

Facebook: Friend or Foe?

Independent Study Module MEIS501X

Introduction

“When you are on a long plane journey, you turn off your phone – and, to an extent, switch off your life – for 8 hours. As soon as those hours are over and you have left the plane, you can switch your life back on again. For many children and young adults, school or college is the place where they turn their life off for eight hours every day.” (Date and source unknown)

The continuing growth of ‘the cyberspace era’ has brought with it a permanent change in the way that students interact and socialise (Wolfe, 2011). A major part of this change is the advent of social networking sites on the Internet, which have evolved to become virtual communities where people communicate, share information and, importantly, build and maintain ongoing relationships. Online social networking communities such as Facebook have become part of the daily life of many teenagers, with a potentially far-reaching impact on the way that they study and learn (Wolfe, 2011). Indeed, as the South West Grid for Learning’s (SWGfL) ‘Facebook Advice’ document (2010) states:

“Facebook is a global social networking site used by 10% of the population on the planet. Its phenomenal popularity has been defined by the opportunities it gives its users to communicate, collaborate and share in a way that has never been possible before.”

SWGfL go on to posit that today’s young Facebook users have grown up immersed in this technology and inhabit it in the same way as any other space in their lives. Teachers and tutors have embraced the self same technology and as a result find themselves increasingly in the same space as the children or young people with whom they work. There may be advantages for this in providing an additional educational environment, but there are also many pitfalls. For example, it would not be wise to assume that students in their teens automatically have a handle on digital operations purely as a consequence of their age without expressing some of the reservations inherent in the research of those such as Gillis (2010) who says:

“Teachers seem to think that the students are tech savvy, because the kids are using social media...students are not better digital consumers than teachers – they just use different applications.”

There is evidence then to suggest that whilst they enjoy a superficial familiarity and certainly manifest no fear in utilising new technology, what The Joint Systems Information Committee (JISC) among others refers to as “The Google Generation” are not necessarily inculcated with sufficient deeper level skills to utilise the web in a truly effective manner, or necessarily understand the implications of improper use for both their own safety and/or

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future prospects (JISC, 2007). There is still a role and training requirement for 16-19 educators in this regard.

Therefore, with social networking sites becoming ever more ubiquitous and an increasing number of mobile telephones providing internet browsing capability, it would seem that no matter how hard educationalists within the Further Education sector dissuade, cajole or discourage their learners to avoid social networking sites within college hours, theirs is a losing battle.

Social networking is seen by educationalists such as Hew (2011), as, at best, an unwelcome and frustrating interruption in the classroom, with Facebook having very little educational use, and at worst, a virtual 'Sodom and Gomorrah', with cyber-bullying, the posting of inappropriate content and grooming of younger students real concerns. Mobile devices are routinely taken away from learners at the start of sessions, stored in a box or cupboard until the end of the lesson and then returned to the learner. However, I would agree with the sentiment of the quote at the start of this paper, and further argue that draconian behaviour such as this can only make the gulf between technically adept learners and their teachers wider than ever before. And while educators' aforementioned concerns certainly hold weight and are not to be dismissed, banning the use of Facebook in colleges across the country does rather smack of 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.

As a result, I shall be stating the case that social networking - and in this instance, Facebook - should not only be allowed in the classroom, but teachers should embrace how the social networking site can be used successfully as a part of the teaching and learning experience. I will, through research and evidence provided by my own practice, argue that not only does Facebook provide a useful setting for communication between learners and teachers, but both instils and hones a number of 21st century skills, as well as providing a powerful marketing tool for education establishments as a whole.

As well as arguing that Facebook should be used in further education, I will also explore the benefits and address the concerns of using Facebook with students aged 16-19, to look at how Facebook groups can be used safely and effectively within teaching and learning and to provide information regarding one particular 'hot potato' – namely the befriending of students - and to examine learners' attitudes towards using Facebook. Wider aspects which will not be covered in depth here but will be commented on in the conclusion include suggested rules for safe use of Facebook within educational institutions and how Facebook can assist with the delivery of both core and soft skills.

