

Avenues Other

A limited enquiry into workplace delivery and assessment.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper and associated symposia is to promote discussion of the practicalities, applicability, and implications, of delivering vocational qualifications in the workplace. After the initial presentation, the presenters promote discussion of the findings, and most importantly, the exploration of alternative avenues: what forms the models might take; the implications; and the issues of skill and knowledge development. In particular focus will be how workplace delivery of VET appears to be influencing perceptions of 'trade' qualifications.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion of the findings on workplace delivery. Primarily the paper holds detail of the various RTO interviews conducted as well as relevant methodological detail. In addition it provides insights into the questions, and responses to such questions, arising in our minds as the interviewers. It is intended that this in turn should provide participants with an insight into the thoughts, concerns - existing paradigm perhaps - of practitioners attempting to adapt their trade delivery practices to a changing industrial and social context. Further, as to why it is our belief that whilst all of the practices reviewed hold merit, it is to avenues other than these we must look if skill development of apprentices in regional construction workplaces is to be effected.

Part One

Overview

During latter half of 2007 we (the presenters) undertook a limited enquiry into workplace delivery on behalf of TAFE NSW Riverina Institute. The purpose of this enquiry was the investigation of workplace delivery techniques appropriate or adaptable to apprenticeship training in the regional construction industry. The enquiry was supported by Reframing the Future funding.

Representatives of five Victorian based Registered Training Organisations (RTOs'), both public and private, were interviewed either face to face or (in one instance only) by phone link. The organisations involved were chosen on the basis of a review of recommendations offered by independent researchers and peers within the industry. In each case it must be stated that the RTOs concerned were extremely open and forthcoming throughout the interview process, they were justifiably proud of their past and current activities in delivering qualifications in the workplace. We hope this work offers appropriate respect to their achievements.

Despite their enthusiasm for the research the names of these RTOs and their clients are withheld, the purpose of the review being to provide representative examples of alternative practices in workplace delivery, rather than focusing upon the perceived value or otherwise of the capabilities of any particular organisation. In light of this

the five RTOs have been referred to simply as Private 1, Private 2, Private 3, Public A (Country) and Public B (Inner City).

Methodology

Following discussions with numerous researchers and RTOs, both public and private, a small cluster of Victorian based RTOs were identified as offering a range of approaches and, importantly, were open to further enquiry. Four of the five were able to be visited allowing for face to face discussion, using an open interview approach. A similar discursive technique was used in the telephone interview of the manager of the fifth RTO. Use of open interviews allowed for issues and themes to arise that we had not previously considered, whilst in the latter part of the discussion issues of import, or that had otherwise not been addressed, could be brought into focus.

In each case a particular client or delivery site and qualification would be focused upon for detail of exemplary methods or approaches. It was not deemed important that all of the organisations dealt with the construction trades, instead the possibility of crossover between industries was explored.

Limits of Enquiry

- Excepting Public A, only one representative of each RTO was interviewed. Generally this representative was not conducting the delivery of the focus qualification
- Clients and delivery sites of the RTOs were not visited
- Documentation employed for assessment was not reviewed
- No 'students' or 'applicants' were interviewed
- Several RTOs known to be delivering construction based qualifications in their entirety were not reviewed, being eliminated by arguably preconceived perceptions of what it was to deliver 'well'. This, or access was not available.
- Both interviewers were male.

Discussion

Detail of the findings are to be found in the addendum to this otherwise brief paper (offered separately to participants). Rather than labour over each of these in turn it is perhaps of greater value discuss their import, allowing the relevant detail to rise as is relevant. Firstly it is of interest that of the five RTOs, none operated similarly: Only one 'delivered' training in a traditional interpretation of the word; one sought to developed the workplace, inclusive of management, as a learning community; one only assessed the training delivered by the employer; one only conducted Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessments of existing experienced workforces; and one actually conducted neither workplace assessment or training – although it offered appearances to that effect.

In each case it was clear to us that the representative believed strongly in what they were attempting to do, and were doing it 'well'. Private 1, for example, engaged with several large organisations requesting skill development of their staff. Extensive efforts were then made to contextualise appropriate qualifications so as to develop skills relevant to these workplaces.

