

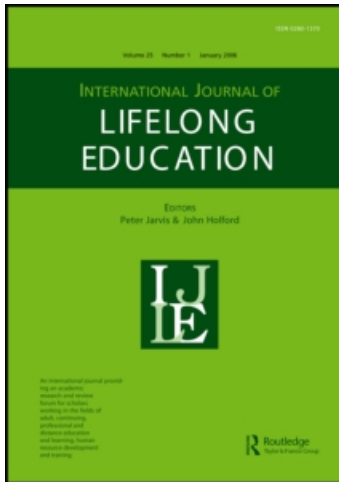
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The teacher's role in supporting a learner-centred learning environment: voices from a group of part-time postgraduate students in Hong Kong

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This study outlines what 29 part-time adult learners perceive as effective teacher (tutor/instructor/lecturer) practice in supporting their learning. The positive characteristics of teacher support from the students' perspective are first examined, and then what they found to be disappointing. Finally, the underlying themes that emerge are considered and the data is subjected to a holistic interpretation. Overall, the study confirmed the usefulness of a framework developed from a consideration of literature on learner-centred education and students' conceptions of learning. The investigation was able to reveal both key differences between and key similarities among the groups of students. The differences relate to conceptions of the roles and responsibilities of both students and teachers, while the similarities relate to the relationships between the parties in the teaching and learning environment. The implications for tutors/lecturers in improving their support to their students are highly significant. However, the most challenging task in establishing a learner-centred context is to influence students' learning conceptions and help them take a more active role in their learning.

Introduction

This article emanates from a holistic study of the experiences of part-time university students in Hong Kong. The overall project aims to identify what the part-time students consider to be important issues related to their studies. The plan is to identify constructs, describe them and then devise ways to measure and evaluate them.

The project commenced by adopting a qualitative approach in order to gather initial data through open semi-structured face-to-face interviews, in a language of the interviewees' choice. Most of the 29 interviewees opted to use Cantonese, and the interviews were transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

The interviews produced a substantial body of qualitative data that were divided into broad topics for analysis. One area, including the interview discussion, concerned teaching and how interviewees related to their instructors/tutors.

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Interviewees were probed on the support received from their institutions and, in particular, their instructors/tutors in their studies.

We first examined the students' notions of what they considered to be the characteristics of a helpful teacher, and what teacher behaviour they found to be disappointing. A number of themes emerged, such as student–teacher relationships and conceptions of a student's role. We noted that these themes relate to features of a learner-centred learning model. We then reviewed the relevant literature and outlined a framework to re-examine the data. In doing so, the respondents' orientations towards teaching and learning were also taken into account. The respondents were classified into two broad orientations, as 'reproductive' vs. 'facilitative' (Kember 2001). Comparisons were then made to examine the extent to which learner-centred teaching was favoured by these students. Finally, the implications for teaching in relation to promoting a learner-centred learning environment are discussed.

Literature review—learner-centred teaching

A major paradigm shift in teaching, advocated during the last few decades, is that teaching should be learner-centred, not teacher-centred. In a learner-centred mode, the focus is shifted to the constructive role of the learner, which differentiates it from a teacher-centred model in which knowledge is transmitted from teacher to learner. But learner-centredness is an ambiguous concept. Does it refer to content that the student wants to learn and to learner control of instruction and assessment strategies? Or does it refer to something more holistic which engages the learners' whole academic and personal development? Such ambiguity has prompted some educators to analyse its definition and offer detailed suggestions about the conditions required for its effective application.

Brandes and Ginnis (1986, cited in Burge and Howard 1988: 2–3) identify seven major principles for a student-centred learning approach:

... the learner has full responsibility for her own learning ... the subject matter has relevance and meaning for the learner ... involvement and participation are necessary for learning ... the relationship between learners should show helping styles and learner self-responsibility ... teacher is a facilitator and resource person ... learner sees himself differently as a result of the learning experience ... the learner experience confluence ... affective and cognitive domains flow together.

Also, Maclean (1987, cited in Burge and Howard 1988: 4) outlines five concepts for person-centred learning: the emergent design of the course process, interdependence or a supportive climate, a reflective, creative and open-ended knowledge system, and reflection and critical self-assessment.

