

DECAL: ■

A Strategy for Collaborative Literature Discussions

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Abstract

This article addresses a small group literature discussion technique that was implemented during one pre-service teacher's field experience in a seventh grade Language Arts classroom. Based on the principles of social constructivism and transactional theory of reader response, the DECAL model is structured to allow students to better understand the complexity of literary elements and to stimulate lively discussions. DECAL stands for Design, Extensions, Connections, Author's Structure, and Language. It is a variation of collaborative literacy in which group processes are a part of the individual learning activity. DECAL provides teachers with the steps to promote active engagement and empower students to build their own knowledge within the constructed democracy of learning. The small group literature discussion technique presented in this article is applicable to teacher educators who wish to address the important role of collaborative book discussion for young adolescent readers in middle grade pre-service teacher education.

In This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents (2003), the National Middle School Association (NMSA) (now called the Association of Middle Level Educators) offered that curriculum, instruction, and assessment for young adolescent learners should be specifically crafted for their unique needs. NMSA (2003) states, "The distinct learning characteristics of young adolescents provide the foundation for selecting learning and teaching strategies, just as they do for designing curriculum" (p. 2).

With the tenets of this position as our rationale, our focus with undergraduate middle grade education majors is to continually emphasize the important need to recognize the developmental characteristics of learners between the of ages ten to fifteen when designing middle level instruction (NMSA, 2003).

Design Extensions
Connections Author's Structure
Language

Accordingly, we teach our developing teachers that instruction is appropriately aligned to meet the unique needs of this age group that include the cognitive, physical, and psychological developmental characteristics of young adolescent learners, as well as their social developmental needs. In our work, we emphasize that active participation in learning is a necessity as middle grade students are inquisitive, eager to make sense of their lives and environment, and have a preoccupation with social peers (Brown & Knowles, 2007; Manning, 2002). Because young adolescents are social by their very nature, we take seriously the role that small group collaborative book discussions can play in student learning.

The primary purpose of this article is to present an innovative strategy to enable middle grade students to better understand the complexity of literary traits and to stimulate lively discussions during collaborative book talks while making meaning as a community of learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To do so, we present one pre-service middle grade teacher's journey to plan and implement collaborative literacy during her Language Arts methods' practicum field experience featuring DECAL. DECAL is a small group instructional strategy that serves as a springboard to engage students in interactive discussions while reading and responding to literature.

We begin with a discussion of our initial conference meetings with our pre-service teacher to lay the foundation for DECAL as a collaborative literacy strategy. We then describe the meaning and learning components of DECAL and provide the steps and instructional materials to initiate DECAL in the classroom. In addition, we examine the concept of collaborative literacy, as well as an account of what the literature has found to be the positive benefits when small groups of students come together to share their thinking through collaborative book discussions. We conclude with a discussion on the implications for using DECAL as a collaborative literacy strategy for young adolescent readers.

The Background

A few weeks before Jess (a pseudonym) taught her Language Arts unit for her practicum field experience, she confided in us her fears of using collaborative group work in a middle grade classroom. First, she

was worried she would not be able to manage the group, and secondly, she was worried about student accountability in an era of high-stakes testing. With little experience teaching, we—the professor and the field supervisor—understood her concerns, but we were eager for Jess to recognize the social developmental needs of the young adolescent learner and to plan instruction that would appropriately engage her students in active participation through collaborative interaction (Brown & Knowles, 2007). Accordingly, we wanted her to understand the power of group work to build knowledge when students are given opportunities to connect their life's experiences to texts and build communities of learners (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann, 2008).

With the additional pressure to meet benchmarks for student achievement, the three of us began planning the unit in spring 2012 by first integrating the state and national Language Arts' standards for the seventh grade classroom where she was placed for her practicum experience. Jess was assigned to teach *Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008); therefore, we turned our attention to plan instruction that would permit small groups of students to read and discuss the book while working collectively to negotiate meaning. With these tenets in mind, we turned our focus to a group strategy that we believed would enable her seventh grade students to better understand the complexity of literary elements and to stimulate lively discussions. The small group literature discussion strategy we chose and the supporting questions for discussion were created by the first author with input from the second author. The strategy is a variation of the popular method of literature circles (Daniels, 1994, 2002) called DECAL that Jess had learned in my methods class for Language Arts.

