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Universities, Reflexivity and Critique: uneasy parallels in practice

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ABSTRACT There are profound changes affecting universities. Under pressure from the forward march of neo-liberalism, there is a process of forgetting about the origins of the university and its distinctive place in society. Whilst responses by university management often amplify these consequences, there are similar tendencies within academic professional cultures. Both combine to enable forms of power to individualise issues around the pursuit of recognition for global excellence. Within universities, this creates an organisational space or 'missing middle' that needs to be the subject of reflexive consideration and action in order that the unique role of the university in society is not lost. This article examines these forces in order to contribute to a critical reflexive practice to resist current forces and develop resistant and imaginative cultures.

Introduction

During the last 10 years, we have undertaken research on the socio-economic contribution of universities to their regions. In the process, we have uncovered issues concerning the recognition of different knowledges by particular interests in those regions. Uncovering those, in turn, led us to examine the organisational contexts in which the research was produced. Overall, we were led to the conclusion that unless content (what is produced) and context (how and where it is produced, with whom and why) are brought together in our understandings, we risk undermining the distinctive role of the university in society as a diverse site of knowledge production.

We find that calls to a critical, reflexive practice are empty without examining the relations between content and context, and the consequences that arise in bringing these together (May with Perry, 2011). The rapid changes occurring within our universities have varying consequences, which are often negative. Yet we would agree with the proposal that imaginative adaption, with a confident and clear sense of possibilities, requires that academics in general 'undertake serious reflection designed to formulate a solid self-understanding of their purposes' (Graham, 2002, p. 126). Nevertheless, once we embark on an examination of these relations, we find some uneasy parallels between what are often held to be separate practices. This article examines those parallels in order to contribute to more reflexive contexts for knowledge production, as it is this ability to reflect on the presuppositions and institutional conditions of practice that provides for vibrant occupational cultures.

In order to achieve this, we first examine the dynamics of changes in relation to those who occupy the positions in universities from which changes are enacted and legitimated. We then move on to consider how identities are bound up in particular conceptions of work, and conclude by drawing parallels between these orientations. The result of this is to leave an occupational space, or missing middle, between the context and content of work that further detracts from understanding and contributing to the unique role of the university in society.

The Intangible in Search of the Unattainable

The contemporary environment is saturated by neo-liberalism. This involves ever increasing efforts to maintain the edifice of the apparent self-evidence of policies which inform changes in higher education. One key element of these is the idea of naturalised competition as the optimal state through which to organise our societies – ably achieved through the destruction of prior institutions and powers within what are uneven geographical developments (Harvey, 2010). Within the university itself, we find clashes between the legitimacy of bestowing honour on persons, auctioning places to the highest bidders and the importance of maintaining integrity (Sandel, 2012). Here we also find a managerialism focusing on administrative solutions to what are political issues. Taxonomic devices are produced which are designed to regulate activities and circumscribe spheres of discretion (May, 2001; Odin & Manicas, 2004). The result is the production of an indifference which does seek to understand difference, accompanied by a movement from collegial to executive decision-making (Currie, 2004). Commentators have characterised the results as justifications for cruelty and inequality (Parker, 2002) and being symptomatic of a ‘psychotic’ state (Sievers, 2008).

At an organisational level, the tendency is for politics to become sealed within sub-units through the supposition that any resulting differences are somehow reducible to the revealed preferences or peculiarities of the individuals who comprise them (Baker & May, 2002; May, 2006). It is a powerful technique of individualisation which, as we shall argue, finds an expression in academic cultures. Yet in terms of the management of universities in this climate, can we find the possibility for alternatives to the reproduction of these forms of control? Managerial positions in universities, after all, tend to be occupied by those who once were, or still claim to be, academics. Here we might find an alternative disposition finding its outlet in positions of influence.

Modes of incorporation within universities mean that many have found a place in the auditing culture that informs the measurement and control of performance (Power, 1999; Strathern, 2000). Thus, whilst some seek to distance themselves from the implications of these transformations, it is not those ‘outside’ an institution who perpetuate the practices that are the object of critique, thereby allowing boundaries to produce the distance that enables a critical and reflexive gaze, but those from ‘within’. That leaves many academics perplexed by the current actions of those whose past writings would seem to indicate an alternative approach.