... it emphasises helping students to learn and thus begins with a concern for what the learner experiences rather than the factors that contribute to good instruction. Of primary importance is the encouragement of learner autonomy and person responsibility.

Emphasis is placed on personal meaning and the value of knowledge generated through experience.

Burge (1988, 1989) also suggests some generic principles for learner-centred practice, grouped under a set of 'Rs'—Responsibility, Relevance, Relationship and Rewards. Burge and Howard (1988: 5) further elaborate these principles and outline several components involved in implementing a learner-centred view, which include:

... the learner's ability, resource and opportunities for access to learning; the choices in course content and course process; the relationships between theory and immediate, practical problems to be solved, and between one's own experience and knowledge and that of others; the diversity in how individual preferences in learning styles and needs are shown, and in the levels of adult development reached, in terms of cognitive, psychological, physical and moral development; and the support mechanisms needed and available for success in a course.

These components guided the development of a survey questionnaire in Burge and Howard's study (1988), which aimed to explore the attitudes and practices of some selected Canadian distance educators regarding a learner-centred view of education. This study highlighted a key issue in defining a learner-centred orientation to education—the individual diversity of students must be taken into account.

In short, in a learner-centred perspective, the learner's experience/needs and the learning process are valued; and balanced emphasis is placed on the cognitive and affective domains in the learning process. These points have been further developed and demonstrated in the learner-centred psychological principles outlined by the APA (American Psychological Association 1997) and the premises of a learner-centred model as proposed by McCombs and Whisler (1997).

Overall, according to the literature, we can judge a learner-centred learning context by examining the extent to which the following features are displayed. These considerations provide a useful framework for the present study.

- the individual diversity of students: their varying educational backgrounds, work experiences, learning styles and the part-time learner role;
- relationships: the relationships and interactions between teacher–learner and learner–learner;
- responsibility: (conceptions of) student and teacher roles in learning, self-responsibility;
- the relevance of course material: student choices in course content and course process.

It should also be noted that the literature reviewed above is primarily from an educator's point of view. Assumptions made by educators about what is needed for learners to achieve desired learning outcomes could conflict with those of the learners themselves. The present study will draw on the learners' unique perspectives and experiences and examine the features of desirable tutor/lecturer practice.

Method

Sample

The data were collected by conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 29 part-time postgraduate students in universities in Hong Kong. Among the group of 29 (S1 to S29 in the quotations in the data presentation), 16 were in their first-year of part-time studies and the other 13 had studied for a longer period. Only four out of 29 mentioned that they had prior part-time study experiences before they enrolled in their current programmes. Seven were studying in a distance learning mode and all the others in face-to-face learning, in either research or taught postgraduate programmes.

Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured, with a set of questions relating to the broad range of issues affecting part-time students. For this part of the overall project, the relevant questions are those related to the degree of interaction with teachers and academic support. The schedule included questions such as the following:

- (Q1) How would you describe your relationship with the teaching staff?
- (Q2) How would you describe the degree and nature of interaction with your teachers?
- (Q3) Have you found your tutors helpful with your studies?
- (Q4) Have you needed help from tutors with other problems?
- (Q5) What can your university do to help your studies?

The interviewees were free to choose the language used for the interviews. Most of them opted for Cantonese. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English soon after the interviews.

Analysis

Transcripts were initially sorted with the NUDIST software (Richards and Richards 1991, QSR NUDIST 1997) so that responses to similar questions were grouped, but with the respondents still identified. The process is akin to forming a variable-by-respondent matrix, though in this case the volume of data was far too large to portray on a two-dimensional sheet. Having performed this initial ordering of the data, it was then possible to compare responses from all interviewees to similar questions.

Once the data had been ordered it was possible to search across interviewees and courses for common responses or constructs with respect to similar questions or variables. Categories and constructs that emerged from the data were discussed within the overall project team for conceptual verification. The coded data were cross-checked by the authors to ensure the validity and reliability of data interpretation. The quotations selected for this paper are those that represented significant constructs that appeared across the range of students and courses.

Framework for analysis

Comments on teaching and teacher support of students' learning cropped up in several parts of the interview transcripts and were first examined in an open manner without any specific framework.

