level.

All students at the International School of the Americas (ISA) engage in a 120-hour career-exploration internship before graduating. The ISA Internship Program is one of the school's hallmark real-world learning experiences, providing students with the opportunity to experience the fields they are contemplating pursuing in post-secondary life. The students in this year's senior class are working in many diverse spheres—medicine, the arts, politics, teaching, business, community organizing, and more. As the ISA Internship Coordinator, it is my privilege and pleasure to support these students as they navigate the world of work and learn what it takes to be a professional.

When I first stepped into the shoes of the Internship Coordinator last August, I quickly realized that the very best aspect of the Internship Program is the fact that students are going to a hundred different places, working with different mentors (community business partners and other professionals who agree to supervise our students) at different times. They are each having their own completely individualized, authentic learning experience. At the same time, I discovered that the most challenging aspect of the Internship Program is this variety of workplaces, schedules, and partnerships, which makes it impossible for students to meet as a group and learn from each other in a structured time and place. That is, until now.

This year, I've integrated the use of the Internship Ning, a social networking site that serves as a virtual classroom where students can discuss their internships, exchange ideas, and offer feedback and support to one another. This gives them the opportunity to benefit from everyone's insights and experiences in addition to their own. The site also has the potential to become a learning network that will link our school community with the professional community in new and dynamic ways.

Challenge #1: Gaining District Support and Launching the Ning

Ning.com (<http://www.ning.com>) is a free web-based platform that allows users to create their own social networking sites. The word "ning" means "peace" in Chinese, writes Gina Bianchini in "The Story Behind the Ning Name" (http://blog.ning.com/2007/04/the_story_behind_the_ning_name.html). Sites created with Ning.com offer many of the same features available on Facebook or MySpace. Members create profiles, join groups, post blogs, share photos, and so on.

The first obstacle to implementing the Internship Ning was the school district's Internet filter. In order to make the site accessible to students from school, we needed the support of the district's Educational Technology and Computer Service departments. Since some sites created on Ning.com are inappropriate for students, we didn't ask the district to unblock the Ning.com parent site, just the Internship Ning (<http://isainternship.ning.com>). Teachers of younger students should note that the Ning platform is not an option for students younger than 14 as stated by Ning.com's Terms of Use.

In addition to the Internship Ning, we requested access to blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, and other Web 2.0 tools that would facilitate our internationally-focused, project-based curriculum and enhance our ability to engage students in meaningful communication and collaboration around global issues. Three face-to-face meetings, four months, and many emails later, we were granted permission to begin using some of the tools, including the Internship Ning.

Properly unblocking these sites was worth the patience and persistence. From an equity standpoint, I needed to be sure that all students would have access to the Internship Ning and related sites by making them available on campus. From a pedagogical standpoint, I needed students to be able to sign on during class so I could give them a hands-on introductory tour of the site.

Backstory: How I Discovered This Thing Called Ning

After teaching ninth and twelfth grade English at The International School of the Americas for eight years, I became a secondary literacy specialist for the North East Independent School District. This role involved sharing teaching strategies and resources with middle and high school reading and English teachers across the district. I also began teaching pre-service teachers at Trinity University and Texas State University where I was using web-based learning management systems to share resources with them and engage them in online discussions. However, the course websites created using these systems were only available to currently enrolled students. When the students in my university classes began asking if it would be possible for them to access these websites after the semester was over, I started looking for an alternative way to continue sharing ideas and resources with former students and colleagues online.

I created a blog, "English Teacher Teacher," <http://englishteacherteacher.blogspot.com/>. I had seen Karl Fisch's "Did You Know" presentation (<http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com/2006/08/did-you-know.html>), which had led me to Michael Wesch's video, "The Machine is Us/ing Us," (<http://mediatedcultures.net/mediatedculture.htm>) and I had been particularly struck by Candace Lombardi's article entitled, "There's a blog Born Every Half Second" (http://news.cnet.com/2100-1025_3-6102935.html). In my initial blog post (<http://englishteacherteacher.blogspot.com/2007/12/hello-edublogosphere.html>), I wrote, "I can't even imagine how many blogs have come into existence while I've been writing—and rewriting, and changing, and editing—this first post, but I'm about to push the button and join the edublogosphere! Here goes . . ."

