Teaching and Learning of International Business:
A Case Highlighting Pedagogical and Political Issues

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The global economy requires companies to integrate the specialist training of their workforces, formulate and execute strategy centrally and nurture their economic vitality. The educational implications for business students in learning about the global business environment can be adjudged differently from that of business in a purely domestic context, i.e., students need to learn about globalisation, national and international business environments and how companies manage their international operations. The current paper interprets the teaching and learning implications of the development of a multi-disciplinary international business unit, specifically in terms of evidenced pedagogical and political issues. The outcome suggests that, in institutional settings, the political voice of an intransigent minority can be more influential than successful resolution of pedagogical issues that have resulted in the establishment of a "quality" unit.

Keywords: pedagogy, international business, teaching and learning, integrated studies, business teaching

Introduction

J. J. Wild, K. L. Wild, and Han (2008, p. 6) describe globalisation as the "trend toward greater economic, cultural, political, and technological interdependence among national institutions and economies". Naim's (n.d.) view is that it "provides a conduit not only for ideas but also processes of co-ordination and co-operation used by terrorists, politicians, religious leaders, anti-globalisation activists, and bureaucrats alike". By adding "students" to this list, the educational implications for business students in learning about the global business environment can be adjudged differently from that of business in a purely domestic context. That is, students need to learn about globalisation, national and international business environments and how companies manage their international operations. Moreover, students need to learn about co-operation in organisations at all levels; personal, professional and multi-disciplinary. Integrative workplace behaviours can be developed from acquisition of these skills and competitive corporate advantage and sustainable personal development can result.

An increasing number of medium and larger organisations are ignoring the shackles of size and competing nationally, regionally and globally despite localism being deeply ingrained in many medium and small enterprises bounded by domestic, municipal and provincial boundaries (Meyer, 2008).

The transition to competing in the global economy requires companies capable of integrating the specialist

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training of their workforce, formulating and executing strategy centrally and nurturing their economic vitality to meet the demands of cultural challenges and international trade in a world where national security continues to be a motif, economic fragmentation persists and financial uncertainty is accelerating.

There is virtually no argument against Schoemaker's (2008, p. 119) contention that "business education should be based on a curriculum for managing emerging technologies in a fast-changing world and maintaining a balance between business and society". Similarly, there is no lack of curriculum developments regarding business education. However there are valid, consistent demonstrations that constituents regularly "criticize business schools for failing to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of how business organizations function" (Athavale, Davis, & Myring, 2008, p. 295).

The potential benefits and transformational nature of an integrative curriculum have resulted in considerable attention in scholarly literature, e.g., focus has been directed to:

• Descriptions of the external forces that create the demand for integration within business education (Stover, Morris, Pharr, Reyes, & Byers, 1997);

• More than 60 publications that have reported on 20 different methods to integrate the business curriculum at 35 universities (Hamilton, McFarland, & Mirchandani, 2000);

• Examination of techniques used in curriculum integration (Young & Murphy, 2003);

• Global mobility that has impacted upon both the workplace and the tertiary classroom (UNESCO, 2005).

As a consequence of the globalisation of business and the commercialisation of tertiary education, universities have turned to a three-pronged approach of changing, modernising and promoting the context of international business through their tertiary business education programmes. One such approach is presented in the current paper.

Teaching/Learning Challenges

The task of assisting tertiary students inexperienced in the world of business to exit the university and become integrated, knowledgeable business employees capable of establishing a substantial international career is one which equally challenges both the university and business institutions. Nevertheless, the chasm between the two extremes provides an essential stage of growth which institutions can use to capture and exercise personal and organisational intellect to provide opportunities and examples of converting tertiary teaching into dynamic learning that can be transferred into life-long learning in the business world.

In the current case, undergraduate business students were enrolled in a business degree programme which had two major features:

• A "core" programme of six common units studied by all first-year commerce students;

• A third-year compulsory "capstone" business unit designed to provide a realistic experience of strategy implementation for an organization operating within a competitive environment.

A substantial gap between the first and third year programme features was evident to students and academics alike. A unit in international business targeted at a second-year level to reinforce the learning in the generic 1st-year studies, extend the study of international business and provide a developmental link to the 3rd-year "capstone" unit which required established teamwork and multi-disciplinary skills was missing.

