Cyber-Self-Reflection: Developing learner autonomy in online programs

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Abstract: This paper reports on a study of the perceptions of online graduate students regarding issues related to the relationship between learner autonomy and online learning. The study also investigates the degree to which the five categories of autonomy proposed by Finch (2001) can be effectively used to analyze this type of data. Based on participant input, key factors which may support the development of learner autonomy in online environments are also identified.
Key words: Autonomy, online learning, applied linguistics, teacher training

1. Introduction: What is learner autonomy?
"The general agreement on the value of autonomy in education has often hidden the fact that there is little consensus as to its definition" (Finch, 2001: 2).

The definition of 'learner autonomy' is still a matter of debate. According to Murray (2004), the term 'learner autonomy' dates back to a report that Henri Holec wrote for the Council of Europe in the 1970s, in which he defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (cited in Murray, 2004: 3). According to this definition, taking charge of one's learning would involve taking responsibility for all the decisions related to the learning process. From this perspective, learners and teachers both play specific roles in learner autonomy. For example, learners are actively involved in determining the objectives or goals, selecting the content, deciding on the methods and techniques they will use, monitoring the process, and evaluating what has been learned; whereas, teachers would create the 'learning structure' and provide 'guidance and support' (Murray, 2004).

Since Holec, however, the term 'learner autonomy' has been defined in a variety of ways [see review in Finch, 2001]. This diversity is reflected in Cotterall's (1995) 'reasons for advocating learner autonomy'. Cotterall (1995) identifies three types of reasons for advocating learner autonomy: philosophical, pedagogical and practical reasons. Finch (2001) further operationalizes this distinctions, proposing that autonomy-related terms can be linked to broader educational and socio-political derivations (adapted from Benson & Voller, 1997:1 - cited in Finch, 2001: 3). Finch (2001) classifies the various interpretations of learner autonomy into five categories, based on:

1. *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. the exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning;
5. the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

It is hypothesized that the responses of online graduate students, reflecting on the issue of learner autonomy in online learning, will be analyzable within these categories. In this paper, we will investigate the applicability of Finch's (2001) categories to the

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analysis of online learners' perceptions of the role of learner autonomy, and explore the types of issues identified by participants.

2. Online learning and autonomy

Learner autonomy has often been discussed in relation to online learning. As much of the early stages of online learning (or ICT) arose within the context of distance education, this relationship is perhaps not difficult to understand. There has also been significant work within this area on the field of second or foreign language education. For example, Warschauer (2002: 2) argues that second language (or L2) students who are encouraged to use ICT processes which involve autonomous and collaborative learning are actually empowered 'to continue their own learning and communicative innovation outside the classroom'. However, the question of whether 'online learning' inherently promotes autonomy, or whether online students are inherently capable of being autonomous learners often remains unexplored (as does the issue of the 'inherent' value of learner autonomy). Additionally, the issue of what the term 'online learning' actually means in any particular context is also rarely addressed (Woodman, 2004).

White (2004) suggests that the use of ICT therefore requires new skills, motivation, and commitment, identifying the key contribution of the teacher as the construction of the 'learner-context interface'. She comments:

> Learners who enter a distance…course also identify many new opportunities…the flexibility of access in terms of time and place has long been acknowledged…there is more freedom from input and interactions which are not immediately relevant to the individual learning needs...there is also the possibility of developing skills in self-direction and management of learning experiences (White, 2004: 2).

In terms of this 'learner-context interface', White lists key teaching strategies as relating to:

1. Forum management
2. Encouraging expression of thoughts
3. Creating and managing learning environment
4. Students norm to each other in terms of online genre
5. Independent learning in the distance context is concerned with developing the ability to engage with, interact with and participate in particular learning environments, which are not always directly mediated by the teacher. (White, 2004: 1).

