

Academic Writing and the Art of the Possible

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Abstract

Over the last thirty years the demographic profile of Australian universities has changed significantly to include increasing numbers not only of international students, but also of local students whose first language is other than English, mature age 'second chance' students, VET articulants, and students from migrant, indigenous, rural, or lower socio-economic backgrounds. Such a change has coincided with an institutional shift towards a corporatised and vocationalised higher education environment. This paper addresses the challenge of supporting the learning needs, particularly the literacy learning needs, of the new demographic within a changed environment. It addresses three concerns: firstly, that traditional approaches to literacy support are inadequate and inappropriate to the needs of non-traditional students; secondly, that a vocationalised curriculum does not address basic literacy; and, thirdly, that corporatised higher education privileges economy, efficiency, and standardisation over contingent learning support needs. The paper considers how these concerns might be negotiated by offering the case of a literacy support program that engages with a vocational/corporate discourse to create new possibilities for meeting students' literacy support needs.

Introduction

If there is one thing that does not change in contemporary Australian university life, it is the continuous presence and processes of change itself. Funding arrangements, organisational hierarchies, philosophical orientation, technologies, the student demographic, and the role and status of teaching and learning within the institution are all in a continuous process of change (Armstrong et al, 1997). Added to this complexity is the ill-defined but nevertheless ubiquitous concept of globalism. As Harris (1996, p.55) remarks in his *Review of Postgraduate Education*,

Higher education itself will become more strongly an international service with students and employers choosing, on a global basis, the programmes they require, delivered in ways and at times that suit them, making use of new communications and information technologies.

As with all cultural transformations, the current process of change in universities is invigorating but also disruptive and contentious as the various stakeholders in higher education strive to forward their own agendas. It also has its casualties, not least in terms of academic staff morale; many academics within the universities may

experience the various forces of change as an unstoppable juggernaut that threatens their intellectual role, their autonomous status, and their philosophical/political beliefs about what universities are for (Reid, 1996).

The reality, however, cannot be reduced to terms of a struggle simply between the old and the new, because the conflict is also between different elements of change within the system. As Bourdieu (1993, p.34) asserts in his discussion of transformation in cultural institutions, 'The generative unifying principle of the "system" is the struggle, with all the contradictions it engenders'. In other words, contention and contradiction need not be perceived as symptoms of a system breaking down but may, alternatively, be perceived as enabling conditions for the system's continuing survival and relevance. Within a system as complex as that of higher education, the relationship between elements of change is dialectical, constantly moving towards and away from alignment. The challenge is not one of bringing these elements into equilibrium because such equilibrium can only be transitory; rather it is one of coming to terms with continuous change and identifying within it opportunities for addressing critical issues in innovative ways.

This paper addresses the issue of teaching and learning academic writing in a changing higher education environment, and focuses in particular on sentence level mechanics. It contextualises the issue by considering three key elements of change within Australian higher education. Each of these key elements is multifaceted, but here they have been categorised under the broad headings of 'democratisation of access', 'professionalisation of disciplines', and 'corporatisation of the university'. The shifting dynamic between these elements has contributed to the paradox that at a time in which the ability to write clearly, concisely, and in a 'reader-friendly' way is highly valued as a graduate attribute, students are being enrolled with inadequate basic writing skills, disciplines are doing less to improve students' literacy, and universities are failing to address the issue of covert conditionality – that is, the admission of students with a level of written literacy that does not match the level required by their chosen courses and which needs to be raised if they are to succeed.

Democratisation – changing the demographic

The term 'democratisation' refers to the transformation of Australian universities from elite establishments to institutions accessible to all who have the intellectual potential to successfully complete a degree course. The transformation process has been partial and uneven across the university sector, subject to various institutional and sociological factors and compounded by increasing recruitment of international students. Since the abolition of fees for all Australian resident students in 1974, and the creation in 1988 of a unitary system in which institutes of higher learning attained university status, the demographic profile of Australian university enrolment has changed significantly.