Likewise Private 2 goes to great lengths to evaluate the competency or otherwise of their target group: often requiring assessors to spend whole days in road trains;

meeting applicants at truck stops at four in the morning; and going so far as to instruct supervisors in training and assessment practices (partial qualification) when skill gaps arise for drivers.

In each case however there were elements that we had to confront as ‘challenging’ to our current delivery or training paradigm. Of these there are elements that appear to have little relevance to the establishment of ‘appropriate’ workplace skill and knowledge development for apprentices, and elements that, whilst still challenging, hold promise. It is appropriate that we should look at these in more detail.

Recognition of Prior Learning and Current Competencies (RPL & RCC)

Both Recognition of Prior Learning, and Recognition of Current Competencies (RPL & RCC) are well documented processes (see: Everyone’s Guide to Recognition Ver. 3.1, 2007). Briefly, RPL is the recognition that people develop skills and knowledge informally and outside of the formal educational system. RPL effectively ‘formalises’ the informal – brings the applicant into the ‘system’ – and benchmarks them against relevant competency standards. RCC is an assessment only process whereby an applicant’s competency is checked for currency. With respect to the development of skills and knowledge of apprentices, who in the main are of limited experience and have had only a short time to develop their skills in the workplace, both were perceived as avenues of limited ‘initial’ relevance.

That stated, RPL may have some value in the evaluation of apprentices who, having spent a significant period embedded in the workplace, are confronted with training in units of competency that they may already have developed. This is the approach adopted by Public A. Yet even here there is a cautionary note: often the practical ability is context specific, and only a limited grasp of the underpinning knowledge is held. Likewise the narrow field of experience invokes questions regarding transfer to other contexts. In the main, the applicants to Public A demonstrated this as an issue.

Private 2 refutes this on the basis of prescribed competency. Competency, they state, “is a bench mark... ..if you don’t think its high enough talk to your ISC...” (Industry Skills Council). In addition, they were firm in the belief that competency was “entry level training...”. The “trade” they contended was something else, developed over time, and that the general public will eventually isolate those who are not of sufficient standard.

Private 3 on the other hand, whilst also offering ostensibly an RPL program, seeks to develop worker’s problem solving ability. In so doing they argue that although all of the skill and knowledge development is context specific, including the language of its mostly English as a Second Language (ESOL) and Languages other than English (LOTE) applicants, they develop the key ‘soft skills’ that allow for transfer between contexts and problems.

Here we see two different strategies for two different goals: one enters, checks existing competency, coaches were required, and exits – qualification delivered to the standards set by industry; the other enters the workplace seeking to develop, and raise the standard, of the whole context over time, leaving when that aim is achieved – “...we’re there for as long as it takes...”. It is almost as a ‘bonus’ that the workers achieve a qualification effectively through RPL.

Concerns

- If competency is entry level training only, where is the ‘trade’? And given a generally uninformed public purchasing to a price, will they be aware that what they are receiving could be better? In addition, who picks up ‘the mess’ left by poor operators before they are isolated.
- When developing the workplace using consultants who are not experienced in the context of the delivery (as occasionally Private 3 does – preferring not to use the term ‘trainers’), can one be sure that the direction taken is appropriate (sustainable, economic, safe, and the like). The incremental shifts sought are based upon, and effected by, an existing workforce of (at time of entry) unspecified competence. The key performance indicators (KPI) may look good, yet is the direction ultimately right? This does not deny the value of the alternative perspective offered, indeed it is alternative perspectives that are frequently missing in workplaces. As Private 3 themselves stated “... if we ask why something is done and the answer is *“because we have always done it that way”* the alarm bells ring...”. However should not that perspective be mediated by a broad grounding relevant to the context? Is the existing workforce sufficient in this role?

Employers as ‘Trainers’

In many existing cases of workplace delivery within the construction industry it is the employer who is deemed the ‘instructor’ and the RTO takes on the role of ‘assessor’ only. There is trustworthy argument that assessment is an integral component of the skill development and that the two should not be viewed in isolation. However the contemporary VET system of competency based training tends to promote this separation. Public B examples this form of delivery. Funding is the key issue here and currently limits contact hours (approximating only 10 – 12 hours per stage or ‘year’ of course). This contact time (or lack of) tends to disallow extended observations of practice. Third party reporting thus would appear to be an essential component yet neither Public RTO gave much credence, nor avenues for the collection of, this form of evidence. Private RTOs likewise were not particularly confident of evidence collected from supervisors or managers.

