

Curriculum Leadership Portfolios: Enhancing Scholarly Approaches to Undergraduate Program Reform

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Abstract:

This article examines critical contributions of curriculum leadership portfolios as an effective medium in which to support undergraduate program reform. Action research methodology was employed to investigate the processes and outcomes of curriculum leadership portfolios over a 10-year period at the University of British Columbia. Data suggest that curriculum leadership portfolios helped faculty to develop a reflective curriculum practice and engage in the literature on the scholarship of curriculum practice and the scholarship of teaching and learning, to assess their curriculum context and identify the strengths and weaknesses of learning-centred curriculum practices, to develop stage-specific implementation strategies to enhance undergraduate program reform, and to disseminate curriculum research in a community of practice.

Key Words:

Scholarship of curriculum practice, curriculum leadership portfolios, communities of practice.

Marion Pearson with poster



Introduction

Canadian universities have recognized the full importance of attending to quality undergraduate educational experiences in their particular context; however, the enactment of scholarship directed at enhancing learning-centred curricula remains very much in its infancy (Christensen Hughes, 2007). Despite numerous accounts about the shortcomings of undergraduate degree programs in Canadian universities, we know remarkably little about how to develop scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform (Hubball & Gold, 2007). New media opportunities (emerging and innovative digital or non-traditional classroom learning experiences) offer exciting possibilities to engage faculty members in educational scholarship. In various formats (electronic or hard copy), portfolio learning, for example, has the potential to provide meaningful and relevant curriculum leadership experiences for university faculty. Although portfolio learning is not new to the higher education literature, very little research has investigated the effectiveness of curriculum leadership portfolios. This research uses these challenges as its starting point to examine whether and how curriculum leadership portfolios are an effective medium in which to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform at the University of British Columbia. This study has implications for curriculum leadership portfolios across disciplines and institutions.

Scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform

Fuelled by global concerns about rigour, transferability, and accountability of undergraduate programs, there has been widespread attention on graduate attributes and the higher order learning outcomes requisite for effective participation in a globalized, knowledge-based economy (Bresciani, 2006). Such concerns have led to many curricular reform initiatives in a broad array of disciplines all over Canada. At the same time, and in relation to these activities, there has been a growing interest in the scholarship of curriculum practice (SoCP). Engagement in theoretical and practical rigour to optimize learning-centred curricula, for example, is vital to the success and sustainability of efforts to reform undergraduate programs (Fraser, 2006; Hubball & Gold, 2007; Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2004). As this body of scholarship grows, clearer understandings of contextually-bound best practices will emerge and allow others to benefit from the knowledge gained in these complex settings (Devine, Daly, Lero, & MacMartin, 2007; Hill, 2007; Zundel & Mengel, 2007).

Essentially, SoCP involves the formulation of relevant research questions, the collection and analysis of data, and the dissemination of results in peer reviewed contexts. SoCP research questions focus on diverse issues of curriculum change (Hill, 2007; Hubball & Gold, 2007; Walkington, 2002; Wolf, 2007). Examples include

- What are the key contextual factors (social, political, economical, cultural) that influence the development, implementation and/or evaluation of this curriculum?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum?
- What knowledge and skills are students expected to acquire from the program?
- To what extent are intended curricular outcomes being met?
- How are individual instructors applying curricular outcomes in their own teaching practices?

- Why is curriculum change needed?
- How do undergraduate curricula serve institutional purposes?
- By what criteria should curricular effectiveness be judged?

In order to engage in scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform, curriculum leaders in many Faculties are increasingly turning to a broad array of action research strategies. The distinguishing features of action research are that it has a focus on practical issues and problems; seeks positive changes that promote human flourishing; involves others in the inquiry through participatory democratic processes; uses ongoing reflection to guide the evolution of the inquiry; and builds capacity to engage in further inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Thus, reflection is a critical component of SoCP, necessary for the assessment of curriculum contexts and past, present, and future curriculum directions. However, reflection, and, more importantly, the action resulting from that reflection can easily become ad hoc and lost within the complexity of curriculum change, especially if not carried out in a strategic and systematic manner.

