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Feedback consistencies and inconsistencies: Eight mentors' observations on one preservice teacher's lesson

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Abstract

Mentors play a key role in developing preservice teachers for their chosen careers and providing feedback appears as a significant relational interaction between the mentor and mentee that assists in guiding the mentee's practices. Yet, what are mentors' perspectives on providing feedback to their mentees? In this case study, eight mentors viewed a professional video recorded science lesson facilitated by a final-year preservice teacher during practicum for the purposes of providing oral feedback in a simulated mentor-mentee discussion. Findings showed that mentors' feedback was variable in both their positive feedback and constructive criticisms and, in one case, the feedback was contrasting in nature. Implications are discussed, including preservice teachers receiving feedback from more than one mentor and universities researching the design of valid and reliable tools to guide mentors' oral feedback.

Introduction

Mentoring preservice teachers (mentees) is a responsibility for ensuring the quality of the profession for the future. Mentor teachers hold considerable power in the progression of their mentees, particularly as the mentees are invited into the mentors' classrooms and mentor teachers are in positions that can influence the direction of their mentees' careers (e.g., a preservice teacher can be failed by a mentor). The type of relationship the mentor has with the mentee and the ways in which the mentor guides the mentee's development become crucial to confidence building within the school context. Providing feedback to the mentee also becomes a linchpin for advancing practices, yet mentoring is variable and as such inequitable (Hudson,

2010). One mentee may receive quality attention from the mentor while another very little input. Indeed, mentor-mentee discourse appears as one of the key actions within the mentoring process, largely despite the variability in the quality of the discourse. This study analyses how eight mentors provide oral feedback on a final-year preservice teacher's video recorded science lesson, occurring within the school setting. The analysis is intended to present similarities, differences, and a rationalisation towards developing feedback tools and engaging a community of mentors in dialogue for improving the quality of mentoring process.

Literature review

It is clear that the mentor is crucial to preservice teacher's development within the school. Findings in various studies (Anderson, 2007; Blank & Sindelar, 1992) show that the mentor teacher has an impact on the mentee's practices, particularly as a result of discussing practices, modelling teaching and providing feedback. The mentor's personal attributes surrounds the mentoring process (Hudson, 2010), which can have an impact on the mentee's willingness to engage with the mentor. For instance, a mentor who listens attentively and instils positive attitudes and confidence in the mentee is more likely to engage the mentee more than a mentor who does not listen or instil attitudes and confidence. There are high stakes involved when mentors provide feedback to their preservice teachers, as consistent negative feedback can deplete the mentee's confidence levels and attitudes for engaging further in teaching (Hudson, 2005). The costs incurred for teachers leaving the profession are substantial (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010) and as such mentors, who are at the forefront of determining the preservice teacher's suitability to the profession, need to employ effective mentoring practices.

Teacher education is a multifaceted responsibility with universities and schools as key stakeholders. University academics provide information about theories and connections to practice with mentor teachers facilitating the preservice teacher's practical studies in school contexts. Despite the preparation of preservice teachers towards employment within a school system, the degree is undertaken through the university, thus "the university must take a greater role in assisting both partners to illuminate expectations and to foster productive communication" (Bradbury & Koballa, 2008, p. 2143). Part of university responsibility is undertaking research on how to advance preservice teacher education in both university and

school settings. At the school level, investigations are required on how schools support preservice teachers and how to further support mentor teachers in facilitating preservice teachers' learning. There are studies in China (Chi-kin Lee & Feng, 2007), Australia (Sempowicz & Hudson, 2011), UK (Rippon & Martin, 2003), and US (Smith, 2007) that show the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship is pivotal to the mentoring support a preservice teacher receives. Respectful relationships provide a basis for mentor-mentee feedback discussions with "the use of open sharing of valid information as the basis for conversation between the two" (Timperley, 2001, p. 112).

