Experiential Learning *About* Intercultural Communication *Through* Intercultural Communication. Internationalising a Business Communication Curriculum

Joanna Elizabeth Crossman

University of South Australia-Australia

Abstract

This paper reports on a rich, qualitative research study that aimed to discover how undergraduate and culturally diverse students experienced a collaborative, international, online, experiential project to learn about intercultural communication. Student participants in the study endorsed experiential learning in culturally diverse groups *about* intercultural communication *through* intercultural communication. The data revealed how participants made sense of and responded to intercultural communication amongst team members by juxtaposing personal experience of working in the online international learning group, their own cultural heritage and the literature available to them. The author concludes that experiential learning is a powerful tool for learning *about* intercultural communication *through* intercultural communication in the context of online, international and culturally diverse teams working on business case studies. It is also recommended as an activity that serves the process of internationalising a business communication curriculum and some of the broad aims of global citizenship.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Business education; Business Communication; Experiential learning; Internationalisation; Global Citizenship

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The Context of the Research Study

This paper is based upon a small qualitative research study that explored the experience of a group of first year Australian university business students who voluntarily participated in an international experiential project to learn about intercultural communication. The project is described as 'experiential' in that it incorporated, amongst other things, learning that did not conform to traditional classroom approaches (Kolb 1984: 32) and involved students in doing, observing, thinking and reflecting (Mitchell and Poutiatine 2001) in relation to both personal experience and academic literature concerned with intercultural communication.

The project involved the collaboration of Australian business undergraduates from mixed cultural heritages as well as international students largely from Asia, and business communication students in the Netherlands. The students' task as culturally diverse team members was to respond to a case study that concerned a franchisor in Australia considering two expressions of interest from potential franchisees in the Netherlands and Hong Kong. Specifically, they were required as 'communication consultants' to advise the franchisor of any potential implications for intercultural communication between the organisation in Australia and Dutch and Chinese franchisees and suggest ways to facilitate effective communication between the franchisor and the franchisees. In this way, the cultural heritages of students from Asia, the Netherlands and Australia reflected the cultures identified in the case study. Not only did the design of the project in this regard fulfil Speece's (2002: 106) encouragement to create learning whereby Asian students can become a "wonderful resource for Western students to learn more about cross-cultural issues", it also acknowledged the role that *all* participants can play in assisting one another to untangle the complex influence of culture in interpersonal communication by drawing upon and sharing the perspectives of their own cultural heritage and experience.

Student participants from both the Australian university and the one in the Netherlands were provided with a wiki site where they could 'meet' and access guidelines for the project, receive advice about how members of the virtual groups might work together, post messages, pictures of themselves or share details of relevant research papers concerned with intercultural communication relevant to the case study. Gibson, Rimmington, and Landwehr-Brown (2008: 12) have defined the concept of Global Learning (GL) as a student centred practice of using technology to gain "global reach and global perspectives" necessary to develop intercultural communication competence by facilitating, "interactions between learners of different cultures" and it would seem that the design of this project is consistent with that definition. Global learning is thus a link to the purpose of this research paper, namely to reveal how student participants in Australia experienced the project *about* intercultural communication *through* intercultural communication from their own perspective. Learning *about* intercultural communication *through* intercultural communication is also consistent with both the broad aims of deepening experiential learning and the internationalising of the business curriculum in which this communication course sits and research participants were enrolled.

The theoretical approach to the literature and indeed the analysis of this study is best described as multi-disciplinary. In this regard, it responds to criticisms that current intercultural research can be limited in resisting a multi-disciplinary approach (Yamazaki & Kayes 2004: 363) to interpreting both the literature and the findings. Despite accusations of dilettantism from some sources, interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly adopted by academics, given the potential to generate new knowledge that cuts across disciplinary silos (Jacobs and Frickel 2009).

