
Creativity and Accountability in Competency-based Language Programmes: Issues of Curriculum and Assessment¹

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The widespread adoption of competency-based language curricula in adult ESL programs in Australia is linked closely to national education and employment policies in a period of economic uncertainty and high unemployment. Increasingly, teachers are required to be accountable to a range of 'stakeholders', including funding authorities, for the outcomes of their language programs. The public responsibility of teachers for providing defensible assessments of learners' progress is thus a major factor informing the design of competency-based programs and of their assessment procedures. In this context, large claims are often made for the superiority, even the uniqueness, of competency-based assessment. Indeed, it has been argued that the interdependence of assessment and teaching in itself assures the quality of outcomes, and thus satisfies the need for accountability.

The paper offers a critical examination of some of the claims made for competency-based assessment in the most widely-used and explicit curriculum model currently in use, the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (NSW Adult Migrant Education Service). Focussing on the Assessment Guidelines which have been designed to accompany CSWE courses, a number of theoretical and practical issues are considered, particularly the relation between the curriculum model, the assessment procedures used to measure language learning outcomes and the 'real world' of work which they ostensibly serve.

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1. The tension between creativity and accountability:
general issues

'... Give me your definition of a horse.'

(Sissy Jupe thrown into the greatest of alarm by this demand.) 'Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!' said Mr Gradgrind, for the general behoof of all the little pitchers.... 'Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours'...

'Quadriped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.' Thus (and much more), Bitzer.

'Now, girl number twenty,' said Mr Gradgrind, 'You know what a horse is.'

(Charles Dickens, Hard Times Chapter 2)

As the triumphant closing sentence of this passage reveals, Mr Gradgrind is in no doubt at all what knowledge consists of, nor of how to measure it. In the classroom scene at the start of the novel, we witness a situation in which Girl Number Twenty's incompetence at an assessment task is exposed to ridicule. For Gradgrind, Dickens's archetypal 19th-century hardware merchant, knowledge, reality itself, is a matter of indisputable fact and calculation, consisting solely of what can be observed, regulated, governed, and made to return a profit. His young pupils are treated as 'little pitchers', receptacles to be filled with the facts which will transform them into productive work-units in the industrial system served by Coketown. Sissy Jupe, the horse-trainer's daughter, who knows beyond a doubt what a horse really is, is struck dumb here by the impossibility of the task of definition, and so, inevitably, goes on to endure many more such trials before the intelligence, warmth and vitality she embodies are properly recognised.

What can the caricatured world of this highly polemical novel, almost a century-and-a-half old, possibly have to do with our much more enlightened times—more particularly, with language

programmes for adult migrant ESL learners in Australia? A number of applied linguists and language educators (for instance, Auerbach 1986; Moore 1996; Quinn 1993; Tumpovsky 1984) might well reply, 'a good deal more than you think'. Good teaching has always demanded creativity, in devising curricula and course materials, and in dealing with the human variety of the individuals in any classroom. It has always involved accountability: taking professional responsibility for assessing what learning has taken place, and conveying the results of these assessments to students, parents and institutions. Teachers have always needed to be resourceful and alert to learners' needs, while learners themselves have been the source of much creative teaching. We all know too that education systems these days may harbour the occasional Gradgrind squeezing the life out of enquiring minds, but in current models of education, however diverse, teaching and learning are generally assumed to entail a complex and creative process of interaction involving students and teachers, students and students, and the world beyond the classroom. What remain uncertain, and constantly in dispute, however, are the adequacy and appropriateness of the instruments of assessment, the means by which the results of teaching and learning are determined.

In principle at least, while both teaching and assessment may have different purposes, there is no necessary conflict of interest. Teachers are constantly assessing students' performance as part of their ongoing interaction and professional responsibility, as well as making end-of-course, summative assessments of their achievement. Assessment of different kinds, for different purposes, formal and informal, recorded and verbal, is integral to all teaching and learning. Yet the recent preoccupation in adult language and literacy programmes with measuring and reporting the 'outcomes' of learning in terms of standardised 'competencies' has attracted considerable debate, not least because of the potential domination of the curriculum by assessment (eg Auerbach 1986; Jones & Moore 1993).