The challenge was to develop an innovative, multi disciplinary unit in relation to teaching and learning that

would bridge the gap between the first and final year units. The unit needed to be integrating across disciplines to make a holistic difference to the skills of students and give them experience at working with students from other study areas.

The Answer—In Theory

Initially, it was determined by university staff that the second year unit would be a multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural, multi skilling unit to develop emphasis on the "co-operation" of professionals within a company to establish and maintain "competitiveness" with its external environment. As the eighth common core unit for all business undergraduates, it was designed to align with three major educational objectives for students to:

- Obtain a foundation of applied business knowledge;
- Develop and enhance professional skills;
- Expand their capacity to operate in an international, multi disciplinary environment.

A combination of discipline specific language, theoretical understandings, principles and models would be provided during lecture sessions. Tutorial sessions based on a series of experiential activities to enable the development and practice of realistic business skills relevant to the international business environment would be developed. A pre-requisite for admission was that students would have completed all requirements of their first year programme.

Unit delivery was based on a three-part course:

- Part A—Introduction—the nature of international business—Our Context;
- Part B—Functional Skills—operating in international/global settings—Our Actions;
- Part C—Discipline Perspectives—issues in international business—Our Challenges.

In the first phase, a team of discipline-based lecturers would be drawn from sub-schools within the business faculty. Their task was to prepare and present lectures, conduct tutorials, facilitate group discussions with appropriate illustrations of current international business practices, discuss case studies, clarify business language and other specialist issues. To provide continuity across the 12 different lecturers and weekly topics, a unit co-ordinator would attend each lecture and tutorial to act as a learning resource for students. An initial cohort of 30 students would be drawn from across the faculty to trial the unit in one semester. The second semester would see the unit offered to all second year business students before the unit was extended to offshore campuses and offered to students attending those sites.

The Answer—In Reality

The greatest danger in presenting the multi-disciplinary approach was to ensure that each weekly portion of the unit was not seen as a stand alone topic. With 10-12 different lecturers this was a very real concern. Not only were students required to develop multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural teamwork skills, but so were staff members. By conveying a sense of teamwork among the staff, a positive role model was provided for students. Furthermore, the commitment, talent and collaborative nature of the staff involved extended to them developing co-operative research involving different disciplines.

The delivery of lectures and the materials included was appropriate and the dedication of staff to their own discipline and international business was obvious and more than satisfactory. Additionally, their selection of

relevant pedagogical techniques to involve students in their learning tasks was closely allied to the lecture material and the needs of students to develop multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural teamwork skills.

It became obvious that for students, the greatest difficulty was related to the imbalance between students who had completed their first year units in the home university and those who, having completed the first year of their programme overseas, were studying and living in unfamiliar surroundings for the first time. The intended aim of having each study team comprised of a broad representation of gender, nationality and academic discipline options was achieved and the team members provided additional social support for students.

Similarly, Part A of the unit, proved an ideal way to assist new students adjust to the topic, the learning expectations and in meeting new associates with its introduction to international business in the lectures and international teamwork skills in tutorials.

Part B, with its emphasis on the language and cultural aspects of business, was a valuable addition to the unit content. This part proved to be even more useful in that tutorials enabled students to recognize, practice and learn a range of functional skills that could be developed in the current unit and used in other undergraduate units. Student workgroups/teams began to function positively and without constant supervision with merely guidance by experienced staff with "teaching and learning" competencies. Having the experiential learning activities in Part B pitched at an ideal level assisted group functionality as well.

It was apparent in Part C of the unit, that students made more effort to attend classes in "disciplines" with which they were familiar and to hear staff that belonged to the sub-school in which they were enrolled and/or most interested.

Initially, the assessment of student progress was to be made in two ways, formally and informally. Each week, during tutorial sessions the lecturer took advantage of the student work-group sessions to visit each team individually in an informal manner to ensure that appropriate learning was taking place and to provide immediate feedback. Formally, there were three assessment activities. Individually, each student was required to present an emailed communication of their weekly reflective learning journal (worth 20%) to the unit coordinator. The second individual assessment item required students to write a paper on research and comparative evaluation of two journal articles/texts (worth 30%). A group research project (worth 50%), with both an oral and written presentation, required the input of each team member's discipline understanding and group decision-making leading to group consensus about a purpose-written case study provided by the unit coordinator.