Thus, the role of the types of learning tasks designed in online learning environments appears to be critical to the development of learner autonomy. According to Cotterall (2004: 5), there are a number of key strategies for engaging learners to use more autonomous learning strategies, including:

1. Align course goals with 'real world goals'
2. Promote personal goals and
3. Encouraging reflection.

Research by Woodman and Kourtis-Kazoullis (2006) also provides support for this perspective. Woodman and Kourtis-Kazoullis (2006) found that online learning appears to help develop learners' 'depth of learning' through: (a) cyber-self-reflection, (b)

applied self-directed learning, and (c) collaborative learning. Cyber-self-reflection involves going beyond simple self-reflection to application of new knowledge (Woodman & Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2006). Synchronous options foster spontaneity while asynchronous options allow students time to think, research and respond. Applied self-directed learning involves learning to access and assess internet-based resources through web searches, accessing e-journal articles, etc. while collaborative learning involves learning via collaboration with online classmates and others via electronic forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication.

2.1 Task type and the development of autonomy

Cyber-reflection appears to be an effective means for students to develop critical literacy through self-reflection (Woodman & Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2006). Students not only reflect on the material that they read, but are able to reflect on issues brought up by other students and instructor in the online course. They are able to express their own opinions and viewpoints on issues and this can lead to a deeper awareness of issues. Students tie in course material to social realities relevant to their experiences and collaborative critical inquiry is the means in which *curriculum* content is related to the students' individual and collective experiences. Broader social issues, relevant to students' lives, are analyzed and students are encouraged to discuss ways in which social realities might be changed through social action and democratic participation (Cummins and Sayers, 1995).

Finally, Incremental Self Reflection, which involves scaffolding or context based learning (Cummins, 1996), is also proposed as a method for development of autonomy. For example:

(1)   Opinion: What do you think?
(2)   Analysis: How could (what you think) influence what you do/think?
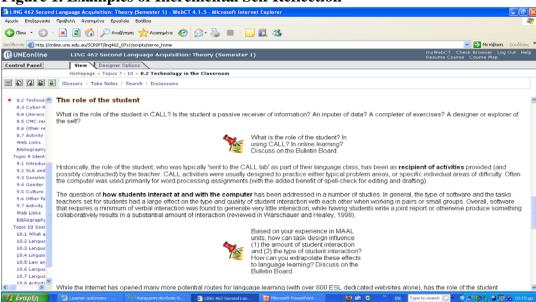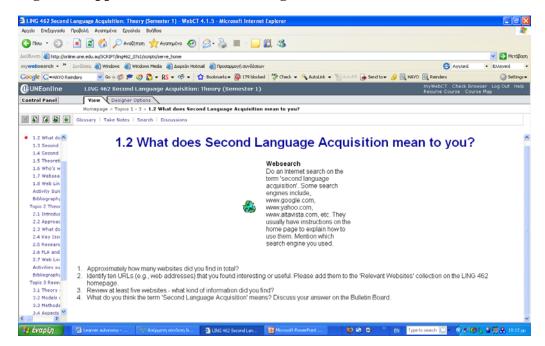(3)   Synthesis: Use this knowledge to problem-solve

Figure 1. Examples of Incremental Self Reflection

Thus, Incremental Self-Reflection may help develop autonomy by encouraging learner engagement through lowering anxiety by using initially easy items to increasing more complex self-reflection questions to develop student confidence (e.g., incrementally).

2.2 Applied Self-Directed Learning

Another method (or task-type) in online learning that may help develop learner autonomy is applied self-directed learning which may involve learning to access and assess internet-based resources via web searches, accessing e-journals, etc. This self-directed learning allows students to proactively investigate topics and issues of interest to them, and then share their findings with their colleagues and classmates (Cotterall, 2004; White, 2004).

Figure 2. Applied self-directed learning exercises

For example, learners may do web searches which develop awareness of outside resources, review and critically analyze sites and share their new resources**.**

3. The Study

This study was part of a larger inter-institutional e-twinning research project between graduate courses at two regional universities - one in Australia and one in Greece. The participants were all students in the Australian online program, who had agreed to take part in the Greek Tele-collaboration Project. Participants were to discuss nominated topics within the joint class forum with their Greek counterparts, and other participants from the Australian program.

3.1 Methodology
3.1.1 Participants
Participants in this study included eight (8) graduate students in the Australian online program: seven (7) female students and one (1) male student. Six of the participants were Australian, one was Canadian and another was American. At the time of the study, three were living in Australia, two were living in Japan, two were living in Canada, and one was living in the UK.