Among those who are academics turned managers, we find the ability to translate the externally attributed value to particular activities into internal organisational advantage – for example, technological innovation in the biosciences links with the aspirations of a city to become ‘smart’ and ‘innovative’. Occupants of these roles between environmental attribution and internal production act as ‘go-betweens’ (Goffman, 1984). They collect information on the team’s ‘performance’ and match that against the values conferred on the outcomes of their efforts. The measurement of a team’s performance is indicative of a cognitive-instrumental rationality that carries with it ‘connotations of successful self-maintenance made possible by informed disposition over, and intelligent adaptation to, conditions of a contingent environment’ (Habermas, 1984, p. 10). As suggested, this is most apparent in technological product innovation through the creation of ‘spin-out’ opportunities and the presence of science parks as the physical manifestation of university–business links. Other forms of knowledge, concerned with process and not product, however, are often left in the wake of these selective practices.

Aside from those who act as the successful boundary agents between the institution and its environment, we also find cognitive dissonance and disappointment among academics who perform managerial roles. These roles can be taken with the assurance that they are only temporary and some additional remuneration will result as compensation for what is seen as a ‘lapse’ in career. At an individual level, this provides a partial freeing from recognition of having taken a course of action that is seen to be against interests born of original submission to the path of scholarship. In practice, however, those who once represented particular forms of knowledge as scholars become those who, in their daily practices, embody their past insights as somehow irrelevant to their new situations. Knowledge in action and knowledge for action thereby leave the relations between content and context unexamined.

Gate fever (the experience that inmates have prior to ending their prison sentences) also plays its role: the assured sabbatical at the end of a term of office provides alleviation for current suffering

under mounds of paperwork and attendance at numerous meetings. It is those meetings that enable the rituals of managerialism to reproduce organisational events in its image – that is, a continual preoccupation with process over purpose, with the former being seen as a necessity and the latter as an indulgence that the apparent imperatives of time can never permit due consideration.

Wholehearted embrace is another route. Along with a new *modus operandi* and set of experiences come disparaging backward glances at those who do not understand the self-evidence of environmental realities. As we have experienced during our work, it is perfectly possible to identify oneself as having been an academic situated within critical organisational studies and now, as a university manager, the two are seen as entirely incompatible. For others, a refusal to lapse into castigation of past practices which are seen as out of touch with a self-evident reality allows nostalgia to play its role. As one university manager put it to us when describing an interaction with an academic about a particular article they had both read: 'It was good, but I don't have many opportunities to have interesting discussions'.

A huge amount of effort goes into preventing an understanding of the practices and consequences of this state of affairs. It is not assisted by the cognitive distance that is apparent between those who are physically proximate in their working environments. Here, that knowledge by acquaintance becomes informed by an information overload through descriptions provided by the army of intermediaries in the 'effort bargain' (Baldamus, 1961). These are the reproducers of an administrative-technical discourse that distances itself from a reflexive orientation to the purpose of these institutions. People speak 'on behalf of' others, or 'to' them, but rarely 'with' them. The possibilities for learning in these seats of erudition thereby diminish.

These intermediaries are part of information-gathering units which perform two particular tasks. First, they devise the means of monitoring throughput and performance measures according to evaluation criteria, as well as devising ever-greater means of seeking quality via audits and processes of validation. Second, they feed back this information, which has the power to structure organisational discourse. These practices produce texts on organisational performance that constitute knowledge produced through particular descriptions of performance. Knowledge by acquaintance, which involves context-sensitivity and direct learning with and through others, may be dismissed as that which reproduces the cultures that are the targets of transformation; it is often also seen as involving too much time and effort – despite the enormous amounts of energy and time devoted to its avoidance.

To move away from these forms of organisational gaze challenges those managerial prerogatives constituted through a distance from the subjects of transformation; it requires proximity and the potential to witness, or even share in, the consequences of a narrow ethos. The producers of organisational documents and those who make decisions based on them are relieved of engagement with differing university cultures and the contextual reasons for their existence. Instead, talk of 'opportunities within crisis' and 'giving 110%' abounds. Once again, the opportunities for understanding in these seats of learning are diminished by these practices.