Developing and presenting a new unit is fraught with unintended consequences as well as anticipated and unanticipated opportunities which are welcomed as a significant part of the development. In the current case, despite the students' reported overall success of the trial process, collective input from involved staff indicated a number of areas where they wanted to make changes to ensure that the unit was not simply unique, but appropriately innovative.

Responding to the Teaching/Learning Feedback

At the conclusion of an initial trial semester, a number of issues were identified for re-consideration.

Textbook

Although there are a number of available textbooks that have been written specifically for supporting the teaching of international business in a multi-disciplinary way, including Australian texts (Wild et al., 2007;

Fisher, Hughes, Griffin, & Pustay, 2006), there was not a single book that specifically covered the goals, directions and content of the current unit. In another situation, an Australian university (Kennedy & Stoney, 2007) has a text that covers the teaching of four undergraduate units, although having an ideal content, it is an extensive and expensive book available only to persons enrolled in the specific programme at that university. Consequently, the authoring of a purpose-written text was considered a possible, future, co-operative activity for involved staff.

Student Handbook

In the absence of a specific textbook, a unit handbook was provided as a central repository for staff input, student collation of learning materials and a record of unit progress. The loose-leaf, shrink-wrapped handbook was distributed with holes punched for ready placement in an A4 file. The advantage of the handbook was that it could be up-graded formally each semester, and weekly insets added during the semester.

Student Assessment

The task of having students email their reflective writing journal to the coordinator was successful, however, students new to the university after completing their first year units overseas were adapting to a new lifestyle, study regimen and computer system so it took longer to complete the task than expected. The recommendation was that, in future, journals be marked in class to enable more immediate individual and group feedback.

Eighty percent of students selected and evaluated journal articles directly referred to during lectures and/or associated with the tutorial work; consequently, their research, writing and learning involved, while limited, strongly supported the lecture materials and unit goals. The case study was written in two parts, specifically for the unit. Part A was used for the team to prepare and present an oral report to the whole tutorial class. Once oral presentations were concluded, teams were able to use Part B to prepare a written report—The crux of the written report was to examine, with the case organization, the interaction of staff members with various discipline specialties.

Use of Technology

Following the trial, the multi-disciplinary unit was to be extended to all business school students, including those studying overseas. As a consequence, students were encouraged to use the established blackboard technology. The trial experience was that students, and staff, were somewhat reluctant to use the technology at the start of the new unit. However, as the semester progressed, the number of users increased quite dramatically and, by the end of the semester, blackboard was the preferred method of contact.

Teamwork

Finally, the early emphasis in tutorials on international teamwork benefited students; they developed into close knit groups and established continuing relationships with students from other disciplines. The benefits were exhibited in the increased interaction among group members, more confidence in personal and group member contributions and the broadening of ideas beyond those of individual disciplines. In large part, the success of the tutorials was related to the selection by staff of material geared to the needs and abilities of second-year students and to the level of connection each staff member was able to achieve with class members during their interaction.

Pedagogical Issues

The second stage of implementation of the new unit was to extend its availability to all 2nd-year business

students. Consequently, changes were made as result of learning from the trial semester and in order to adapt the unit to cater for a cohort of up to 1,000 students.

Unit Delivery

Although the content of lectures remained largely the same, some changes were made to suit the delivery in large lecture theatres. In addition, with the prospect of the unit being taught in overseas partner programmes, an I-Lecture format was investigated and trialled.

Team Member Handbook

In order to ensure that all students had a comparable background in learning skills, more guide sheets on "learning-to-learn" were included. The emphasis was on creating quality unit experiences and developing a work-integrated learning (WIL) that suggested potential learning activities related to integrating university and industry experiences. The handbook was designed to be a workbook. It was brought to each class and tutorial, written in and material added, when necessary. A substantial section at the beginning of the workbook was designed to assist students learn how to be a constructive team member and a successful learner. Included were ideas on learning in tutorials, team roles and development, a how-to-study guide, with tips on learning topics such as how to use the university library, undertake the required oral and written presentation tasks, referencing skills and planning a personal learning timetable.