DECAL: The Construct

While DECAL is an extension of collaborative literacy, it is designed to permit middle grade students to delve more deeply into the complexity of literary traits under the guidance of strategic categories and questions to foster learning. The acronym DECAL represents five facets of learning in regard to literary text. DECAL stands for **Design, Extensions, Connections, Author's Structure, and Language**. It is a variation of collaborative literacy in which group processes are a part of the individual learning activity. In this process, individual and collective activities rely on each other. Collaborative literacy encompasses a variety of titles and varying interpretations that focus on developing comprehension and an appreciation for literature. Harris and Hodges (1995) posit that collaborative literacy promotes individual knowledge when students work in small groups with a common goal or purpose. In conjunction, Wood, Roser, and Martinez (2001)

articulate that collaborative literacy is a construct in which students work together to read and discuss literature in a context that promotes acceptance. In fact, research has shown that collaborative book discussions provide the opportunity to develop literacy skills that lead to thoughtful, competent, and critical readers (Sandman & Gruhler, 2007). Other studies have shown student engagement in discussions about texts have improved reading comprehension, higher-level thinking skills (Kucan & Beck, 2003), and increased motivation (Almasi, McKeown, Hamilton, & Kucan, 1997; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Additionally, research has revealed that literature discussions provide opportunities for students to ponder confusing aspects of text and to "gain not only a deeper understanding and appreciation of text ideas, but also a deeper understanding of what it means to think about those ideas" (Kucan & Beck, 2003, p. 3). Correspondingly, Hill, Johnson, and Noe (1995) contend that as students engage in discussion, the act of studying, pondering, and thinking carefully leads students to be more thoughtful and evaluative of their own responses. Research has further shown that students, who once felt marginalized in whole class discussions, learn to discover their voices and become competent participants (Johnson, 2000; Sandman & Gruhler, 2007) in small group literature discussions. In essence, students realize the power of the written word and in turn, they begin to value participation in the democracy of learning (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007).

Conceptually, DECAL is framed by two theoretical traditions that provide a set of coherent ideas for understanding how the strategy shapes literacy practices in a collaborative environment. Specifically, conceptual support for DECAL is framed by social constructivism and transactional theory of reader response. In a social constructivist classroom, learning is constructed in a social setting as students share knowledge to negotiate meaning (Vygotsky, 1878; Wells, 2004). The theory that reading is transactional has been described by Sisk (2003) as "the process of reading as a carefully orchestrated relationship between the reader and the text in a social situation" (p. 11). Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reader response describes the process of reading engagement as a reader construction of the text, and student response as a personal event. Therefore, as readers interact personally with the words on the page, multiple meanings can develop as these interactions between the reader and text are personal and relate to each individual reader's experiences. Accordingly, a social constructivist perspective and the transactional theory of reader response provide a meaningful conceptual framework for DECAL because the strategy permits young adolescents to connect prior experiences and knowledge and then offer

personal responses while engaging in collaborative discussions.

Planning for DECAL

Jess was very interested to implement DECAL in her instructional unit, but she was unsure of how to begin. As an undergraduate middle grade education major, she worried how to form the groups for reading and how to assess individual and group learning. Jess's seventh grade class consisted of twenty-nine students (thirteen males and sixteen females) of mixed reading abilities. According to the results of the 2011 state-mandated reading test, 75% of the students in her class were reading on grade level, 5% of her students were reading below grade level, and the remaining 20% were determined to be reading above the seventh grade reading level. The students attended a Title I middle school in a rural community approximately 40 miles from a mid-size city in the Southeastern region of the United States. The ethnic make-up of her class consisted of the following: White students (48%), Black students, (41%), Hispanic students (8%), and Asian students (3%). All but five of the students participated in the free and/or reduced school lunch program. The five students who did not qualify for free and/or reduced lunch ranged from medium to prosperous socioeconomic status.