However all three private RTOs interviewed stated a preference for assessing over extended periods of observed practice. Always with clustered competencies. This reflects our own preference and that of many TAFE based instructors. All three private RTOs also stated that current audit practices tended to disallow this approach and so in attempting best practice they find themselves “...risk managing...” their assessments for arguably the wrong reasons.

Concerns

- Do small ‘one man’ employers have the time to train apprentices? With larger firms who tend to ‘farm out’ their apprentices to subcontractors, is the apprentice any better off? How much material that is ostensibly ‘peripheral’ to the doing of a task, yet ultimately informs the problem solving and transfer elements – the appropriateness – of that doing, is being lost to practice by imposing the training upon the employer. Or must we accept the argument proposed by Private 2, that competency is entry level only: that the new ‘tradesperson’ will eventually develop this knowledge and skill as time and context allows?

- It has long been acknowledged that much, if not most, skill development takes place in the workplace. Indeed even as an apprentice myself I argued that at TAFE one might be ‘taught’ everything, yet learn nothing; whilst at work be ‘taught’ nothing, yet learning everything – as much hinging upon the learning styles of the apprentice, as instructors and co-workers or employers. If this is the case, however, why is it that we are yet to incorporate any element of training in mentoring, instruction, or for that matter assessment (given the integral role) in our trade or post trade qualifications?
- If, as it is believed, that employers simply do not have the time to ‘train’, and the importance of long duration observations of practice (of clustered competencies) is trustworthy, how might this be funded for application in small regional workplaces?

Some Concluding Remarks

It is to be acknowledged that talk of ‘the trade’ is not much countenanced in contemporary VET literature, being considered overly indeterminate: ‘Competency’ being considered ‘measurable’; ‘the trade’, not. Yet there is value in maintaining our link to this human vessel of broad knowledge, skill, and experience pertaining to various sectors of our industry: indeed often the only bridge between these sectors.

In accepting this, if we choose to bow to the mounting pressure and belief that competency is in fact ‘entry level’ training and that ‘the trade’ is something else, how are we to recognise this something else? How do we reflect this within the AQTF system – need it be? Do we need another level of recognition, based upon evaluation rather than ‘training’: some form of evaluation for which application is made ‘post competency’? There are sufficient national and international examples, both historical and current, from which a relevant model might be developed. Whilst this may reduce pressure on assessors of ‘competency’ in the workplace, there remain risks that must be considered however, particularly with regard to OH&S and transfer at ‘competency’ level, of insurance and remuneration upon ‘trade’ recognition.

The avenues explored here offer elements worthy of consideration, yet as whole practices we would contend they are inappropriate for trade based skill development and evaluation: particularly in small regional workplaces. And so, whilst borrowing much that is valuable from these, we must consider the development of avenues other.

Part Two

Avenues Other: Some Direction

The point form proposal that follows should be taken as guidance towards, rather than a given, or ‘fixed’, model. As elements of possible approaches to delivery they aim to maintain ‘training’ – the purposefully guided development of skill and knowledge (as against recognition of existing competence) – that is not apparent in the approaches reviewed. It is a ‘partial’ workplace delivery model with the greater quota of site based training and assessment rationalised to context.

- Adopting a ‘whole of practice’ model of skill development and its evaluation.
- Bulk of formally guided generic skill & knowledge development off-site (flexibly and rational to context and skill development requirements)

- Online workplace activity material extending face to face delivery, improving access and contextualisation
- Bulk of practical and written assessments on-site or online (flexible and rational to context and assessment requirements) – * see note below.
- Practical assessments of clustered competencies conducted on-site over extended time frames.
- Key skill development goals (clustered competencies or otherwise) assessed at staged intervals throughout the apprenticeship period
- Assessments integrated with skill development – feed forward modelling
- Whole of workplace development approach – employers and or supervisors integral to apprentice skill development.
- Online portal access for ‘third party’ data uptake (no paper inputs)
- Open acknowledgement and support of Legitimate Subjective Observation: see below. (LSO – prevalent yet not formalised in all the avenues of assessment reviewed in this paper) rather than allowing the ‘blind eye’ to continue the pretence of pseudo objectivity in assessment.
- RPL at entry to course and entry to each competency.
- Graded competency allowing for, promoting, and rewarding, the pursuit of excellence
- Inclusion of mentoring, training, and assessment, practices in trade training (within certificate 3 and above).

