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# Keeping it personal: self-generated learning tools for lifelong professional development

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**Abstract** Approaches to learning in the twenty-first century need to reflect student diversity in order to widen and sustain participation in education and continuing professional development (CPD). There is some evidence of success in widening access to professional social care employment through training and qualification programmes but a notable lack of success in sustaining this participation into CPD and lifelong professional learning. This paper argues for an increased contribution of more personalised, self-generated learning approaches to sustainable participation through the development of the Professional Identity and Values Organisation Tools (PIVOT). The tools have been developed by the authors from the constructivist teaching and learning insights of Personal Construct Psychology and are freely available to download and use (see below). The intention is to enhance reflection for professional learners and practitioners through self-generated personal constructs and values and the creation of self-directed learning aims. We argue that the inclusion of enhanced reflective techniques such as PIVOT helps to facilitate a deep, personal engagement in the processes of learning to learn and builds a foundation for sustained participation in and ownership of students' and practitioners' CPD and lifelong learning.

**Key terms:** PIVOT, social work, personal constructs, reflection, reflexive, self-generated learning, CPD.

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## Introduction

Widening participation opportunities for unqualified workers, service users and carers to enter the social work and social care professions remains a major policy aspiration and an important challenge to employers and educators. However, despite some successes in widening entry, there are continuing problems of staff staying and pursuing post-qualification studies for CPD (General Social Care Council [GSCC], 2010). The problems of recruitment and retention have led to unprecedented government-sponsored campaigns to improve the profile and level of awareness of social work, and in England, a wholesale, fundamental review is taking place through the Social Work Reform Group (Social Work Task Force, 2009). Social work services are used by a wide range of individuals and families across an increasingly pluralistic and multi-cultural UK society, and it has long been

argued that the social care workforce should reflect, as far as possible, this broad diversity of lived experiences. There is evidence that this is happening to a certain extent (GSCC, 2010), but it remains difficult for new entrants to become not just qualified social work professionals but confident and committed lifelong learners. The issues are important as they go to the heart of both operational and policy debates about the future of social work and the ways that the profession educates and develops its practitioners (Cooper, 2010a; Cooper, 2010b). Professional education is a formative factor in shaping future practitioners, and the ‘competency debate’ of the last 20 years brings these arguments into sharp relief.

Since the 1990s the education experience of social workers has been moulded through regulatory frameworks and schedules of ‘evidence requirements’ and national occupational standards (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work [CCETSW], 1987; CCETSW, 1989). The intention was to ‘assure quality’ and to set minimum standards of competent, demonstrable performance in practice settings (CCETSW, 1995; GSCC, 2002). There are complex debates both for and against this educative approach to adult teaching and learning (Jessup, 1991; Hager and Beckett, 1995; Bridges, 1996; Lum, 1999). However, it is argued in this paper that practice learning through competency-based, ‘meeting requirements’ approaches engenders a ‘surface’ as opposed to a ‘deep’ level of learning (Marton and Saljo, 1984; Biggs, 1993), and that while it may help to widen the gateposts to entry-level participation, it is not a productive basis for sustained participation in CPD or lifelong learning. Indeed, the primary author has further argued that such a surface level of practice-based assessment *for learning* leads to the acceptance of an unreflective ‘surface-mode’ of social work assessments *in practice* (Cooper and Broadfoot, 2006). Thus, we argue that what is needed, within a social work education context of increasing expectations (Social Work Reform Board, 2010), are approaches to continued professional learning that are conducive to sustained personal commitment and engagement. This paper reports on the creation of PIVOT as a set of techniques designed to facilitate this through deep, personal reflection and the generation of professional constructs, values and learning aims. Overall, we are proposing three main arguments:

- 1 that the sustained effectiveness of widening participation initiatives will be enhanced by a renewed emphasis on engagements in personal learning journeys
- 2 that approaches and techniques for enhanced reflection on professional identity development and the self-generation of personal values and directions – enabling learners to develop their own preferred learning pathways – are underplayed but foundational factors in practice-based learning

- 3 that the quality of practitioners' reflexive learning journeys in their experience of professional education will influence the quality of their reflective practices with service users.

These three arguments will be explored through two main sets of theoretical ideas from education and personal construct psychology, followed by illustrative empirical data from interviews and a pilot of PIVOT.