Underpinning Concepts

The underlying rationale: The need for graduates who are competent in intercultural communication

In essence, the concept of culture is concerned with the knowledge that humans use to interpret behaviour (Trahar 2010: 144) and as such it operates in a reciprocal and influential relationship with communication (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1996: 3). The pace of globalisation has intensified the importance of employees understanding how culture affects all manner of workplace communication and practices and as a consequence, the internationalisation of business education has now become well established (Yamazaki and Kayes 2004: 362). A number of sources have associated internationalisation with the developing notions surrounding global citizenship (see Bourn 2010: 21; Caruana 2010: 30; Shiel 2009) though the concept of internationalisation, like global citizenship has not yet been clearly defined (Bourn 2010: 27; Caruana 2010: 30). Problematically, there are indications in the literature that few managers (and by implication university graduates) are sufficiently well equipped for the task of communicating in culturally diverse workplaces (Parry & Proctor-Thompson 2003; Suutari 2002: 218-226) and since culture is known to influence effective problem solving, decision making and indeed organisational growth (Caccioppe 1998: 44; Rossen, Digh, Singer and Phillips 2000: 25; Tung and Thomas 2003: 116) the consequences of this apparent deficit could well prove costly.

It also seems likely that the rise of virtual teams in global organisations together with evidence of an increasing emphasis upon internationalisation via accreditation bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (Porcano, Shull and Farmer 2007) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) will motivate academics to continue to explore ways of preparing graduates. Indeed, Cooper (2009: 569) has remarked that the implementation of strategies designed to facilitate student interaction and enhance cultural understandings as nothing short of imperative**.** The process of internationalisation has presented university academics with a rich source of cultural capital that has the potential to deepen understandings about culture for both staff and students (Brown and Jones 2007:1-2). Nevertheless, learning about culture and communication doesn't occur simply by virtue of the fact that globalisation has led to culturally diverse classrooms. As Peacock and Harrison (2009: 507) point out, interaction between international and local students in the classroom experience is not always managed well even when course goals are specifically associated with cross-cultural learning. Nevertheless, the momentum to continually improve cultural expertise through the university curriculum continues and has now come to include related goals that fall within the values based paradigm of global citizenship. The concept of global citizenship incorporates both social responsibility and cultural

inclusivity and is attracting increasing interest across disciplines given that future managers will require an appreciation and understanding of it (Vadura 2007: 17).

Experiential learning

Essentially, experiential learning is underpinned by the maxim that "Experience of all kinds is central to learning" (Mentkowski and Associates 2000: 8). Experiential perspectives are largely rooted in the intellectual traditions of philosophy and psychology but are now applied in a variety of disciplines and contexts. The work of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1948/1997) and Kolb (1984) have constituted powerful sources to inform and define experiential enquiry. Such is the enthusiasm for experiential learning that it has been described as the "educational way of the future" (Mak, Barker, Logan and Millman 1999: 64) and teaching and learning strategies in major universities show little sign of retreating from this perspective. More specifically, the project described in this research paper reports on an undergraduate intercultural communication project and is consistent with the view that communication forms the basis of experiential forms of learning (Mentkowski and Associates 2000: 71).

Both experiential and global learning has been associated with reflection (Gibson, Rimmington and Landwehr-Brown 2008: 16; Yamazaki and Kayes 2004: 363), characterised as a critical process in sense making when individuals exploit their own experiences as a source of knowledge (Freire 1973: 100). The design of the project encouraged students to do just that in that the case study was about Dutch, Australian and Asian stakeholders reflecting the cultural heritage of the learners themselves. Capitalising as it did on personal cultural experience and meaning making that was brought to the learning as a resource, much like the academic literature on intercultural communication, the project design also involved an holistic approach that is a key element of experiential learning (Kolb 1984: 31; Rogers 1994: 35). Other literature has also encouraged the value of holistic approaches to learning about intercultural communication in experiential ways that draw upon both the affective and cognitive domains (Bennis 2003: 132-3; Mak, Barker, Logan and Millman 1999: 64).