In many universities, students entering undergraduate study through the traditional end-of-secondary-school matriculation procedure are outnumbered by international students, mature age 'second chance' students, technical college articulants, and students from migrant, indigenous, rural, or lower socio-economic backgrounds. The resulting cultural and social heterogeneity has changed Australian universities into a more equitable, inclusive, and indeed interesting environment for learning, but the change has also brought with it new tensions. One such tension is the contradiction between an undergraduate system designed primarily to address the learning needs of a 'traditional' school-leaver cohort and the actual learning needs of 'non-traditional' students admitted to undergraduate courses. Among the areas in which non-traditional students are perceived to fall short is written literacy; there is a common perception among lecturers that mass accessibility has brought with it an appreciable decline in written literacy standards, including standards of mechanical correctness (Dawson, 2001b). Even when measures are taken to accommodate the learning needs of students who do not conform to the school-leaver model, there is still a tendency to continue privileging this model as the norm from which non-traditional students deviate. One consequence of this is that instead of fully recognising non-traditional students' positive presage factors (Biggs, 1996), such as life skills, work ethic, or maturity, lecturers tend to focus on areas of perceived shortfall (Dawson 2001b).

Concern with literacy standards is not, of course, a phenomenon that started with the democratisation of universities; on the contrary, complaints about students' declining literacy standards appear to be perennial, as Connors and Lunford's 1988 study demonstrates. In the study, the authors collated expressions of concern from U.S. college and university lecturers spanning the period from 1901 to 1986 and found that throughout the period, the impression that contemporary students had lower literacy standards than students of the past was almost universal. To gauge the validity of this impression of continuous decline, Connors and Lunford analysed for mechanical errors a sample of 3000 student essays written in 1986 and compared this sample with samples from 1917 and 1930. They found an error frequency of 2.26 words per hundred in the 1986 sample, compared to 2.11 in 1917 and 2.24 in 1930, and concluded that essentially American university students were 'not making more formal errors than they used to' (p.406). In other words, lecturers' perceptions proved to be an unreliable indicator of actual standards and the lost golden age of superior student literacy was shown to be a myth.

Having acknowledged the subjectivity of lecturers' perceptions of decline in standards, we nevertheless need to recognise that the shift to mass accessibility has brought into the university system many students whose experiences of literacy learning do not conform to the model experienced by the traditional school-leaver, a model informed and influenced by what universities have considered to be prerequisite to successful tertiary learning. Admittedly, a pass in matriculation-level 'English' could not guarantee

that school-leavers would make a successful transition to the more sophisticated level of communication required within their chosen disciplinary discourse (Nightingale, 1988), but given the primacy of language as an instrument for learning (Langer and Applebee, 1987; Zinsser, 1988), it was seen as a function of the matriculation system to exclude prospective students whose levels of literacy put their prospects of academic success at risk. Most institutions offered some form of 'remedial' assistance for native English speakers with writing difficulties, but this measure was almost entirely informed by a deficit model; inadequate literacy was perceived in terms of lessons that students had somehow failed to learn. Such an approach neglects to acknowledge the new demographic or the wide diversity in individual students' prior experiences of literacy learning.

Professionalisation - writing across the curriculum

'Professionalisation' refers to the recognition that many university courses are designed to prepare graduates for immediate participation in a profession; many courses are also accredited by professional bodies. Within such courses, students are expected to acquire requisite academic writing skills not through programs that focus on the mechanics of writing but from exposure to such 'writing-across-the-curriculum' approaches as discipline-specific communication skills units (of the 'English for technical communication' type) and the integration of generic communication skills within discipline subject units.

The principal advantage of a writing-across-the-curriculum approach is that academic writing is appropriately contextualised for students. This approach teaches students (especially in scientific and technical disciplines) that writing is not only a 'pragmatic skill for getting the job done [but also] a conceptual tool for constructing understanding' (Yoursa, 1996,p59). Potentially, this approach leads students to move beyond simplistic perceptions of writing within their discipline as a discursively neutral competency and to become aware of it in terms of historically determined modes of exegesis within a scholarly discourse community (Becher, 1989). Clearly this recognition of conceptual and discursive aspects of academic writing is crucial in the development of intellectually astute academic writers.