## Educational arguments for lifelong professional development

Professional practices in health and social care are increasingly framed around the policy ideas of consumer participation and involvement in their own experiences of service provision (Department of Health, 2005). This shift in principles has not transposed into education experiences. More than 20 years ago Heron (1988) criticised the hierarchical power structures of professional and higher education on the grounds that they work against the stated aims and values of adult education to empower learners:

The prevailing model for assessing student work in higher education is an authoritarian one. Staff exercise unilateral intellectual authority: they decide what students shall learn, they design the programme of learning, they determine criteria of assessment and make the assessment of the student ... I have power over people if I make unilateral decisions to which they are subject. I share power with people if I make decisions on a bilateral basis in consultation with them (77).

Despite more recent arguments for self-assessment in adult education (Boud, 1999; Hinett and Thomas, 1999), the case for radically enhanced participation of learners in 'learning partnerships' of decision-making processes remains apposite. Heron is offering a critique of the higher education institution power structures within which students as learners do not participate in their own assessment. In the necessarily linked contexts of professional education for social work practice and continuing professional development, this seems indefensible. The comparison between messages about 'participation' is stark when there is a consistently espoused principle in social work practice that encourages efforts towards empowerment of service users and requires participation within acknowledged structures of power imbalances. In comparison, the message from the education context is very different, where there remains little evidence for the acceptance of such principles and practices within the structures and processes of institutional higher education (HE).

Heron argues that the unilateral control and assessment of HE learners by staff as 'assessors' means that the education process is at odds with the objectives of that

process. His arguments crystallise the core debate about participation in professional CPD and highlight a familiar question: should social workers be educated or trained? The approaches derived from 'requirements-driven' social work CPD seem to be at odds with the espoused principles of higher education, which, arguably, are to help 'grow' an educated person who is intrinsically motivated and self-determining; is open to negotiation about their own development objectives and able to devise a programme to attain them; can set criteria of standards to assess the work produced; and can be involved in assessing the work in the light of those criteria. Or, is the objective to train people to operate efficiently within imposed performance measures and carry out tasks effectively to meet target parameters? The debate is central to the vision of sustainable participation in professional CPD in the future and mirrors the parallel and conflicting discourses between lifelong learning and performativity argued by Broadfoot and Pollard (2000).

Heron argues that the unilateral imposition of assessment criteria through which intellectual ability is graded and measured leads to what he calls 'the wrong sort of motivation'. Social work learners in current programmes of post-qualification CPD describe the imposition of 'hoops to jump through' (Cooper and Rixon, 2001; Cooper, 2009). This degree of 'extrinsic' motivation, Heron argues, leads to intellectual and vocational alienation. What should be the excitement of knowledge discovery and skill development becomes the onerous demonstration of 'competence' that satisfies verification criteria set through imposed regulatory frameworks. On this argument, the implications for the practitioner are clear as:

the person exercises their vocational role in a way that is cut off from his [*sic*] real needs, interests, concerns and feelings, and hence uses the role in his human relations with clients somewhat defensively and rigidly (Heron, 1988:81).

Our arguments for a renewed emphasis on participation in learning and assessment have, as their core referential principle, a whole-person conception that links professional education experiences with consequent approaches to professional practice. However, we would go further to argue that these ideas need to be developed through an approach that includes a psychological constructivist dimension and a focus on self-generated learning. This re-visioned focus starts from the identity of the individual practitioner and learner as a key source of definition in the processes of learning and understanding (Miehls and Moffatt, 2000). Raising the profile of an individualised and holistic human dimension helps to broaden the locus of professional *learning* in social work across the wide spread of domains traversed by *practice* in social work. In other words, the argument for sustained engagement in social work CPD should focus on the reflexivity of individuals, their relationships in learning partnerships and their ability to generate knowledge. The theoretical supports for this approach are set out in the next section.