Portfolio learning and scholarly approaches to curriculum practice

Portfolios are an excellent medium for the development of a critically reflective practice, and they are widely used and assessed in various forms to enhance scholarly practice in diverse fields such as arts, business, teacher education, law, and medicine and other health professions (Klenowski, 2002). Portfolios are succinct collections of deliberately selected works (e.g., critical analyses and evidence pertaining to professional backgrounds/context, philosophical approaches, strengths, and goals for further development) and can occur in various formats. For example, the recent growth in the use of e-portfolios in higher education is being driven by many factors including the pursuit of active learning methods; the accessibility and adaptability of digital communication technologies; and the ability to evaluate learning outcomes that are not easily demonstrated with traditional forms of assessment (Clark & Eynon, 2009). The digital communication technologies used for e-portfolios can also facilitate interactivity between components of the portfolio and between individuals (Shephard, 2009). Further, it has been argued that electronic portfolios have a number of distinct advantages over print-based portfolios, including a capacity for greater variety of content, ease of storage and management of content, and ease of presentation with instant access to digital video recordings, pictures, and internet sites (Sung, Chang, Yu, & Chang, 2009).

Portfolios have the potential to support faculty learning in a variety of ways (Rolheiser, Bower & Stevahn, 2000). Most importantly, portfolios require faculty to engage in the metacognitive task of critical self-reflection, for which few opportunities are otherwise provided in formal educational settings (Zellers & Mudrey, 2007). A growing body of evidence suggests that cognitive benefits from engaging in this sort of reflective process include deeper learning and higher achievement; theory-practice integration; learning across experiences and time; the development of critical thinking and decision-making skills; and attitudinal benefits such as improved self-confidence, willingness to take responsibility for learning, professionalism, and satisfaction with the learning process (Buckley et al, 2009; Miller & Morgaine, 2009; Rickards et al., 2008;

Zellers & Mudrey, 2007). The above portfolio outcomes are ideal for curriculum leaders, who play a significant role in fostering scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform. However, despite a growing body of literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), as well as widespread curriculum reform activities and challenges occurring in universities all across Canada, very little research has been conducted on the ways in which curriculum leaders are engaging in portfolio learning to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform (Hubball & Gold, 2007).

Context for investigation of curriculum leadership portfolios

This study draws upon 10 years of mentoring experiences, findings, and reflections of faculty members engaged with curriculum leadership portfolios in the 8-month SoTL Leadership program at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada. The UBC SoTL Leadership program began in 1998, and was developed in response to the University's Academic Plan ('Trek 2000' at the time, now 'Trek 2010') and the increasing recognition of the complexity of academic work along with the need for university professors to develop scholarly approaches to curriculum and pedagogical practice (Hubball & Poole, 2003). The UBC SoTL Leadership program was designed for faculty members of any rank and in any discipline from Canadian and international institutions involved in leadership positions for teaching and/or curriculum development. The use of the term 'leadership' in the title is deliberate. It highlights one of the key aims of the program, that is, an attempt to develop across the institution SoTL practitioners who not only engage in their own scholarship on curriculum, teaching, and learning but, when they return to their faculties and departments, will lead and support others in similar investigations. Over 200 faculty members have graduated from this program, including national teaching fellows, Canadian Research Chairs, curriculum developers, tenured and untenured professors, and instructors. Thus, communities of practice were central to curriculum leadership portfolios and SoCP investigations in multidisciplinary settings (Baldwin, 2008; Friedman, 2008; Cox & Richlin, 2004; Harp Ziegenfuss & Lawler, 2008; Hubball & Albon, 2007; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Warhurst, 2006). In practice, this required curriculum leaders to identify potential colleagues for collaboration, support, and/or shared scholarship and dissemination opportunities.

Within this context, approximately 20% of program participants have elected to focus their studies on SoCP. Hence, within a community of practice and through mentoring by two program facilitators over an 8-month period, each of these faculty members completed a comprehensive curriculum leadership portfolio, which consisted of critical SoCP investigations around his/her curriculum practices (Hubball & Burt, 2006; Hubball & Albon, 2007). The curriculum leadership portfolios were assessed on completion of the program by members of the portfolio assessment team, a group of external peer reviewers selected from the previous graduates of the program. External peer reviews consisted of one-on-one interviews with each participant to discuss the contents of his/her portfolio, including its completeness and the learning outcomes achieved, as well as plans for ongoing SoCP.