Into this ambivalent mix 'entrepreneurialism' has extended its reach. On first glance, this appears to cut across managerialism. The latter tends to be directed towards an unquestioned universality of applicability through an indifference to persons and contexts. Yet whilst offering a means through which to judge otherwise disparate practices and biographies, entrepreneurialism works on and through dispositions in particular ways, the result of which is to reproduce an individualism that categorises people according to their ability to live up to the promise of some yet unrealised state of excellence. Traditional boundaries, constituted within academic departments and sub-units that represent the homogenisation of knowledges, become blurred and rearticulated through its supposed self-evidence of competitive promise.

As a result of this blurring, entrepreneurialism becomes, in practice, a two-dimensional process. First, it is held to offer an opportunity to those who might wish to reinvent themselves in the image of potentiality within a 'success culture'. Second, it works to regulate those who do not accord with its aspirations. Its power rests on unexamined and unrealisable ends: it is the intangible in search of the unrealisable (May & Perry, 2006). Yet it is the absence of an engaged challenge that allows for the continuation of its free play. Academics who are critical may also be detached from these practices, and that bolsters the continuation of its unexamined presuppositions. Others may benefit, as entrepreneurialism refers to economic growth, and securing industrial funding for

research usually relates to patents and knowledge-transfer activities associated with technological innovation (Gulbrandsen & Slipersaeter, 2007). But it also includes sponsorship of various forms from industry. It thus works both around and through academic cultures. However, within the university as a whole, the effect is to further uncertainty concerning its social, economic and cultural purposes as it seeks to emulate particular facets of a competitive, neo-liberal environment.

Academic Cultures: resistance, retreat and rebellion

In universities, there is a mixture of reactions on the part of academics: from resistance, via engagement, to indifference. In turn, this relates not only to degrees of recognition afforded to 'external' necessities within institutions, but also to forms of knowledge and the positions of academics that enable or constrain their actual and potential courses of action. Natural scientists, for example, are argued to be more able to adapt their normative orientations to industrial links through the belief that this actually extends knowledge, whilst large companies make the sort of long-term research investments once thought to be the province of state research funding.

In terms of academic cultures, what about academic professionalism as a counter to those tendencies that are perceived to have an undesirable effect on modes of academic production? At one level, we can see a reduced commitment to the organisation in the name of appeals to universal academic freedom. Those who can move in the academic transfer market seek institutional shelters that are more in line with their motivations and aspirations, and are rewarded accordingly. It may result from being employed in places that are more resilient as a result of their capability to mobilise resources, but may also arise from individually negotiated contracts that become exceptions in less resilient institutional settings. Nevertheless, this is not a course of action that is open to the vast majority of academics. Individualised logics meet one another, with gaps being filled by varying rationalisations, expectations and performances.

Cutting across the potential for learning within academic cultures is the supposition of the neutrality of organisational measures, ably assisted by the assumption that they are translocal (Smith, 1999). Applications of these forms of objectivism become their own justification. Criticism of the validity of such means falls on deaf ears, for it questions the very presuppositions on which decision-making processes are based. When all that fails, as it often does, there is never a questioning of the whole enterprise. On the contrary, the frenetic process goes in search of yet more measures. As Stan Cohen (1985, p. 185) wrote of the difference between his conception of social control and an Orwellian image, we see meetings in which '[s]erious looking PhDs are sitting around a table. Each is studying the same computerized records ... The atmosphere is calm'.

A disciplinary orientation, when combined with an organisational context aligned to environmental expectations, creates positions and practices that stabilise sufficiently over time in order to turn subject into object. These spaces of practice, or 'shelters' (Freidson, 1994), are places of relative autonomy in which the macro-realities of political economy are connected with micro-experiences and activities to create particular kinds of culture. What we find in these 'shelters' are varying degrees of relative autonomy according to an occupational hierarchy, orientation to work and alignment with expectations of knowledge. We also find that, 'in addition to the requirements for personal integrity in general, individuals who practise or profess an academic subject are also constrained by the integrity of their subject' (Noble, 1999, p. 173).

Whilst a reflexive orientation to processes of justification may emerge from time to time, those academic cultures that enjoy the most stability are, in the Kuhnian sense of the word, 'normal'. As long as the political-economic and cultural conditions remain relatively stable in their configurations, their power rests on continuity and self-evidence. It is this relationship that goes between capitalise on in performing boundary work. It is also the background against which the struggle for academic recognition takes place. Academics seek recognition through distinction from each other, which serves to heighten individualistic cultures. Opportunities to learn from a diversity of experiences according to engagement with different groups and varying knowledges are not assisted by these practices.