## Self-generated learning through personal construct psychology

A constructivist approach to teaching and learning assumes that individuals are not passive receptors of knowledge but active interpreters and creators of meaning and understanding of themselves and others in changing personal and social worlds. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) provides a productive theoretical framework and set of methodological tools for investigating an individual's perceptions of themselves in their physical and social environments. The meanings that individuals construct for themselves by learning through engagement and interaction with their social world is central to the PCP approach. This approach has been applied to illuminate the processes of human learning in a variety of educational and occupational contexts (Pope and Keen, 1981; Beail, 1985; Pope and Denicolo, 2001). It is the focus on self-generated processes of learning to learn that indicates the relevance of a PCP perspective and its applicability to arguments for a sustainable conception of professional CPD.

The core epistemological assumptions underlying PCP, as originally set out in great detail by Kelly (1991), are essentially post-modern in that all our current perceptions and enquiries about events, ourselves and others, along with our search for meaning, are subject to change and could be revised and construed quite differently. There is some basis to the argument that Kelly may have been one of the first post-modernists in his assumption that people have the ability to 'reconstruct' themselves and not be determined by historical factors. In other words, Kelly was suggesting that our psychological processes are active in an automatic sense of constructing personal schemata through which we abstract and filter aspects of our environment so as to increase our ability to anticipate and impose an order upon events. This 'imposition of order' through constructed personal meaning is a core perspective of PCP for education. It indicates that what is being learned is not 'received knowledge' or a partial grasp of reality 'as it is', but a personally abstracted and filtered replication that provides a sense of order and confirms a sense of fulfilled anticipation. This broad theoretical position was applied to social work by Henkel (1995) in her identification of pragmatism and constructivist approaches for practice and education that:

challenge dualistic forms of thought; ... confound the clear cut division between subject and object; ... facilitate a review of the relationship between conceptions of knowledge as a means of control or practical intervention and knowledge as understanding and dialogue; ... [and] provide an epistemological framework for the idea of reflective practice and education (68).

A conception of professional learning that is based on reflexivity and informs the interventions into private lives cannot be within the traditional professional paradigm of an 'expert' body of knowledge applied to an objective reality. Rather,

the starting point is a facilitation of perspectives within different social realities where learner/practitioner and service user combine to co-construct an agreed understanding of their working relationship (Fisher, 1991; Cooper, 2001). This same approach of active participation within a constructivist model of professional learning and social intervention is, we argue, crucial to enabling individuals to become aware of and develop themselves as active learners. PIVOT was developed to draw upon these constructivist insights and facilitate enhanced reflection on participants' own personal constructs and values of themselves and others to support and inform self-generated learning aims. The next section sets out what the tools and techniques provide.

## PIVOT – the Professional Identity and Values Organisation Tools

PIVOT was developed from Personal Construct Psychology, which has an extensive evidence base of research application in many spheres of professional activity (Neimeyer, 1990). PCP's main advantage is that its constructivist theoretical basis and techniques enable participants to undertake deep reflection and analysis of their own personal views of themselves and others and generate personal constructs that capture these perspectives. Through the PIVOT activities, within structured interviews, learners are enabled to:

- draw out their own personal **constructs** of professional identity formation within practice
- progressively refine and develop these constructs to reflect and highlight their own core **values**
- systematically scale these **values as learning aims** and use these learning aims as a basis for an action plan to develop their own professional practice.

The nature of PIVOT is that it offers opportunities to access and explore different levels of cognition and personal meaning within the systems of constructs employed by the participants. It is this self-generation of personal meaning that, we would argue, significantly contributes towards a sustained participation in processes of learning. The process of exploration is necessarily interactive and reflexive through focused dialogues. Early widening participation research by the authors (Cooper and Pickering, 2008) indicated the potential for development of these techniques in order to help participants generate their own constructs or verbal labels to describe how they perceive aspects of themselves and their work environment. Viney (1988) has characterised this approach as a 'mutual-orientation model' defined by two main beliefs: that people are actively trying to make sense of what is happening to them now and to anticipate what will happen to them in the future; and that they



have the ability to create their interpretations of their worlds and not just respond to them. The techniques and activities offer a way for facilitators clearly to distinguish and start from the participants' own constructs and language. The participant is invited to generate their own construct labels, in their own words, which are used as an idiographic starting point from which to engage in a reflexive exploration of self-generated perceptions and approaches to learning.