Tutorial Experiences

With the advent of a large enrolment of students, it was not possible for topic lecturers to meet with every tutorial group. However, lecturers did develop a standard format for providing weekly materials to assist learning and generate ideas to assist team understanding and experiences (see Table 1).

Table 1

Weekly Learning Resources

Unit objectives	Readings	Lecture handouts
Active learning tasks	Personal tasks	Case study
Unit questions	Discussion questions	References

In addition, the unit coordinator was charged with locating and employing the requisite number of tutors, and provided a 2-day training programme to induct them into the challenges of tutorial management, the uniqueness of the multi-disciplinary approach and strategies available for use with individuals, teams or the tutorial class as a whole to assist in the maximizing of learning.

Unit lecturers were available to interact with students during and after lectures, and available to tutors to clarify specific matters arising from the tutorial experiences.

Learning Journal

Based on Kolb's (1984) four-stage learning cycle of experience, reflection, generalization and action, together with the four learning styles of diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating, students in the trial reported favourably on the value of using a journal to record their personal learning. Consequently, it was determined to use the E.R.G.A. as the format for students to provide an end-of-unit summary, rather than a weekly submission, on the value of their learning during the unit.

Writing Task

For a variety of reasons, ranging from a concern about enrolling students' writing and language skills to the need for tutors to learn quickly about their student group, a simple writing task was required of all students in the first tutorial. In addition to nominating their name, student ID, major study discipline, gender and university background (local or overseas), students were asked to write an A4 page response to one of the following questions:

- What have you learned in your first year at university?
- How do consider your current studies will help your future career?
- How useful is intercultural knowledge in the conduct of international business?

The advantage for tutors was that they were able to structure the tutorial classes to meet the identified, individual needs of students; for students with limited writing/language skills, the tutor was able to refer them to specialist language skill development seminars.

Case Study

As a variation to the international business case written specifically for the trial period of the new unit, the case in the second semester was based on a purpose-designed and filmed DVD. The lecturer in each topic developed a set of questions related to the content of their lecture. The questions, then, were presented to three former students of the university's business progamme: one was a business owner in Zhuhai, China, with links to Northern Asia, Japan and across the Pacific to North America; a second was employed in an international business based in Singapore with links from South-Asia through Sri Lanka, India and the Far East; the third was based in Casablanca, Morocco, with dealings in North Africa and Europe. Interviews were conducted in-situ and a set of four disks was produced. DVDs were made available in the university library and an oral presentation on aspects of the material was required of each team as a group project and an individually prepared written report was required on a student selected topic which combined DVD and related research information.

Use of Clickers

Classroom Response Systems, Student Response Systems or Audience Response Systems, whereby each student uses a device (Clicker) like a TV remote, have been used in universities for over a decade to allow instructors to ask questions and gather immediate student responses during a lecture. At the end of the second stage of implementation of the multi-disciplinary approach to the teaching and learning of International Business, it was considered that the use of clickers would facilitate class discussion, enable lecturers to fine tune their instruction to student responses, encourage peer interaction, collect data as formative assessment and, overall, encourage the integration of the teaching and learning. Because of the diverse academic experiences, talents and discipline specialties of students, engagement of students with the topics and their fellow team members was to be promoted. It was considered that the initial expense of purchasing the technology would be well worthwhile, provided lecturers asked the right questions so that large group instruction could be transformed into an active learning experience.

Propriety Issues

In academia, it is not uncommon for the development of teaching and learning practices simply to follow previous decisions or use former procedures with minor modifications; thus, only a modicum of thought goes in

to examining potential alternatives and their consequences. However, this is not the case when a new unit is proposed, planned, developed and implemented. In the case of designing and managing the tactics/strategy of a multi-disciplinary international business unit with 12 different lecturers, it was a challenge for staff to "persistently practice procedural propriety and to exclusively execute ethical excellence" (A. Sikula & J. Sikula, 2008).

