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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Futures

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/futures

Explorations in intercultural work integrated learning: Educational process for a Topsy-Turvy world

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 31 March 2010

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how work integrated learning (WIL) can be re-imagined/re-enacted as collaborative playgrounds of networks. To do this we first establish the working context for these reflections by exploring fragments of biography and the immediate catalyst which was a recent seminar held over 5 days, beginning in the rural Swedish town of Ed and, for the last 2 days, at University West in Trollhättan. We then set out to explore the normative and theoretical context of our approach before finally moving to an exploration of the concept of WIL via CLA and scenarios. Our overall goal is to describe some features of an expanded concept of WIL as it relates to intercultural learning. In doing this we hope to generate processes that facilitate the kind of learning necessary if we are to enable teachers and students to build sustainable futures they can realistically aspire to.

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This paper proposes a creative engagement with a feature of our modern cultural and educational landscape: work integrated learning (WIL). Creativity's role, from a cultural point of view, is to challenge conventions – not least the academic one of written style – in order to offer other possible futures to those engaged in cultural reproduction [1]. We propose to weave our story into the account of an event that pushed the boundaries of WIL and us. Yet we aim to develop an open and reflexive futures context that helps us frame the cultural terrain of WIL in such a way that we and our students are not confined to the linear discourse often adopted in higher education institutions when the funding for such programmes comes up for debate.

So we wish to begin this exploration at the beginning by acknowledging that the work of cultural play has for us been a life long process. To begin at the beginning, as Alice was advised by the King of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, is a good place to start. However, we will not take the King's advice of going through to the end, as for us who follow the rhizomes of cultural play, there is no end [2,3]. The present is open and the future beckons.

Our purpose is to explore a way of learning that relates to a growing rhizome, learning webs of conviviality/playgrounds for new stories. We do so in relation to an annual seminar on Interculturality and Sustainability at University West, Sweden. The theme for the 2009 seminar was 'Collaborative playgrounds in-between' and it incorporated divergent voices from Tanzania, Bolivia, India, Australia, Uganda and Sweden. As these voices flow together a chorus emerges in which biography, as lines of flight across both space and time, weave together. Two of the authors (Bjurström and Sannum) have shared this play for many years, as the following anecdotes attest, and we find the finger prints, like resonant echoes, to our play together this year in Ed and Trollhättan.

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- 1969
 - “Happy Easter”, shouted a strange figure after having torn up the door. Amazed, we got up from the kitchen table just to see the back of a tiny Easter witch (Sannum) who ran away across the fields. On the hall floor was a triangular letter filled with Easter candy. “Run - catch her!” howled Dad. I was stunned. “Why did she not stay enough for thanks?” Dad, originating from the area told us about the Dalsland custom of the Easter letter and the subsequent compulsory Easter witch hunt. Second to seeing a black man in the bakery at Brunnsbo Square, this was the most exotic thing, I (Bjurström) in my then four-year-life had experienced.
 - “But what is This?” we ask, whilst in Pettersson’s henhouse. It was packed from floor to ceiling with the most unlikely things. “Mom bought them at an auction, it’s tights for the circus”, explains Miriam, daughter of a collecting mother with a taste for the odd. “I bet we can sew them together and use them for fishing in the river.”
 - On a gloomy November day, in the ruins of a barn, we move slowly and ponder the traces of activity we see. The ash turns everything grey. We are the last survivors. A pitchfork, a part of a bridle, a wheelbarrow and some wheel nuts are brushed clean, put on high and saved. “Well, what do we do now then?” “How do we survive from here?”
- 2009
 - A seminar entitled “On Interculturality and Sustainability: A collaborative playground in between”, takes place in the same area. The organisers (Bjurström and Sannum), who have temporarily left Pettersson’s henhouse, have prepared it mostly by formulating an open, clear and intentional invitation. The invitation is sent out to students, networks, colleagues, companies. The play at Gamla Real in Ed and at University West will soon be staged with people from Tanzania, Uganda, Australia, Bolivia, India, Bohuslän, etc all with a common interest in and commitment to exploring interculturality and sustainability.