For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were designed to facilitate an examination of the ways in which faculty are engaging in curriculum

leadership portfolios to enhance undergraduate program reform at the University of British Columbia.

1. What are the critical elements of a curriculum leadership portfolio in order to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate degree program reform?
2. In what ways are curriculum leadership portfolios being used to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate degree program reform?

Method

To address the above research questions, a variety of qualitative methods were used to collect data over the period 2000 to 2009. These methods included focus group interviews, analysis of individual portfolios, and a review of Faculty-specific curriculum documentation (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Hubball & Clarke, 2009; Mills, 2000). Four relevant stakeholder groups were consulted to obtain data to assess critical processes and outcomes of curriculum leadership portfolios including: two program facilitators and program advisory board members, ten portfolio assessors from different disciplines, three curriculum Chairs, and ten program graduates who elected to specialize their program of study on SoCP in the 8-month SoTL Leadership program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). The co-researchers and authors of this paper include a program facilitator and a member of the portfolio assessment team.

Data collection, with respect to the first question, focused on the minutes from the annual program debrief meetings between program facilitators and advisory board members. In particular, participants were required to discuss and critically assess formal program evaluations and participant feedback regarding the learning outcomes and quality of learning experiences incorporated in the SoTL/SoCP leadership portfolios. Additionally, critical data were obtained from the annual meetings chaired by the program facilitator with the portfolio assessment team (n=10) who conducted the external peer reviews with each graduating member of the program and his/her portfolio. Finally, individual interviews and portfolio examinations were conducted by the program facilitator with ten program participants (n=10) who elected to specialize their program of study on SoCP.

In order to address the second question, data were obtained from the annual program debrief meetings, chaired by the program facilitator, in which ten portfolio assessment team members were invited to engage in a critical review of their portfolio assessment experiences. In particular, portfolios were reviewed with respect to an analysis of learning-centred curricula and course syllabi, curriculum and course re-design research projects, peer review of curriculum practices, and curriculum leadership presentations. Follow-up focus group interviews then addressed faculty members' on-going SoCP investigations, and the sorts of suggestions each had for further developing the curriculum leadership portfolio. Data were also obtained from focus group interviews chaired by the program facilitator, with ten program participants (n=10) who elected to specialize their program of study on SoCP. Finally, interview data were gathered from meetings with three curriculum chairs in 2008 who shared their experiences regarding the extent of practical application of the curriculum leadership portfolios in terms of faculty-specific policies and/or curriculum change processes.

Throughout each phase of the research, there was a process of critical reflection on emerging data through discourse and commentary between the research investigators, program facilitators, and program advisory board members (Friedman, 2008; Senge & Scharmer, 2008). The range of qualitative data thus obtained were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and drew upon Senge & Scharmer's (2008) community action research framework to internalize theory and practice. For example, through a systematic and cyclical process of inquiry involving hypothesis testing, planning, observing, analysis, and action, data were analyzed into 'categories of description' for common and isolated experiences and for major themes. Further, comparative analysis was conducted across data set groupings in order to examine the perspectives, assumptions, and resultant practices of curriculum leadership portfolios (Baldwin, 2008; Hubball & Clarke, 2009; Merriam, 2002; McKinney & Cross, 2007; Silverman, 2000).

Results

Results Objective 1) What are the critical elements of a curriculum leadership portfolio in order to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate degree program reform?