To summarise this shift of focus: for a couple of decades now, 'learner-centred' approaches mindful of 'individual needs', together with curricula and teaching methodologies devoted to the 'communicative' purposes of language learning, have dominated the scene. More recently, however, in Australia and elsewhere, adult education, migrant ESL programmes included, has been entirely re-

vamped by government fiat in terms of 'competencies' and 'competency standards' (Manidis & Jones 1992; Hagan et al 1993; Bottomley et al 1993). Both the acquisition of language and the attainment of proficiency in its use have become more and more enmeshed in the vocational imperatives of governments fearful of rising unemployment and the threat of recessions. Developing a highly skilled and adaptable work force has become a high priority, therefore, and the efficacy of language programmes is to be measured in terms of what language learners are able to do with language, and in particular, what tasks and functions they are able to perform as potential members of the work force.

Meanwhile, from the point of view of adult migrants newly arrived and searching for jobs, proof that a workable level of language has been achieved is similarly a high priority. Various studies (Brindley 1989; Bottomley et al 1993) have reported the dissatisfaction of adult migrants with courses whose aims and outcomes were at best vaguely generalised and at worst impossible to define. From both sides, from government and work force (potential or actual), a real pressure has developed to urge language teaching and learning towards becoming as vocational as possible.

The strength of the pressure can be seen in the fact that industry and employment, education and training, have all been restructured by the Australian government in terms of 'competency standards' (Mayer 1992). Adult second language programmes have also been drawn into this reformation. The result is a nation-wide competency-based language programme, the Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) (Manidis & Jones 1992; Hagan et al 1993), developed by the NSW Adult Migrant Education Service (AMES), and given accreditation by the National Training Authority. Certifications of competency issued at each stage of the programme provide information to future employers and educational institutions. The assessments offered within this system thus have vitally important consequences for migrant learners.

In adult language and literacy education, the demand for public accountability in teaching and assessment is greater than ever before, and, correspondingly, more problematic. As more language and literacy courses are funded, developed and accredited for adult learners, and the 'learning outcomes' of those courses officially certified, there is increasing pressure on teachers to provide accurate

and relevant information on assessment. The picture is obviously much larger and more complex than an intimate two-way relationship between teacher and student: for adult learners, access to a range of opportunities—to work, to promotion, and to further courses of study—depends on the judgments of their teachers. For teachers, the needs of students, of course-providers, educational institutions, funding authorities and government, all demand attention. The public responsibility of teachers for providing defensible assessments of learners' progress is thus a major factor informing the design of competency-based programmes and of their assessment procedures.

From one point of view, this increasing demand for public accountability is an important acknowledgment of the professionalism and expertise of teachers, and ought to contribute to appropriate recognition of the role of educators in this country. But it also raises a number of questions which have been brought together under the general theme of the tension between creativity and accountability. Over-detailed specification of outcomes, and hence of assessment tasks and criteria, may well constrain both teaching and assessment (Lewis 1994; Jones and Moore 1993; Moore 1996). In the opposite scenario, where the specification of competencies and the design of assessment procedures are left entirely to teachers (who may be without expertise in and awareness of the complexities of assessment), the fairness and accuracy of information derived from such assessments is open to question (Brindley 1994).

In matters of language learning and assessment, the theoretical is never far from the practical, and in assessing language in use—that highly contextualised matter with which competency-based programmes are concerned—theoretical concerns need to be related to particular instances and situations. The CSWE depends on a conception of language competency which may seem straightforward to governments, but which contains a number of theoretical and practical problems for language teachers and those concerned with language assessment. My interest is to examine a couple of the central claims made for this competency-based programme in the light of evidence from published materials and recent critical comment.