One relationship role is for the mentor to provide feedback and a key purpose of feedback is to stimulate the mentee's reflection on practice (e.g., Schön, 1987). There appears a need "for the mentor to be methodical in bringing about critical reflection on practice" (Harrison, Lawson, & Wortley, 2005, p. 288). One aim of mentoring should be to develop "critical and reflective thinking, self-direction, creativity, autonomy, and praxis" (Galbraith, 2003, p. 9). Reflective practice can be enhanced through astute mentor questioning and particularly probing questions that allow the mentee to deconstruct and reconstruct pedagogical practices (Harrison et al., 2005). Such investigations can help to collate effective practices and possible models on how mentors can be effective when providing feedback. Indeed, "mentors seem to need exposure to a variety of models of mentoring in their training as well as practice in the observation and analysis of interactions between mentor and mentee" (Harrison et al., 2005, p. 290). During feedback processes, the mentee also needs opportunities to describe and interpret the effects of teaching practices, for which the mentee may "stress some particular features and not others [thus] any personal interpretation of events may therefore hide prejudices and opinions that could be usefully questioned" (Harrison et al., 2005, p. 289). Ultimately, mentors must facilitate a shift from dependency through independency to interdependency that embraces professional autonomy with the recognition of a team approach. The mentor's feedback is an action to assist this transition.

Despite, the importance of written feedback as a formal record of teaching observations and the subsequent mentor-mentee dialogue (Maloney & Powell 1998), oral feedback can occur more frequently and fluently, and provides a response directly after a teaching episode (Bunton,

Stimpson, & Lopez-Real 2002; Sempowicz & Hudson, 2011). However, mentors report on their own mentoring as being variable in quality and quantity (Hudson, 2010). These differences appear in all aspects of the mentoring process, including the provision of feedback. Soares and Lock (2007) showed differences between mentors written lesson appraisals with one mentor focusing on classroom management while the other had a focus on pedagogical issues. This study was further supported by Lock, Soares, and Foster's (2009) study, who call for more than one mentor to evaluate a mentee as a way to negate the discrepancies that may occur between feedback (see also Kimball, 2002). Indeed, they suggest that one group of like-minded mentors (e.g., science teachers) may provide different advice through different lenses compared with English teachers. Tillema's (2009) study also demonstrates how varied purposes and perspectives on lesson presentations can translate into different written reports from mentors. This highlights the need to have a community of mentors to provide a "multifaceted appraisal of accomplishments" (p. 155).

A case study by Sempowicz and Hudson (2011) showed through eight audio-recorded episodes between a mentor and mentee that the mentor dominated the dialogue (mentor's talk time ranged from 4 to 14:11 minutes, mentee's talk time ranged from 1:10 to 4:20 minutes). Yet, individual interviews with the mentor and mentee indicated that the oral feedback assisted the preservice teacher to progress and both were satisfied with the level of mentoring input. It was clear that the oral feedback was based on the mentee's teaching practices from which both the mentor and mentee identify and rationalise the positive aspects of the lesson and areas for improvement (Berliner, 1987). In addition, problem solving was a dual process with both mentor and mentee seeking possible solutions.

Oral feedback needs to be an open discussion between mentor and mentee that translates the teaching experience into professional discourse, presenting open articulation of practices open to discussion rather than private thoughts that may leave situations unanswered (Edwards, 1995). Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism applies to the mentoring process, particularly during feedback where both mentor and mentee can share their understandings and construct meanings that have value to specific teaching contexts. Tillema (2009) outlines evaluation questions as a framework to scaffold feedback processes, namely: (1) what is the purpose, (2) what is being

evaluated [object], (3) what counts as evidence, (4) is the information useful to the mentee [focus], and (5) what measures are used [criteria]. Tillema has a sixth category on involvement of different mentors who can evaluate teaching.

The research question for this study was: What perspectives do mentors have on the same lesson for providing feedback to the mentee?

Data collection methods and analysis

This interpretive case study analysed audio-recorded feedback from eight mentors after observing a final-year preservice teachers' video-recorded lesson. There were no discussions previously on how or what to provide in the feedback; instead these mentors were asked to observe and provide feedback as they would normally undertake such roles. It was envisaged this would capture some of their usual practices. The eight audio recordings were transcribed by an experienced research assistant with a PhD, hence a word count could be used on mentors' feedback. Data were analysed with identification of mentors' positive feedback and constructive criticisms (see also Feiman-Nemser, Parker, & Zeichner, 1993). Examples of mentors' feedback aimed to provide evidence to support the general findings.