3.1.2 Methodology
Data was collected from graduate student posting within their discussions with Greek

telecollaboration partners, within an online course on second language acquisition. Students were asked to respond to specific questions about learner autonomy and online learning via the online discussion forums (WebCT). The instructions on the discussion forum were as follows:

> Please answer this DISCUSSION question to the best of your knowledge: In your opinion:
> 1. What is 'learner autonomy'?
> 2. Why would you want learners to become autonomous?
> 3. In your opinion, does online learning help develop learner autonomy? Why or why not?
> 4. If you are a teacher, how could you use online tasks to develop learner autonomy?

Forty-eight (48) postings were identified as relating to the four discussion questions, and therefore analyzed based on the categories in Finch (2001).

> 1. *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
> 2. a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
> 3. an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
> 4. the exercise of *learners' responsibility* for their own learning;
> 5. the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning

The results will be discussed in terms of the four discussion questions posed, and referenced to Finch's (2001) Categories #1-5.

3.2 Results and Discussion
Analysis of the postings also found support for the usefulness of Finch's (2001) categories.

Discussion Questions 1 and 2: What is 'learner autonomy'? Why would you want learners to become autonomous?

We will consider *Discussion Questions 1 and 2* together in this Section as many participants tended to discuss them within the same postings. The majority of responses to Question 1 (*What is learner autonomy*) can be categorized within Finch's (2001) Categories #2 and 3. In other words, the 'main' definitions of learner autonomy offered by the participants can refer to issues of *"Skills"* (e.g., Category #2) and *"Capacity"* (e.g., Category #3). For example, CH comments:

> CH: In my very humble opinion, learner autonomy *is the ability* [Skill] *(and desire)* [Capacity] *of a student to influence their own learning* [our emphasis]

And CR provides the following example to underline these aspects:

> CR: In the past, we admired those successful 'self made' people who did not have the benefits of a formal education. In our society today however, education has become a commodity for which the user pays a large sum of money in order to obtain a magical passport to future success. It sometimes

seems to me that as a society we are more concerned with educating our young to conform to the prevailing cultural norms than *fostering autonomous, creative learners who can think outside the square* [Capacity][our emphasis]. Like most of us, I have never had much experience of learners or educators who operate outside the school system until last year when I taught a young woman who had been home schooled to the age of fifteen. She came from a small farming community outside Canberra and the parents cooperated to hire any educators they needed to teach subjects outside their area of expertise (including an L2). This student really stood out in her peer group because *of her maturity* [Capacity] *and her skills* [Skills] *as an autonomous learner* [our emphasis]. Perhaps in that case, online learning is a more realistic and accessible means of developing learner autonomy and free us from the 'shackles of institutional education'.

In addition, RS refers to the role of *Situation* (e.g., Category #1), as well as *Skills* and *Capacity* (e.g., Categories #2 and 3) in discussing the role of motivation in the development of autonomy, and the role of the teacher in creating environments in which, she suggests, autonomy can thrive. RS states:

RS: For me, *explicitly teaching learning strategies* [Skills]*, and fostering an environment where students have the opportunity to learn from each other* [Situation] *paves the way towards learner autonomy* [our emphasis]. These are *extrinsic factors I can mould somewhat* [our emphasis]. However, I totally agree with your last posting that the *intrinsic factor of student motivation* [Capacity]*, where students want to learn and improve as best they can and want to keep pushing themselves is what fundamentally drives students towards autonomous learning* [our emphasis]. Like you, I think that we certainly *can't create that drive* [Capacity] in students- that has to come from them- *but we certainly can try to inspire students to want to learn more through, as you have suggested, offering choices and giving students the opportunity to share experiences* [Situation]*, which, once again, brings us back to how extrinsic factors can influence intrinsic ones* [our emphasis].

Therefore, it appears that online graduate students have a variable definition of autonomy, which incorporates the sometimes contradictory components of *Situation, Skills* and *Capacity*, reflecting the same diversity found in the research literature (Finch, 2001).