Benefits of Using Facebook in Teaching and Learning

According to research carried out by Ashton Sixth Form College (2010), there are many benefits to using Facebook with learners. It is their preferred method of communication, it

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is accessible from any Internet enabled computer and from learners' own mobile devices, it is easy to use and learners are familiar with the format; therefore there are no training needs.

The college's research concentrated on the pedagogical benefits of using social networking software. However, there are benefits to 'soft' skills, including the broadening of learners' social circles and the honing of their social skills such as that presented by Braun (2009), who says that:

"Facebook broadens our children's social circle in a way that wasn't quite possible before this technology. The two biggest aspects of this...are the ability to keep in touch with old friends and the opportunity to learn and practice their social skills."

Braun goes on to state that Facebook is already one of the places students turn for real-time homework help, with school and college students utilising Facebook's synchronous 'chat' facility, along with other real-time communication tools to work together on homework assignments and collaborative projects (Braun, 2009). However, "working together" isn't something that is relegated just to homework help and after-school projects. Matthews (2010) believes that collaboration is one of the cornerstones of the "21st Century skills", and in this context, the key characteristics of an intentional and purposeful collaboration include the ability to work effectively and respectfully with diverse teams and organisations, the flexibility and willingness to compromise to accomplish common goals, shared responsibility for work and the ability to value individual contributions.

Greenhow (2008) goes on to suggest that students using social networking sites are actually practicing the kinds of 21st century skills teachers want them to develop to be successful in today's digital world. Varshavsky (2009) states that:

"Today, we live in a technology and media-driven environment, marked by access to an abundance of information, rapid changes in technology tools and the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions on an unprecedented scale. Effective citizens and workers must be able to exhibit a range of functional and critical thinking skills, such as: Information Communication Technology (ICT), (along with) media and information literacy."

Varshavsky goes on to state that learning and innovation skills are what separate students who are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in today's world and those who are not. These skills include communication and collaboration, and importantly, employment skills. These 'Life and Career' attributes comprise, amongst others, social and cross cultural skills, and personal accountability.

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Greenhow looks at the more 'hands on' employability skills required in the 21st century, stating that as well as the employability, collaboration, and social skills already mentioned, the development of a positive attitude towards using technology systems, creating, editing and customising content and thinking about online design and layout are honed. Students are also sharing creative original work such as creative writing and film and practicing safe and responsible use of information and technology. She goes on to state that the Internet offers tremendous educational potential in more general terms. Levinson (2009) gives a specific example of the successful use of Facebook, telling the story of one talented teacher who cooked up an entire 20th-century China project on Facebook. Students went on to adopt the personalities of Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek and created and updated Facebook pages and profiles, replete with photos and wall postings. In the words of the teacher in question: "This project changed the classroom. Students were so motivated and put far more hours into their research than they would have done with a traditional project." Further to improved motivation, collaboration, social and communication skills were also being strengthened. The aforementioned research of Varshavsky, Greenhall et al has proved, at least to an extent, that social networking sites do develop the skills that 21st century learners should be practicing, both in the classroom and more widely. Levinson's work alone adds weight to the argument that Facebook should be allowed in the classroom and that teachers should embrace how social networking sites can be used successfully as a part of teaching and learning. Facebook clearly does provide a useful setting for communication between learners and teachers,

Drawbacks to Using Facebook in Teaching and Learning

Of course, it would be dangerous to work on the assumption that 'everything in the Facebook garden is rosy'. Ashton College does go on to point out the genuine dangers of using social networking sites. These include issues such as the ability for staff and students' personal information to be compromised, staff and students becoming subjected to inappropriate behaviour from either party (or a wider, anonymous Facebook audience), the possibility of students feeling that 'their technology' is being improperly used by teachers and concerns that using Facebook in teaching and learning could become time consuming, with time better spent on more productive activities. However, these issues, though reasonable, are not insurmountable. As long as personal and group or page settings have the relevant privacy levels set, there should be no reason for information to be compromised. The official Facebook Safety Centre's 'Safety for Educators' page (2011) contains a wealth of advice and guidance pertaining to concerns regarding inappropriate behaviour, and has pages relating specifically to issues such as dealing with unwanted messages and wall posts, preventing or addressing cyber bullying, online harassment, and, importantly, how to deal with abuse on Facebook involving students. I would argue that