Context of John's lesson for mentors' observations

An Earth science lesson at a private high school was professionally video recorded with John, a final-year preservice teacher, undertaking his final four-week practicum. John was teaching a Year 8 class on the topic of "rocks" and was video-recorded professionally by a private media company (including sound engineer, camera man, and producer). He had prepared his lesson without consultation with the video company or researchers, as this lesson was considered part of his usual teaching program. John taught this lesson to two other Year 8 classes and will teach this lesson a total of five times during the week. The lesson was conducted over 2 x 45 minute periods, which was then edited onto a DVD to a total of 6 minutes and 20 seconds for the purpose of providing a sufficient simulation for mentors to analyse key aspects of John's lesson. That is, the introduction, body and conclusion of the lesson remained sequential and allowed adequate exposure for viewers to analyse teaching practices during these sections.

The DVD of John's Year 8 science lesson was presented to a group of experienced teachers ($n=25$). Within the one room, each mentor was asked to view the edited lesson and record notes as if being John's mentor teacher observing his practices. At the conclusion of the video, teachers were asked to form pairs (one had three people because of the uneven number of participants). Instructions were provided to the group that one person in the pair was to be "John" and the other was to be John's mentor teacher. Audio recorders were placed randomly in front of eight participant pairs by two research assistants and the researcher (Hudson). Both the mentee (John) and the mentor teacher were to enact their roles with the mentor providing feedback to John after viewing the edited lesson. This enactment seemed to pose no difficulty for these experienced teachers as each took on their roles earnestly. The role separation provided an opportunity for mentors and mentees to consider each other's role in the mentoring process, however, the focus was on the mentor's feedback. As mentor teachers are generally time poor when providing feedback within school settings, the mentors in this study were allocated and timed for five minutes only to provide feedback.

Results and discussion

Findings indicated that these mentors' perspectives varied about what constituted positive practices. To illustrate, only the use of ICT (e.g., PowerPoint, digital photographs) was shown as a positive aspect of John's lesson by more than half the mentors ($n=5$; Table 1). Indeed, only half the mentors agreed that revision links, presentation of lesson objects, and monitoring the groups were positive practices. There were also three mentors (2, 4, & 5) who provided positive feedback on practices that no other mentor considered. For instance, only Mentor 4 commented on John's science content knowledge while Mentor 5 outlined John's way of building vocabulary and structuring the lesson as positives. As to the volume of positive feedback, Mentor 1 provided the most positive comments (7) while mentors 4 and 5 only provided three positive comments to John; the other mentors were somewhere in between. Indeed, five of the mentors (2, 3, 6, 7, & 8) provided four positive comments each with no two mentors provided exactly the same positive comments (Table 1).

Table 1: *Mentors' positive feedback on John's science lesson*

Positive Feedback	1*	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Linked the last lesson/revision	✓					✓	✓	✓
Use of ICTs	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Presented lesson objectives	✓					✓	✓	✓
Clear instructions		✓						✓
Asked questions	✓		✓			✓		
Preparation of resources	✓	✓						
Hands-on activity that engaged students	✓		✓	✓				
Monitored groups/moved around	✓		✓				✓	✓
Positive reinforcement		✓						
Content knowledge				✓				
Used students' names			✓				✓	
Structure of the lesson					✓			
Building vocabulary					✓			

* Mentor

Areas for improvement (constructive criticisms) were articulated by all these mentors in varying ways. Although there was no consensus on any one area for improvement, seven of the eight mentors explained the need for John to make his instructions more concise and more explicit (Table 2). However, Mentor 8 claimed John's instructions were clear but also wanted more explicit instructions. These mixed messages would make it difficult for John to determine how to improve his instructions, particularly as Mentor 8 did not provide an example of how to make the instructions more explicit. Six mentors (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, & 8) provided two constructive criticisms each and only two mentors (1 & 3) showed agreement on the same comments. Indeed, half the mentors (2, 4, 5, & 7) made comments that no other mentor stated (Table 2).