At the same time, if disciplinary positions are multiple and the forms of understanding generated are generally accessible to non-experts, the authority for findings and the basis for practices will be considerably weakened. A situation would rapidly emerge in which the positions

and cultures that enabled knowledge production in the first place become more tenuous and certainly not tenured. Against this background, we see the emergence of other sites of knowledge production that provide career structures according to different cultures and political-economic conditions. As consultancy firms hire academics and allude to their work to boost their reputations, we see a regurgitation of generated knowledge without due reference to its origins, which, some may say, is a mark of the success of knowledge. However, whilst benefits may accrue to individual academics, the consequence can also be to add to an undermining of the uniqueness and value of the knowledge produced in university cultures in the absence of such recognition.

The effect is to gloss over the varying contributions that those who work within universities, across different disciplines, make to the development of their institutions. That leaves one-dimensional views, administrative-technical 'solutions' and private sector consultants to occupy the space that is left through a plethora of reports about innovative practices and potentiality that take little account of the relations between context, content, capacity and capability. It works to downgrade the engagement of researchers with the environments of which they are a part at a local level, because it sits in the shadows of something called 'internationally recognised', in which professional rationales (aspirations to global excellence through peer review of content) and managerial rationales (international league tables of institutional esteem) meet. Relations between excellence and relevance thereby play out in institutions and their regions in different ways (Perry & May, 2006, 2010).

The commitment that arises from within practice and provides for self-identifying narratives of professional experience and purpose becomes marginalised in these processes. The gendered components of professional knowledge may also be at their most apparent. Expressions of anger, born of this commitment and directed against the consequences and rationale of transformative practices that represent the supposed logic of the market, are readily dismissed as symptomatic of 'emotional outbursts'. Displays of episodic power (May, 1999) are individualised, and co-participants to these encounters are relieved of the need to consider the reasons *why* someone expressed such feelings in the first place. The contexts of practice that give rise to commitment are then bracketed via a concentration on the inappropriateness of behaviour in terms of *how* it is manifested by the individual concerned.

What we are seeing here is a clash in knowledge practices. This, in turn, leads to displacements, calculated adjustments and forms of resistance, whose effects can create spaces for alternative forms of practice. It is also a situation that has been described as an embedded 'state of hostilities' (Prichard, 2000), with one characterisation being: 'fields of conflict and competition between incompatible models living uneasily alongside each other' (Burtscher et al, 2006, p. 243).

How often those charged with responsibilities, who readily accept them as part of their professional identities, are relieved of them through third-party allusion. Here, we are referring to what the system does, whose constitution is reproduced in the utterances, actions and also indifference of its participants. The peculiar disjuncture between what is good enough for an audience and one's professional identity in terms of critical knowledge is suddenly suspended in the most extraordinary acts of institutional reproduction, leaving expertise to reside in the exceptionality of character as defined by outputs that become evident in long *curricula vitae*. The effort required in terms of desiring to bring about a particular outcome is suddenly halted through referral to the very thing that is known to bring about its likely demise. For this reason, we hear utterances among academics such as: 'We have been advised that...', 'According to administration, we cannot...' or 'We tried that 20 years ago and it did not work then'.

The idea of developing more collective cultures is often met with cries of indignation concerning its offence to individual autonomy. It is this dynamic that Pierre Bourdieu picks up on when reflecting on his experiences of forming a research group and being confronted with accusations of indoctrination:

What is neither perceived nor understood, except as an object of fear or indignation, is the intense intellectual and affective fusion that, to different degrees and in different ways from one period to another, united the members of the group in participation in a mode of organization of the work of thought that was perfectly antinomic to the literary (and very Parisian) vision of 'creation' as the singular act of an isolated researcher (a vision which inclines so many ill-trained and intellectually ill-equipped researchers to prefer the sufferings, the doubts and, very often, the

failures and the sterility of solitary labour to what they perceive as the depersonalizing alienation of collective understanding). (Bourdieu, 2007, pp. 19-20)

Herein lies a limit to reflexivity – that is, when critique gets close to the familiar, it activates a strong reaction that leads to preservation of the status quo. Those who are apparently critical of simplistic measures can suddenly become propelled into discussions that deploy such measures. How many times have the scores from the United Kingdom's past Research Assessment Exercise been used to distinguish departments during informal conversations at conferences by the same persons who are apparently critical of crude performance indicators? Now this is to be replaced by 'metrics', where the focus is on the process of measurement, and the busy empiricists can, once again, find their outlet divorced from any general discussion of purpose and contexts.