CH is one of the few participants who specifically answers Question #2, explaining WHY one might want to help learners become autonomous. She answers primarily in terms of *Capacity* and *Skill* (e.g., Finch's Categories #2 and 3):

CH: Ok. I like learner autonomy. *I think that it helps the learner to learn more* [Capacity]*, and to learn more quickly* [Skills] [our emphasis].

However, the importance of *Skill* development is revealed as she goes on to say:

CH: I think there are quite a few teachers out there who work very hard to try to get *students to act in a more autonomous way* [Skills] [our emphasis]

within their classrooms. BUT - most students are products of education systems which if anything, destroy autonomy and free/critical thinking… The *systems trains a lot of students NOT to be autonomous* [Skills] [our emphasis] in their learning ... and then the occasional teacher who has a different ideas has an uphill battles ('Miss, why do you always have to try to make us think?'). I think a lot of more recent graduates are more flexible in their ideas, but at the same time, despite the best of intentions, if you're teaching in the Australian Education system (or the British one, where I am at the moment), you've only got so much time in the day, and designing and marking assessment tasks that cater for the autonomous learning needs of the 150 students ... well... *maybe educators who are outside the school system are in a better position to foster learner autonomy* [Skills] [our emphasis].

The implicit, usually unexamined, assumption of the benefit of autonomy which seems to permeate the literature (Finch, 2001) is further revealed in the discussion which developed on the forum regarding a possible cultural dimension (or the cultural relativity) of the value of learner autonomy. For example, NG comments:

NG: I do think this (autonomy) *has to be taught* [Skill]. It is not innate. *And I think it is culture specific* [our emphasis].

Thus, NG appears to be both challenging any assumption of innateness, and adding the specification that autonomy may be culture-specific, and therefore possibly not 'universally' valued. LE agrees, eloquently examining key aspects of this assumption:

LE: Since the advent of cognitive approaches which have placed the learner in the centre of models of learning as an active "meaning-maker" and problem solver, *education scholars view learner autonomy as an essential ingredient of successful learning* [our emphasis]. However, sometimes *this widespread belief among EFL and ESL teachers seems to put them on a collision course with students from other cultural backgrounds who may have quite different assumptions and expectations of teacher and student roles and responsibilities* [our emphasis]. This is an issue that's also been identified by researchers into language learner strategies (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 161). *This raises fundamental questions about where the "universal" validity of our models of learning ends and ethnocentric bias begins* [our emphasis]. And I don't think the answers are simple.

Within LE's comments, there is an important challenge to the theorists and classroom teachers who aspire to developing learner autonomy: what is the goal for developing learner autonomy within a particular situation (and what is meant by "autonomy").

This problem of the operationalization of 'autonomy' is further illustrated by comments by CC and NG, who, while agreeing with the idea of cultural dimensions to autonomy (or the perception thereof), appear to implicitly operationalize autonomy as 'having one's own opinion'. For example, NG states:

NG: *North Americans…are taught to express their opinions and 'think outside of the box', but students from other cultures are taught just the*

opposite [our emphasis]. I once had a student in a remedial ESL writing class who turned in a paragraph that was pretty much a word-for-word copy of the sample paragraph I had presented in class to teach the paragraph structure. *He thought that that's what he was supposed to do - COPY my example* [our emphasis].

Similarly CC, while commenting on fostering learner autonomy in Malaysia, suggests by her examples that she is also conflating to 'having an opinion' or 'challenging authority', with 'developing autonomy':

CC: *I definitely think there is a cultural aspect to fostering learner autonomy* [our emphasis]. My experience in Malaysia was that *students were not encouraged to be autonomous, nor to have an opinion, in their previous studies* [our emphasis]. I would intentionally make outrageous statements to try to play devil's advocate and *try to get them to disagree with me*. I could have said, "Snow is black." They would just copy what I said, memorise it and expect the test question to be, "What colour is snow?" It took a long tine *(sic)* and a lot of effort on my part to get some (never all) of them to *take some ownership in the process, challenge me, and become somewhat self-directed* [our emphasis]. They found it tough that *I expected them to apply and, worse yet, evaluate and have an opinion on what we did, especially to put forth an opinion that disagreed with mine* [our emphasis].