Table 2: *Mentors' constructive criticism on John's science lesson*

Feedback	1*	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Model task	✓		✓					
Concise and explicit instructions	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Too much walking around the room		✓						
Elaborate on students' answers		✓	✓	✓				✓
Use higher-order thinking questions							✓	
Checking for understanding				✓				
Extend vocabulary development					✓			
Lecture style				✓				

* Mentor

Four mentors (3, 4, 6, & 7) asked no questions of their mentees, two mentors (5, 8) asked two questions and Mentor 2 asked one question. However, Mentor 1 asked the mentee four questions during this feedback session, placing onus on the mentee to reflect on their practices prior to the mentor providing feedback. Harrison et al. (2005) outline that probing questions allows the mentee evaluate practices, and others (Galbraith, 2003; Schön, 1987) also emphasises the importance of critical self reflection. Mentor 1 appeared to display an experienced, methodical approach to mentoring that facilitated reflection on practice (see also Harrison et al., 2005), yet other mentors did not adequately employ a probing-questioning approach. As a more detailed example of mentors' methods of feedback, the following provides further insights into the first four mentors' provision of feedback and ways of providing the feedback.

To open up discussions and gauge the level of reflective processes, Mentor 1 initially asked a question of the mentee: "John, how do you think that lesson went today?" to which the response was generic with statements such as "I think some things I could have done a bit differently to engage the whole room". Mentor 1 then probed further, "Okay so what's one thing that you would maybe change for next time?" This question elicited a more specific response around working with the whole class, small groups and individuals. Mentor 1 then used 345 words in a continuous flow to outline eight positive points on the lesson (e.g., "You shared with them the

goal that you had for the lesson today which was an excellent idea”), praising John for certain initiatives (e.g., use of his own photos to “orientate the children to the topic”), and commending the way John arranged the practical hands-on activities with guided questions when he monitored the small groups discussing the characteristics of particular rocks. It was at this point that Mentor 1 provided advice on how to improve the lesson with only one suggestion that had links to other actions: “The only thing I thought perhaps before you moved them on to the activity, some of the children were really keen to get to the activity and probably weren’t quite sure what they had to do with the worksheet”. Mentor 1’s suggestions for improving this aspect included going “through the worksheet a bit more explicitly”, “modelled to them using a rock that you didn’t include in the activities” and “make sure that they really understand what they have to do”. It was then concluded with a positive comment about how John monitored the groups and that the students enjoyed the activity. Mentor 1 used a “sandwich approach” where constructive criticism was stated between sets of positive comments.

Initially, Mentor 2 provided two positive comments around the preparation of “variety of activities” and that students were focused before outlining to John an area for improvement: “One little point, I don’t know whether you’re aware of, how much walking you do around the room... Just be aware of that”. Mentor 2 then followed on with three more positive comments: “great use of ICTs”, “you were organised with the rocks”, and his “clear instructions”. Indeed, Mentor 1 and Mentor 2 had opposing views on John’s instructions to the hands-on activity. While Mentor 1 wanted more explicit instructions with modelling, Mentor 2 highlighted John’s “clear instructions of what the kids were supposed to be doing” and emphasised this point further “all your instructions were really clear so that you stepped through everything”. It was after 175 words that she asked John “How did you feel that went?”. Mentor 2 allowed a little interaction with John; however she referred back to her point about John’s “pacing around the room” with a more explicit reason about “purposeful walking around the room like for behaviour management or proximity that sort of stuff”. Mentor 2’s following comments (385 words) were punctuated with brief reactions from John. Mentor 2’s only other criticism was “a couple of times when the students answered questions you didn’t actually acknowledge that they’d given a correct a response”, which lead back to elaborating on students’ responses; however she ended on a

positive comment about John's use of "positive reinforcement".

Mentor 3's initial compliment about John's lesson focused on how he "moved amongst the students and you got to see what they were actually doing individually at their desks as you were still continuing on with your lesson", which contrasted Mentor 2's perception as "pacing around the room" with a lack of purpose. Mentor 3 also outlined as a positive practice on how John asked a question and then rephrased it, to illustrate: "you could see the students were a bit confused so you rephrased it saying: How do we use the rocks in our society?" From this point, Mentor 3 target areas for improvement such as "Something that would be good to see you do a bit more of would be to elaborate on the answers that the students gave". This mentor also emphasised in three sentences about having the students "listen to all the instructions... before asking them to move to their work stations. Mentor 3 concluded the talk on two positive points (i.e., "using their names when asking for answers" and "really great hands on activity that definitely engaged the students"). This mentor asked no questions of the mentee but provided a sandwich approach (3 positives, 2 constructive criticisms, and 2 positives) within a monologue feedback.