Despite the fact that there exists broad agreement that the process of internationalisation must incorporate aspects of the student experience (Peacock and Harrison 2009: 487), few studies in business education appear to have adopted an experiential approach in developing intercultural communication that involves online collaborative learning. However, those that do tend to concur that powerful learning occurs from the perspective of both students and teachers. Examples include a small study using content analysis, conducted by Eblem, Mills and Britton (2004) involving US and New Zealand students, and Swift and Denton (2003: 41) emphasised the benefit of developing "real world skills" and student involvement not only in terms of the "rational transfer of information/theory" but also in terms of personal engagement. Harrison's (2001) paper based on work undertaken in Israel also expounded on the positive benefits of experiential approaches in learning about intercultural communication but concerned a social studies program rather than a business curriculum. In short, the literature appeared to be encouraging in terms of trialing an online, international project to learn about intercultural communication in culturally diverse groups.

Methodology

The research aim and theoretical perspectives

The aim of the study was to discover how university business students studying on an undergraduate communication course perceived an international, online experiential project as a means of learning about intercultural communication. To do this, grounded theory was adopted. Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss and an explanation of the method was published in their seminal text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in 1967. Derived from symbolic interactionism which purports that meaning is understood and negotiated via social interaction (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007: 1374), it is now arguably one of the most common research methods used by qualitative researchers (Morse 2008: 13). Grounded theory has been used extensively in intercultural contexts (Sheridan and Storch 2009) and its selection in the context presented here is therefore not unusual.

Grounded theory allows the researcher to access the "lived experiences, behaviours, emotions and feelings" of participants (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 10) and aims to discover a theory or explanatory framework by examining concepts and their properties grounded in the data (Starks and Brown Trinidad

2007: 1373). In short, grounded theory makes it possible for us to know "what is going on" or happening "in or around an event" (Morse 2008: 13-14).

A constructivist grounded theory approach, largely driven by Professor Kathy Charmaz of Sonoma State University, has been adopted. From this perspective, grounded theory involves the use of systematic, inductive somewhat flexible guidelines (rather than formulaic procedures for collecting and analysing data) in order to construct a theoretical framework that explains the data collected in some way (Charmaz 2003; Charmaz 2006: 9). Such an approach rejects the existence of an objective reality in favour of the view that the world is constructed via multiple individual realities influenced by particular contexts and this shift repositions the researcher as "the author of a reconstruction of experience and meaning" (Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006: 2). Constructivist grounded theory is therefore, "ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist" (Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006: 6).

The participants

Purposive sampling was selected as is common when using grounded theory because of the importance of recruiting participants who have experienced the explored phenomenon (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007: 1374). While students from the university in the Netherlands also participated in the project, the data discussed in this paper were gathered from students enrolled in the Australian university only. The hard copy data collected from students in the Netherlands was not sent to Australian researchers but analysed by a local European researcher. Thus, without access to raw data collected in the Netherlands, the study has been limited to some extent but the rich data collected from the Australian university participants was nevertheless considered valuable. A total of 27 students in Australia participated in the project, 11 of whom were international students (i.e., holding student visas in Australia) and came from countries such as Botswana, China, Korea, India, Malaysia and Singapore. The remainder were Australian students from varied cultural heritages. The ethical management of the research was approved by the appropriate university ethics committee. Participating students were also provided with ongoing information and support with regard to the research process, practical and academic aspects of the project, as well as technological features of the wiki and the group membership structure.

Data collection and analysis

Data collected from interviews, questionnaires and journals were analysed using the constant comparative method characteristically associated with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Open ended questionnaires were administered at the beginning, middle and end of the project by the research assistant in hard copy because in keeping with an interpretive tradition, they were less likely to be influenced by the researcher and to better reflect participant views (Foddy 1999; Nunan 1994). The primary objective of questionnaires 1 and 2 was to ascertain what participants expected to gain from their involvement in the project and their rationale for participating whereas questionnaire 3 explored their experiences and perspectives of the online intercultural learning project and in what ways, if any, the project influenced their understanding of intercultural communication.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant at the end of the project in order to provide participants a further opportunity to express their thoughts regarding the process, structure, interpersonal interaction and general experiences in the project. Participants were also encouraged to state any issues that were important to them but were not otherwise covered in the data collection process. Some of the questions posed were: *Please describe your experience of the project; What do you believe challenged communication in the groups and what worked well? Please indicate how relevant you believe the project has been in preparing you for intercultural communication in the workplace; Please suggest any ways in which the project might have been improved*. Finally, participants were also encouraged to keep personal reflective journals on the learning process and to submit these journal entries at the end of the project. However, few participants actually did so. Nevertheless, the journal entries that were submitted were analysed as rich sources of data.