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Facebook clearly has both the robust rules and attitude it needs to minimise online abuse, though while such acts are a sad reminder of the world in which we live, being aware of such dangers, preparing students for both positive and negative online behaviours and teaching them how to be as safe as possible online (as students are taught in the real world) are not only relevant but vital.

At this point it must also be noted that anything placed on Facebook (that is photos, documents and suchlike) belongs to Facebook, theoretically in perpetuity. Facebook is a free service because it sells data about user trends to advertisers and marketing groups. However, it is surprising how many users do not realise that they do not own the data within Facebook (which is retained even on deletion) or how this data is sold and used by Facebook and its associates. In his article on popular website "TechCrunch" (2009), Schonfeld quotes Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, who states:

"When you share your data with someone else, whether it be an email or a photo, it becomes their data as well. You cannot normally rescind data you share with other people in an e-mail. So why should a social network be any different?"

I would argue that by making students aware of this; by students self-censoring - thinking about any image they share before posting - 21st century skills such as the aforementioned awareness of online identity, (and one's own online persona), eSafety and how shared data may impinge on both online and real - world relationships are strengthened.

Student and Teacher Concerns. Time for a Shift in Mindset?

Concerns regarding students' attitudes to teachers using Facebook and teachers' own concerns about teaching and learning becoming time consuming both require something of a mindset shift. Mindset is a concept posited by University psychologist Carol Dweck in decades of research on achievement and success. As Dweck (2010) states:

"In a fixed mindset, people believe their basic qualities, like their intelligence or talent, are simply fixed traits. They spend their time documenting their intelligence or talent instead of developing them. They also believe that talent alone creates success – without effort..."

Conversely, it is stated that those with a 'holistic' growth mindset believe that 'their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work, with brains and talent being no more than a starting point'. (Dweck, 2010) Furthermore, according to Dweck, this view creates a shift in world view - love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment (in all things). Therefore, if staff were to consider a move to a growth mindset, they would be better prepared to learn the skills required to successfully use

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technology in the classroom- and, more specifically, to be able to use Facebook safely and usefully. Conversely, it is stated that those with a 'holistic' growth mindset believe that 'their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work, with brains and talent being no more than a starting point'. (Dweck, 2010) Furthermore, according to Dweck, this view creates a shift in world view - a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment (in all things). Therefore, if staff were to consider a move to a growth mindset, they would be better prepared to learn the skills required to successfully use technology in the classroom- and, more specifically, to be able to use Facebook safely and usefully. As Haines (2012) states in his article 'Updating your Mindset', if you build a course entirely on Facebook, you may very well have to deal with bullying or inappropriate comments at first. That is the reality. If you are truly a teacher though, your guidance will help shape the next generation of young learners to know better than to bully each other or share obscene images. Haines goes on to state that:

"If you avoid the Internet entirely, you will notice no change the next day. Maybe not even the next year. Sooner or later however, you'll try to explain to a classroom full of students how to sharpen their pencils and take a multiple choice test and they won't understand a single word you say. They'll be too busy looking down at their phones playing Corpse Granny. Next time you speak to a teacher, give them this push notification: We are overdue for a mindset upgrade in education. Press Install now."

Furthermore, if teachers are seen to make 'good' use of Facebook in the eyes of the students, and students' educational experience is improved as a direct result of using social networking in an educational setting then it is reasonable to assume that, for both students and practitioners, this shift would occur. It could be said that this, in turn provides another argument for use of Facebook improving student motivation and engagement: if teachers are comfortable using technology, students feel a greater sense of 'closeness' toward them. In a study carried out by Baya'a and Daher (2009), students taking part in an experiment involving the use of mobile phones to deliver mathematics were impressed by the fact that the relation between them and their teachers shifted from one of control (with the teacher holding all the power) to one that was both social and equal. "We did not consider them as teachers because the environment was that of collaboration and fun" quoted one participant. In this experiment, importantly, both the group's attendance levels and results improved.