Stage 1 of PIVOT provides the foundation for the subsequent stages. It uses a customised repertory grid exercise (the term 'repertory' derives from the idea that each individual has their own repertoire of personal constructions of experience) to enable processes of deep reflection. The templates used, along with detailed process advice and video demonstrations are available to download (Cooper and Pickering, 2009). The content of a grid, comprising elements and constructs and the interrelationship between the two, is important and will be described next.

## Stage 1 – Repertory grid: elements and personal constructs

Participants are provided with a grid that has nine elements made up of people from their practice-based experiences in two categories of self and others. Five are examples of other workers that they know or have known, and participants are asked to think of a mix of examples of what they would regard as good role models or, conversely, people they would not want to emulate. One element was a supervisor they have or had in the past. The final three elements were of different temporal aspects of themselves – that is, 'me as a pre-qualified worker/me as a student worker/me as the qualified worker I want to be'. The process of thinking about these elements, which will be described below, focused the reflection on the participant's ideas of themselves in a learning journey over time from how they saw themselves before becoming a student through to what they wanted to aspire to in the future. The supervisor element is a key 'other' relationship that all professional social workers will have experienced. The five examples of other social workers draw upon the practice-based learning environment in terms of 'practice modelling'. Having a mix of people who were chosen to be examples of 'good' or 'poor' practitioners introduces analysis through differentiation and judgement. Differentiation and distinction is a key process for eliciting constructs through deep, reflective analysis and generation of personal construct labels in the participants' own words and frame of meaning.

Constructs are elicited through reflecting on random combinations of three elements so that all are considered at some stage. The facilitator asks a question along the lines of, 'In terms of what is important to you in social work, which two of these are similar in some way but different from the third?' The focus of the question, in this application, is contained within the request to think about and reflect on these three people in terms of *what is important to them* in social work. The technique can be varied for application in any sphere of professional activity.



Then, as part of this reflective process, they are to choose two elements that are similar or have something in common – and, importantly, that is not shared by the third. The student needs to come up with a description such as a short phrase or maybe just a word that characterises what they feel two of them have in common. This is known as the similarity construct label and the tutor (or student) writes this in the left-hand column of the Personal Construct Grid. The student is then asked: ‘what is the opposite of that for you?’ and this word or phrase is written in the right-hand column of the grid as the opposite construct label. Note that it is not the ‘logical opposite’ that is being asked for here, but the student’s own personally meaningful opposite. The ‘similarity’ and ‘opposite’ ends are, together, one construct. The examples in Figure 1 below illustrate this point.

**Examples of constructs**

A construct is a representation of just one way in which someone views someone or something and it is expressed as bi-polar, as contrasts.

The following are examples of constructs:

Organised – Unreliable  
Vulnerable – Confident  
Warm and cuddly – Cold and distant

A construct always represents a contrast, so you need to understand both ends before you can be sure of the meaning intended by the whole construct. In the first example above the opposite of being ‘organised’ is not ‘disorganised’ but being ‘unreliable’. This particular contrast provides the personal construct and the personal meaning.

The following are examples of constructs – from social workers involved in an earlier PIVOT pilot:

Positive focus – sloppiness  
Passionate about what we do – It’s a job

**Figure 1:** Examples of constructs

In psychological terms, the constructs generated are not fully fleshed-out conceptions but self-generated indicators of personal meaning. The enhanced reflective process of construct generation is an experience that discovers new levels of personal meaning and, as a consequence, offers the potential for change. However, constructs do not have a discrete, reified life of their own (Fransella, 1989). Constructs are themselves a reflexive theoretical construction, in that they only have an objective existence as linguistic labels through the moment of elicitation and for as long as they have meaning to the person who created them. Facilitating this process is of great value to tutors, as well as to their students, as they are able to participate in a ‘mutually-orientated’ and focused discussion about the student’s developing insights and professional progress. The next stage of PIVOT illustrates a deepening aspect of this process.