Based on her concerns, one of the first tasks in planning was to determine how the groups would be formed and our advice was to avoid self-selected groups; a procedure that frequently allows friends to be with friends and negates new and different perspectives. Jess then proposed ability grouping as she thought this would be a time where she could do more hands-on guided instruction with less capable readers. We welcomed her interest in guided instruction, but we asked Jess to reflect on the best instructional practices for middle grade students she had learned in my Language Arts methods course. In our discussion, we pointed to research that supports how heterogeneous grouping provides opportunities for equal access to participation, allows for all voices to be heard, and requires active assistance among participants involved in meaning-making activities (Burris, Wiley, Welner, & Murphy, 2008). In this view, less capable members appropriate knowledge through interaction with more capable peers and is what Vygotsky (1978) termed in his seminal explanation of learning as the zone of proximal development. We emphasized that she would be one of the more capable members as she moved among the groups to facilitate discussion and scaffold learning; a procedure that would allow her to monitor, manage, and assess each group's collaborative interaction. Jess agreed to use heterogeneous groups and acknowledged that this method would be best for her diverse seventh

grade students. As a caution, we did prepare her for the possibility of what Kapur (2008) has termed as productive failure; the processes whereby students initially fail at a new task but overcome and learn from their missteps. In our final preparation meeting, we emphasized that assessment is an on-going occurrence in small group discussion (Frey, Fisher, & Everlove, 2009) and would require that she, the group, and individual members evaluate the learning experience to give her students a venue to share their knowledge and reflect on their roles as participants.

Jess Puts DECAL in Action

To initiate DECAL in the classroom, Jess implemented the following procedures, having been previously advised that the time allotted for her seventh grade students to fully grasp each step would best be determined by the needs of her students. For purposes of this article, the procedures we provided Jess are purposely separated by whole class and small group instruction to provide a gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Subsequently, this procedure allows for teachers to move from teacher-centered discussions, in which they control the flow of activity, to shared stances, in which responsibility is more equally shared, to more student-centered stances in which students take primary responsibility. In addition, the significant terms for each component of DECAL may be adjusted for purposes of state-mandated learning objectives and grade level requirements. To illustrate DECAL in action, we have provided excerpts of Jess's interactions with her students that were captured during our observation visits. All students' names from Jess's classroom are pseudonyms.

Whole Class Instruction

Step one. Jess began the instructional unit by providing each student with a handout of materials. Focusing on the *Strategy Guide of Key Concepts* in their handouts, Jess displayed the guide (see Table 1) for her students to view using the available technology in the classroom. She then introduced the strategy by first discussing the meaning of each letter in the word DECAL and then followed with an explanation of the components that comprise the strategy. To assist her seventh grade students, Jess used the following descriptions in order for them to understand the components of DECAL: **D** represents Design which signifies the textual foundation the author has created to tell the story; **E** represents Extensions and involves processes that require students to expand their knowledge and explore the text further; **C** represents Connections as readers make associations with the text; **A** represents Author's Structure and focuses on authors' elements; and **L** represents language and is an examination of the many functions of language.

TABLE 1 Strategy Guide for Key Concepts in DECAL

DESIGN	EXTENSIONS	CONNECTIONS	AUTHOR'S STRUCTURE	LANGUAGE
Purpose	Author's Work/Life	Reader's Experience	Genre	Vocabulary
Theme	Perspectives	Predictions	Format	Figurative
Conflict	Inquiry	Text to Self	Patterns	Literary
Values/Beliefs	Alternatives	Text to Text	Point-of-View	Author's Tone
Symbolism	Voices	Text to World	Plot Structure	Mood
Motivation	Dilemmas/ Controversies	Character Identification	Structural Elements	Power
Bias	Unanswered	Sympathy/Empathy	Character Development	Foreign

Following this initial overview of DECAL, Jess discussed the significant terms associated with each component in learnable parts. She then clearly described each term and provided an appropriate context to bring meaning to the terms. In doing so, she used the familiar story *The Breadwinner* for DECAL. As Jess began this step, she directly instructed her students in the following manner:

Class, under the word *design*, you will see the word purpose. Remember, in our previous literature discussions, we have defined author's purpose as the main idea. Since we have just finished reading *The Breadwinner*, I will use this book since you are familiar with it. I would say that the purpose of the book was to teach readers about the horrors from oppression that people in Afghanistan faced under the Taliban rule, especially women and girls. I think the author's purpose for telling this story was to tell readers about the loss of freedom.