Playfulness is infectious. It invites all present to open, in a non-threatening way, to emergence. Institutionally the intercultural seminar is the third of its kind held in Sweden and was arranged by University West, AkHUt (Academy for Sustainable Development) and Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan. It is part of a measure at University West with a special focus on how Intercultural WIL can be developed in relation to a flexible network. This tension between meaning making process and structural frame brings energy to the creative encounter in which learning paradigms rub up against one another and the resultant ‘heat’ shapes the between [4], the point of encounter, like hot wax in a crucible.

1. Context: what happened at the seminar

The Intercultural seminar in June 2009 started off with a 3-day session in rural Ed. The theme *A collaborative Playground in between* was investigated in an Open Space [5] manner. The topics varied from a session on *Proverbs to City soil—on growing in cities to A silent walk in the forest nearby to Footsteps to Sustainable Energy to An intercultural Play about ideas of learning to Storytelling—based on a tour around Ed looking for traces of Old and New stories to Cooking to Meditative dance to Reasons for Optimism to Costume Design*, etc.

The last 2 days of the seminar were held in the urban environment of Trollhättan at University West. The participants were met by Professor Sven-Eric Liedman who, via a prerecorded audio-visual message, told a mysteriously growing number of teddy bears about the importance of play. The fourth day investigated intercultural communication based on various projects that have emerged within the networks and as from previous seminars. In the middle of the seminar doors to a spacious and quite room were opened, a room with its walls covered with empty paper.

In the afternoon we met in this open space in-between and focused on the re-occurring themes that had emerged within the discussions earlier. After a physical warm-up the walls were filled with threads from the discussions, networking ideas, etc. People wrote, drew, doodled, corresponded in an attempt to capture fragments of the process. All was accompanied by music that moved from soft musical improvisation into joyous and energetic klezmer. Participants danced and wove around the space.

The following ‘word cloud’ (Fig. 1) captures something of this outpouring. It consists of words that were written on the paper that covered the walls in the “inter-space” room at University West during the seminar. The bigger the letters are, the more frequently the word was used. It can be seen as a mirroring of the collective consciousness evolved during the seminar.

As Friday was World Environment Day we discussed world context in relation to different aspects of the Economy and Environment. The wide range of topics included Economy and Ethics; Microvita and the Shaman; Reflections on the banking systems from an aliens perspective; Prout and the Global Economy; and Quality management for global sustainability.

2. From context to reflection

Much had happened between the play of 1969 and 2009. Values and their associated commitments form and are tested in life. Adjustments are made, compromises struck between ideals and reality, and all the time we nurture our dreams. In this playground of life we craft meaning [6]. As educators we come to understand the struggle for control of hearts and minds as a call to our civilizations to wake up and take note. We inhabit an unstable and topsy-turvy world so our mechanisms of culture must change with it. And for this to happen of course, we too must change. The following premises outline our starting point in this creative cultural work.

structure and the structured. This space is alive to every heartbeat. It is where life happens, where learning and becoming play, and where comedy and tragedy take turns in every unfolding game.

3. Work and a fourth premise

A constellation of values drives this rhizomic process. Deleuze and Guattari sum up the normative nature of our work:

“... to write *for* the illiterate – to speak for the aphasic, to think for the acephalous. But what does ‘for’ mean? It is not ‘for their benefit’, or yet ‘in their place’. It is ‘before’. It is a question of becoming. The thinker is not acephalic, aphasic, or illiterate, but becomes so” [7, p. 109].

This becoming acephalic, aphasic and illiterate points to the necessary forgetfulness that begins the work of encounter. And all teaching and learning is about encounter. If we are too self aware, clinging to position, authority and identity we will fail the test of openness. Hierarchy is anathema to open process. Thus a degree of forgetfulness, where identity is suspended, and open play fostered allows for intercultural process to emerge. And this openness moves us away from the expectations of dialogue to pure emergence in which generosity is the prime motivator. The openness is in fact, as Levinas reminds us, *a Work*. Thus it is that “the Work conceived radically is a movement of the Same toward the Other which never returns to the Same” [9, p. 49]—in short it is transformative in nature. Such work begins with generosity. It never ends as we are always moving away from the same. This is what makes our work in intercultural entrepreneurship so interesting.