The downside of the writing-across-the-curriculum approach is that it often does not address actual and particular literacy difficulties that impede students' development as members of their discipline's discourse community. Nor does it address at sentence level the mechanics of writing. In this it conforms to the view, first expressed in the mid-sixties, that the formal study of grammar does not improve writing (Braddock et al, 1963). However, such a view should be seen in the context of freshman composition classes in U.S. universities and colleges, a context in which students were engaged in intensive writing regimes supported by adequate formative assessment. This is

obviously a very different set of conditions compared to those prevailing in Australian universities today. Nevertheless, in a discussion of the work of James Britton, who coined the term 'writing-across-the-curriculum', Cowan (1993, p1) continues to disparage the teaching of writing mechanics. He comments,

In contrast to the traditional view of writing instruction that emphasises mechanical correctness and rigid discourse forms, Britton's theoretical and empirical work promotes the view of writing as an intellectually rigorous context for creative and critical writing.

Here he is setting up a false dichotomy between two views of writing instruction. In privileging the view of writing as 'an intellectually rigorous context for creative and critical writing' over the 'traditional' view of 'writing instruction that emphasises mechanical correctness and rigid discourse forms', Cowan (1993) fails to acknowledge that writing that is intellectually rigorous, creative, or critical must first conform to grammatical conventions if it is to communicate credibly, especially to an academic (or professional) audience. Moreover, through the pejorative language he uses, he marginalises teaching and learning the mechanics of writing as a rigid, unimaginative, intellectually demeaning activity. Certainly, writing mechanics - as with any other subject - can be taught in a pedantic and prescriptive way, but it can also be taught in a dynamic way that empowers students, giving them the confidence to develop and enhance their performance as 'creative and critical' writers. This is particularly relevant to students whose previous educational experience has not included formal learning of writing mechanics; facilitating their understanding of punctuation, grammar, and syntax as a logical, integrated system in no way inhibits their creative and critical faculties (Dawson et al, 2002).

As part of the 2001 *Report on the Provision of Communication Skills Teaching, Learning, and Support in Undergraduate Courses at Curtin University* (Dawson, 2001b), 115 lecturers in the Divisions of Health Science, Science and Engineering, and Business at Curtin University were interviewed regarding their thoughts on and attitudes towards students' academic writing skills. The majority of interviewees acknowledged and were positive about their own role in supporting student learning of generic communication skills relevant to their discipline, especially those skills demanded in the workplace. Although none of the interviewees made explicit reference to the concept of 'scholarly discourse communities', the notion of relevance to practitioners was a prevalent theme, reflecting the professional orientation of the disciplines represented in the survey. Asked to evaluate the comparative importance of writing competence against other graduate skills and attributes, the sample group's ratings were in general conformity with those of a range of employers (Carnevale et al, 1990; ASCPA & ICAA, 1996; Evers et al, 1998; Siegel, 1999).

In contrast to the interviewees' general agreement with the proposition that lecturers within discipline areas have some responsibility to help students acquire such generic communication skills as presenting to an audience, data-gathering, critical reading, and organising reports, the survey sample expressed a high level of negativity over a question pertaining to the mechanics of written literacy: punctuation, grammar, syntax, diction, and so on. All lecturers interviewed in the survey identified inadequate student written literacy as a major issue in their discipline, and most gave examples of specific grammatical problems they saw as being of considerable concern in their students' writing. It is likely that in identifying mechanical problems as a major shortcoming in students' writing, these lecturers were in fact singling out only the more superficial and therefore more easily identifiable faults, rather than finding, recognising, and addressing deeper, less tractable faults in thinking and organisation. Nevertheless, mechanical errors do exist and certainly contribute significantly to poor writing performance (Massam, 2003).

The lecturers surveyed expressed the firm view that responsibility for addressing such writing difficulties lies not with lecturers within the disciplines but with the secondary education system and/or students themselves. Over 80% of interviewees stated that they did not believe that correcting mechanical errors in students' written assignments was their responsibility (Dawson, 2001b). Many admitted that even if they had sufficient time to mark each written assignment comprehensively and in detail, they lacked the expertise to explain to students how they might improve the mechanics of their writing. Moreover, these lecturers were not able to suggest to students how they might get alternative assistance.

Corporatisation – shifting the discourse

'Corporatisation' refers to the trend towards operating universities along lines that resemble those of corporate enterprises, substantially increasing the administrative, organisational, and accountability-related duties performed by academic teaching staff. One of the consequences of this new managerialism is that lecturers have less time to give adequate formative feedback on individual written assignments; detailed feedback at the sentence level is clearly out of the question. This lack of feedback has led to a deepening of the crisis in the standard of academic writing, especially in courses with large numbers of non-traditional students.