Mentor 4 provided three positive comments within two very brief sentences at the beginning of her talk, which focused on John's content knowledge, PowerPoint presentation (ICT), and the practical hands-on activity that engaged students. She used 353 words out of a total of 366 words to provide ways that John could improve on his lesson. The first critical thought related to John's command of content knowledge about rocks by saying:

If you know your content with kids not knowing it in the first place, you end up pushing through a lot of work quickly without actually checking the kids' knowledge and whether they actually understand what you're getting at right from the word go.

In this instance, the compliment about John's content knowledge was quickly diverted to using it in a way to target students' zone of proximal development (ZPD, see Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, her positive comment at the beginning of the feedback session was contrasted by a critical comment on the same issue. She supporter her statement to John as follows:

They're very responsive to you, obviously fully confident in what you do and basically hanging off your every word. I get the feeling with a lot of information on the PowerPoint and on the

board and all that sort of stuff, I'm just not sure how much the kids actually thought they had to write down. It was presented quite a lecture style.

Mentor 4 wanted to see instructions delivered in a better way with more interaction between John and the students during the introductory part of the lesson, for instance “The questions were good but some of the answers [needed] a dialogue or a conversation going with kids rather than it being a teaching episode”, that is, an elaboration on students’ responses. She also suggested a way to develop more concise and explicit instructions by “writing the instructions on the board so they know exactly what they have to do... because you ended up going round and saying the same thing a number of times because they’re not exactly sure what they...”. John was informed that he did not need to repeat his instructions during the lesson, though this criticism was not picked up by any other mentor. Indeed, Mentor 4 made John’s instructional techniques the most critical point of the lesson, which was not delivered to the same intensity as the other mentors who commented on John being more concise and explicit with instructions. Mentor 4’s last comment was a minor critique of John’s “pedagogical approach and style and the variety of techniques” and she concluded her talk with “but that just comes with more experience so excellent stuff”. Mentor 4 seemed to approach her mentoring as glossing over the positive practices and providing detailed critical feedback, noted that approximately 96% of her audio-recorded time was used to outline how John could improve his teaching. No questions were asked of John during Mentor 4’s talk to gauge his understanding of the teaching episode.

At this point, mentors 3 and 4 discussed John’s lesson together and both agreed that he had facilitated a sound science lesson. Mentor 3 elaborated on John’s PowerPoint by adding he could have included instructions on one of his slides, which was not acknowledged by Mentor 4 in this discussion. Instead, Mentor 4 highlighted once again “the main thing I think anyway is just engaging kids and questioning to and fro sort of thing, it was just that lecture style” to which Mentor 3 agreed, however the discussion followed:

Mentor 3: Yeah but I think they were still engaged though because there were a lot of people asking...

Mentor 4: Oh totally yes. Just what they had to write down, like you know that thing about how rocks are used in society. I mean unless they’re told beforehand probably everything I write down on the board. You’ve got to be pretty specific about those things.

Mentor 3: And I guess what he could have done is he could have had an extra rock there where he'd gone through and demonstrated what he would do for each of those and then had that on your slide so that they could see the sort of thing that they needed to do for each one. That would have been good too.

There appeared to be a minor disagreement between the two mentors with Mentor 3 claiming the students were engaged through John's teaching style. Mentor 4 then agreed but justified her comment about providing explicit instructions to which Mentor 3 built on this response with a specific solution (i.e., demonstrating the students' task with a rock not used by students in the lesson).

With reference to Tillema (2009), although the purpose of the feedback and object of evaluation were not outlined by any mentor, it was inferred by their comments that they focused on developing the preservice teacher's practices. All the mentors presented evidence in the form of articulating their observations that lead to information they deemed useful to the mentee.