Prior to beginning this first step, Jess had been advised that this step may involve both pre-teaching and re-teaching each term based on her students' prior knowledge and may take several Language Arts instructional periods to model each component of DECAL. We make the same recommendation for teachers in the classroom.

Step two. This step required Jess to use explicit teacher instruction and involved several instructional periods. Jess began this stage by referring her students to the *Guiding Questions for DECAL* in their handouts while she displayed the questions (see Table 2) for her students to view using the available technology. Once again, she used *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000) as her literature example to read the questions aloud and to model the appropriate responses for each component.

As she verbalized the questions and responses, she paused and modeled how to think aloud what was being asked to help her middle grade students make meaningful cognitive connections between the types of questions and the component of DECAL. By doing so, she taught her students how to self-monitor their learning by utilizing metacognitive strategies—thinking about thinking (Fountas & Pinnell, 2000). In other words, Jess specifically modeled an important method for her students to begin to process information. To illustrate, Jess modeled how to think aloud in the following manner:

Class, I want you to follow along with me while I read a category question aloud. Please refer to your *Guiding Questions for DECAL* and I will demonstrate how to think about what the question is asking me. I will use *The Breadwinner* since you know this book. Please look under the word design and look at the second question while I read it out loud. The question is: *What special message or theme is the author trying to convey through the writing?* Now, when I read the words theme and special message, I stop and think (Jess models out loud), this is the big idea or a topic the author wants us to explore. For *The Breadwinner*, I think the author wants us to think about all the obstacles the Afghan people faced, such as disease, homelessness, starvation, and oppression. Now when I think about these obstacles, I think a good theme might be survival.

Jess continued to model how to think aloud as she addressed the guiding questions for each category. This was also a valuable time for her to assess her students' prior knowledge of the significant terms from the previous step. As her students tapped into their knowledge of DECAL's components, Jess engaged in

TABLE 2 Guiding Questions for DECAL

DESIGN

What is the author's purpose for writing the story/text?
What special message or theme is the author trying to convey through the writing?
What are the conflicts (internal/external) found in the story/text?
What responses to the ideas, beliefs, and values in the literary selection do you have?
How has the author used symbolism in this text/story and why?
How and why are the characters motivated?
What biases are presented in this story/text?

EXTENSIONS

What information can you provide about the author's work/life?
What perspectives are presented in this text/story?
How can your understanding of the text be extended?
What changes/revisions would you make to this text/story and why?
Whose voices are silent? Why? Whose voices are heard? Why?
What dilemmas or controversies are discussed in this text that relate to our world today?
What more do you want to know about the concepts and/or conflicts presented in this text?

CONNECTIONS

What experiences have you had with this form of reading?
What do you predict will happen next in the text/story?
What comparisons can be made with other literary selections?
How does this text/story relate to your personal life?

How does the literary selection relate to the author's life and other works?
How does this literary selection relate to events or people in the real world?
With which character can you identify and why? How do you describe the connection?
Which character or characters do you sympathize and empathize? How so?

AUTHOR'S STRUCTURE

What type of literary work is the selection?
How is the literary text formatted?
What patterns do you observe?
The story or text is written from whose point-of-view?
What is the plot structure? Is it a circular or linear journey?
What structural literary elements are used?
Foreshadowing? Flashbacks?
How are the characters structured? Round? Flat? Stereotype? Archetype?

LANGUAGE

What unfamiliar, unusual, and foreign words are used in the literature?
What figurative elements are used? Metaphors? Similes? Personification? Onomatopoeia?
What special literary language is detected in the writing? Irony? Satire?
What is the author's tone?
What is the mood of this text/story? How do you feel when you read?
From the author's language, what character is preferred or rejected?

a reiterative process to make sure the students had grasped the important words.