Obviously, time constraints on assessment and feedback are only one consequence of the changing nature of academics' responsibilities. They are, however, symptomatic of more profound structural and ideological changes in the system that have implications for meeting students' literacy learning needs. As Oakes et al (1998) argue, the strategic planning that enables corporatisation of cultural institutions such as universities is in fact pedagogic action; that is, all business planning is ideological

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in that it simultaneously excludes certain ideas as unthinkable and inculcates other ideas as being incontestable and non-problematic. In an increasingly corporate environment, assumptions about the cultural, symbolic, and social value that traditionally gave universities recognition, reputation, and legitimacy are no longer 'incontestable and non-problematic' but are being challenged by new assumptions about economic value as a strategic determinant within a global environment.

Since the power of any discourse lies in its monopoly of legitimate naming, changes in the language signify or prefigure material changes in what is being named. We can see this in action in the way that the word 'client' is increasingly displacing the word 'student' and, in doing so, positioning the language user as subject to an economic discourse rather than a traditional academic discourse. The words 'client' and 'student' are not equivalent: 'client', originally implying dependence upon an authority, has come to signify engagement in a transaction (usually a commercial transaction) with a professional; 'student' signifies an individual person actively engagement in learning. In the context of higher education, the word 'client' may refer not only to the individual student but also to a variety of stakeholders, including professional bodies, employers, the student's sponsors, and the community in which the graduate will be practising. All clients have a material interest in the educational product, but of these, the student is distinctive in that she or he is always also the *co-producer* of the product. The 'educational product' - another term appropriated from corporate discourse - is not only the university's input in terms of what it contracts to supply in the way of curricula, instruction, and resources but also the processing of this input by the student as the agent of learning.

The semantic slippage between the words 'student' and 'client' has worrying implications in its potential to de-emphasise or even obscure the crucial co-productive role of the student. Most students - especially non-traditional students - do not enter the university as productive learners but, rather, need to 'learn how to learn' (Marton and Saljo, 1976; Entwistle, 1998). In the same way, learning the mechanics of writing may be a condition of their successful performance as learners within their discipline. For many non-traditional students, having these basic learning and writing needs addressed is a key factor in enabling them to engage successfully with their studies in the early part of their degree programs, leading to better performance and end-of-course outcomes within their discipline curriculum. In using the word 'client', therefore, it is important that we retain the concept of students as co-producers of their own learning and that we offer programs through which they may take up the co-productive role as competent learners and writers. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that in a global educational environment, students do, as Harris (1996) points out, make consumer choices about programs and their delivery. Therefore, just as we need to retain something of the traditional concept of 'student' when we say 'client', we also need to include the notion of 'client' when we say 'student'.

The art of the possible

The present misalignment between the actual literacy needs of students and traditional views that instruction in the mechanics of writing is a pre-university function clearly needs to be addressed. A pragmatic way of addressing it is to develop a 'stand-alone' writing mechanics program that is not marginalised as 'remedial' but recognised and legitimated by the university as an accredited adjunct to discipline courses. In developing such a program, it is neither logistically feasible nor educationally desirable to look to either traditional comprehensive grammar courses or remedial programs for a model, because the program will not only need to deliver positive learning outcomes but also to recognise democratisation (the program must be pitched at a level accessible and attractive to all students and in tune with their needs and anxieties), professionalisation (it must be relevant to professional as well as academic writing situations), and corporatisation (it must be global, innovative, and accountable).

Writing mechanics and democratisation

In factoring democratisation into a model for a writing mechanics program, three aspects must be considered: diversity, equity, and empowerment. Meeting the literacy needs of the wide diversity of non-traditional students poses a major challenge that requires careful analysis of students' presage factors and of their needs (Dawson, 2001a). In the present demographic there is a wide range of competence levels and prior literacy learning experiences, and it is important to recognise that although writing competence at the level of the sentence is the desired outcome from the program, each student will experience the learning journey towards that outcome differently; each will bring with her or him a diversity both of strengths and weaknesses. Mature age students will usually have experience of writing in the workplace but not academic writing; international students may be able to write at a sophisticated level in their first language but not in English; students from indigenous and lower socio-economic backgrounds may have significant gaps in their writing competence but have effective oral and interpersonal communication. An effective writing mechanics program engages with students' existing communicative strengths.