However, there were no questions asking the mentees if their feedback was useful. The criteria used to determine feedback appeared inconsistent, indeed, mentors focused on different aspects of the lesson with no consensus on either the positive practices or areas for improvement. There appeared little discussion about practices (e.g., Edwards, 1995) and little problem solving as a dual process between the mentor and mentees. There was also minimal social construction of meaning between the mentors and mentees (see Vygotsky, 1978). The limitations of this study may be the restricted timeframe allocated for the provision of oral feedback and that it was a simulated experience (i.e., mentors observed an abridged version of John's science teaching on DVD then provided feedback to each other in designated mentor-mentee roles).

Conclusion

This study investigated eight mentors' oral feedback on one preservice teacher's science lesson and demonstrated variability in both their positive feedback and constructive criticisms and in some cases contrasting perspectives. Timperley's (2001) study indicated that the feedback was variable and there was some apprehension from mentors on how to disclose concerns about a mentee's practices to the mentee; yet after undergoing mentoring education the quality of feedback improved in alignment with the mentoring training. This demonstrates that for mentees

to receive equitable feedback may require educating mentors with skills and strategies to facilitate professional conversations that lead towards improving teaching practices. As an analogy, witnesses at the scene of an event (e.g., car accident) tend to report differently on their observations and it is then up to independent assessors to determine the reality. The adage of the seven blind men and the elephant (i.e., seven blind men are placed around an elephant to touch and describe the elephant from their perspective) may be a similar description of these mentors' perspectives on the same preservice teacher's lesson. The mentors demonstrated an individualised ontology (nature of reality) where prior knowledge was employed to provide feedback. The implications from the inconsistencies in the mentors' descriptions highlight the need to provide other measures to guide mentors in their feedback. Indeed, mentors have the power to fail preservice teachers, which generally aligns with the mentor's feedback and how the preservice teacher had attempted to address the feedback; though this too can be inconsistent. Anecdotally, mentor teachers can be overburdened when confronted with the possibility of failing a preservice teacher; consequently the support mechanisms to guide their practices need to be validated.

Preservice teachers rely on their mentors' feedback to be insightful on how to advance their pedagogical practices. As there are inconsistencies, mentors need education on the content and manner of providing feedback to ensure more equitable and reliable mentoring. Mentors should bring their own individual experiences and insights into their mentoring; however there also needs to be methods of providing consistency in the feedback. For example, medical practitioners will provide opinions and, although some opinions may disagree, the use of evidence (tests) assists to verify the opinion. In times of doubt, they consult one another on their opinions. Hence, instilling in mentors the value of dialoguing with other mentors to verify feedback opinions can aid in improving the quality of mentoring (e.g., Kimball, 2002; Lock et al., 2009). As this study showed the variability of oral feedback, having more than one mentor providing feedback on a preservice teacher's pedagogical practices may begin to present a more balanced view on the mentee's performance. This has implications for universities as they can guide the mentoring process to include a community of mentors as part of expectations within mentees' school experience programs. University researchers can also investigate the design of valid and reliable tools to guide mentors' oral feedback. In addition, schools need to be proactive

in establishing ways for mentees to receive multiple viewpoints about their teaching. Mentees need quality assurance that mentors can provide reliable feedback; yet mentors themselves must have reliable and valid tools to guide their oral feedback.

In consultation with mentor teachers, universities need to design feedback tools through research so that mentors can provide feedback in more informed and objective ways. Educational research is needed on the design and use of mentor feedback tools (e.g., instruments guiding oral feedback practices), evaluated in pre-posttest conditions. For instance, a pre-test with a group of mentors providing oral feedback on a lesson (similar to the one outlined in this paper) followed by the same group of mentors who had undergone education on the use of a mentor feedback tool that can be tested on another lesson. Such a study would begin to determine the effectiveness of mentor feedback tools, outlining the consistencies and inconsistencies of such tools and refining accordingly. Further research is also required on how preservice teachers use the feedback provided through mentor feedback tools. Rajuan, Beijaard, and Verloop (2008) claim that what preservice teachers “learn about teaching practice from their cooperating teachers remains an unanswered question” (p. 131); hence well-constructed mentoring programs can present explicit feedback practices for ensuring preservice teachers receive quality mentoring, which can be tracked to gauge how preservice teachers implement the feedback (e.g., Sempowicz & Hudson, 2011). Developing a bank of research-tested mentor feedback tools would assist in providing more equitable and reliable mentoring to assist both the mentors and mentees.

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