The Effort of and for Representation

The results of the consequences of these dynamics affect institutions, disciplines within them and individuals in different ways. Limited and short-sighted ideas of competition prevail with a need to import internationally leading scholars on the back of trying to climb the ladder of global excellence. Such persons are beamed into places in a celebration of the mobility of expertise over an understanding of the distinctiveness of existing contexts. Talented teachers of research or those who are pursuing work that is regarded to be of less than international prominence are left in the wake of these short-term cultures. Resulting tensions are assumed to be alleviated by invoking 'workload-balancing models' and subjecting staff to appraisals according to outcomes that few can realistically achieve. Spatial mobility is afforded to those individuals and groups who play this game – in other words, those whose personal circumstances permit mobility in the first instance – and the transfer market operates on this assumption, with particular effects on knowledge workers (Ackers & Gill, 2008).

Institutions are internationally compared in extraordinary displays that relieve speakers of any burden of contextual and historical understanding. New ways of measuring performance are always emerging, but the same hierarchies continue, with the result that work of interest in research at scales of activity other than something called 'international' is afforded less recognition. Connectivity between institutions and their locality is important, but modes of academic production and what is regarded as a legitimate outlet for publications are not context-sensitive. It is not only institutions, but also researchers who may be in, but not of, the places where they work.

As noted, here we see an alignment between apparently different rationales around the idea of excellence. Canonic status is attributed to those who are not contaminated by contact with different expectations, but who engage in the single activity of particular lines of research and spend their time in conferences networking with other like-minded persons. The engaged virtuoso, on the other hand, sees many different audiences and is thus committed to translation – the process of which places them in a frame of view that, because of its activity, means the same knowledge is seen through different viewpoints. Audiences may then feel able to judge not just on the consequences, but also on the content of the knowledge deployed and represented. The occupational closure that is afforded to the canonical is exposed to contestation for the engaged virtuoso. Here we find a different ethos, way of being and commitment: 'This work of modifying one's own thought and that of others seems to me to be the intellectual's reason for being' (Foucault, 1989, p. 461).

An isomorphism thereby exists between an institution's clamour for a place in the global hierarchy and the forms of recognition exercised in academic cultures. Both invoke fixed ideas of space, in which ambiguity is eradicated and certainties reign. Necessity and calculation come together in the fantasy that we are in total command of reality, and the attributed logic of globalisation finds its outlet in decontextualised celebrations of rational individualism. What of the sustainability of these practices? Are those with the positions and power that result from these moves then predisposed and supported by their new institutions to build lasting cultures of inquiry with support and development, or is the door to the new office closed because it is business as usual? Or, if the individual is so predisposed, are they left to protect their professional space in the face of overwhelming expectations? Perhaps, quite simply, they are never there! It is surprising how little effort is made in understanding the work of colleagues.

Variability exists in reflexive understandings between individuals, their practice and institutional positions. We can find complacent arrogance – either through reference to endogenous forms of credibility or ideas of unproblematic applicability to different communities – bolstered by contexts that never challenge such behaviour, but it is also shown by an assumed exceptionality of character that cannot admit the importance of context. After all, to do so would be to admit a relation between what is known and the place from which it is produced. It is something necessary for others, but, in terms of the institutional conditions of knowledge production, its reflexive limits lie in the perpetuation of an unrealistic individualism that allows particular identities to be claimed or drawn upon which hold content and context in isolation.