2. Claims for competency-based curriculum and assessment

It is argued that competency-based programmes, in contrast to 'traditional approaches to teaching and assessment methods' are uniquely placed to foster creativity in teaching and assessment:

Competency-based approaches to teaching and assessment offer teachers an opportunity to revitalise their education and training programs. Not only will the quality of assessment improve, but the quality of teaching and student learning will be enhanced by clear specification of expected outcomes and the continuous feedback the competency-based assessment can offer. (Docking 1994: 15)

Even larger claims are often made for the inherent superiority of competency-based curricula: for instance, that the specification of competencies and the assessment procedures to which that gives rise is in itself an assurance of quality :

The fundamental assumption of a competency-based approach is that quality is assured through the careful specification of competencies and the use of competencies as the basis of curriculum design, teaching strategies, assessment, record keeping and decision-making from then on. The CSWE is a good example of this kind of rigorous thinking in curriculum design. (Docking 1994: 14)

Both CSWE's curriculum document (Hagan et al 1993 and its *Assessment Guidelines* (Burrows 1993a,b,c) are indeed very detailed and explicit in outlining requirements and principles of assessment, and in providing a range of sample tasks for assessing each competency. They give ample evidence of efforts to apply creative and innovative teaching practices to the development of assessment materials. However, whether or not these assessment materials can meet the demands of validity, accountability and fairness, may be open to question.

The first claim is that the present system gives precise yet flexible appraisal of learner achievements (Hagan et al 1993; Burns & Hood 1994; Burrows 1994). Ostensibly, specific language competencies are informed by much broader generic desiderata, or Key Competencies

(Mayer 1992), which are intended to underpin all competency-based vocational programmes, as follows:

1. Collecting and analysing ideas and information
2. Expressing ideas and information
3. Planning and organising activities
4. Working with others and in teams
5. Solving problems
6. Using mathematics
7. Using technology

Nevertheless, the first problem, as Quinn (1993) has pointed out, is that Mayer's seven Key Competencies constitute broad fields of activity—what one might think of as domains rather than abilities. The second difficulty, as Chappell and Hagar (1994) and Chappell (1995) point out, is that Mayer's list gives as much importance to attributes and processes as to the ability to perform individual tasks. So there is a perceptible mismatch between the all-embracingness of the Key Competencies and their incarnation as the task-specific requirements of the CSWE.

Turning, therefore, to the practical level on which CSWE's classroom curriculum operates, competencies turn out to be, not just very much narrower than the Key Competencies, but in fact covertly prescriptive. At first sight, however, the list appears to be extremely broad and comprehensive:

1. Can understand the context of work in Australia
2. Can use a range of learning strategies relevant to employment contexts
3. Can understand an oral presentation relevant to workplace contexts
4. Can negotiate complex/problematic spoken exchanges relevant to employment/workplace contexts

5. Can participate in group discussions meetings relevant to employment/workplace contexts
6. Can participate in casual conversations relevant to the workplace context
7. Can read diagrammatic/graphic texts relevant to workplace/employment contexts
8. Can read procedural texts relevant to employment/workplace contexts
9. Can read informational texts relevant to employment/workplace contexts
10. Can write short reports relevant to employment/workplace contexts
11. Can write procedural texts relevant to employment/workplace contexts
12. Can complete formatted texts relevant to employment/workplace contexts
13. Can write letters of application for employment
14. Can write a resume.

(Burrows 1993c, *CSWE Stage 3 Vocational English*: xxii-xxiii)²

This very vagueness is seen by some critics as masking the fact that the proposed outcomes or competencies comprise, in Lewis's words, 'a checklist of idealised 'normative behaviour' abstracted from any empirical basis and reified as universal standards of performance' (1994: 18). From another point of view, such broad goals as Competency 4 (to 'negotiate complex/problematic spoken exchanges relevant to employment workplace contexts') look general enough to escape at least one of the problems besetting LSP courses—namely, the minute specification of particular domains of language use³. In fact, however, each of the twelve core language competencies is

²Despite the 14 items enumerated in this list, there are in fact 12 language competencies to be evaluated—nos. 1 & 2 (knowledge and learning) being distinguished from the other 12 because so variable among individuals and not concerned with language ability (Burrows 1993).

³See critiques of LSP by Widdowson (1984), Skehan (1984) and Davies (1990), for instance.

made up of as many as nine smaller components or units of performance, all apparently discrete and given equal weight, as in the following list of performance criteria:

Performance Criteria				
Student	1	2	...	25
• achieves purpose of exchange and provides all essential information accurately.			...	
• uses appropriate staging for text eg opening and closing strategies.			...	
• requests/provides information as required			...	
• requests/provides goods and services as required			...	
• explains circumstances, causes consequences and proposes solutions as required			...	
• sustains dialogue eg using feedback, turn taking, seeking clarification and understands statements and requests of the interlocutor			...	
• uses vocabulary and grammatical forms appropriate to topic and register eg use of modals, grammatical errors do not interfere with meaning			...	
• pronunciation/stress/intonation do not impede intelligibility			...	
• interprets gesture and other paralinguistic features			...	