Initial data showed that respondents talked extensively about what helped their learning—from instructors' provision of detailed notes to 'interact as adults with mutual respect'. Some were obviously disappointed with their instructors who 'prescribed too much homework' or 'lectured as if in secondary school' while others applauded their teachers for their immense help. Some themes such as student–teacher relationships and the individual diversity of students emerged. The ideas concerning learner-centred perspectives outlined above provided insights for re-examining the data.

However, interpretation of the students' perceptions of teaching only make sense if their conceptions of learning are also taken into account. For example, the study of van Rossum and Schenk (1984) showed that students with reproductive conceptions of learning saw good teaching as ensuring that facts were absorbed. As conceptions of learning developed towards reconstruction of meaning, the good teacher came to be seen as a facilitator of learning. A study by Kember (2001) also found evidence of students holding dichotomous belief orientations, i.e. students' belief sets about knowledge, teaching and learning that are characterized by two broad orientations labelled didactic/reproductive and facilitative/transformative. The characteristics of the two contrasting belief sets are illustrated in Table 1. Two writers of this paper reviewed the 29 cases independently to code and group the respondents into two groups—the 'R' (standing for didactic/reproductive) and 'F' (standing for facilitative/transformative) groups—and examined their comments on teaching and relationships with their teachers. The two sets of coding were then compared and the final classification agreed upon. There were 13 respondents in the 'R' group (S1–S13) and 11 in the 'F' group (S14–24). Five cases were unclassified due to the limited information available (S25–S29).

Table 1. Characteristics of the two contrasting belief sets (Kember 2001: 215).

| | <i>Didactic/reproductive</i> | <i>Facilitative/transformative</i> |
|-----------|---|--|
| Knowledge | Defined by authority Knowledge and theories are right or wrong | Transformed or constructed by the individual Judgements have to be made about alternative theories based upon evidence and analysis |
| Teaching | A didactic process of transmitting knowledge The teacher is responsible for ensuring that learning takes place | Teaching is a process of facilitating learning The student is responsible for learning independently with guidance from the teacher |
| Learning | The role of the students is to absorb the material defined by the teacher Outcomes are judged by the students' ability to reproduce material | The role of the students is to reach an understanding of relevant concepts The outcome is the student transforming knowledge for own purposes and context |

Presentation of data

The findings are divided into two parts. The first concerns the interaction and relationships between the respondents and their instructors, and the second focuses on conceptions of student and teacher roles in learning.

Interactions between respondents and teachers

Relationships and interactions. When asked to describe their relationship with the teaching staff and consider whether sufficient academic support was received, several issues related to the cultivation of interpersonal interaction arose.

Among the 18 respondents who had expressed their views on these questions, 13 of them (four from the 'R' group and nine from the 'F' group) indicated that they had a good relationship with their instructors/tutors. The other five respondents (two from the 'R' group, one from the 'F' group and two unclassified cases) showed some degree of dissatisfaction with the relationship between themselves and the teaching staff.

A number of factors identified by respondents that facilitated or impeded the development and maintenance of a good tutor–student relationship are outlined below:

- *Availability:* some respondents showed concerns on this issue and expected the teacher to be approachable and contactable as needed. For example, one respondent noted that 'adult students are more active in contacting their teachers when they have problems' (S20). Another student showed appreciation of his/her tutors because 'anytime I cried for help, they were there' (S18). Others required more communication channels (e.g. e-mails, phone and fax) and expected timely contacts—both formal and informal—if needed. This is understandable as these learners are working adults. Once there were frequent contacts, one might feel 'more comfortable and direct to raise questions with teachers ...' (S2).
- *Responsiveness:* students approached their tutors for advice and support. Their relationship can be developed only if the tutors are responsive to students' situations or needs. Three of the above respondents felt extremely disappointed, as the tutor 'was impersonal and indifferent' (S17) and 'did not understand my situation and was not serious in answering my questions' (S26). Consequently, one student felt 'psychologically aloof in the absence of frequent contacts (with tutors)' (S17) and another therefore 'never sought help from lecturers' and preferred to consult peers instead (S25). On the other hand, the tutors who 'answered students' questions patiently and in detail' (S21), 'showed concern about their students' (S5) and 'took initiatives to contact students to know their progress' (S22) were more likely to cultivate a positive interpersonal relationship with their students.
- *Mutual respect:* a majority of the respondents were aware of their roles as adult learners and assumed a friendly and open relationship with their tutors. They tended to see their teachers as 'knowledgeable friends' on an equal footing, and therefore looked for a relationship of mutual respect. The following quotations were typical responses with respect to this aspect:

The teachers will not be so stern ... We interact like friends ... we are adults, the teachers will not treat us as young students in class ... they

still treat us as students ... our distance is less in our conversations. (S16) Some teachers will pay more respects to us ... as adult students ... closer ... they no longer treat us as children. (S18) Tutors respect students for their work experiences—in the past, the teacher taught us something. I mean from high to low. Now we are equal ... he respects you because you are a working adult. You have many experiences. (S24)

It should be noted that the respondents in the 'R' and 'F' groups were fairly consistent in the expectations of tutor support in this respect. The demand for a relationship of mutual respect seemed to be a common thread across the two groups of learners.

Individual diversity and interactions. When asked to compare the interaction with teaching staff in their part-time study and previous full-time study, issues related to their roles as working adults and part-time learners stood out.

- *Work experiences:* six respondents (four from the 'F' group, one from the 'R' group and one unclassified case) noted that they were working adults who valued sharing their experiences with their teachers in the learning process. These students came from professional sectors such as business, engineering and teaching. As pointed out by one student, 'we have several years of working experience ... so our horizons are different from that of fresh graduates' (S20). Therefore, s/he appreciated the interaction of sharing work experience with teachers. Also, some students noted that they and their teachers 'are in the same profession (teaching), so the distance is shorter now' (S18) and considered that 'if we have problems (in the teaching process), we can stop in the middle and then keep on after solving the problem' (S19). Students in the engineering profession emphasized that the sharing of practical experience was important to their learning. In this regard, one student commented that 'the school can't teach you that sort of knowledge' (S3) and one agreed that 'the reality is different from what the lecturers teach us' (S29), implying that the lecturers lacked practical work experiences to share.
- *Part-time students' needs:* four students (three from the 'F' group and one unclassified case) highlighted this topic. As part-time students and working adults, some prefer more flexibility in their learning and appreciate teaching staff who understand their constraints and adjust course requirements accordingly—for example, not requiring compulsory assignments and providing make-up opportunities if they failed. Overall, they wanted teachers to understand their situation as part-time learners and to show concern for the 'human factor' of learners, which 'becomes more important than course content' (S23).
- *Relevance of course materials:* the working adults showed concern about the choice of course content and the course process in their interaction with teaching staff. Seven students (one from the 'F' group, four from the 'R' group and two unclassified cases) made comments on this issue. First, in view of their time constraints and tight schedule in part-time study, they urged that 'lecturers should try to meet our needs and interests by selecting relevant topics from the broad syllabus and rearrange course components to meet the tight schedule' (S29) and should not 'push us intensively' (S2). One student also commented that the design of a course 'failed to align the contents of assignments and examination' (S26). Some students showed strong dissatisfaction with the course materials/design that were 'remote

from practical/local situations' (S17) and with 'insufficient inclusion of local research resource' (S5).

It should be noted again that the views on interaction did not differ greatly between the two groups of learners.

Conceptions of teaching and students' roles in learning

Conception of a teacher's major role by the 'R' group. An effective teacher as depicted by the 'R' group possesses the following skills:

- Presents effectively and makes students understand; presents with good examples that students can apply and leads students to learn in an interactive process.
- Answers students' queries and provides correct answers. Covers 'more materials than students needed so students could pick up what they needed' (S1). Provides good notes, guidance on reading that helps students read easily and in-depth guidance for advanced study.
- 'Demonstrates ways to search and retrieve information' (S1). Provides guides and networks for reference sourcing, utilizes the resources very well and tells students what are the useful materials.
- Gives assignments that make student aware of knowledge gaps (of what should be learnt vs. what has been learnt) and helps students to cope with assignments.

Overall, effective instructor/tutors are expected to be responsible for ensuring that learning takes place.