The search for the place of passion – from which is derived the affirmation ‘Here I stand’ – in knowledge production mixes in an uneasy relationship to research practice. Its professionalism accompanies uncertainties about commitment, leaving no place for caring and passion to be part of its practice:

‘Commitment’ is initially a lack of good manners: to intervene in the public space means exposing oneself to disappointment, or worse, shocking those in one’s world who, choosing the virtuous facility of retreat into their ivory tower, see such commitment as a lack of the famous ‘axiological neutrality’ that they wrongly identify with scientific objectivity. (Bourdieu, 2008, p. 386)

The ideal of autonomy is often premised on an individualistic creativity which, for the vast majority, is not attainable and assumes a set of prerogatives reliant upon the persistence of institutions through time (Butler, 2006). This is where the expressive and strategic provide for a rich mix, which, if not part of a culture that recognises its place, strength and limitations in the world of which it is a part, leads to individualised frustration and even resentment towards unfulfilled promises. All this so easily becomes unproductive, as opposed to a productive tension that is taken forward in practice – together. What this removes from the scholarly stage is an understanding of the relations between character, content, context and consequences without individualising explanation or reducing each to the other.

Conflict results in this separation, or it is avoided through less interaction via situational withdrawal or techniques of neutralisation and denial. At an institutional level, a combination of attitudes that obliterate the relationship between context and content leaves the place of activity to be the object of the partial attention of others outside of the cultures of academia. Tensions, between the constitution of expertise as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge in an age of scepticism and the different expectations placed on universities, are manifested in frustrated ambitions and contradictions, which are too often played out at an individual level.

There is also the ability to attend to different practices at the same time, in which forms of knowledge and effort (‘organisational’ and ‘academic’) are kept apart and yet ultimately rely upon one another. Snow’s (1993) two cultures are more informed by a tension between knowing and knowledge in universities. These pressures create nostalgia for those who can remember a bygone era in which distinct domains of activity did not create fuzziness. As noted, this varies, and there are cases where communities continue to practise according to their capability to maintain boundaries. Knowledge, in terms of what is embodied and produced in textual products, is separated from knowing, which comes to exist within dominant organisational practices as ways of seeking to measure the performance of production. Learning evaporates and, with it, the opportunity to harness alternative futures for research beyond capitulation to economic myopia. These courses of action serve to reproduce those distinctions which are indifferent to an explanation of the institutional conditions that enable them in the first place.

Summary

We cannot doubt that universities are being subjected to wide-ranging changes with negative consequences for their future survival as distinctive sites of knowledge production. An ever increasing elitism in the face of diminishing resources seems to be taking us back in history to a time when university access for privileged groups was routine and access for the rest of the population was not seen as an issue. The logic of neo-liberalism needs to be contested, and so too does the hegemony of managerialism to constitute possibilities for change. Yet we have also said

that narrow claims to professionalism, based on limited understandings of the changing conditions of knowledge production, need to be contested, and this generates a strong reaction when bringing the problems to cultures that are seen to be the last lines of defence against unwarranted intrusions. Professionalism as detachment, either explicitly or by default, bolsters the view that the production of scholarly knowledge takes place according to the abstractions that govern the pursuit of international excellence, thereby reducing the significance for understanding its place of origin.

We have suggested that sensitivity to context (which does not imply context-dependence) is precisely the key element that is missing in discussions. Whilst networks of individuals, working together around particular issues, can bolster activity according to the resources and contacts at their disposal, the sustainability of such activities is dependent on the level and durability of cultures and resources. This is informed by more intensive ideas of the relevance of knowledge from frequently unstated and unexamined points of view. Context can be pushed to its limits in an analysis of modes of production of knowledge, and an understanding of content and forms of culture can easily be eradicated. The result is that the potential to understand the relations between institutional conditions and cultures of production is diminished and, with that, what is distinctive about the university in terms of what is produced. Overall, there is a relative silence around these issues, and learning and control are, by default, given over to limited understandings. Quite simply, these issues are too important to be left to these terrains.

The potential for the identification of distinctiveness diminishes. Forms of knowing through and in different practices emerge and clash. When they are apparent, they often rely on attributed values – patents, spin-out opportunities and services to businesses – or the supposed self-evidence of organisational measures. Struggles for academic recognition take place, but they often misrecognise the content and forms through which it is realised. There is little active engagement that challenges those preconceptions which are driving change, and it can end up being constituted in limited hierarchies of knowledge or severing the understanding between character, context and culture. Learning is the casualty in the wake of these practices, and yet it is frequently assumed that the distinction of the university is derived through it being a place of learning!

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