* There are identity issues here that would have to be risk managed if adopted. How to ‘prove’ that the assessment was completed by the stated individual is difficult, as it is with site based work that is claimed as that of the apprentice/applicant, yet was not seen to be performed by the assessor.

Behind a Whole of Practice Evaluation Model (From the doctoral research of Costin 2003)

Whole of practice evaluation offers a way of legitimately maintaining a dialogue on competence with the context, the practitioner, a national agenda, and the community within which that practice is being performed, *even as the judgement of that competence is being made*. This approach thus acknowledges, indeed makes effective use of, the subjective frailty of the human situation – for it is only a human that can maintain such a dialogue. To a limited extent this avenue is reflected in the approach of the RTO Private 3.

To recognise the need for whole of practice evaluation one must confront fully the issue of competent practice. For without understanding that, we cannot move towards an understanding of its assessment, nor its evaluation. Facing this question is to be challenged to engage multiple, alternate, perspectives. To understand practice one must accept ‘reality’ as holding both the subjective and the objective, and that this reality may be known in multiple ways: in a practical sense, such as through the skills of the tradesperson, as proposition - what we believe to be ‘true’ even though we have never seen or experienced it, and or through experience itself. And that each of these has a level of trustworthiness that must acknowledge.

Following the lead of those such as Beckett & Hager (2002 p.15) “...the notion of ‘practice’...” is reserved for such phenomena that “...deal seriously in the human arts of know how, reflection, intuition, the tacit and so on”. The concept of ‘technical

practice', the basis of competency based training and assessment as it is contemporarily applied is thus rejected. Instead a stance inclusive of the whole person relational to the context in which their acts are embedded is adopted. Practice is therefore seen to be a social activity, acknowledged as such by the community surrounding it, and hence centring upon "...the experiential authority of diversity, discourse and power" (Beckett & Hager, 2002 p.15).

Hence there is of practice that which may be quantifiable, such as certain material outputs, and yet much which is subjective and qualitative in nature. Who is a practitioner? – anyone recognised as such by the community surrounding that practice. It must be understood that from this perspective certified competency is not at issue in the determination of 'who' is a practitioner, only legitimacy in the eyes of the community. Likewise from this perspective practice cannot be 'measured'. It can, however, be evaluated, and here in there lies a significant difference.

Of relevance here is the ancient adage whereby the master informs the novice "before enlightenment, chopping wood - after enlightenment, chopping wood". It offers a message of some import to the understanding of practice. For the difference between the master and the novice or apprentice is as much in the thinking and perspectives behind the doing, the way of being, as the doing itself. It suggests that practice is more about ways of being and doing, than measurable behaviour. That it is as much if not more, about the subjective and qualitative as it is about the objective and quantifiable. It is about the making of judgements in the heat of action.

The implication of this to the 'assessment' of practice is significant. Indeed from this perspective practice taken as a whole cannot be assessed at all, rather it can only be evaluated. Only through evaluation do we acknowledge the subjective and value laden nature of the judgement making we are observing; likewise it is only through evaluation that we can openly acknowledge the subjective and value laden nature of our own act of making judgements on the doing of others.

It would be erroneous to suggest our assessment technology, competency based training, as the sole issue here. It goes deeper: for to move forward, we must acknowledge a mind set derived from a positivistic, material way of looking at the world, and our desire to objectify and so solidify our surroundings. We like to look at things and hold them to 'be', in a very fixed sense. What's more, our governments, or more correctly the financial institutions supporting our governments such as the World Bank and the IMF, like accountability and the auditable. Competency tick sheets are auditable, whereas subjective 'opinion' is considered not to be.

Legitimacy is therefore offered to those methods that are repeatable and by extension, in the VET sector at least, it is the easily measurable product of doing that is given precedence over the more problematic human act of the doing itself. This is so even though it is the latter that informs us the more on the sustainability of a persons practice, and their suitability or adaptability to new problems and contexts. The person is excluded in favour of audibility for the purposes of funding. In losing sight of the person, we lose sight of the ways skills are developed and deny a broader, context embedded perspective of competent practice. These are issues clearly informing, and limiting, the avenues of delivery adopted by the RTO's reviewed here.