Because learners receive updates from educational or institution / course-related pages they have chosen to 'Like' while performing more standard Facebook operations, the social networking account becomes a part of their Personalised Learning Environments (PLEs) through synthesis, and as they are already 'there' they feel comfortable with the

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technology. In many cases, they don't need to remember separate account or log in details for an institution-driven platform.

When this sense of student familiarity is paired with accessible, 'hands-on' staff training that gives teachers the opportunity to learn the skills and knowledge they need to be able to make use of Facebook - to enhance their own practice and personal Information Technology skills, and this boost to skills and confidence - and this form of staff development could, in many cases, deplete their negative attitudes.

I would argue then, that both students' and practitioners' improved Information Technology and Internet skills, and an awareness of the pitfalls associated with online identity and data sharing, as well as the flexibility to shift one's mindset if necessary (and, in doing so, be able to fit into the digital landscape with more ease) all hone 21st Century skills such as ICT and media literacy and communication.

Facebook Communities via Groups

As mentioned previously, social networking sites are a very good way for communities to manage work or share ideas to on which to work. As a result, Facebook groups make it easy for members of a community to hone 21st century skills by connecting, sharing or collaborating on a given topic or idea and providing a shared space where members can participate in communal activities such as group chat, email lists, document sharing and group photo-tagging. As an incidental but important aside, groups are closed by default, meaning that only those added to the group by a group administrator (be that a teacher, institution's resident safeguarding officer or similar) can access or search for the group online.

Facebook does not necessarily have to be 'all about the learner' either. The social networking site can also be used as a platform from which to find other practitioners and exchange ideas, swap best practices, share educational information and join (or even set up) other, relevant educational groups.

To Friend or not to Friend?

An article written by Jane Wakefield (2011) for BBC News throws up an interesting argument. It has long been an 'unwritten law' of sorts that teachers, under any circumstance, should refuse any friend requests from students (particularly those under the age of 18). However, Wakefield, writes:

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“Teachers should also set up Facebook profiles, an account which should be quite separate from any personal Facebook pages. Facebook...has actively encouraged teachers who have wanted to do (this). Teachers setting up Facebook accounts should not befriend pupils, rather allow the children to take the initiative. They should not read their pupils’ Facebook pages and should never chat via instant message. But for giving reminders...offering a space for informal chats...and allowing parents and children to keep up with school news...Facebook is invaluable.”

The Official Facebook in Education group suggest on their Safety for Educators page that teachers create a group or page specifically for interacting with students, parents or colleagues and that the user creates friends lists to control what parts of their profile students are able to access. Friends lists create different privacy levels for different groups of friends. This allows the user to selectively open more of their profile to selected friends. Jesse Dwyer (2010), contributing to the official Facebook team’s blog says:

“You can sort your friends into lists...for instance, if you're a teacher, you can create a Friend List called "students" and adjust your privacy settings to control what people in that list see...each time you receive a friend request, you'll have the option to add that person to the appropriate list as you accept them.”

Dwyer goes on to urge teachers not to be afraid to severely restrict what certain people can see. She offers the following analogy: if you are a teacher, you would not invite a student to a dinner party with friends and the same goes for your boss or other people you don't interact with in those types of social settings. She urges users to use their Facebook privacy settings to reflect the types of relationships they have. This would appear to be good advice for all users, regardless of profession – and certainly does give what was once a black and white notion - that teachers should never befriend their students – several shades of grey.

Whichever solution one chooses, both teachers and students can gain insight and control regarding the way they use Facebook, and collaboration, communication ICT, information and media literacy skills are, again, embedded and improved.