Thus, although the majority of participants appear to consider *Situation*, *Skills* and *Capacity* key issues in the definition of learner autonomy, there remains considerable diversity in response. In addition, the issue of cultural relativity in terms of the value of learner autonomy is also identified as an issue which needs further consideration.

Discussion Question #3: In your opinion, does online learning help develop learner autonomy? Why or why not?

Responses to *Discussion Question #3* also show a diversity of opinion, with all five of Finch's (2001) categories identified. For example, CH and NG both refer to the role of the *Situation* (Category #1), as well as *Skills* (Category #2), *Learners Responsibility* (Category #4), and *Right of Self-determination* (Category #5):

CH: Online learning *can help a student to develop autonomy, in cases where they are allowed to self-select tasks, and areas of interests* [Self-determination] [our emphasis]. On the other hand, *if the online learning environment is over-prescribed, it may decrease autonomy* [our emphasis]*,* as the student remains reliant on the lecturer\teacher.

NG*: I don't think a student can be successful in an online environment without autonomy* [our emphasis]. There is noone standing at the front of your living room watching what you are doing on the computer and then assessing your work! *So student motivation* [Capacity]*, discipline* [Responsibility]*, and learning strategies* [Skills] *have everything to do with success here - all characteristics of an autonomous student* [our emphasis]. And programs *encourage autonomy by their structure*

[Situation] [our emphasis].

Thus, in terms of the discussion of whether "*learning online makes a more autonomous learner (or vice versa)?*" in general, the participants appear to identify an ongoing interaction between the influence of Category #3 (e.g., *Capacity*) and Category #1 (e.g., *Situation*), or White's 'learner-context interface' (White, 2004).

By contrast, when reflecting on their own experiences as learners (i.e., rather than as teachers reflecting on their students), CC, CR and NG all suggest that they were already autonomous learners when they began their online studies. For example, CH comments:

> CC: *I was already a pretty autonomous learner* [Capacity]*, but found the in-class discussion a source of extrinsic stimulation/motivation* [Situation] [our emphasis]. As an online learner, I *have had to develop more self-discipline* [Capacity] [our emphasis] to do the readings because the class discussion on the bulletin board is not quite the same. I still get a similar sense of satisfaction when I have some interaction, commenting on someone else's post or getting feedback from someone else.

And CR agrees:

> CR: *Personally, I think all of us completing the* [degree] *are autonomous learners otherwise we would never have been motivated* [Capacity] *to complete linguistic studies at this level* [our emphasis]. *Certainly the online technology makes it easier* [Situation]*, otherwise we would have to spend long hours in the University Library to access the research necessary to complete our studies. Therefore* ICT has made it possible for all students to become autonomous learners and for teachers to be 'guides, facilitators and anticipators' [our emphasis].

NG also agrees, although she qualifies that she feels she has developed from an autonomous learner, into an 'autonomous researcher':

> NG: *I don't think that online learning has "made me a more autonomous learner", either. I must have been that way to start* [Capacity]*, otherwise I would not succeed in this type of learning environment* [Situation] [our emphasis]. Sometimes when I talk about the [degree] to other people, they say things like, "I could never do that because I'd get too distracted" or something similar, so *other people need to have a physical classroom* [Situation] to go to, visual stimulation of the lesson and other students, and face to face interaction. While I certainly enjoy all that, *I had to already have the discipline (autonomy)* [Capacity] *to work in an entirely online environment to even consider this program* [Situation] [our emphasis]. On the other hand, the [degree] has *helped me to become better at finding resources on my own* [Skills], since nothing is "handed out" in class. I have also become pretty good at *Internet searches and using references from readings and other students* [Skills] to find more resources. So in that sense, *I have become a more autonomous 'researcher'* [our emphasis].

And RB nicely summarizes the issues of structure and individual differences, in noting:

RB: we in the [degree] (and also, to some extent because we are in a post-graduate environment) *are already autonomous learners by nature of our ability* [Capacity] *to participate in the course* [our emphasis]. Many of the undergraduate students I meet in my work comment that they would find it very difficult to 'stay on track' in an external course, and that attending classes and having a timetable keeps them motivated and moves them through their coursework. However, I often explain to them that *there are sturctures (sic) in place in the* [degree] - *such as the bulletin boards - to keep learners 'on track' as well* [Situation] [our emphasis]. For those of us that have studied online, for all the wealth of information on the internet, we are all aware of misinformation and distractions out there in cyberspace as well! So I guess *working independently online does not necessarily 'make' you an autonomous learner, but...ICT makes it 'possible'* [our emphasis].