Whole of practice evaluation is, as stated earlier, a dialogue: one that can only be maintained by the human. To legitimise this dialogue however specific humans are

called for, those that are expert in the context being reviewed, peers within what is broadly speaking a community of practice (for more on this issue, and the concept of the bricoleur practitioner see AVETRA 2008 conference papers: Costin, G.P. *The Art of Making*). Being human they intuitively read various ways of being and doing that signal a candidate 'had what it took', 'had come to grips with the practice' - their practice, that judgements made would bring about resolutions to problems acknowledgeable as appropriate. More importantly, that the applicant was likely to go on doing so in any foreseeable future contexts, foreseeable that is from the evaluator's particular experience base.

Whilst assessment tools might hold some criteria closer to the objective end of the subjective objective continuum, the bulk of the 'doing' may be described as legitimate subjective observation or LSO. And LSO is the main 'technique' underpinning the whole of practice evaluative approach.

LSO opens the way for VET practitioners to take observations, subjective observations, which are offered legitimacy upon the grounds of, experience base, contextual engagement, skill in the area being observed, and the capacity to acknowledge alternative resolutions as appropriate. Doing so is, or should be recognised as, a skilful act that cannot, should not, be reduced to formula. It is in the realm of skill and technique, not formula, nor fixed method. Like any practice, it is as much about the thinking, the perspectives behind the doing, as the doing itself.

Hence the term evaluation rather than assessment. It is acknowledgement of the value laden nature, the human element, in the judgement making of both those doing the doing, and those making judgements upon that doing. It is the bringing together of legitimate observers trained in the observation of skilful practice, an authentic context and traditional assessments applied to the products of workplace embedded activity that is whole of practice evaluation. Whole of practice evaluation is seen as a means of informing our search for other avenues by which trade based qualifications may be delivered: more significantly, by which the skills of such vocations be developed, rather than just assessed.

Implications

Despite the best of intentions of authors, it is often difficult to impart the full implications of VET practice to readers via the research document. What is more, as I have argued in another paper presented at this conference (see Costin, G.P. *The Art of Making*) it is even more difficult to impart this message to the 'common' reader. That which follows, therefore, responds to the proposition laid out in the aforementioned paper. It attempts to highlight that which we easily forget in our search for data: the whole person. More importantly, the implications to the whole of a person when the VET practitioner, or more correctly, the system informing their actions, gets it wrong.

The Gift

The smell: that beautiful, rich, familiar smell of wood, lacquer, and age. It seem to envelope him, as did the darkness, as did the ground as it rose to meet his collapsing form. Through the drumming in his ears he was dimly aware of voices shouting, one seemed to be screaming – but it seemed to far away to be his own. As the blackness closed in he remembered his grandfather telling him of a soldier who, just before dying, had smelt bread. He'd never understood.

The look in his mother's eyes as she walked into the room said it all. He could tell that she had been crying, had stood just outside the door trying to compose herself before entering. He smiled, holding back his own tears.

'Hi mum'

She gave him a hug.

'Hey, let go a bit mum, breathing's good you know'

'Still the same Tom then'

'Yeah, well, sort of'. He waved his hand vaguely, stiffly, 'Not exactly the same'.

Still smiling.

His mother went to speak, but her determination failed her. Even under the bandage the hand was the wrong shape: no longer the shape she had given it, no longer the one she had watched develop grace, skill and dexterity. Had admired. This was not right, not fair, she couldn't even bring herself to look at it, though she knew she must, soon, before she left. For both their sakes. For now though, she changed tack.

'Tanya will be here soon, she's taken some time off work. Your dads' picking her up on his way so they should be here in half an hour or so'.

Tom let this go. In thinking of Tanya he thought of his hand on her skin, of intimacies past, and the idea repulsed him. He thought it would hurt her too.

As his mother spoke his mind drifted back to his Grandfather, of what he had given him, and of what they had both hoped for. Money was always an issue in these things. His parents had been more practical. He had always liked woodwork at school so he'd sought out an apprenticeship in carpentry. His reasons for the choice were just like the other blokes on the site 'outside... ..build my own home'. The similarity ended there though. His dream was very different to theirs. Was.