This insight brings us to a fourth premise. It may seem that the definition put forward by Levinas is far from the common sense one of ‘something we do for a living’, or ‘an activity to sustain life’. We would argue, however, that both positions are not incompatible. Rather, as Marx observed, we human’s make ourselves through our labour [10]. A point reiterated by both Hannah Arendt [11] and Paulo Freire [12].

3.1. Premise 4

Work makes us human and involves all encounters both common place and extraordinary in nature. In this, the vocational, the entrepreneurial and the transformative work of becoming acephalic, aphasic and illiterate form an integrated continuum of human expression.

This commitment to a vision of work that is well beyond the pragmatic frames of reference of institutional reasoning is not simply an inversion of the common logic of vocational education but an extension of it to its expression as a macro-social process of citizen empowerment. To further such work we turn to futures thinking and explore the context of WIL as an ongoing and creative series of context bound experiences.

4. Unpacking WIL

As noted, it is common to take the present as a stable field of existence. Education from this perspective is designed to maintain and further this stability into the future. The authors argue, however, that any sense of stability is an illusion. This is not a bad thing, however, as it allows us to engage with the present as a dynamic and open set of possibilities. This in turn opens up the future to a wide range of alternatives. Futures thinking is about engaging the present by thinking about these alternatives. In this the Future is in fact a principle for present action. Futures work is not at all intended to predict the future but rather to stimulate individuals, communities, organisations and institutions to creatively engage with the present in order to generate preferred futures [13]. Futures thinking is therefore a partisan process driven by value assumptions about the real and our place in the world.

This section applies two futures tools to the question of work integrated learning. It does so in order to disturb the present by providing us with some distance from it [14]. The tools will be used in tandem as they mutually reinforce one another. The first tool is the scenario. These are essentially thumbnail sketches of possible futures. They can be generated by any individual or group seeking to understand possible trajectories for any current situation. They are a fascinating and multifaceted tool as the scenario symposium recently hosted by the *Journal of Futures Studies* bears witness (2009).

Together with the scenario we will use causal layered analysis (CLA). This is a poststructural tool that maps context as layered [15]. It proposes the layer of Litany as what we all experience in the day to day. This level is made up of discrete and unorganised information or data—the news headlines, encounters, fears and hopes, etc. The layer of System is given as that structural response which makes sense of much of the raw material in litany. Society looks to system for order and holds it accountable for mistakes and places faith in it when under stress. Thus we find government departments, organisations, processes such as economics and religious institutions working across this area. The layer of worldview sustains system by generating belief systems, values and assumptions about the real that provide coherence for system. This is the level of discourse and ideology and theology and the lenses these evoke. Thus we find positivism, empiricism, materialism, holism and a range of cultural values such as caste, class, competition, egalitarianism, socialism, etc., all working across this space. Finally, CLA also identifies the layer of myth/metaphor which relates to the deep unconscious cultural tropes that societies and civilisations rely on for inner meaning and sustenance. This is the level of deep cultural forces such as belief in heaven and hell, the drama of evolution, stories of fall and redemption, of reincarnation and of animistic and atavistic intuitions. It

Scenario 1: Utilitarian (jobs and cheap labour)

WIL appears in numerous higher education institutions as a response to a **range of drivers**: 1. students as pragmatists want to take courses that increase their employability (nothing new there) so institutions remain creatively competitive in offering courses that integrate work place learning in the student’s learning package; 2. this process of self selection for WIL is further encouraged by employers pushing for inexpensive labour, experience, relevant practice and knowledge that is not impeded by abstract (irrelevant) learnings; 3. as these threads are popular in the press and mainstream media, policy is also shaped to encourage WIL courses that are seen to be relevant and market oriented.

Fig. 2. Scenario 1.

can also be, at the institutional and personal levels, the inner stories we tell our selves such as “I am like Cinderella,” or “I am unlucky” or “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”.

CLA will be used in such contexts as a device for decoding and deepening the scenarios [16]. It is worth noting, however, that in workshop encounters it is also highly useful as a process in which participants work to generate depth within context and identify points for intervention [17].