Table 1. Performance Criteria (Burrows 1993c: 10)

Each of these units represents a mandatory criterion, in that a learner must achieve 100% success in demonstrating mastery of the component parts. In effect, it means that competencies so narrowly defined are almost inevitably atomised or distorted.

3. CSWE's model of language use

The authors of the CSWE make it perfectly clear that their competency-based programmes are grounded in a theoretical model of language behaviour: namely, Hallidayan functional systemics and the genre-theory extrapolated from it (Hagan et al 1993; Hagan 1994). However, the competencies and specific criteria thus derived do not by themselves validate the theoretical constructs which

assessment tasks may attempt to tap. Indeed, the metaphors used to describe the language competencies in the CSWE guidelines are notably rigid, like a Lego-land building, as Candlin (1995) has argued. According to this theoretical model, the larger domains of language use are composed of competencies, and each competency of elements, smaller units—'identifiable and discrete sub-groupings of skills and knowledge' (Burrows 1993). Is this in fact a model of language use which can possibly account for language behaviour? It certainly is both static and curiously ordered, implying that language performance can be compartmentalised and, further, that each skill or element contributes equally to successful performance. It allows for no interplay or overlap between these sub-skills, nor for individual variation in learners' interlanguage, and thus may well conflict with the perceptions teachers themselves have of their students' language development and performance.

The equal value allocated to each element of a competency is clearly reflected in the equal weighting of criteria in the scoring schedule. And 100% correct, a perfect score, is required for the student to be awarded a competency. Some critics of competency-based curricula and assessment (Quinn 1993, among them) have criticised the model on the grounds that it implies a view of language which is essentially reductionist, unable to accommodate the notion of the learner's creative capacity to generate new meanings in unfamiliar situations. The author of the CSWE assessment guidelines attempts to allay such fears, as follows:

The first performance criterion in each of the language competencies describes the overall performance of the task. However, it is necessary to assess in relation to all the performance criteria. In this way, a narrow reductionist model of competencies is avoided. (Burrows 1993c: vii)

Despite these brave words, however, the opposite is actually the case. A narrow reductionist model is reinforced, rather than avoided, since teachers are permitted to assess only through the specified performance criteria, at the expense of what may be more dynamic and complex aspects of language performance. Boxes are ticked, rather as in the service-manual of a car, implying that language performance can be similarly compartmentalized. Nor is there room to discriminate among levels of performance: you either are or are not competent, much as a radio either is or is not switched

on. And there is no opportunity, either, to report on what is individual about a learner's developing use of language. Under a curriculum dominated by assessment procedures of this kind, learners are liable to become mere work-units in the system. Teachers may see their students' language development quite differently, but the mandatory nature of the curriculum and assessment guidelines governing the courses they teach commit them to following standard procedures in reporting and accrediting learner achievement.

For all the claims that CSWE permits flexibility, creativity and responsiveness to individual needs (Burns & Hood 1994), there are strong counter-arguments to suggest that this competency-based programme is both externally imposed and highly prescriptive in the demands placed on teachers and learners alike (Lewis 1994). There is good reason, too—or at any rate a consistent logic—in CSWE's penchant for ticked boxes. Its principal concern is with linguistic categories, rather than with the far less predictable field of language development and behaviour. Selected aspects of Hallidayan linguistic analysis of text, discourse and related genre theory are co-opted and transformed into performance-criteria. Primarily descriptive in Halliday's own use, these features now become prescriptive, as students are required to demonstrate that their use of language conforms to the essentially text-based patterns he elicited. Quite apart from the lack of empirical justification for this procedure, the teacher/assessor is left without means to judge learners' underlying abilities as distinct from their production of set features of text and discourse. In other words, there is no theoretical model of language performance or language development here, and thus no grounds for deciding what does or does not qualify as competency.