Step three. For purposes of this article, this step combines the teaching materials from the students' handout packet in a whole class setting. This phase permits time to scaffold learning while acting as a coach and to gradually move from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning. Jess began this step by instructing her students to return to the *Strategy Guide for Key Components*. She then displayed the guide once again using the available classroom technology and referred her students to the *Guiding Questions for DECAL* in their handout packet. As she led her students during this stage, she demonstrated how to address one component of DECAL at a time and to use the strategy questions to address each term within a component. Jess then allowed time for guided instruction as she and

student volunteers combined examples of the key components with their corresponding questions. The following exchange between Jess and her students were captured during our teaching observations:

Jess: I am going to use the category author's structure. Nick, why don't you choose one of the terms for us?

Nick: Okay, I will pick point-of-view.

Jess: Good choice. Now look at your handout for guiding questions and read the question that goes with point-of-view.

Nick: The story or text is written from whose point-of-view?

Jess: Okay good. The question is asking you to tell us the character who is telling the story. It might even be the author.

Nick: Okay, I get it. I think the author is telling the story.

Sam: But, I think it might be Parvana.

Nick: I mean the author is speaking through Parvana so it is Parvana's point-of-view because she is experiencing the meanness of the Taliban and she is sharing her life with us.

Jess: Good job you two! I would agree that it is Parvana's point-of-view as told through the author.

Jess continued to engage student volunteers in this process as a means to monitor and informally assess her students' understanding. As her students began to understand how the questions worked in conjunction with each term, Jess allowed independent time for student pairs to complete the strategy guide

Step four. During this stage, Jess allotted time for her students to share their responses to the significant terms on the strategy guide, analyze and evaluate responses, make changes, and clarify any questions or concerns the seventh graders had. This step marked the conclusion of whole group instruction as her middle grade students prepared to assume full responsibility for their literacy activity during their collaborative meetings.

Small Group Instruction

Step five. For purposes of this article, this stage highlights the beginning of small group assignments and group discussions. Classroom teachers can use their own grouping methods based on the book to be read; however, we suggest students be assigned to pre-determined heterogeneous groups consisting of four to five students. In Jess's classroom, this task was accomplished by assigning students to a character in *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). The students then met up with other students who had been given the same character to form their group. Because Jess had twenty-nine seventh grade students, she formed five groups of five students and one group of four students. She instructed the group with only four members that the category of Extensions in DECAL would be addressed by the group in a final activity. Once the groups were in place, Jess established clear parameters for effective communication. While middle grade students need the opportunity to talk and ask questions during their group meetings, she knew that her students must be taught rules on how to listen respectfully, ask appropriate questions, and give constructive feedback so that structure is in place during group interaction.

The students then met to create a schedule for reading and determined how much to read before the next meeting. Each member was allocated a component of the DECAL model and regularly rotated responsibilities among group participants. The reading was completed individually and the students prepared for their collaborative reading discussion using the

guiding questions within their DECAL component. In Jess's classroom, regularly scheduled discussions occurred within the classroom setting until the text reading was complete.

On a weekly basis, Jess met with each group to evaluate their learning experience and record student responses. During this time, Jess reported she used a variety of questions to probe, such as (1) *How do you view your membership in a literary community as an active participant?*, (2) *How does the participation in a collaborative community enhance your comprehension of the reading?*, and (3) *How does the participation in a collaborative literacy community create a feeling of self-accomplishment?* The students were then given the opportunity to voice their individual reflections through journal writing. As a culminating task, each group planned a literature showcase, such as a reader's theater, enacted scenes, rewrote scenes, or created a video using digital technology for class enjoyment. It was during this time that the group of four students seized the opportunity to elaborate on the Extensions dimension of DECAL.

Jess's Findings

Vacca and Vacca (1999) explicate, "Through the power of talk . . . students are able to transcend the information encountered in text; and in doing so, they are in a better position to transform knowledge and make it their own" (p. 212). Jess's efforts to involve her middle level readers in a small group literature discussion provided an experience that thrilled all three of us in terms of the students' textual engagement and their enjoyment for learning where words such as "cool," "helpful," and "more fun" were heard time and again. For example, Jess told us her students liked discussing stories in small groups and several of her students felt their ideas were listened to for the first time. Jess also shared that many of her students believed they learned more by discussing the reading in collaboration with their group versus reading on their own for comprehension.