It is also interesting that while CR suggests "ICT has made it possible for all students to become autonomous learners and for teachers to be 'guides, facilitators and anticipators'", RB is more qualified in her assessment, saying "working independently online does not necessarily 'make' you an autonomous learner, but…ICT makes it 'possible'".

Thus, while the participants generally agreed that there was a potential link between online learning and the development of autonomy, there does not appear to be any consensus on what the relationship is, or how autonomy is defined. All five of Finch's (2001) categories can be identified, with the influence of *Situation* (Category #1) and *Capacity* (Category #3) being most frequently identified, again supporting the recognition of an ongoing interaction between Capacity and Situation (e.g., 'learner-context interface').

Discussion Question #4: If you are a teacher, how could you use online tasks to develop learner autonomy?

Responses to *Discussion Question #4* reference most both Category #4 *Learner's responsibility* (Category #4) and *Right of learner to determine direction of their learning* (Category #5). The participants emphasize the importance of 'real tasks' and 'choice' being built into the online environment (e.g., Category #1 (*Situation*)), supporting the importance of the learner-context-interface and task-type (Cotterall, 2004; White, 2004; Woodman & Kourtis-Kazoullis, 2006). For example, CR suggests the need for 'real' tasks:

CR: To my mind this is the key to successfully developing autonomous L2 learners-the *online tasks must be 'real' and allow students to creatively use their language skills* [our emphasis], however limited they may be.

And CC emphasizes the importance of choice:

CC: The bottom line is that most motivation is intrinsic, but extrinsic factors can help that intrinsic motivation to be stimulated. *Encouraging autonomy in an online environment is being done by the structure of this course*. There are *choices offered in the list of readings* [our emphasis]. Anyone who wants to read more, can. *Choice in discussion questions also makes it easy for a student to participate more, reflect more, or do web*

searches [our emphasis]. Some units structure the bulletin board in a way that doesn't stimulate participation. It is just another place to post a short essay, not a place to actually interact with other students. *For me, activities are more motivating when questions are more allow sharing personal experiences, there are a lot of choices, and there is more interaction with other students* [our emphasis].

CH goes even further in underlining the importance of *Learner's responsibility* (Category #4) and *Right of learner to determine direction of their learning* (Category #5), stating:

> CH: If I was going to use on-line learning to develop autonomy, *I would ask the student to propose an area that they would like to focus on, then work with them to find the necessary online resources that would develop their skills in that area* [our emphasis].

Finally, a number of participants, including NG, specifically discuss the online program in which they are studying, identifying aspects of some courses (or units) which they feel relate to the development of autonomy:

> NG: the [graduate program] is an *excellent example of encouraging autonomy* because we *have each course's expectations but are allowed to choose topics to work on, find resources, contribute to discussions, monitor our own progress, all within structured guidelines* [our emphasis]. *Teachers* in such programs *encourage autonomy by giving feedback and suggestions for further thought much* [our emphasis] like this BB discussion thread.

Thus, for participants – graduate students who are also teachers - the role of choice and learner engagement appears to an important consideration in the development of autonomy in online programs.

Summary and conclusions

This study explored the use of Finch's (2001) Categories to analyze graduate student self-reflections on learner autonomy in online learning. It also identifies key factors in the creation of online learning environments which may support and promote learner autonomy. First, it was found that while Finch's (2001) categories captured many of the factors identified by participants, it does not appear to address the issue of cultural relativity in the understanding of learner autonomy. Second, key features of the online learner-context-interface (White, 2004) were identified as critical to the development of autonomy include features which emphasize (1) learner choice and (2) areas of learner interest. The identification of these features underlines the fact that 'ICT' is not seen to inherently develop autonomy, but rather the 'learner-context' needs to be carefully constructed and overseen. Finally, the results of this study underlined the diversity of implicit and explicit definitions which exist regarding the term 'learner autonomy'.

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