All staff members were required to be a model for the unit with its international and multi-disciplinary aspects, as well as demonstrate to students appropriate and correct teaching and learning behaviours and morals which avoided all forms of discrimination. In the face of the diversity and uniqueness of students and their study specialties, staff members were required to interpret and practice fair and equitable treatment, and this extended to their presentation of common "discrete and substantive meanings" (Kill, 2008). Staff members were required to demonstrate collaborative and collegial teaching, conform to the provision of a set format of tutorial materials and ensure that their lecture topic was an integral part of the whole programme and linked specifically to the work of other academic and workplace disciplines. Another challenge was related to dealing with the unexpected uncertainties arising from their unfamiliarity with being only one of a team of 12 lecturers. In effect, the new unit required staff to learn new strategies to deal with their employer regarding workload, and establish different professional relationships than had proved successful in the past with lecturers, tutors and students.

Adapting the concepts of A. Sikula and J. Sikula (2008, p. 10), management of new units "takes time, tenacity and transparency to implement, but with practice over time, individuals and institutions can learn to replace defective decisions with successful selections". In addition to human communication problems and limitations, it was found that developing a unit that is not only new but idiosyncratic to the needs of an institution cannot be implemented very quickly or changed continuously. Thought, reflection and observation of the teaching and learning of the unit was an on-going activity that extended from months to years to warrant deliberative action. Appropriate benchmark standards of propriety were set by following processes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Benchmark Standards

Learned knowledge	Correct consultation	Meritorious mentoring
Positive role modeling	Pooled judgement	360 degree feedback

Proprietary Issues

Stakeholder management theory and practice is well established in business (Bourne, 2008), with a concomitant "practice epistemology" that requires reflective practice and "communicative action" in the form of conversations with colleagues that result in a "participatory structure" (Raelin, 2007, p. 505). Thus, in the current case, a dozen academics from different disciplines were required to contextualize the study of international business by establishing a community of practice. The demand was for a method of co-production of knowledge (Ospina, Godsoe, & Schall, 2001), a participatory approach to which all parties were considered partners in bridging the gap between theory and practice. The challenge of designing and implementing the multi-disciplinary approach raised a number of issues about the proprietary nature of each discipline's content, each individual academic and the capacity building required for innovative teaching and learning to be applied consistently.

Bengtsson and Kock (2003) have described coopetition as a situation where competitors simultaneously co-operated and competed with each other. Coopetition could be seen as a new business model (Walley, 2007) that was useful as a hybrid activity enabling academics to resolve their different approaches to competition and co-operation. Developing a professional alliance to identify and improve multi-disciplinary outcomes for the unit leads to a better product and services for students, although not without a number of challenges.

A major challenge was to build enough trust so that staff members could work as partners. The radically different disciplines and experiences of academics who often speak different languages, together with divergent views of the world and international business, let alone those related to the teaching and learning of the subject made trust-building difficult.

Additionally, an embedded and compounding problem was that each staff member's contribution to the design and implementation of the new unit was not counted as part of their normal workload. Consequently, there was little support for their work from discipline peers and executives. Academics are busy people deeply committed to their subjects and, although they were highly enthusiastic and reflective, co-production of the new unit was time consuming, more ambitious and demanded a deeper participation than was expected.

Another proprietary issue was related to that of flexibility. Striking the balance so that students could learn to value the cooperative, multi-disciplinary nature of work in an international business was difficult. Without that balance, the danger was that students would consider some staff members as being indifferent to the unit and multi-disciplinary cooperation as not being genuine. Some academics were used to and wanted a fixed plan and design for each staff member and students to follow; others preferred a flexible process of co-production with a modicum of formal planning. Obviously, concessions had to be made and these were not necessarily easy to achieve.

Despite the initial challenges, a more market-oriented approach to understanding the knowledge economy, international business and the mediating role of academics in creating, delivering and evaluating students' learning was achieved. The trial process of presenting the new unit allowed the contributions of individual academics to become more integrated as their understanding of the problems and opportunities of the pedagogy lead to increased collaboration, involvement and accountability.

Political Issues

Lloyd (2002), a management consultant and speaker, has emphasized that there is a difference between good and bad political behaviour. In the case of the design, implementation and promulgation of the multi-disciplinary approach to international business, there was evidence of both types of behaviour. The experiences encountered in the trial of the new business unit demonstrated Lloyd's (2002) concept of the shades of grey between being politically aware, politically correct and being too political, in a negative sense.