Jess discovered that DECAL endorsed an environment that was conducive for her young adolescents to build a sense of community as they grappled to understand the complexities of literary analysis. She found that her student-centered approach was engaging for her students to make connections to their personal lives and inviting for students to learn through collaborative and social opportunities. For example, during group meetings, Jess captured how the issue of prejudice became front and center in each of the collaborative literacy meetings while discussing *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008). Most of the students readily acknowledged that issues of social justice in literature were relevant to today's problems as the students

connected to racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and political prejudice. Jess shared that words such as “bias,” “discrimination,” and “picked on for being poor” were repeatedly heard. Additionally, some students often spoke from personal, sometimes painful experiences that illustrated the strong connections they had for this piece of literature. For instance, Jess explained that one student wrote in his dialogue journal about his personal experiences with prejudice by offering that he was tired of being judged because of the clothes he wore, where he lived, and the color of his skin.

Jess further found the DECAL strategy provided her young adolescents a venue to engage in in-depth discussions as the students collaborated to understand the inner workings of texts and the interpretive possibilities. For example, Jess shared that as the students began to grapple with the significant terms of *controversies* and *dilemmas*, the students began to recognize the social inequities in the reading and grew outraged at the political and cultural dominance in the hands of a few. In these instances, Jess reported that student dialogue reflected a value that membership in a cultural group or a lack thereof created an imbalance of privilege. At the same time, the strategy supported a continuum in the development of reading stances by posing questions to encourage students to read with a critical eye (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). For example, while reading and discussing *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), Jess recalled how one group struggled with the idea of killing other District members in order to survive, but she observed the students to reposition and change subjectivities to make sense of the textual world. Many of her students argued that the main character needed to do whatever it took in order to survive. Other students acknowledged their admiration for the main character who chose to fight in place of her younger sister and drew upon her inner strengths to fight, to kill, and to win. In this instance, the situated context (Gee, 2001) within the social group allowed the students to make sense of the character’s decisions and actions. They were able to recognize that killing is against society’s mores on the one hand, but they were willing to make exceptions in this context. In other words, the students learned to suspend their initial judgments about the story character by positioning to take the character’s perspective. In doing so, the DECAL strategy permitted the students to engage in critical stance.

Conclusion

To support learning opportunities for her young adolescents, Jess recognized and understood the importance of building an open and accepting environment for her learners to come together as a

community of active participants (Wood, Roser, & Martinez, 2001). Jess discovered that collaborative literacy was a mechanism for socializing the content and positioned her students as learners, thinkers, and actors. This participation structure is what Rogoff (1994) refers to as transformation of participation, whereby all participants played active roles in the process of learning, both as individuals, as well as to the community in which this learning is important. In this instance, she combined the theory and research she had learned in my Language Arts methods course and applied her understanding of this knowledge. Through the implementation of DECAL as an instructional strategy for collaborative literature discussions, her students constructed meaning while reading and responding to literature, made connections to their lives, and developed a sense of enjoyment and belonging. To state succinctly, DECAL was a smart strategy for Jess to bring her seventh grade students together to talk about a book they had read.

Implications for Using DECAL to Build Collaborative Literacy

In 1993, Mercer (1993) asserted that learning is talk; learning is enhanced when students have opportunities to talk about the ideas and to respond to the ideas of others. Today, Mercer’s words still hold true. To reach all young adolescent readers, middle grade teachers need to recognize that for students to gradually take responsibility for reading and comprehending at higher complex levels of thought, then students must be involved in the exchange and exploration of ideas which are central elements to the understanding and creation of competent readers. This requires middle grade teachers to plan opportunities for their students to share developing thoughts, pose questions to each other, and to collaborate while making meaning of the texts and their own life’s experiences. Accordingly, the use of collaborative literacy is an effective method of social interaction because the collective thinking of the group helps each individual group member’s thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). As students interact, they realize their prior knowledge, the knowledge they are acquiring, and the skills they are learning in order to acquire future knowledge are all tied together. When middle grade teachers emphasize a community of learners through collaborative literature discussions (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they understand that by providing a safe environment for groups’ social and emotional needs, they are giving their students a sense of belonging and enabling them to feel connected to others. Using DECAL in a collaborative literature context endorses an attitude that is conducive for young adolescents to work together and support one another throughout the reading process.

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