## Stage 2 – Values laddering: enquire within

Stage 2 of the PIVOT process offers an opportunity to choose from among the constructs generated in Stage 1 and explore these in greater depth to access personal and professional values. Laddering is a form of recursive questioning where the participant is asked about their construct in order to explore their higher level or core values within their own set of personal meaning and priorities. The process serves two important functions. First, it serves to validate the expressions of personal meaning through an enhanced reflective process that re-examines the importance of the constructs to the participant. ‘Participant verification’ is of primary importance within PCP and underlies the primacy of personal meaning as an inviolable principle of the theory. The second purpose of the process serves to offer the opportunity for the participant to choose any pole of any construct that either has most significance to them or that they want to ‘enquire within’ about. The activity encourages deeper reflection on participants’ professional and personal values in their practice. It encourages them to capture what is really important to them now, and to think about aspects of practice to which they aspire. It may bring out ideas and values that they were not aware of holding dear – a sort of ‘I didn’t know I knew it’ experience. Figure 2 illustrates this. This student developed the following extract from their personal construct grid.

|   | Similarity construct label          |  | Opposite construct label           |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| A | Relaxed with paperwork              |  | Very ordered                       |
| B | Distant                             |  | Approachable                       |
| C | Conscientious                       |  | Lax                                |
| D | Depth of knowledge                  |  | Lack of interest                   |
| E | Dislike of form filling             |  | Process driven                     |
| F | Elitist attitude                    |  | Egalitarian                        |
| G | Sense of fun / humour               |  | Unduly serious / grave             |
| H | Cope with pressure – get on with it |  | Stressed                           |
| I | Aware of professional boundaries    |  | Inappropriate behaviour / attitude |

**Figure 2:** Personal construct grid example

From among these nine constructs the student is able to choose to explore any of them, and the one chosen in this example was: ‘Aware of professional boundaries – Inappropriate behaviour/attitude’. The process of laddering involves asking a series of questions that requires the participant to choose their most valued construct label – in this example it was ‘aware of professional boundaries’ and to explain ‘why is this important to you?’ The answer to these series of questions reveals deeper level, self-generated responses that move across the boundaries between important personal and professional values. In this example the verbatim sets of personally and professionally meaningful responses were as follows:

- 1 This end of the construct is important to me because ... 'To be unaware of professional boundaries risks the safety of service users, myself and colleagues. It is important to be conscientious'.
- 2 This value is important to me because ... 'Private life is essential'.
- 3 To further explain the importance of this ... 'This is about respect for others. It is about integrity and honesty. It touches my values spiritually and how I feel about promoting empowerment and equality'.

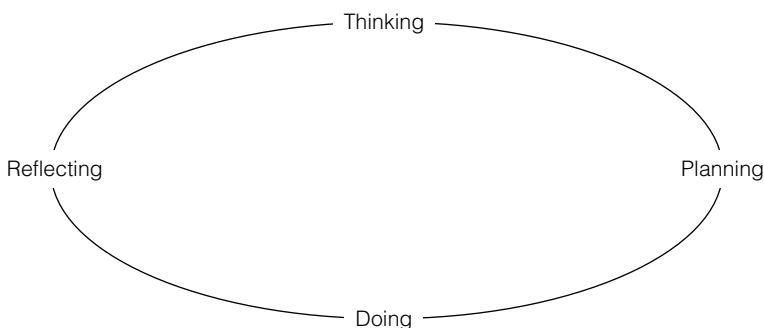
This example is illustrative of the central importance, in social work practice and education, of values. Social work education devotes a great deal of time to the discussion and assessment of values in practice. However, there is a significant gap between the institutionally codified sets of values positions and the individually expressed generation of values 'in action'. Students' educational experience is often one of dissonance between the moral immediacies of professional practice and the need to 'meet requirements'. The reflexive experience of enhanced reflection through PIVOT helps participants to get back in touch with core personal values and so brings the educational importance of values back to conscious awareness. The following excerpt from a tutor's feedback describes this:

it was 'hard work' but it made her think about her values and where they come from. The laddering process was particularly useful to her, stating – 'from the construct, I didn't think it was going to turn out like it has, I've never thought about my values in this way before'.

The first two stages of PIVOT offer opportunities to generate personal constructs about professional practice, to explore and capture these in great depth and to bring a range of core values to conscious awareness. The third stage of PIVOT consolidates these enhanced reflective processes and helps to complete the learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) by turning the reflective experience into a more sustained, practice-based educational involvement.