5. Four scenarios for WIL

The following four scenarios seek to capture some of the diversity of WIL. They also move from narrower to broader possibilities taking the reader on a journey of the imagination and the heart. The authors are committed to expanded futures for WIL and have used scenarios and CLA here to explore some features of a deepened and creative engagement with educational culture. This work links with our thinking about the intercultural possibilities for WIL and underpins the values work that occurred as we (Bjurström and Sannum) developed both the course on intercultural entrepreneurship for sustainable development and the intercultural encounter held this year (2009).

Each scenario is followed by a brief outline which is then translated into a CLA table for added clarity (Fig. 2).

This scenario focuses on the practical concerns of institutions and the markets they serve. The emphasis is on job placement and the institutional and funding relationships that facilitate such pragmatic concerns. There is no big picture at work here, rather a practical desire to match students with jobs and maintain market share. Education is seen in functionalist terms as meeting societal needs and relies on a largely anti-intellectual and vocational mythos linked to simplistic readings of meaning such as that epitomised by the British children’s show Bob the Builder (Fig. 3).

Another possible reading is available to us. That is of the hardened academic engaged in research. Theory building and testing are central concerns for such individuals yet they are also institutional beings with responsibilities to education. For them education is simply the vehicle to build theory. Thus we offer scenario 2 (Fig. 4).

This scenario focuses on academic and disciplinary concerns that underpin course building and delivery. In this context theory drives the process and students and their experiences afford opportunities to reflect on and develop theory. Pedagogy here is a field in which learning encounters are the laboratories of theorists. The drivers for this are research dollars and institutional accountability. Theory facilitates understanding of life and students are essential the blank pages that disciplinary experts draw on. In a funding driven world the myth here is publish or perish (Fig. 5).

CLA 1	Utilitarian (jobs and cheap labour)
Litany	Jobs, unemployment, competition, head lines in news
System	Vocational education, job focused curriculum, institutions and funding, policy, politics, unions, unemployment, immigration
Worldview	Education should be practical, work is the true learning, abstract thinking is a waste of time, people are a societal resource
Myth/Metaphor	Schools are knowledge factories; life is the best school, “Bob the Builder”

Fig. 3. CLA of scenario 1.

Scenario 2: Idealist (trial theories)

Academics committed to theories of praxis and experiential learning design courses that place students in work places of their choice. Courses are developed that 1. reflect an ideological commitment to experiential learning and the practical acquisition of skills, 2. allow for the testing of such theoretical assumptions through the trial and error of placements and student feedback (both anecdotal and also researched), 3. explore a range of theoretical assumptions about learning and identity formation in a range of cultural and institutional settings.

Fig. 4. Scenario 2.

CLA 2	Idealist (trial theories)
Litany	Theories, students, employers, work places
System	Research = Dollars, justify existence, learning laboratories
Worldview	Students are blank pages, lifeworld exists for research, theory enables understanding
Myth/Metaphor	“Publish or perish”

Fig. 5. CLA of scenario 2.

Scenario 3: Egalitarian-Structuralist (democratic, participatory)

Visions of deeper learning possibilities drawing on the works of Ivan Illich and Paolo Freire lead to the development of learning contexts within student’s life worlds that are expansive and self affirming. Thus the WIL experience actively fosters a critical appreciation of how we are all implicated in the maintenance of power relationships. Students are held as co-creators of their learning and hierarchies both educative and work based are challenged in an effort to enhance the learning potential of any WIL experience.

Fig. 6. Scenario 3.

Theory is of course necessary for thinking about learning and its encounters. But we argue that it needs to be grounded in wider concerns. The potential for WIL to foster egalitarian and democratic possibilities thus forms the focus of scenario 3 (Fig. 6).

The focus in this scenario is on students and their communities. The system develops decentralised modes of delivery while fostering democratic values and inclusive learning contexts. Learning is seen to be life long and participatory in which the individual learner engages creatively with context. This conscious embracing of student and context is deepened by a commitment to a triple bottom line that validates the social, economic and environmental dimensions of context. The mythos for such a scenario is aptly summed up as “All for one and one for all!” (Fig. 7).

This progressive vision of the potential of engaged and participatory work is taken yet another step forward in our final scenario which considers the cultural domain of learning as open, creative and trans-structural in nature. While acknowledging the structural imperatives of context it suggests that we also need to be conscious of cultural process in the construction and maintenance of such structures. Thus we have scenario 4 (Fig. 8).