'Are you Ok Tom?'

'Yeah, fine'

'Now lad..., Tom isn't it? Tom, Ok so what do you know of the drop saw?'

Tom looked the unit over and recalled his training from Hayden, the only tradesman he'd worked with other than Phil, his boss. Hayden had seemed a bit nervous about showing him for the first time: preferred to show and tell and then get the hell out of the way as if by this he could relinquish blame if anything went wrong.

'Ok Tom', Hayden was shouting over the noise of the motor, 'make sure the timbers back against the fence, pull the trigger and let it get up to speed before you start cutting or you'll stuff up either the motor or the timber. Then bring it down steady like, on and through the timber'. He gave a couple of 'demo's' as he called it and then let Tom try it.

'Got the hang of it? You don't need to change the angle on it for this job so we'll worry about that later. Any questions?'

Not aware of anything to ask Tom had let that go and focused on doing the job. As Hayden moved away he called back, 'And keep yah bloody hands out of the way. Though I reckon you guessed that bit'.

Now he was being tested by the bloke looking after his training. It was pretty good, pretty easy. Every so often he got tested on something. Every so often he had to get on a computer and do a 'package' with a test at the end. Dead simple. The other blokes reckoned he was getting it easy compared to what, and how, they had had to learn. Didn't mean he wasn't learning though. He figured the quicker he got his certificate the better. You learnt most things on the job anyway. Even the other blokes agreed on that score.

‘So Tom? How often do you use it?’

‘Heaps, started using it the first few days I began work. I cut most of the frame for this house. And at the last place we had a roof to do, and I cut...’, he paused, unsure of the correct name for the roof members, ‘... I cut some of the sticks for that. I cut the bevels as well’. He felt a small surge of confidence in remembering the term ‘bevel’ at least.

‘Did you set up the bevel cuts?’

‘Sure did’ called Hayden from inside the frame of the building. ‘We’d set out the angles, and he’d cut em’

Uncertain of the assessor’s raised eyebrow, Tom thought he’d better clarify that bit, ‘I didn’t measure the lengths or anything, I just did the cuts to the lines they set. It wasn’t too hard’ he offered.

‘Ok so lets see a couple of cuts then’.

Tom proceeded to make big bits of timber into small bits as he showed he could set up and use the machine. After a few minutes the assessor seemed to loose interest and he moved onto to other areas needing assessment. After an hour he left. Tom didn’t expect to see him for several weeks, ‘...actually could be a couple of months’ the bloke had said (Bob? Bert? Tom was no longer sure). Bob (or Bert) only got a total of ten hours each year to visit him so he had to make the best use of each visit. ‘Don’t want to waste time on things you’re clearly up on Tom. Save it for the trickier things latter on. Your boss has signed off on all this lot. I’ll see you next time’. A hand shake, a wave to Phil, and he was gone.

It was his father who drove him home from hospital. The surgeon had said that he operated at least four to five times a week on hand injuries from power saws, and that he wasn’t the only hand surgeon in the area. Tom wasn’t sure if this was supposed to make him feel better for being amongst the many, or worse for just being another one who’d got it wrong. He’d not even seen where his fingers had gone. He’d just reached across to get the off-cut like he’d done before but maybe the guard had stuck a bit, or he hadn’t lifted up the saw properly in his haste, he’ll never know. No one had told him how dangerous it was to do that. They said something about a Workcover investigation but that had no meaning. It didn’t alter the regret: the anger, the despair. Not now, not as he walked in the house. Not as he looked at the door.

It was a week before Tom would open that door. Nobody pushed him. They too felt his fear. As it creaked slowly open under the hesitant pressure of his good hand the smell came to him once more. The smell that used to welcome him now seemed to choke, to mist his vision. He hesitated, through the mist he saw his grandfather’s gift, ‘A gift to match yours lad’ he’d said when it arrived. Despite his anguish he was drawn forward. Now he understood the old man’s story, though unlike the soldier, Tom hadn’t died: his dream had. Lifting the lid he was careful not to make it sound. He gently brushed the keys, and was surprised to find them wet: the tears were silent, unlike his soul, which seemed to burn. He knew now that, like the soldier, the smell of this piano would come to him one last time...

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