Conception of a student's major role by the 'R' group. 'R' group respondents, though holding predominantly a didactic/reproductive orientation towards teaching, are not unaware of their roles as learners. They described their roles and duties as follows:

- Some of the respondents indicated that they preferred lecturing and considered that it was important to attend classes. By doing so, they can 'pick up what they want from a teacher's demonstration as needed' (S1).
- Some of them considered that effective study strategies include: 'to be attentive to an instructor's presentation' (S3); 'to memorize what a teacher said in class, listen to teacher's requirements and find relevant information' (S4); and 'read all given readings seriously, check and match them with teacher' (S1).
- In preparing for their assignments and examinations, some respondents indicated that they 'will ask instructor/tutor for help in assignments' (S8) and 'follow teacher requirements in examination preparation' (S4).

In a nutshell, this group suggested adopting a narrow and focused study strategy to achieve their learning goals—'expedience prevails' (S4).

Conception of a teacher's major role by the 'F' group. In contrast, the 'F' group portrayed a different picture of the instructor/tutor who provides helpful assistance. Two respondents talked about their research supervisors and nine respondents about

their taught programme instructors. They lectured, organized discussion and provided guidance to reading/studies, as did the 'R' group instructors. But they did much more than that:

- They encouraged exploration, analysis and presentation of students' own ideas. For example, they 'used mind maps to help students organize points and ideas' (S21), 'used discussion, self and/or group reflection to share different experiences among students' (S19) and 'helped students to develop a clear mind to apply what they have learnt' (S24). One research student appreciated his/her supervisor for 'being open-minded and objective in helping students to set their research focus' (S14).
- They shared their experience and most up-to-date research findings with students and 'provided practical advice from their own research' (S20). Also, 'they are willing to share their expertise in their discipline though he might not know much about a student's specific research area' (S14).
- They aligned assessment with their teaching goals—to emphasize learning processes rather than outcomes. They 'used portfolios to assess continuous learning and learning outcomes and provided choices for students in portfolio input' (S18). They also 'used continuous assessment through in-class discussion and group projects, with no exam except in some quantitative subjects' (S24).
- They empowered students with the tools to learn and be responsible for their own learning. For example, they 'provided stimulating lectures with chances for students to develop more well-structured thinking on the subject matter and present their ideas' (S16). Also, they 'provided a bit of teaching with emphasis on group interactions and a bit of project; provided chances to discuss and explore' (S17); and 'they provided good guidelines to give direction for studies' (S19). 'Used case study method with a lot of discussions in class and group work' (S20); 'preferred to have some problem-based learning' (commented that the teachers did not have working experience so it is difficult for them to develop such a mode of teaching) (S24).
- They were concerned about students' learning and 'could spend hours with students, explaining and helping students learn' (S20). They also 'tell students about their weaknesses and let students be in control' (S15).

Two students summed up succinctly on this issue:

Teachers are facilitators now. They may not tell us the answers to our problems. However, they will let us know the root of the problems (S20). Tutors are important, not for dispensing subject content to students but to facilitate their learning ... What the students learn from the learning process is most essential. So the lectures, their attitudes, their approaches and their reflections are very important (S23).

Conception of a student's major role by the 'F' group. Respondents in the 'F' group perceive their roles in some of the following ways:

- The role as a responsible learner: they realized that, as responsible learners, they needed to 'take initiative to learn' (S16), 'be self-dependent, not waiting for teachers to lead or inspire them to explore' (S22). One mentioned that setting goals/expectations was an important step to 'take charge and be in control of one's learning' (S16). The research mode students noted that they worked as research partners as well as

co-learners to explore an area of mutual interest with their supervisors. Therefore, they need to 'negotiate and compromise with their supervisors/teachers who might have different research interests' (S14). 'Knowing what one needed' (S14, S15) and 'thinking and analysing diligently to construct one's ideas' (S14) was seen as a way to be responsible for one's learning.

- The role as an active learner: this group of students suggested the following strategies to play an active role and take charge of one's learning. Some suggested 'an inquiring mind' is important. One must 'be open-minded to different perspectives with an inquiring mind' (S16) and 'be open to new ideas and observe one's change' (S20). Some suggested that authentic learning helps. Therefore, one must try to 'apply new ideas in work' (S18); 'apply learning at work' (S22); and 'apply new ideas in work and apply some theories in real life situations' (S24). Not surprisingly, an active learner will 'use different learning strategies as needed' (S22). More specifically, discussion and interaction with teachers and peers was considered as an effective way of knowledge construction, as the following quotations show: 'Be participative ... and learn from teachers and peers through class presentations and other group activities' (S16); 'Learning from a teacher's experience ... and the sharing was the most valuable part' (S19); and 'Frequent discussion with instructors helps' (S21). Therefore, it is important to 'build a good interpersonal network in learning' (S20).