As this promotes a cultural lens it is alive to the humanness of interaction. Its focus is on individuals and collectivities in co-creation. This is the level of true intercultural encounter where decentralised processes facilitate open-ended structure and a commitment to quadruple bottom line values in which the spiritual domain is included in thinking about the social, economic and environmental dimensions of context. Thus multiplicity defines reality and process is thought of rhizomically. Surprise and openness are underwritten by a mythos that is captured in the famous phrase “Life is a box of chocolates” (Fig. 9).

CLA 3	Egalitarian-Structuralist (democratic, participatory)
Litany	Students, community
System	Democratic, co-learning, centralised decentralisation, context specific, triple bottom line
Worldview	Learning is life long, collaboration, co-creation, participatory, popular authoritarianism
Myth/Metaphor	“All for one and one for all!”

Fig. 7. CLA of scenario 3.

Scenario 4: Rhizomic Playground (transformative, open)
Realising that students and their teachers are all products of structure, course leaders and participants actively conspire to generate learning contexts that seek to reach beyond the confines of structure and allow for transformative encounters with settings that challenge assumptions and nurture new pathways. Institutions thus act as crucibles of possibility rather than as mediators of dominant social visions. Students become both critically self aware and co-creatively engaged with their own learning processes. Collaboration is rhizomic with room for surprise and a trust in open ended systems.

Fig. 8. Scenario 4.

CLA 4	Rhizomic Playground (transformative, open)
Litany	Many hands, surprise, laughter, tears
System	Decentralised and community-based learning, take risks, quadruple bottom line, creative open structure
Worldview	Multiplicity defines reality, process is rhizomic, structure always contingent
Myth/Metaphor	“Life is a box of chocolates”

Fig. 9. CLA of scenario 4.

6. Reflection

It is easy to think of scenarios like the above four as mapping out alternatives. To do so would be a mistake. Such scenarios are in fact more like maps of belief systems in the constellation of society. The four scenarios are possibilities along the social continuum. It goes without saying we think that education must be pragmatic and is designed to meet social needs. Thus the utilitarian dimension is a valid one. But on its own it offers a brittle and regressive social practice that disempowers students and their institutions. There is so much more to work integrated learning than such a scenario suggests. In such a view students are simply pawns of capital, knowledge is reduced to information and learning is mistaken for the student's ability to reproduce information on demand. In essence the student becomes a piecemeal learner in a world lacking cohesion and larger meaning.

The second scenario looks at WIL from a course coordinator's perspective. It suggests that students and the learnings they encounter are all part of an academic field trip in which students are specimens and work places are habitats. The academic's job is to theorise the world and then test their theories on the students. This somewhat improbable setting is, however, a reality in that academics are learners too and all grand encounters in learning can be consciously theoretical in nature. Academic disciplines do have something to contribute to learning encounters and need to be consciously invoked in any development of new learning contexts for students. Yet again on its own this scenario is overly narrow with disciplinary knowledge focused on control and mastery of context and information. The student and indeed the teachers all become goal oriented and loose sight of the bigger picture.

	Form	Indicators	Agency
Litany	Information	Replicate	Piecemeal Learner
System	Disciplines	Control/Mastery	Goal-Oriented Learner
Worldview	Purpose	Building/Change	Interactive Learner
Myth-Metaphor	Story	Transformation	Reflexive Learner

Fig. 10. A CLA of the learning continuum.

Is there a bigger picture we ask? Well we hope so. Thus scenario three invites us to consider learning as life long and collaborative. This is where theory and practice merge in a socially informed embrace. Praxis, as developed by Freire [12], is about developing the consciousness of learners—*Conscientization* [18], it is democratic, inclusive and empowering. It is both an extension of the practical utilitarian concerns of scenario one and the theoretical and disciplinary (both epistemological and Foucauldian senses intended here) issues at the heart of scenario two [19]. This scenario suggests a future for WIL that is critically reflexive in nature and actively committed to empowering both student and context. The learning is interactive with students coming to understand that structure is not hegemonic but constructed. The purpose of learning responds to this realisation by actively inviting students to engage with context to build better, individually and collectively emancipatory futures.