So far, this paper has looked at how students’ interactions with others have changed with the advent of the cyberspace age, how online social networking communities have become part of daily life for many, educators’ attitudes to social networking, the benefits and drawbacks of using Facebook in teaching and learning, and the ever contentious topic of ‘friending’ learners. Next, I will look briefly at how teaching has moved from traditional, didactic pedagogy to student-centred and learner led practice, with the teacher no longer being ‘The sage on the stage’, but ‘the guide on the side’. I will also be looking at improving student outcomes in light of using Facebook as part of teaching and learning, and learners’ attitudes to using Facebook.

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While popular social networking tools have clearly become intertwined with the personal and social lives of students, it is clear that many of the underlying capabilities behind these tools have a future role in learning. Tools such as real-time access to instructional media, the potential to share opinions and ratings, and the ability to communicate interactively with peer groups are likely to have a continued growing impact on the classroom experience. More important, the use of these tools is helping to change student attitudes towards learning itself, from a one-way transfer of knowledge to a much more interactive and group-orientated environment. This links intrinsically to the theory of Student-centred Learning. A variety of phrases have been coined to describe this critical shift in mission and purpose of education. Barr and Tagg (1995) express the change as a move from an 'Instruction Paradigm' in which institutions deliver instruction to transfer knowledge from faculty to students to a 'Learning Paradigm' in which institutions produce learning through student discovery and construction of knowledge. Huba and Freed (2000) use the phrase 'learning-centred assessment' to emphasise transition in the focus of instruction and assessment from teaching to learning. Furthermore, student-centred learning, also referred to as Student Centred Instruction [SCI], is, according to Collins and O'Brien (2003):

"An instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the center of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively. The SCI approach includes such techniques as...assigning open-ended problems and problems requiring critical or creative thinking...and using self-paced and/or cooperative (team-based) learning. Properly implemented SCI can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught."

The aforementioned ability to share opinions and ratings, to communicate interactively and using a variety of methods with peer groups and teachers, and even to assess peers' own work anonymously if required, lend themselves naturally to a space such as Facebook, where the facilities the social networking site provides can, amongst other things, make assessing classmates' work can be as simple as 'Liking' a post or image and where collaboration and cooperation can be through a group or shared message.

Student Outcomes and Learners' Attitudes to using Facebook

A case study produced by the JISC Regional Support Centre for the South West on behalf of the Excellence Gateway (2010) examines how a team of music teachers at City of Bath College utilised Facebook (and other 'Web 2.0' applications such as YouTube) to enhance

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the learner experience. The teaching team noticed that a whole communities of musicians existed on Facebook, and that these communities were networking extensively. They also found that they had some difficulty contacting their students using mobile phones and emails, and wanted to find another way to improve communications for their students. As the case study goes on to say:

“The College decided to conduct usability research into student online trends focusing on the technology they liked to access and use. The study determined that around 99% of their students used Facebook, with some 70% using internet-enabled mobile devices...this has had a direct and positive impact on e-learning and (students’) use of Web 2.0 applications (e.g. Google Docs, Facebook and YouTube) has enabled a real collaborative community, which is constantly thriving and seeing real success.”

The case study further reports that as a direct result of blended and eLearning courses making use of Facebook (and the other applications mentioned above), City of Bath College saw assignment submission rise to 100%, and Ofsted awarded grade 1 categorisation of courses that made use of Facebook and web 2.0 applications. Comments from the teachers involved in the case study are wholly positive, with one member of staff claiming that Facebook has drawn some students back into the aforementioned music course after they had been withdrawn because of the supportive and collaborative environment the social networking site enabled. The same member of staff goes on to mention how one of his students was given a contract to help a company with their promotion of online events, highlighting the employability and 21st century skills that use of Facebook - and other Web 2.0 technologies - had improved. Further case studies have also been made available on the Excellence Gateway website, with institutions such as Abingdon & Witney, Hartlepool, and Brighton, Hove & Sussex College also using Facebook to create social learning opportunities. The fact that such case studies are becoming more frequent could be seen as a sign that the use of Facebook both in and outside of the classroom is becoming more commonplace.