What I didn't fully confess in that first entry was that I felt very nervous about initially publishing my blog. It wasn't until I got comfortable with this new genre—by reading numerous educational technology blogs—that I felt ready to begin blogging myself. In retrospect, this isn't too surprising. I believe strongly in the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing, and whenever I invite students to try writing in a new genre, I always have them begin by reading "mentor texts" from that genre.

I began reading blogs written by top educational technology innovators, zeroing in on those that were referenced multiple times or nominated for the Edublog awards <<http://edublogawards.com/>>. Not only was I "reading like a writer" to learn the conventions of the genre, in terms of content, length, style, and so on, but I was also learning about the tech tools and features I could incorporate into my blog—hyperlinks, embedded videos, cluster maps, tag clouds, blogrolls, widgets, and more.

This was my first foray into the world of Web 2.0. It was new and exciting, and as I tentatively stepped forward, I found myself following the electronic breadcrumbs left by the many other educators who had ventured into this territory ahead of me. Their blog posts and wiki pages offered me an interactive map of the emerging Web 2.0 landscape, and as I explored, I became passionate about the amazing potential these tools offer us to connect learners and make learning collaborative. The more I read, the more I realized how important it is for us as teachers to take advantage of Web 2.0 tools not only to create our own personal learning networks, but also to introduce them to our students and incorporate them into our teaching so students can develop the knowledge and skills needed to take advantage of these connective technologies that are so essential to life-long learning in the 21st century. Following in the web footprints of the edubloggers I had come to admire, I embedded my delicious tags into my blog, and linked it to my YouTube playlists. I also joined Classroom 2.0 (<http://www.classroom20.com/>) "the social network for those interested in Web 2.0 and collaborative technologies in education." Participating in the Classroom 2.0 community showed me what was possible through Ning.com.

Challenge #2: Helping Students View the Ning as a Personal Learning Network

Once we finally had the Internship Ning fully accessible on the school computers, I was eager to introduce it to the students. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, I emailed all 112 seniors and invited them to join the Internship Ning. Only five of them did so, which was disappointing at first. But since I had set up the Internship Ning as a members-only, password-protected site, there was no way for students to preview it, and I realized they may not have been inclined to join without knowing more about it. The next week, I went into their classes, showed them the site, and invited them to sign up on the spot. Since it's a transition year, this year's seniors weren't required to participate in the Internship Ning, but most of them wanted to join the site once they saw it in action.

One of the core assignments of the Internship Program is the written reflection. Students are asked to regularly document their internships in order to articulate and analyze their experiences and become more aware of their own learning. I urged students to begin blogging and participating in discussion groups rather than writing their reflections the "old-fashioned" way. The students enjoyed customizing their profile pages, "friending" each other, and joining groups. But as students began to use the Internship Ning for non-academic purposes, I realized that if I wanted them to really engage in this site as a serious space for learning, and not just as an ISA Facebook, I needed to share more of my thinking about why I had created this "virtual classroom" and the ways I hoped and expected they would use it.

Teaching Story: Letting Students in on the Big Idea

My main purposes for implementing the Internship Ning into the ISA Internship Program were two-fold. First, since students are engaged in their internships outside of school hours, I was trying to create a virtual classroom—an online community where students could converse and collaborate, and where I could support and enrich their learning. Second, I was hoping to enhance the Internship curriculum in a way that would help prepare students for the literacy demands of the 21st century. On both accounts, the Internship Ning has already surpassed my original vision, and we have just begun to glimpse its ultimate potential.

As a virtual classroom, the Internship Ning is in many ways a much more flexible and dynamic space than a physical classroom. Students can interact with any member about any topic or question at any time. And rather than being limited to a classroom where only 20 to 30 students are able to collaborate with one another, the virtual space enables students to interact with all 100 plus of their classmates, as well as alumni who continue to participate on the site. Once we have mentors participating too, there will be the potential for all students to learn from that mentor, not just the student who is physically interning with him or her.