4. 'Competency' and its paradoxes

According to the CSWE Assessment Guidelines, 'successful performance in one assessment task is sufficient for the student to be considered successful in the achievement of a competency' (Burrows 1993c: ix). From this, it might be inferred that success in one performance of a task across all the criteria indicates the learner's ability to perform similar tasks in a variety of real-life situations. And in fact CSWE's assessment procedures explicitly deny the need to test the accuracy of this inference by further sampling—a recommendation which violates well-established principles of

assessment practice (eg Brindley 1994)⁴. The danger here is that 'success' within an insulated system is equated with language competency itself. Conversely, a student may be successful, several times over, on all but one criterion of a particular assessment task, and yet be deemed not to have achieved the relevant competency⁵. Making no allowance for other factors which may affect task performance for better or worse, such as background knowledge, familiarity with task type, setting, and so on (Bachman 1990), it seems an unreliable basis for judgement. Who can blame teachers in such circumstances for adjusting their official assessments to bring them into line with their intuitive sense of a student's communicative effectiveness?

All that CSWE certification certifies, therefore, is that students have performed a particular task as the result of classroom training.

Achievement assessment measures student use of familiar learnt language in familiar, learnt and relevant situations, within the classroom or outside it... Students learn to use language in the classroom and assessment measures what they have learnt. It does not measure the proficiency they have in the language
(Burrows 1994: 33)

Nevertheless, the phantom claim also hovers round this document, that the language skills gained are transferable, which suggests very strongly that one can infer the individual's capacity to reproduce a similar level of performance in a different setting:

The language that students have gained as a result of learning will be transferred to interactions outside the classroom, and students will demonstrate to themselves their increase in language proficiency.
(ibid)

⁴Brindley insists on the need for multiple assessments and a range of tasks, as well as assessor training and the development of banks of carefully trialled tasks, to attempt to limit the threats to validity and reliability posed by performance tests. This detailed and comprehensive account of validity and reliability in competency-based assessment indicates the complexity of the issues involved in task design and specification of criteria.

⁵The CSW author's recognition of this problem is reflected in an uneasy compromise, ie that a student may be deemed to have 'partially achieved' a competency, a compromise which still avoids the issue of defining what constitutes satisfactory performance.

The writer cannot have it both ways. It may be true that competency-based assessment will measure what has happened in the classroom, but there is no evidence that such language competency will necessarily be transferred to other situations. In particular, if the competency is sampled only once, the claim is even harder to support. However, if the learning is not transferable, if the skills involved are not generalisable beyond the immediate context of classroom-based assessment, those to whom educators are accountable have some reason for concern.

At best, the CSWE model takes language performance (and by implication, the work which the learner is preparing to engage in) to consist of a series of tasks. This narrow focus should come as no surprise. Specified achievement, not proficiency, is CSWE's goal; a learner is accredited with a competency once he or she has demonstrated success on a single task on a single occasion. There is no further investigation. And here we come to a major paradox of the situation, for the Government wants language development to be one of the ongoing and transferable skills of the workplace, yet the competency-assessment procedures of CSWE confirm only that a learner has fulfilled a task; they have nothing to say about the learner's capacity to transfer those skills to another context. Indeed, the authors of the CSWE curriculum and assessment documents see this as a positive feature of the Certificate: it validates itself by claiming to measure no more than achievement in the course of study it has set.

In this, it resembles other outcome-based programmes which specify behavioural objectives in advance—a procedure which has been strongly contested by both educationalists and applied linguists such as Widdowson (1984) and Candlin (1995), who argue that such programmes are essentially retrospective, looking backwards and reporting only what has resulted from a course of study, rather than aiming for ongoing and future performance.

To this extent, the programmes I have been describing do not meet the needs of the social and political context in which they operate. So far, I have been asking what may be meant by 'competency', and questioning the conceptual basis of such programmes. But looking beyond language-programmes to the context of workplace and professional training, we can see that interpretations of competence and competency standards have frequently been unduly narrow and

instrumental, emphasising performance at the expense of the complex range of attributes and qualities which enable people to do things successfully.