Discussion of Findings

Data discussed in this section were collected and analysed from the interviews, questionnaires and reflective journals and are presented here as a single source given a high level of consistency in the findings. In summary, the data revealed that participants were enthusiastic about experiential learning as

a means of developing expertise in intercultural communication and perceived the project to be highly applicable to the workplace. The project and interaction amongst its members gave rise to reflection and theorising about intercultural communication and provided useful insights into the role of conceptualising identity, ways of working, stereotyping and responding to situations that were sometimes charged with cultural uncertainty and tension.

Experiential learning and its links with workplace contexts from the participants' perspective

Engaging with authentic and 'real-life' issues that arise in workplace contexts, and the development of a deepening awareness of alternative cultural perspectives is a feature of both 'global learning' (Bennis 2003: 108; Gibson, Rimmington and Landwehr-Brown 2008: 17) as well as experiential learning and indeed, the data were steeped in reflections about how the learning could relate to current and future employment.

Although participants were not asked about their employment status directly, the data contained a number of references indicating that many were currently working. A common motivation for participating in the study was an expectation that developing intercultural communication skills through the project would enhance employability in organisations with a "global culture". Indeed, research suggests that they could well be correct (Crossman and Clarke 2009). Working participants also acknowledged how the experiential nature of the project had helped them to appreciate the varied cultural perspectives of colleagues and to maintain those working relationships in terms of appreciating what was acceptable to other individuals and what was not.

The project was viewed as relevant by one employed participant who was required "to interact with [people] who come from different countries" in her workplace and wanted "to help them in the right way so that they [didn't] feel left out ….[or get] offended". Another part time hotel worker felt the project was "interesting" because it assisted her in understanding why a particular cultural group of people appeared to share similar "characteristics". In other words, the experiential project not only helped students to explore a case study collaboratively but also enabled them to bring new understandings to existing workplace issues with which some at least, had struggled. Such findings are consistent with a very recent UK study exploring interaction between local and international students suggesting that students valued the experience as one likely to prepare them for a culturally diverse workforce (Peacock and Harrison 2009: 502).

Navigating cultural and personal meanings

As indicated earlier, participants in both the Netherlands and in Australia collaborated in trying to solve a case study about intercultural communication drawing upon not only their knowledge of cultural theories but also their personal cultural experience. It was thus not lost on participants that just as the case study concerned stakeholders from Asia, Australia and the Netherlands, their own online teams were also composed of members whose heritages and experience were reflected in these broad cultural orientations. It is in this way that the project can be described as involving learning *about* intercultural communication *through* intercultural communication and indeed, in as much as the process involves the personal experience and cultural background of students it characterises, according to Bourn (2010: 23) global citizenship development in university programs.

The data were steeped in examples of participant reflection on what appeared to be occurring in the intercultural communication within their learning groups and how individuals tried to analyse interpersonal interaction by drawing on their knowledge of communication theory and academic literature. When intercultural communication within the learning groups proved problematic, individuals adopted identifiable and conciliatory strategies to manage tense moments and situations rather than more assertive or defensive responses. Conciliation, even tentativeness and care in relating to other students interculturally is not necessarily unusual. For example, a focus group study in the UK also suggested that participant students displayed quite high levels of anxiety about causing offense towards international students (Peacock and Harrison 2009: 495).

Conciliatory strategies included explaining, apologising, conceding and drawing on theoretical constructs to provide a rationale for behaviour. Explanations such as, "It was not what I meant" or "I just want to

know what to do" followed misunderstandings that were perceived as, "a bit difficult". An example of an apology and explanation in response to another cultural misunderstanding ran:

> I sent her e-mail, saying, "I am sorry I misunderstood your e-mail. Because we are from different culture, I am originally from Singapore. I am interested in learning about how people behave. I never have been to The Netherlands before". I explained, "I am sorry. I didn't mean it. What do you want for me to do?".