In terms of 21st century skills, the Internship Ning provides an online environment where students can gain the knowledge and skills needed to "to learn effectively and live productively in an increasingly digital world" (International Society for Technology in Education, 2007) and develop "the skills, knowledge and expertise students should master to succeed in work and life in the 21st century" (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009). It is a space that encourages students to practice digital citizenship; the Internship Ning creates the conditions for students to be self-directed and responsive to the community's needs. In addition, the Internship Ning is a teaching context in which I can be the kind of educator I believe 21st century students need—a facilitator, collaborator, and co-learner.

Two weeks after launching the Internship Ning, I engaged students in a couple of lessons to help them understand my rationale and goals for implementing this social networking site. I wanted them to realize how, as Will Richardson writes, "the read/write web changes everything" (<http://willrichardson.wikispaces.com/page/diff/home/74757129>), so that they would understand why we were doing this and the ways their participation on the Internship Ning fits into the bigger picture of what's happening on the Web. We discussed the Did You Know? 2.0 video and touched on some of the big concepts—exponential change, technological innovation, globalization, and mass collaboration (see Resources for Further Reading). I had students read selected articles from T.H.E. Journal (<http://www.thejournal.com/>) and Edutopia (<http://www.edutopia.org/>) that addressed the benefits and challenges of students blogging. We also engaged in a debate around the question of about whether or not "social networking technologies will bring large [positive] changes to educational methods, in and out of the classroom" using the debate at Economist.com (<http://www.economist.com/debate/overview/123>) as a model. We examined the 21st century standards, especially accountability, social responsibility, and digital citizenship, and discussed how the Internship Ning would be a place to practice those skills. Finally, we co-constructed an Acceptable Use Policy for our site.

Giving students ownership in the process of defining the expectations for the Internship Ning was a critical step in helping them grow as digital citizens. Similar to the process of creating norms for classroom behavior, I trusted that the wisdom of the group would generate a sensible policy. And, even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have presented the students with a comprehensive list of do's and don'ts before allowing them to use the Internship Ning. Until everyone started using the site, I didn't exactly know what kinds of questions or issues would arise. And since many students are more adept with these tools than I am, they discovered features and functions I hadn't been aware of before. Together, we were able to address the questions of what it would mean for a social networking site to be academic and professional rather than purely social.

Challenge #3: Creating Momentum While Keeping it Authentic and Student-Centered

Over the next ten weeks, there was very little activity on the Internship Ning. Those weeks included winter break, first semester final exams, and a class trip to Washington, D.C. Nevertheless, I was worried that students somehow weren't buying in to the idea that blogging was a worthwhile, much less a "cool" thing to do. In response, I presented a mini-lesson on the role of blogging in our global society and in our individual lives.

We started with "Blogs in Plain English," (<http://www.commoncraft.com/blogs>) a video introduction to blogs, "how they work and why they matter." Then we talked about the role of blogging in our lives and in the lives of people we know. We also discussed the phenomenon of citizen journalism and the role it played in the recent presidential election process. Trying to emphasize how ubiquitous blogging has become, I pointed out how it is integrated into many of the tools students use every day, such as Microsoft Word and Google. I even reminded them that Time magazine had declared "You" as Person of the Year in 2006. Whether or not it was a result of my lesson, students generated 25 blog posts for February, 13 for March, and 38 for April. One of the most prolific bloggers since the beginning has been Mario—he's written 19 blog posts, started five discussions, and contributed to six others. When I asked Mario why he liked writing on the Internship Ning so much, he said, "Writing an essay just feels like something you're doing for a grade, but writing a blog post feels like a normal conversation . . . it's almost like Facebook or MySpace, but it's school-oriented."