Pedagogical, propriety and proprietary issues were refined and resolved during the trial implementation process, and the unit had a strong "futures" orientation which emphasized continuous improvement to ensure a quality performance by students. Staff members developed a strong rapport with each other and excelled in integrating student genders, disciplines, teamwork and assessments. Within the group of 12 lecturing academics there was both ethical and professional leadership.

The demonstration of transparency, competence and integrity resulted in a sound level of credibility among

staff members and was recognized by students. Also, students recognized the professionalism, collaboration and caring of staff, the result was an appreciation and respect of the role of each staff and student member of the class. Finally, because of the emphasis on teamwork, the components of equity, impartiality and justice were recognized as demonstrating a fairness that was critical to the teaching of the unit and the operation of international business. Thus, internally, the practicing of influence tactics had a positive effect on the development of the unit.

What the lecturing staff were not able to control were tactical politics exercised by senior managers operating with a strategic perspective and authority. External to the new unit, there were two political tactics that had a less positive effect. The "upward appeal" tactic (DuBrin, 2010) was used by individuals to influence the decisions of senior managers. Additionally, the "three-legged race" tactic (Shleifer & Treisman, 2001) was used to suggest that the progress of the unit was subject to comical spills and running a unit in international business could not reach more important goals.

The "upward appeal" used a number of actions such as alternative reason/logic, aggression, reasoned aggression, understatement and nonchalance to influence senior managers to consider that the multi-disciplinary approach to international business did not solve the "English as a second language" challenges in the institution. Moreover, particular senior managers allowed the consistent barrage of appeals to continue unabated.

A "three-legged race" linking possibly incompatible people can be amusing at picnics, but in an institution can lead to exploitation of conflict, leadership ambiguity, organizational tensions and even project sabotage. The outcomes can be exacerbated further if, when corporate decisions are made, members of the decision-making group do not abide by the group decision, i.e., there is a lack of acceptance of group decisions in relation to corporate responsibility.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning in respect to international business is a complex matter made even more difficult in institutions which require a multi-disciplinary approach for students with multi-cultural living and educational backgrounds and expectations. In the current case of developing a unit to link the first year degree units to that of a final year unit, it was considered that the expected outcomes would far outweigh the anticipated challenges in the development of a unit that integrated various academic business fields. However, despite the successful design, implementation and progressive improvement in the unit, a number of issues have been identified as serious and one, political issues, as fatal!

Firstly, grass roots curriculum developers cannot develop a new unit successfully when senior managers do not have consistent, consensus and supporting behaviours regarding their vision, goals and strategies for the unit.

Secondly, putting more hubs in a wheel doesn't make it go round more effectively or efficiently. Thus, there was a need for the use of one person to manage the development of the new unit, coordinate lecturing staff and be held accountable for the whole programme. Widely based, professional input into the process is essential for an appropriate multi-disciplinary unit to be developed, but it is up to a project manager to determine which input is most relevant to the consistent integration of the academic interests.

Thirdly, pedagogical, propriety and proprietary issues are resolved relatively easily when the stakeholders in the task of unit development are prepared to meet collegially and professionally. In other words, internal consistency of curriculum developers is easier to manage than external environmental factors.

Fourthly, there is no automatic right or wrong in curriculum development. Judgements about the value of a new unit can only be made in retrospect, in the light of feedback by lecturing staff and learning students.

Finally, political issues in an institution have the potential to be fatal, despite the proven successful implementation of innovative pedagogical, propriety and proprietary teaching and learning. Political realities can interfere with curriculum development and implementation processes in relation to:

• Professionalism—when some staff are considered more equal than others, are more vocal in discussions and have greater voting or sanctioning power;

• Consensus—when the democratically determined decisions by a curriculum design team are not supported outside the team environment;

• Rational decision-making—when the development team does not have agreed decision-making rules based on rational argument;

• Group procedures—when individual preferences are promoted for personal purposes by relevant stakeholders such as senior managers, curriculum developers, lecturers or students;

• Priorities—when there is a lack of agreement on the nature of the problem to be solved by the curriculum developers;

• Needs of learners—when the needs of students are subordinated to those of other institutional or staff interests.

Thus, in the current case, there was an inability or unwillingness to tackle the political issues related to new unit development and implementation. This resulted in the cancellation of the international business unit and a new priority being established that required a realignment of a less contentious, existing unit.

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