In making the program equitable, we need to ensure that it is voluntary, free of cost to students, and offered at a range of times convenient to most students. It should be promoted in a way that does not deter less confident students but, rather, emphasises 'student friendliness'. To ensure equity of access, the program should be offered in both face-to-face and on-line modes (on-line learners may need additional support through e-mail correspondence). In recognition of students' heavy workload in their own discipline (as well as their need to negotiate transition to university study), the program must be kept as short as possible – perhaps five or six two-hour sessions.

Clearly, comprehensive and detailed coverage of English grammar rules and conventions is not possible in such a short time, nor indeed would this be appropriate for the learners targeted by the program. The challenge for the program designer is to intelligently analyse students' most pressing needs, to develop materials in response to those needs, and to prioritise, simplify, and illustrate key points. Developing students' understanding of the structural principles of sentences and how these principles govern punctuation, grammar, and syntax is perhaps the most effective way of meeting the challenge; for instruction on the finer points of grammar, a subsequent advanced program might be offered or students could be given a list of recommended texts they can refer to when they complete the program. Apart from revision (preferably accompanied by optional revision exercises), there should be no compulsory out-of-class assessment or preparation tasks.

Because many of the students targeted by the program belong to groups who have not traditionally participated in higher education, it is vitally important that the program does not undermine these students' self-esteem but is, importantly an empowering experience. It is crucial to avoid any suggestion that the program is in response to students' deficiencies. Rather, the content of the program should be presented as if students were learning the mechanics of writing for the first time (for many students it will in fact be the first time the mechanics of writing have been explained to them in a structured systematic way). Interviews with 'at-risk' non-traditional students (Dawson et al, 2003) reveal the prevalence of negative experiences of prior literacy learning and, especially among migrant and indigenous students, continuing feelings of humiliation and embarrassment. In delivering a writing mechanics program that includes these students, the facilitator must be careful to avoid, on the one hand, overestimating students' level of literacy knowledge and, on the other hand, appearing to patronise them. In other words, facilitators of the program must be sensitive to students' anxieties and fear of losing 'face'; they must engage empathically with students, showing both understanding and respect.

Students must be given the opportunity to practise their writing mechanics skills through in-class 'learning by doing' exercises (writing, correcting, and improving sentences). These exercises need to be carefully designed not only to challenge students but also to demonstrate the ways in which sentence structure is related to such aspects of communication as reader psychology and rhetorical power. Students should be allowed to work independently if they wish, but they could be encouraged to confer with their colleagues in completing the exercises. Self-marking is the appropriate mode of assessment of these exercises and students should not be required to disclose their scores. Through this measure, a 'safe' classroom climate is established, reassuring students that they will not be humiliated or psychologically threatened in any way. At the same time, it puts responsibility for learning back on students, who must identify their own areas of weakness, and may choose to follow up in-class exercises with supplementary, take-home revision exercises.

Writing mechanics and professionalisation

Turning to professionalisation, it is important to see the writing mechanics program from the students' point of view. Just as many lecturers in professional disciplines tend to distance themselves from responsibility for their students' basic writing skills, so students in these disciplines tend to resist addressing their own writing skills needs (Dawson et al, 2003). To motivate these students, it is not enough to emphasise employers' preference for graduates with effective writing skills, because valuing the acquisition of a skill is only half of motivation; the other half comes from knowing that the skill can be successfully acquired with a reasonable amount of effort (Entwhistle, 1998). The challenge for the facilitator of the writing mechanics program is initially to convince students that if they invest ten to twelve hours in the program, they will acquire a 'toolbox' of skills that they will be able to use with confidence. It is not guaranteed that they will be able to write easily, eloquently, or stylishly, but it can be promised that if they apply themselves conscientiously to the ten to twelve hours of classes, they will be able to write more competent sentences that will enhance their capacity to communicate with readers in both academic and professional contexts. Each two-hour session needs to have a well-defined objective that is clearly articulated to students and, at the end of the session, students should be given an opportunity to give feedback on whether they believe the session's objective has been accomplished.