In the context of the UBC SoTL Leadership program, the aim of the curriculum leadership portfolio is to develop the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and experiences to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform. Specifically, program participants are expected to demonstrate the following learning outcomes within their curriculum leadership portfolio: 1) the acquisition, application, and integration of SoCP knowledge; 2) SoCP research skills, including the ability to define problems and access, retrieve, and evaluate information; 3) critically reflective SoCP practices and problem-solving abilities; 4) responsible use of ethical principles in SoCP; and 5) effective SoCP leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills. Essentially, the curriculum leadership portfolio was a compilation of assignments demonstrating how these program-level learning outcomes were achieved through a wide range of authentic SoCP experiences. Authentic learning experiences were drawn from various literature sources, research, and practical experience with curriculum chairs and SoTL leaders in various disciplines (Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Grunert O'Brien, Millis & Cohen, 2008; Hubball & Burt, 2007; Hubball, Gold, Mighty & Britnell, 2007; McKinney & Cross, 2007). Table 1 captures the range of SoCP experiences that were employed to address the five program areas.

Table 1. Curriculum leadership portfolio elements and evidence of SoCP

Portfolio Elements (and Learning Outcomes)	Evidence of SoCP
SoCP Literature and Resources (1-5)	Scholarly articles on learning-centred curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation; website URLs, pictures, DVD sources, and selected bibliography.
Curriculum Dossier (1-5)	Written evidence of values and philosophy underlying curriculum practices, as well as contributions, impact, and assessment of curriculum practices. Integration of SoCP literature sources within text.
Stakeholder Data Collection (3,5)	Input from faculty, students, field professionals; review of university visioning documents, external accreditation documents (if appropriate), written evidence of perceived strengths, weaknesses, suggestions for program-level learning outcomes and student learning experiences; analysis summary and implications for further curriculum investigations
Learning-centred Curriculum Model and Course Syllabi (1,4,5)	Documentation of clearly presented program level learning outcomes, 4-year curriculum model and strategic curriculum-based learning experiences and evaluation; examples of learning-centred syllabi with course learning outcomes and integrated assessment.
Action Research: Peer Review of Curricular Practices (1-5)	Written documentation of curriculum investigations and analysis in 2 program settings, review of curriculum documents and interview questions, and a reflective statement pertaining to what has been learned, analysis summary, and implications for further curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation.
SoCP Self-Directed Learning Project (1-5)	Written evidence of a publishable paper/SoCP proposal for conducting curriculum research. Includes rationale and statement of SoCP problem/issue to be addressed; relevant literature review; conceptual framework(s) to inform study; SoCP research questions; methodology (and ethical review if appropriate); SoCP research implications and further studies; references; and dissemination plans.
Curriculum Research Presentation (1-5)	Visual and written evidence of conference presentation pertaining to a SoCP research project. Includes abstract, literature review, research questions, research methodology, implications for study results, and references.

Lessons learned I

Various aspects of the curriculum leadership portfolio have been improved each year since 1999. For example, data from participant feedback, portfolio assessment team feedback, and facilitator reflections have been used to incrementally reduce the number of portfolio assignments from an initial ten to the current seven assignments. This was achieved through the integration of some overlapping assignments (e.g., curriculum leader interviews and action research assignments) and the elimination of assignments that were not effectively contributing to the desired learning outcomes (e.g., a technology assignment requiring the use of I-movie software to create local curriculum vignettes). The quantity and quality of appropriate SoCP assignments will always be contextual and based on particular needs and circumstances. In the context of the 8-month UBC SoTL Leadership program, we have found that the current assignments provide an appropriate depth and breadth of SoCP experiences, as well as providing a balance between guidance and flexibility with regard to SoCP assignments, allowing participants to focus on personal areas of interest.

The program also provides flexibility regarding the format for the curriculum leadership portfolio, allowing participants to construct their portfolios in either hard copy or electronic form depending on their preference. A small but growing minority of program participants has opted to use a digital format. Participants of e-portfolios have commented that they were comfortable with this technology and that it enabled them greater access to and integration of curriculum scholarship materials (e.g., video footage, digital pictures, PowerPoint presentations, articles). Digital formatting has also facilitated the posting of these materials on faculty websites and reduced excessive printing of (ever-changing) paper materials. It should be acknowledged, however, that e-portfolio technology definitely supported some activities but precluded others, and therefore did present certain barriers (e.g., technological challenges for assessment processes, access to hard copy materials, etc). Further, some technological difficulties with implementation, in fact, distracted some new users from the reflection that is central to curriculum leadership portfolios (Buckley et al., 2009; Zellers & Mudrey, 2007). Consistent with other studies, users of e-portfolios have also expressed concerns about privacy issues and the lack of functionality and flexibility of portfolio software (Tosh, Penny Light, Fleming, & Haywood, 2005; Yancey, 2009).