The following quotations elaborate the above ideas:

Tutors are just like friends ... I won't doubt the academic support they've given to me ... You cannot expect every teacher to know deeply the topic you are interested in ... they can only give you some advice logically or empirically ... however, you mainly rely on yourself to explore (S16). Teachers are not passing their knowledge to us ... s/he is a facilitator who helps us to think and gives us comments ... the relationship between teaching and myself is interdependent. (S20)

In the local higher education system where disciplinary content is normally viewed as 'the matter of teaching', one respondent pointed out the deficiency of this conception and urged his cohort to see learning as a process of changes that required mutual reflection among teachers and learners:

I consider the instructors are very important. It is not very important what they teach. What they teach is only a question of whether or not it meets the students' needs. What the students learn from the learning process is most essential, so the instructors, their attitudes, their approach, and their reflections are important. (S23)

Summing up

Overall, this study confirmed the usefulness of a framework developed from a consideration of literature on learner-centred education and students' conceptions of learning. Our investigation was able to reveal both key differences between and key similarities among the groups of students. The differences relate to conceptions of the roles and responsibilities of both students and teachers,

while the similarities relate to the relationships between the parties in the teaching and learning environment. Thus, representatives from all groups of students expressed either satisfaction with positive relationships (in terms of availability, responsiveness and mutual respect) or a measure of dissatisfaction with a perceived negative relationship.

The findings on students' conceptions of their role in learning confirm that not all students welcome a learner-centred approach. While some students prefer it (the 'F' group), others prefer a teacher-centred approach (the 'R' group). Their desire for a particular form of teaching is related to their beliefs about knowledge. Respondents who have a didactic/reproductive orientation find 'transmissive' type teachers more helpful whereas those who have a facilitative/transformational view appreciate teachers who are facilitators of their learning.

However, it should be noted that learner-centredness and teacher-centredness may not be discrete concepts. Rather, they can be viewed as two broad orientations with well-defined points within a continuum (Kember 1997). In Kember's study, there is some evidence of lecturers shifting their beliefs/orientations across the spectrum over time. Of course, it is probably an equally challenging task to influence students' learning conceptions and wean them away from their teacher-centred beliefs.

So what role can teachers play if they want to promote a learner-centred learning environment? The key seems to rest on the relationships part of the research findings. In the 'interaction between respondents and instructors' section, the respondents in the 'R' and 'F' groups were, in general, fairly consistent in their expectations of teacher support. There were vivid descriptions of how the respondents related to their instructors/tutors, and stressed their individual diversity and their needs as adult learners. These 'voices' emerged as themes and came from both the 'R' and 'F' groups, though students from the 'F' group were more likely to comment on the diversity issues of work experience and part-time students' needs, while those of the 'R' group more often commented on the relevance of course materials. Students appreciated tutors who pay attention to learners' unique differences and cultivate positive interpersonal relationships and interaction—themes that are in line with a learner-centred model.

A positive interpersonal relationship between students and tutors is essential in building a learning community, in which the teachers can influence the learners and provide support to them. A number of factors that might facilitate or impede such a relationship have been outlined. As adult learners, the respondents expressed a strong demand for mutual respect among the teachers and students and the need to establish a friendly and open relationship between them.

In addition, paying attention to learners' individual diversity—the practical experience of working adults, the constraints on part-time learners and their concern about course design and coverage—was also essential to sustaining interaction between instructors and learners. Only when there is effective interaction between teacher and learner can the teacher begin to influence their students' approaches to learning and instil change.

The respondents, though different in their conceptions of teaching and their roles in learning, shared a common demand for an interpersonal relationship with their teacher. In essence, the findings support the notion of a holistic paradigm—a teaching and learning environment that emphasizes learners' ability and choice,

the relationships between theory and application, the diversity in individual learning styles and needs, and the required support mechanisms.

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