Mario's comment highlights a key strength of the using social networking for education—the connection between in-school and out-of-school literacies. One of my reasons for implementing the Internship Ning was based on the fact that so many students are using Facebook. According to the National School Boards Association's "Creating and Connecting: Research and Guidelines on Online Social—and Educational—Networking," 71 percent of students with online access use social networking tools on a weekly basis, and informal polling of the ISA senior class indicated about the same proportion. I wanted to build on this out-of-school literacy and create an opportunity for students to engage in professional web-based writing using a site that would seem familiar to them and one which they could learn to use more or less intuitively.

According to the National Council of Teachers of English's "Writing in the 21st Century," teachers need to recognize "that out-of-school literacy practices are as critical to students' development as what occurs in the classroom and take advantage of this to better connect classroom work to real-world situations that students will encounter across a lifetime." I wholeheartedly agree, and my vision for the Internship Ning was that it would be one such space that would help bridge the gulf between students' out-of-school and in-school literacies.

However, the similarities between the features and functions of Facebook and the Internship Ning have proven to be both an advantage and an added complication. One tension between the two sites came as a surprise to me. When I asked Mario why he thought some of the other students weren't participating on the Internship Ning as much as he was, he said, "It takes dedication to get on the Internship Ning rather than Facebook or MySpace." He pointed out that when students sit down at the computer, they are tempted to just spend their time on the Internet socializing, and he said that it was his passion and dedication to his internship that made him want to blog about it so frequently. I had been thinking so much about taking advantage of students' familiarity with Facebook, that I hadn't even considered the idea that my Internship site would somehow be competing with Facebook for their attention. But of course this makes sense given the "attention economy" we now live in.

Another layer of complexity was the fact that many students needed help making a distinction between the kinds of writing typically done on Facebook and the kind of writing that was appropriate on the Internship Ning. Nick, a student who participates in a number of online communities committed to serious intellectual

discussions, commented “A lot of people’s online experiences have been Facebook, so they see the Internet as a social tool to mess around on and not much else . . . they don’t see the actual potential of the Internet . . . [but] the whole point of the Internet is interconnectivity.” Nick also said, “So many people condemn social networking sites as not being productive that they don’t see that they can be a stepping stone into something more productive . . . that [social networking sites] have become part of the professional sphere . . . [and that] these tool sets and skill sets are important.”

Future Story: Where Do We Go From Here?

We’re 20 weeks into the Internship Ning experiment, and it’s already time to introduce the site to the juniors who will begin their career-explorations this summer. From now on, all students will be expected to blog and make additional contributions to the site regularly. And my hope is that with full participation, the student-to-student interactions will become even richer and more meaningful. The Internship Ning is a platform that not only creates a student-centered environment where students are engaged in meaning-making and writing about self-selected topics that are relevant and interesting to them. It also provides an authentic audience for students, and Faith said as a result, blogging on the Internship Ning has improved her writing. She explained, “it helped me practice better writing—writing that I would want a lot of people to read, because I’m proofreading more carefully and using language that I don’t use every day.”

Next year, students’ mentors will be invited to become members of the Internship Ning. This will enable the site to truly become a virtual representation of the professional network we participate in through the Internship Program. The students seem to think having mentors participate on the site is a pretty good idea as well. Jordan said she thought “having the mentors on the Ning with us would force people to really look at their internships and think about what they’re learning from them . . . and getting comments from other people would make it more constructive.”

I’ll be very interested to see what happens when we have mentors participating on the Internship Ning. My hunch is that it will help students become more keenly aware of the site as a public, professional space rather than a private, personal one. Faith seems to agree, saying, “the fact that professionals can read our work [will help differentiate it from a Facebook-type environment] . . . that’s definitely not how it is in my world of Facebook, I mean, teachers are on Facebook, but they don’t comment professionally on our writing.” Although we can’t open the site to the World Wide Web at large for safety and security reasons, having more invited members on the site—both peers and adult professionals—will increase the learning opportunities students gain by participating on the Internship Ning. Students will have a broader audience reading and responding to their posts, which will maximize the dynamic, generative potential of the network. As Nick articulated in our conversation about online communities, “when it gets really interesting is when you talk with people who[m] you’ve never met and who have ideas you’ve never thought about before.”