Conclusion

It is clear that Facebook can be used safely and usefully in 16-19 education and with technology and social media becoming as much of a cornerstone of skills as, historically, ‘the three Rs’, should be embraced inside the classroom. However, as mentioned previously, there are real dangers to using social media in the classroom, so use must be monitored scrupulously. As Fogg-Philips (2011) et al state in their paper *Facebook for Educators*:

“Bring together a group of stakeholders at your school and meet regularly to stay updated. Your use of Facebook may be different from a university

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like Stanford, but the overall purpose is the same: To determine how Facebook and social media can help achieve the goals of your school, instead of detracting or distracting from those goals.”

I would recommend that educational institutions author a Safe Use Policy linked explicitly to their existing Staff Professional Code of Conduct and ask that, should members of staff wish to use Facebook as a part of their teaching toolkit, they follow strict guidelines similar to those suggested in the following paragraphs (see appendix A).

Furthermore, to gain a basic understanding of the principles of safe use of Facebook in an educational setting, staff must subscribe to and familiarise themselves with Facebook’s official *Facebook in Education* (2009) page, which includes the social networking site’s guidance on safety. They should then contact their institution’s Safeguarding Officer (or similar) to register their intention to create a Facebook site. All sites must clearly display the institution’s logo and include the name of said institution and advice on eSafety must feature prominently on the site, as must clear guidance on reporting abuse or other eSafety breaches. (Ferriday, 2012)

Administrators are responsible for the supervision of the site and must monitor postings on a daily basis. Therefore each site should have at least two administrators, with the member of staff responsible for setting up the Facebook site registered as one and the institution’s Safeguarding Officer registered as the second administrator. Both administrators must have full and complete access to the site and be contactable by any students using it. Vitally, students may not be site administrators and security settings must prevent any unauthorised access.

While the use of student images on the Internet and permissions therein is cause for another argument in itself, it is recommended that students complete a copy of the institute in question’s image consent form (see appendix B for an example) before being given access to a group site. Images of students may not be posted to Facebook unless permission has been given on the institute’s image consent form, where permission must be given by a parent or other legal guardian where a student is under 16 (or a vulnerable adult).

To keep boundaries enforced, whole-group posts and messages only should be sent to students through Facebook. Messages to individual students should be sent from the teacher’s institutional email account to the student’s through the regular institution email services. Offensive, threatening or unlawful material that appears on a Facebook site or material that contravenes the institution’s policy on equality and diversity, bullying or dignity at work must be reported immediately to the Safeguarding Officer. (Ferriday, 2012)

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Finally, common sense dictates that sites must not make public the personal details of students, their employers or staff, or disclose other information that might cause distress or harm their reputation.

Suggested rules for safe use aside, it is also vital to remember that Facebook is just one of many tools the teachers should have in their toolkit. Full participation in a course must never depend on Facebook and alternatives must be available to any student who has no access or chooses not use it. However, harking back to the earlier comment that using Facebook in teaching and learning may lead to the possibility of students feeling that technology they see as theirs is being improperly used by teachers does give grounds to temper this argument. Facebook is a tool. It is neither a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), virtual classroom nor electronic portfolio and should not be used as such. Students may graciously give teachers permission to skirt around the edges of Facebook if it improves their educational experience - and makes their lives easier, but to effectively trample all over it and change its purpose – and therefore, learners’ attitudes towards using it – will surely see a mass exodus from Facebook to MySpace, Bebo, Pinterest or the next big thing in social media.

However, as a tool that can assist in embedding, practicing and sharpening 21st Century core skills such as language, history, the arts and geography and oft-mentioned soft skills such as employability, literacy in ICT, information literacy and media literacy, and as well as honing increasingly required communication and collaboration skills via an already familiar technology such as Facebook, and remembering to do all of this in a subtle, manageable way that will not only attract but go on to keep learners motivated, use of the ubiquitous social networking site is not only encouraged - it is, as authors and educators such as Timmons (2012) argues in his article: *Benefits of Online Social Networking* - recommended.

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