Regardless of format, the iterative and complex process of developing a curriculum leadership portfolio can be overwhelming. Data suggest that by establishing goals to direct and focus the development of a curriculum leadership portfolio, program participants were able to monitor their progress to completion in more meaningful ways. These goals should be long term (e.g., to tailor portfolio assignments to suit one's own unique curriculum needs and circumstances), intermediate (e.g., to set monthly portfolio targets), and/or short term (e.g., to carry out an individual assignment to realistic completion).

Results: Objective 2) In what ways are curriculum leadership portfolios being used to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate degree program reform?

Curriculum leadership portfolios were used in many ways to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate degree program reform. First, it is important to note that

faculty members' constructions of curriculum leadership portfolios did not operate in isolation but rather functioned within a community of practice. As such, faculty members were engaged in on-going collaborations and peer-review with colleagues in curriculum learning community contexts, as well as with peers in the UBC SoTL Leadership program. In a review of data collected over a 10-year period with a total of 38 curriculum leadership portfolios in diverse curricular contexts, four key categories of SoCP investigations emerged (see Table 2). Although these categories were in many ways inter-related, the majority of SoCP investigations focused on issues of curriculum implementation.

Table 2. Emergent SoCP themes and examples of research foci

SoCP Research Theme	Examples of Foci for SoCP Investigations
Curriculum Contexts	Environmental scan of alternative/similar programs and SWOT analysis; external accreditation implications; academic planning, educational leadership, and tenure and promotion incentives; scholarship of curriculum practice and faculty development; developing curriculum learning communities and engaging curriculum stakeholders
Curriculum Development	Curriculum models; developing program-level learning outcomes; curriculum redesign; curriculum integration (vertical and horizontal); learning-centred course design
Curriculum Implementation	Curriculum learning communities; effective faculty 'buy-in' strategies; stage-specific implementation strategies for curriculum reform; barriers to curriculum reform; strategic interdisciplinarity, internship, large class size and/or educational technology experiences
Curriculum Evaluation	Critical indicators for program success; curriculum assessment and resource requirements; student recruitment and program-level learning outcomes; post-program graduate leadership positions

In conjunction with a review of relevant Faculty curriculum documentation (i.e., curriculum visioning documents, undergraduate curriculum notice-boards, and curriculum retreat meeting minutes) and individual portfolio analyses, focus group interviews with a representative sample of program participants and curriculum chairs revealed various uses of curriculum leadership portfolios in scholarly approaches to undergraduate degree program reform:

...it was a completely new learning process for me to engage in SoCP (and more broadly SoTL) literature - the portfolio assignments tapped into useful applications of curriculum change...I found it useful for exploring ways to develop learning outcomes from the ground-up, and align various outcome statements...I was able to reflect on typical course syllabi and then develop learning-centred practices which have become useful examples for faculty in our new program...compiling [and assessing] multiple stakeholder input regarding benchmarks for a quality program and learning-centred practices helped to find common ground and 'buy-in' with diverse groups... the portfolio provided a

substantive document of evidence-based data to guide our efforts and decision-making (in the face of skeptical colleagues and senior administration) for curriculum change...it took a lot of work and so, despite the unexpected challenge, I felt quite proud of my assignments and the useful record of scholarship around our curriculum reform experiences...through the [self-directed learning project] SDLP assignment, I gathered information to start a visible curriculum notice-board in our Faculty to disseminate curriculum reform challenges, progress and invitation for on-going dialogue and feedback through various channels. For example, displaying a visual 4-year curriculum model with existing course credits, examples of SoCP articles and future directions.