In “Writing in the 21st Century,” Kathleen Blake Yancey argues that “With digital technology and, especially Web 2.0, it seems, writers are **everywhere**” and that “In much of this new composing, we are writing to share, yes; to encourage dialogue, perhaps; but mostly, I think, to participate.” She goes on to explain that “our impulse to write is now digitized and expanded—or put differently, newly technologized, socialized, and networked.” The Internship Ning is already a thriving example of writing in the 21st century where students are writing for an audience that is networked and participatory and where, as Will Richardson describes, “publication is not the end of the process any longer . . . it’s the conversation that occurs after we publish those things where the real networking and continued learning occurs.” And our site is quickly becoming more than just student-centered, it is becoming learner-centered, with all of us—students, teachers, and mentors alike—as co-learners in a virtual community.

As Nick so eloquently said, “the only way you can really teach someone something is to get them to experience it,” and through the Internship Ning, all students at The International School of the Americas are experiencing the power of writing in the 21st century, the power of networking, the power of participating.

International School of the Americas (ISA) is a small magnet high school of choice located in San Antonio, Texas. The demographics of the school closely mirror those of the larger San Antonio area. ISA’s mission is “to challenge all members of the school community to consistently reflect on and question what it means to be acting at one’s fullest potential as a learner, leader, and global citizen.” ISA students explore local and global issues from multiple perspectives by engaging in authentic learning experiences that include travel,

field trips, internships, and service-learning. With its project-based, interdisciplinary, global studies curriculum, ISA is an Anchor School in the Asia Society's International Studies Schools Network in addition to serving as a Mentor School for the CES Small Schools Project.

Web 2.0 Tools and Definitions

Web 2.0: "Web 2.0 is an umbrella term that is used to refer to a new era of Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites." (Pew Internet and American Life Project, "Research on Web 2.0," <http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/Web-20.aspx>)

Blog: "A blog—short for weblog—is a sort of online journal, a website that features regularly updated, chronologically ordered posts. . . . Blogs vary widely in purpose, format, and readership." (Rozema and Webb, *Literature and the Web*) For a list of blogs being used in education, see "Links to School Bloggers," <http://supportblogging.com/Links+to+School+Bloggers>.

Wiki: "A wiki is a collaborative Webspaces where anyone can add content and anyone can edit content that has already been published." (Richardson, *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*) For a list of wikis being used by teachers and students, see "Examples of Educational Wikis," <http://educationalwikis.wikispaces.com/Examples+of+educational+wikis>.

Social Bookmarking: "Social bookmarking is the practice of saving bookmarks to a public Web site and tagging them with keywords." (Educause Learning Initiative, "7 Things You Should Know About Social Bookmarking," <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7001.pdf>, requires login). Examples of social bookmarking sites include Delicious (<http://delicious.com>), Furl (<http://www.furl.com>), and Diigo (<http://www.diigo.com>).

For short, easy-to-understand video introductions to these and other Web 2.0 tools, visit The Common Craft Show at <http://www.commoncraft.com/show>.

Ed Tech Innovators' Blogs

Will Richardson's "Weblogg-ed"
<http://weblogg-ed.com/>

Karl Fisch's "The Fischbowl"
<http://thefischbowl.blogspot.com/>

Scott McLeod's "Dangerously Irrelevant"
<http://www.dangerouslyirrelevant.org/>

Ewan McIntosh's "edu.blogs.com"
<http://edu.blogs.com/edublogs/>

Steve Hargadon's "K-12 Educational Technology"
<http://www.stevhargadon.com/>

Jeff Utecht's "Thinking Stick"
<http://www.thethinkingstick.com/>

David Warlick's "2cents Worth"
<http://davidwarlick.com/2cents/index.php>

Wesley Fryer's "Moving at the Speed of Creativity"
<http://www.speedofcreativity.org/>