It may also be that the apology from the Asian student in this context is somehow connected to Gao's (1996) contention that in Confucian cultures communication is more likely to function in ways that preserve group harmony. It is, however, interesting to note that that the 'misunderstood' email was attributed to cultural differences rather than say, some aspect of the learning context or confusion about how the tasks should be approached and by whom. One possible explanation may be that since participants were very much aware that the project was focussed upon culture they were more likely to frame or attribute issues in this way.

The experiential nature of the project meant that students were encouraged to reflect on these incidences and to interrogate them as real life experiences that could be brought forth as a resource in exploring the intercultural communication issues. In this way individuals would need to ask themselves, "how do these experiences relate to what I have read and the case study?". A case in point was presented in the observation of some Asian participants who perceived that students from the Netherlands tended to approach problem solving and decision making in a linear, systematic, strategic and logical way. As one Singaporean participant commented, "I was challenged by them. They were telling me that 'in order to achieve this, you have to do this'". A participant from the People's Republic of China (PCR) too, remarked that northern European project members approached the case study, "step by step". These kinds of observations led to discussions about how they may fit with, for example, theories of high and low context cultures (Hall 1976) that had been presented in communication lectures.

The experiential nature of the project also meant that participants were constantly engaged in a process of comparing and contrasting their own values and beliefs with those of others in relation to the literature. As Leask (2010: 8) recently indicated in developing international perspectives, individuals are as likely to deepen their understandings of others as they are of themselves in terms of values, feelings and attitudes. Participant stories were undoubtedly linked to themes of racism, ethnocentrism and stereotyping that surfaced in the overarching consideration of asking, "Who am I?" in this experience and "Who are these others?". It was, as Mentkowski and Associates (2000: 71, 97) suggested, in relating experiential learning to identity development, that students associated the "exploration of their values with finding new ways of understanding who they were or might become". In many respects, participant testimonies were rooted in affirming, re-evaluating and questioning identity as they interacted with others. It was this questioning of cultural and personal identity that seemed to characterise the deep nature of the experiential learning.

Some cultural stereotyping, both negative and positive in nature, was embedded in the data. The term 'stereotyping' refers to mental pictures and statements about groups of individuals that are exaggerated and generalised in categorising them (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2001: 19). Peacock and Harrison (2009: 502) noted that in their own study it had been difficult to conclude that student participants had to any real extent challenged their own values or indeed become more effective in terms of intercultural communication. Examples of stereotyping in the data in this way, do give rise to these kinds of questions about learning outcomes and whether some students appeared to be embracing rather than critiquing stereotypes. Participants from the Netherlands, for example, were described as, "efficient", "goal focussed"(or "orientated"), "impersonal", "driven", "organised", "strong willed", "hard working" or "strict". The tendency to stereotype, based on the learning experience, was also evident in the following comment where an international student compared Australian with Dutch participant team members and it is the inference of what *isn't* said here that is of interest:

> Personally, I prefer to work with Australian students. They treat you very nicely. At the university level, everyone has a similar mentality. We accept we have a different face, colour. Everyone tried to help each other and tried to work as a team.

When one participant noted how she and others tended to be more "aware of [cultural] differences" rather than similarities, she may have been responding to the nature of some cross cultural literature. Noma (2009) suggests in her paper that it is the very nature of some cross cultural literature that gives rise to a focus on difference and ultimately, stereotyping. Despite the best efforts of academics not to oversimplify theories, the teaching of the cross cultural texts of Hofstede (1984), Hall (1976) and Trompenaars (1994) and others may have given rise to some participants developing somewhat stereotyped, bi-polarised conceptions of cultural values and behaviour but the study was not designed in ways that could establish evidence to support this notion. At worst, examples of stereotyping appeared trivial. For example, one participant pronounced that Asians were, "very polite, family-oriented, [people who] bow" in contrast to "Australian people [who] want to look good and wealthy", and indicated that this new "knowledge" helped her "to understand" cultural influences on communication.