Examples of materials with participants



Lessons learned II

As expected, desirable outcomes did not always occur in practice as intended, with various positive and negative consequences. For example, data suggested that the curriculum leadership portfolios provided an opportunity for individualization and creativity that is often quite limited in formal academic work. This was not only viewed as engaging for many program participants, but it also provided a welcome variety for the portfolio assessors. Concurring with previous studies in alternative professional contexts, the mutual benefits of portfolio assessment were also afforded to assessors,

who not only gained insights into the process of participant learning through the reflective portfolio assignments, but were also provided a stimulus for their own self-reflections on curriculum practices (Zellers & Mudrey, 2007).

Based on the valuable suggestions received annually from program participants and portfolio assessors, the curriculum leadership portfolio is in constant transition with ongoing improvements and innovation (including co-authored scholarship opportunities). Thus, in addition to the annual 'tweaking' of the curriculum leadership portfolio guidelines (e.g., refining learning outcomes, assignment guidelines, and assessment practices), the following feedback from a representative sample of program participants and portfolio assessors could be used to further enhance curriculum leadership portfolio experiences. First, the complex logistics of compiling a curriculum leadership portfolio (e.g., appropriate selection of new literature, educational leadership decisions and initiatives, and research methodology), as well as the time and thought required of participants (who are simultaneously occupied with their busy disciplinary responsibilities, sometimes with inadequate support), was overwhelming for some, and therefore presented significant barriers to portfolio completion. Assessors also commented about the time required to effectively assess portfolios. Even with sound criteria, it took considerable time to adequately attend to each portfolio and provide the meaningful, personalized feedback it deserved. Several assessors noted that some participants had become so caught up in the creative formatting of their curriculum leadership portfolios that they had sometimes overlooked the need to adequately address all learning outcomes. In contrast, a few participants commented about the perceived rigidity of the portfolio assignments and deadline requirements, which did not totally meet their needs and circumstances, a barrier that has also been noted in the literature (Driessen, 2009). Assessors noted, again in concurrence with the literature, that program participants who were inexperienced in the art of self-reflection (specifically with respect to educational practices), would have benefited more from personal assistance in the form of guiding questions or prompts, samples of others' reflections, and increased levels of formative feedback throughout the program (Klenowski, 2002; Zellers & Mudrey, 2007).

The above challenges and difficulties are not insurmountable but do demand careful attention to the flexible structure, content, and assessment criteria for the curriculum leadership portfolios and the communication of these to the learners (Driessen, 2009). For example, on Day 1 of the UBC SoTL leadership program, more attention to these details could better prepare participants for curriculum leadership portfolio expectations by providing clearer information about related processes (e.g. planning, goal-setting, reflective analysis, and feedback deadlines). Also, monthly feedback opportunities could be offered to participants to assist with their progress.

Data from our research with curriculum chairs and SoTL leaders in various disciplines suggest that curriculum leadership portfolios enhanced dialogue amongst faculty colleagues, reflective practices, and ongoing scholarship activities with respect to curriculum change. These data generally suggest that portfolios enhanced incremental and short-term change toward learning-centred curricula practices and undergraduate program reform. However, there are currently no data from students (or about them) or long-term follow-up data to suggest the extent to which curriculum

leadership portfolios impacted student learning. Thus, further studies are required to investigate these issues, as well the growth of scholarship pertaining to learning-centred curriculum practices and undergraduate program reform.

Conclusion

This article examines critical contributions of curriculum leadership portfolios as an effective medium in which to support SoCP. As a form of new media for faculty development, the substantive reflection required during the development of a curriculum leadership portfolio (i.e., gathering, interpreting, assessing, and evaluating data sources) helps to improve curriculum practices and enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform. Specifically, data suggest that in various formats, curriculum leadership portfolios enhanced curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation by helping faculty to develop a reflective curriculum practice and engage in the literature on SoCP and SoTL; assess their curriculum context and identify the strengths and weaknesses of learning-centred curriculum practices; develop stage-specific strategies to enhance undergraduate reform; and disseminate evidence-based curriculum visioning in a community of practice. As part of an eclectic range of faculty development strategies, therefore, curriculum leadership portfolios provide an empowering mechanism for curriculum leaders to enhance scholarly approaches to undergraduate program reform. Processes and outcomes of curriculum leadership portfolios presented in this university context are transferable to a broad range of disciplines and institutional settings.

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