Vicki Davis' The Cool Cat Teacher Blog
<http://coolcatteacher.blogspot.com/>

Lisa Neilsen's The Innovative Educator
<http://theinnovativeeducator.blogspot.com/>

National Educational Technology Standards for Students (NETS-S) from the International Society for Technology in Education

- Creativity and innovation
- Communication and collaboration
- Research and information fluency
- Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making
- Digital citizenship
- Technology operations and concepts

http://www.iste.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NETS/ForStudents/NETS_for_Students.htm

21st Century Student Outcomes from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills' "Framework for 21st Century Learning"

Learning and Innovation Skills

- Creativity and innovation
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Communication and collaboration

Information, Media, and Technology Skills

- Information literacy
- Media literacy
- ICT (information, communications and technology) literacy

Life and Career Skills

- Flexibility and adaptability
- Initiative and self-direction
- Social and cross-cultural skills
- Leadership and responsibility

http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120

National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS-T)

Facilitate and Inspire Student Learning and Creativity
Design and Develop Digital-Age Learning Experiences and Assessment
Model Digital-Age Work and Learning
Promote and Model Digital Citizenship and Responsibility
Engage in Professional Growth and Leadership

from The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)

http://www.iste.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NETS/ForTeachers/NETS_for_Teachers.htm

Acceptable Use Policy for the ISA Internship Ning

The purpose of this site is for students to communicate with one another, and with their teachers and mentors, about questions and ideas related to their internship experiences and/or career interests. We, the members of the ISA Internship Ning community, agree to hold ourselves and each other accountable to the following terms of use:

- We will use the site in a safe, legal, and responsible manner.
- We will demonstrate digital citizenship through high standards of personal responsibility and ethical behavior.

- We will use this site in an academically and professionally appropriate way.

Based on input from the ISA class of 2009, appropriate use has been defined as follows:

In General:

- Keep it professional; save the rest for MySpace, etc.
- Use your own good judgment; when in doubt, don't do it.

Language:

- No profanity, no sexually explicit language, no bashing.
- Should adhere to proper English conventions; no slang.
- Should be understandable to all members of the site.

Images:

- No sexual, violent, or otherwise offensive images.
- Should be used in accordance with copyright laws.

Profile Pages:

- Include your full name and/or photo of yourself only with parental/guardian permission.
- Customize the appearance of your profile page using the Ning menu only; no uploaded backgrounds.
- If you're not using a personal photo, other options include: an avatar or animated version of your own image, a Wordle (<http://www.wordle.com>) creation (using appropriate language, of course), a symbol or image related to your internship or career interests, or an image that represents you in a positive manner.

Groups:

- If you create a group, keep it open to all, not restricted.
- Don't ban anyone from your group.
- Groups should be internship related or deal with other topics relevant to the purpose of this space.

Blogs and Discussions:

- Blogs should be posted to everyone.
- Blogs should be related to internship or career interests.
- Posts can include school-related questions, but keep it constructive.

Important Notes:

- All hyperlinked sites, images, and uploaded files should adhere to the guidelines listed above.
- No third-party widgets or rss feeds per district guidelines.
- Guidelines will be updated as needed; members' input is welcome.

Accountability:

- Help remind one another to use the site in a positive and productive way so we can continue to have this privilege.
- Report any misuse of the site to Ms. Moorman immediately.

Honor Moorman graduated from the R. L. Paschal Essential School in Fort Worth, Texas, one of the first twelve CES schools in the country. She is a National Board Certified Teacher, a teacher consultant with the San Antonio Writing Project, a reviewer for ReadWriteThink.org, and the associate editor for the National Council of Teachers of English's *Voices from the Middle*. Her previous publications have been featured in *English Journal*, *English in Texas*, and *The ALAN Review*. Moorman wishes to thank her students Mario, Faith, Jordan, and Nick for their thoughtful contributions to this article as well as her colleagues Julia de la Torre for her illuminating feedback on the first draft and Pamela Valentine for her skillful use of the camera. Moorman can be reached at hmoorm@neisd.net.

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