Educationalists who are critical of narrowly specified interpretations of competencies, Chappell (1995) and Hager (1994) for instance, insist that educational curricula need to resist the old 'behaviourist' models of training which presented learners with a set of standardised learning activities, moving towards competent performance of a pre-specified set of tasks. These models of work are seen to be not only long discredited, but patently inadequate to the demands of the contemporary workplace. The need today, the critics argue, is to draw on such abilities as are engaged in adapting to and participating in change, dealing with problems, reasoning critically and creatively, working in groups, and so on. A broader conception of competence in curriculum and assessment would thus recognise learning-outcomes not just in competent performance of tasks but in the development of such abilities in the process of learning.

Perhaps a major problem in the situation I have outlined is the fact that CSWE has so little to do with the workplace (beyond referring to it in more or less ritual fashion). To be fair, the course is by definition pre-vocational, operating in the classroom to equip those who have not, or not yet, secured jobs. However, its practices and the habits of mind informing them spring not from the real world of work, but from much more abstract schema—linguistic interests which are essentially text-oriented. The contemporary workplace is a more complexly demanding environment than CSWE envisages, just as language, like human beings, is very different from the phenomena Mr Gradgrind is prepared to dissect. Horses for him are items measurable as a collection of parts, but the parts enumerated by Bitzer (significant name) could never make up an actual galloping animal. So too the language-competency attested to by CSWE has little or nothing to do with communicative abilities, but everything to do with fitness to perform those limited functions seen as suitable for the learner's place in society. Unwittingly, while seeking to serve the interests of adult second language learners, it has fallen into the hands of a powerfully instrumental vision of what language exists for—and as such is compliant to the very ideologies of current political practice which a real recognition of citizens' creative skills would challenge radically.

5. Conclusion

Given the high value placed on assessment, and the increasingly high stakes involved for learners, it is arguable that the success or failure of competency-based approaches will be directly affected by the quality and adequacy of the assessment procedures adopted to measure course-outcomes. It is also evident that with the development of more advanced and more specialised programs of vocationally-oriented language study, teachers are expected to design, and assure the quality of, a range of very complex assessment tasks dealing with relatively unfamiliar areas of discourse. Whether that responsibility is a challenge to creativity or an impossible burden will depend on a number of things, not least the provision of time and specialised assistance to enable the necessary professional development to take place.

Assessment systems have to make it possible for teachers to make true statements about their students. If teachers themselves need to design tasks, those tasks must be seen to be both valid or reliable. A student's failure to reach the level set, may mean that the student is below standard, or it may equally indicate that the task itself is unsuitable. Aware of issues such as this, curriculum developers must take more responsibility for assessment. There needs to be at the very least a detailed handbook for teachers, providing a range of possible tasks, spelling out what the criteria for a task might be, providing information on the development of assessment guidelines, and so on.⁶ As it stands, the present CSWE Assessment Guidelines offer no guidance at all on the crucial issue of what may or may not constitute satisfactory levels of performance. Sadly, too, a number of the sample tasks included in this otherwise user-friendly document are seriously flawed or inconsistent.

It is obvious that a balance needs to be sought between creativity in the teaching situation and proper accountability. One of the possible outcomes of the present insistence on accountability may be that teachers are so busy assessing, recording and reporting on their students' performance on particular competencies that they lose sight of the larger goals of the educational process. Whatever the curriculum framework, this process should be fundamentally

⁶NSW AMES has recently produced an assessment and moderation kit (including video) which may address some of these problems. It was not available to me at the time of writing.

concerned to provide opportunities for students' capacities to develop to the fullest. If teachers are preoccupied with devising and/or administering assessment tasks to measure the competencies, there is a danger that language classrooms will be dominated by assessment tasks, and students forced to rehearse set language routines until they are able to achieve a competency and move on to the next stage.

Only long term research will demonstrate whether the claims of competency-based language programmes can be substantiated. However, it is incumbent on the proponents of such programmes to discard the naive assumption that merely specifying competencies as a curriculum framework will control learning outcomes, thus ensuring that quality and standards of learning are not only maintained but increased. After all, competence is a construct, not something we can observe directly. Like knowledge, it is inferred from performance; to take performance to equal competency merely short-circuits the process of understanding how learners come to acquire language, and how teachers may best assist that learning to take place.

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