The reoccurring concepts and terminology of politeness and rudeness in the data are reflections of cultural values and beliefs and are not uncommon in the literature and have been noted in connection with stereotyping elsewhere (see Peacock and Harrison 2009: 491). On occasion, stereotyping might be tempered by comments such as, "of course, we can't generalise" but the emphasis, focus and tone had indicated that stereotypical assumptions were in fact, being affirmed. The data appeared to suggest that participant *espoused* values were regularly "rubbing up" against *enacted* values (Argyris and Schon 1978) consistent with the finding of Peacock and Harrison (2009: 495) who noted that despite a conscious desire to avoid stereotyping students nevertheless found themselves doing so.

Some stereotyping was also evident where tensions and conflicts seemed to exist and where personal cultural identity and values from the participant's perspective appeared to be under threat. In reflecting upon good manners in the context of intercultural communication, the use of 'we' and 'our' in the discourse of one participant underscores her own cultural identity and simultaneously distinguishes it from other cultural values, in the constant process of considering cultural difference and sameness:

> In Asian culture we have to be polite to one another. We don't get used to Western culture. Asian students have to learn about this. However, I strongly recommend Asian students should keep our traditional culture in being polite.

Thus, reflection, as an inherent aspect of experiential learning, played a powerful part in the project involving the juxtapositioning of the immediate and personal experience of intercultural communication with its objectification in trying to understand what was happening, as both insider and outsider, drawing upon the theory available. This process of meaning making through objectification was sometimes characterised by 'self-talk', illustrated as follows and bolded for easy identification:

> You need to be same or similar with Australian people. When I went to the high school, I tried to learn more about different things. Although they (Australian students) are rude, **they didn't mean that**. [I said to myself] **"Don't be sensitive".** Initially, I thought, **"they don't like Asian"** [or later] **"it is just a remark, let it go".** They tend to think that Asian students can't speak English. They [made] negative remarks [and I would think] **"just walk away. Otherwise you will be very angry".**

There is also a shifting within data from the generalisation, *from an Asian cultural perspective* which in the second sentence shifts to, *I feel...* Such shifting between objective and subjective approaches to the experience of intercultural communication is also indicative of experiential learning in that it involves holistic perspectives. The tendency to move between the self, as evidenced by self talk and an objectified voice would seem to be highly relevant to the observation of Beard and Wilson (2006: 2) in defining experiential learning as, "the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environments".

The juxtapositioning of feelings and personal, subjective responses with generalisation and objectification is also interesting in that the latter could be used as a means of protecting participants from painful intercultural interactions. For example, an international student from Singapore commented:

> She said, "If you don't help me, you can leave the group". I was taken aback a bit. She was very frank. My tutor told me today, "People in The Netherlands are more frank and straightforward. You should not be offended. That's just culture".

The inference here is that *taking things personally* as an emotional response to distasteful behaviour could be invalidated or at least diminished, if attributed to cultural and generalised characteristics as opposed to personal ones. The finding would appear to be contrary to the analysis described in the UK Peacock and Harrison (2009) study indicating that students appeared to experience more discomfort in noting difference with regard to groups of students since they associated the practice with racism whereas acknowledging individual differences were perceived as less politically incorrect.

Conclusion

The rich study presented here suggests that learning *about* intercultural communication *through* intercultural communication is a powerful activity that responds to the need for learning approaches that internationalise the business curriculum in universities and develop global citizenship. The capacity of the experiential project appeared to engage students in ways that seemed to be perceived as authentic and relevant to their lives and work. The study has also illuminated how participants try to make sense of intercultural communication by juxtaposing personal experience with theoretical literature. Whilst stereotyping did occur, the observation can be used in the design of future activities so that the potential for meta-cognitive approaches can be developed further through asking questions about what stereotyping is and how, why and under what circumstances individuals might engage in it, particularly when tension and conflict exists in intercultural communication and indeed, culturally diverse learning contexts.

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About the Author

Dr Joanna Crossman is a Senior lecturer in the School of Management at the University of South Australia. She has published a number of textbooks and journal papers about communication as well as related issues such as spirituality in secular workplaces and emotional labour. She is also editor of the Journal of International Education in Business. Joanna has worked as an academic and manager in Northern Europe, the Middle and Far East as well as in her homeland, Australia.

Author's Address

EM4-32
Elton Mayo Building
School of Management
Campus West
University of South Australia
North Terrace
Adelaide
South Australia 5000

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