Yet beyond structure lies the rhizome. Or at least Deleuze and Guattari would have us consider such a possibility [2]. Scenario 4 invites us to examine this idea. This scenario reads the utilitarian, the idealist and the egalitarian as all processes constantly in flux. The learner in such a context is becoming-conscious of the process orientation of learning, context and self as self referential and mutually constructive [20]. The goal of learning here is to transform structure and self—to keep both alive to process and the becoming nature of learning. Thus learning is based on encounter, openness and an inclination to playfulness. WIL in this scenario facilitates such by incorporating the transformative possibility of process into student's learning pathways. Thus the practical is moved to the theoretical, which in turn shifts to the participatory and then allows for the immanence of inversion—in which the roles of student, teacher and context are all challenged [21].

Fig. 5 maps this process and the relationships described above. Essentially it describes pathways to the various levels of learning we just outlined. In this we use CLA to map some of the rhizomic relationships available to us when thinking about WIL—this list is of course is a small sample of an infinite number of possibilities (Fig. 10).

In this figure we see that information has a place as litany and that learners replicate knowledge becoming piecemeal learners as they lack context. This context is supplied in the first instance by system in the form of disciplinary bodies of learning such a science, mathematics and history. At this level students are invited to master a body of coherent and self-sustaining knowledge. This is the goal of their studies and thus they are driven to become goal-oriented learners. What drives them are the assumptions about learning and its role in the life of the student. Such understandings are epistemological in nature. This is drawn from the level of worldview and relates to the purpose of learning. Learning in this context is about building a coherent and stable world of meaning. To do this the student interacts with their learning, intuitively understanding that as they learn they become—thus learning is an act of work that shapes and confirms identity. This identity is located in acts of narrative attribution. Story here functions as the ontological root of our being in the world. To change the story, the mimetic patterns that configure meaning, opens the reflexive learner to transformation.

7. Conclusion

No scenario is likely to be the future but they help us immensely when it comes to formulating questions about current practice. It is important not to let our own incredulity blunt scenario generation. We need to take risks when imagining the future in order to free the mind from its own innate conservatism. Think about the issues and let them cross pollinate in order to generate richer more plausible futures. Allow hopes and fears to come into play. Let your values out to 'flex their muscles'. All positive futures are possible futures, so hope is a key asset in this process [22].

Linking the process of scenario building with a CLA methodology allows the researcher to expose narrative threads and generate new ones. CLA is an important tool in the futures field as it helps practitioners develop positive images of the future that are anchored in the real-life aspirations of those stakeholders engaged in the work of social change. CLA recognises that human consciousness itself is the main agent in social change [17]. It links up with the work of Richard Slaughter who argues for a foresight methodology premised on the recognition that all humans have the capacity to look to the future and anticipate and thus plan for possible developments [23]. Institutions, too, as a working product of many consciousnesses, have the capacity to develop foresight in order to best cater to future needs—be they economic, social or personal [24]. As futurist Sohail Inayatullah points out, it is through the interaction of self, other and environment that innovation 'from the edge' can occur [15].

The intercultural work promoted in the course at University West attempts to promote such innovation from the edge by affirming non-linear and non-hierarchical rhizomic processes. This work is called forth as the result of intercultural encounter. It is based on a commitment to sustainable development. The rhizome is a broad church and ways to do this work

are limitless. For us it lies in playfulness and the possibilities immanent in context [25]. We believe that creative and open process loosens the bonds of habit (the weight of context) and creates the heart space for such immanence to begin emerging.

It can be very challenging to set up and remain in an “as if” world. Actually, it is about living the realization that one cannot have, nor even should try to have, control. Rather we need to be present to what is emerging, with curiosity to see what is becoming while relying on partners and networks [26]. These are like rhizomes that are growing where there is energy and sustenance. As with the open space concept, those who come are the right people at the right place to discuss the right things. We have no ambition to cover everything. This is in no way opposed to critical thinking but extends it, as Ananta Kumar Giri argues, to an invitation to assess the quality of our relationships [27]. We are still playing and will continue to do so for at least another 40 years, because as Sven-Eric Liedman told the teddy bears: “*it is fatal not to play*”.

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