To fulfil students' expectations of success, the same strategies that address issues associated with democratisation come into play: developing logically integrated, dynamic, pared-down content, delivered in an engaging, responsive way. It is important to keep in mind that the interest most students will have in the program is not intrinsic but instrumental (Dawson, 2001c); they want to achieve better grades for written assignments in their own discipline. Consequently, grammatical terminology should be kept to a minimum, and it should be impressed upon students that effective writing is less about memorising grammatical rules *per se* than it is about understanding how the rules can be used to construct sentences that are clear, concise, and 'reader-friendly'. To achieve this, the program must ensure that students develop a deep understanding of the principles of structure; once they have this, they begin to grasp the logic of punctuation, grammar, and syntax, and thus gain mastery over the writing process.

It has to be acknowledged that most students in professional disciplines are at some level resistant to the idea of 'grammar lessons' because they do not associate writing mechanics with performance in their own discipline. Introducing short reorientation activities, especially those that exploit students' knowledge of their own professional discipline, is a particularly useful strategy for overcoming student resistance. For instance, students might be asked to draw structures that are important in their own disciplines and explain the structure to their colleagues (these structures might be

conceptual frameworks, organisational systems, physical objects, and so on). As well as reorienting students, such an activity gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their specialised knowledge to establish that, although they may be experiencing some difficulties in academic writing, they are, in fact, successful learners in their own field. It also demonstrates to students the structural nature of cognition and, as such, is an effective first step in helping them perceive grammatical sentences in terms of systematic structures rather than sets of arbitrary rules. Throughout the program similar five-minute activities that require students to think laterally about non-linguistic structures and systems not only keep them engaged but also encourage deep rather than surface learning of the structural principles of writing dynamics.

Writing mechanics and corporatisation

When we engage with corporatisation in the university environment, we need to be aware of it as a discourse informed by economic values, which will sometimes be in contention with the social, symbolic, and cultural values that have traditionally informed an academic discourse. We must acknowledge that the shift to corporatisation has the potential to compromise academic integrity and that the prioritisation of economic values over social, symbolic, and cultural values necessarily creates moral hazards (Baiman, 1982). Having acknowledged this, however, there is much we can find within corporate discourse that is compatible with academic discourse and much that may be appropriated and incorporated within academia to great benefit. Moreover, in the areas where the corporate contradicts or disrupts the academic, a corporate perspective may encourage critical reappraisal of many academic assumptions and practices, highlighting accountability and duty-of-care shortfalls.

In developing a model for a writing mechanics program, the corporate objectives of creating a successful client - and outcomes-oriented program are partially met by the strategies discussed under the headings 'democratisation' and 'professionalisation'. The program also needs flexibility of articulation; that is, it should be complete in itself but able to be linked to advanced writing mechanics programs, other writing and communication programs, discipline courses, and other units of study, as well as being offered to clients outside the university.

These strategies do not in themselves assure quality; they must be accompanied by rigorous client evaluation during and at the conclusion of the program, and a follow-up evaluation (by students and/or lecturers in their disciplines) six months later to monitor improvements in students' mastery of writing mechanics. Student evaluation instruments should have open-ended sections that solicit advice on how the program might better meet learners' needs, and this advice should be judiciously taken up, leading to continuous improvement. Meeting high accountability and quality

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assurance standards will ensure that the writing mechanics program modelled in this paper delivers an educational product that is excellent in terms of relevance to the user, value for time investment, and educational best practice (Winch, 1996).

Conclusion

In a continuously changing higher education environment, elements of democratisation, professionalisation, and corporatisation are constantly shifting, conflicting, and coming into temporary alignment. A consequence of the conflict between democratisation and professionalisation has been that although adequate standards of written literacy remain a prerequisite for academic success, enrolled students' proficiency in the mechanics of writing can no longer be taken for granted. The professional disciplines show little sign of responding adequately to this situation of covert conditionality, but the university does have a corporate responsibility to resolve the situation. This paper has offered an alternative solution and suggested the value of short extracurricular programs that mediate misalignments between elements of change. In doing so, it has made an implicit case for such programs to be legitimated, accredited, and given mainstream status. The result of such a response to change will be to the benefit of students, academics, and universities now and in the future.

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