### Stage 3 – Learning aims: reflection into action

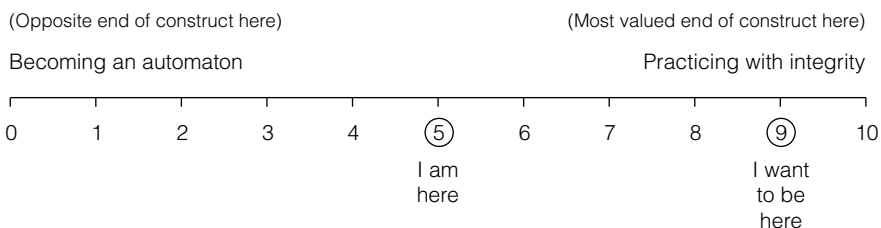
In completing the first two stages of PIVOT, participants experience a series of enhanced reflective techniques, which inwardly focuses their attention to generate their own personal perspectives of aspects of professional practice and values. These will have been captured on the templates provided and can be re-visited and re-explored at any time. This third stage offers an opportunity to choose any of the constructs from the previous grid or value ladder exercises in order to turn them into learning aims. In the simple learning model in Figure 3 overleaf, this stage completes the cycle from reflecting and thinking by moving into planning and doing.



**Figure 3:** Simple learning model

Concrete planning for action, in this stage, has three phases and starts with a scaling exercise that reflects the present self-assessment and future aspirations of participants in terms of where they see themselves now in their practice and where they would like to be. Figure 4 below illustrates a different example of a student's construct. The student is asked to place themselves on the 1–10 scale of this construct and then to aim for how much they would like to progress towards their most valued end:

*In terms of your practice right now, where would you put yourself on this construct scale?*



*Where would you like to aim to be by the end of your training? Ring another number.*

**Figure 4:** Construct scale example

The second phase draws upon solution-focused approaches to change (De Shazer, 1988) and asks participants to anticipate or 'envision' themselves in this improved position. A major part of engaging students in their own progress is for them to 'think themselves in the future' and to describe in detail what it would look, feel or be like when they will be doing things differently. From the above example, the following descriptions were offered:

- 1 I will take the necessary time to engage with service users [SU] and form a relationship

- 2 I will establish an open and honest relationship with SU
- 3 I will agree realistic goals with SU
- 4 I will have the confidence to challenge other professionals and knowing that my challenge is informed by my learning and not just what I think is wrong.

The third phase builds on these personally generated learning aims to establish a series of specific, practical steps that can be taken by the student, with others, to bring about the desired progress:

- 1 Plan my diary to allow time for purposeful visits
- 2 Listen to what SU identifies as their needs and not just imposing my view of their needs
- 3 Create a safe environment for SU to challenge me or others
- 4 Discuss concerns/issues perceived by me with my practice assessor.

The more detail that can be specified for these two phases the more meaningful and practical the steps that can be taken to move towards the student's identified goals and achieve the desired movement along the learning aims scale. One of the consistent points of feedback from the students and tutors in the pilot of PIVOT concerned the difficulty of moving from 'abstract reflection' to the detailed specifics of 'concrete action planning'. It may be that one of the issues for the learning cycle model, when focused techniques such as PIVOT are used to formalise movement, is that the stages need to take place at different times. The use of the provided templates to capture the results enables this to happen more easily and so sustain continuity.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the PIVOT techniques are effective for students and tutors who have both the time and the inclination to engage in enhanced, reflective processes that are hard work but very productive. The following selections of quotes from students and a tutor offer the pilot participants' perspectives:

- 'If you'd asked me about social work values at the beginning I wouldn't have known what to say – I've now said all this – it's brought it all out.' (Student)
- 'It is such a process of self-discovery. It's focused, incisive and it triggers connection after connection – the lights go on like a pinball machine.' (Tutor)
- 'This is really helpful. It helps me to know what it is that's important and how I want to be.' (Student)

Deep reflection and analysis takes time and effort but is likely to be a sound investment for professional programmes that continually exhort their students to demonstrate an ability to ‘critically reflect and analyse’ the experience of values and practice in action. The arguments in this paper are that the PIVOT techniques effectively facilitate self-generated learning and make professional learning personally meaningful. It is this deep, personal engagement in the processes of learning to learn that builds foundations for sustained participation in and ownership of the aims and direction of a student’s CPD and lifelong learning.

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