In Defence of the Lecture: Strategies to Assist in Active Learning Experiences in Accounting Units

Colleen Maria Puttee
UWS-Campbelltown campus
College of Business
School of Accounting
Email c.puttee@uws.edu.au

Kerrie Elizabeth Mezzina
UWS-Campbelltown campus
College of Business
School of Accounting
Email k.mezzina@uws.edu.au

Abstract

As university budgets become constrained, there has been pressure to employ more cost effective methods to deliver our accounting courses. The initiatives undertaken by many faculties have been to adapt units for computer-based delivery and to transfer teaching materials to an electronic repository such as WebCT. Other less favoured strategies, for both academics and students, have been to increase class sizes, reduce the number of contact hours per unit and to utilise additional casual staff, whilst deferring full time staff appointments (Group of Eight, 2003). In the same climate, accounting programmes are being overhauled to reflect the professional bodies’ concern that the modern global accountant will be equipped to deal with the challenges of the 21st century (Frederickson, 1995). These efforts have placed additional stresses on academics to deliver a quality learning experience with declining academic resources. This paper reviews the traditional tool of university teaching – the lecture- and discusses its place in the university of the future. In its defence, some personal experiences are related, which highlight the need to communicate both verbally and non-verbally with our students, a situation that necessitates some physical interaction.

Key words: Lecture, Accounting, Active learning.

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Introduction
As the costs associated with providing higher education today continue to rise, universities are being forced to discover other ways of finding funds and reducing costs to ensure an equitable distribution among the various colleges and schools. In recent budgets universities have been given more flexibility with regards to their enrolments and fees, along with the promise of a $5 billion Higher Education Endowment Fund injection. (DEEWR, 2008, http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/) [Accessed 7 November 2008] However the fact remains that universities have, in the main, responsibility for their own fiscal management.

Given the current economic climate there is a clear message that there will be less financial assistance from the public purse. Universities will be expected to become more entrepreneurial and form research and co-operative networks with other universities and corporate Australia. As a consequence, university management set their faculty budgets with an emphasis on containing operational costs and increasing their access to research funding and outside consultancies. As teaching is a primary function of university life, which carries a high cost factor, it seems sensible to address ways in which we could ‘teach smarter’ and reduce the cost factor.

This paper attempts to address some of the deficiencies and or perceived limitations of the humble lecture and present ways in which we can improve delivery and hence vindicate the usefulness of its face-to-face delivery.

Lecturing as a Teaching Tool
The use of lectures as a means of instruction and communication of ideas has been a common practice since the days of Socrates and Aristotle. The manner in which lectures are delivered however has changed significantly with varying results (e.g. ‘chalk and talk; use of PowerPoint presentations/overheads; videos and interactive role play or discussions/debates). There has been extensive research in the area associated with the use of lectures as an effective instructional tool (Bligh, 2000; Clark, 1990; Murphy, 1998) According to Clark (1990:16) courses which have been carefully designed to achieve the learning objective lead to outcomes that are equivalent whether the training is delivered via computer, video or an instructor in the classroom. Teaching via the traditional lecture has been compared to other less costly methods of instruction such as self-paced study classes and computer based training methodologies (Clark, 1990; Daroca et al, 1994; Stone 1999,Van Dijk, 1999). Advocates of the lecture method consider it cost effective in instructing large numbers of students (Topping et al as cited by Van Dijk, 1999) whilst its critics see computer based instruction or online repositories of teaching materials such as WebCT having the potential to replace the traditional lecture and reduce costs (Lim, 1998).

Within the educational literature, there are two opposing views on the efficacy of the lecture as an instructional method. The more commonly held view is that students passively wait to become enlightened through some osmotic process. For example Murphy (1998) states that the criticisms levelled at the lecture as an effective learning tool centre on it promoting student passivity and it being a shallow form of learning. The traditional style of lecture is also criticised for the “the teacher centred view on education, and the emphasis this lays on the transmission of knowledge.”(Van Dijk, 1999:260). The perception is that the material taught is the minimal amount of instruction (as designed and delivered by the lecturer) needed by the students to grasp the content. Students will also tend to align their learning to the level of importance they perceive the lecturer places on the material presented (or not presented) rather than viewing the lecture as a stepping-stone to deeper learning. This has given rise to a new order where “traditional educational practices especially teaching pedagogies that reflect the dominance of and reliance on the lecture as the sole method of classroom instruction, are clearly under attack.” (Cove & Love,
1996:1) The relevance and effectiveness of the lecture are significantly diminished if no proactive teaching strategies are introduced.

Within the accounting discipline there has been little change in the lecturing style since the inception of the degree. Jones, Caird and Putterill (1989) noted, “the formula for undergraduate teaching in accountancy has mainly been talk, chalk and tutorial where both the talk and chalk were largely the domain of the teacher alone, and tutorials usually followed the same formula as lectures.” (Jones, Caird & Putterill, 1989:151) It is obvious that more needs to be done to facilitate student learning in the accounting courses.

Most accounting units at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) involve lectures between 100 to 300 students. Such large numbers limits the opportunities the lecturer has to become familiar with the student group and develop some form of participative activities in the lecture. Although difficult, it may be possible. Research has not found that large class sizes are necessarily an impediment to student performance. (Hill, 1998; Van Dijk et al, 1999). There is also conflicting evidence that large class sizes preclude significant student participation (Frederick, 1986; and Gibbs, 1992; as cited in Van Dijk, 1999). However from our own experiences, it is difficult to know and accommodate the needs of all students in these groups. Our observations to date have been that a large number of our students were not actively learning using either the traditional style of delivery or one particular format of delivery (e.g. chalk and talk, power point slides or workshops). It has reinforced our view that there must be a better way to deliver a lecture, which encourages active learning experiences.

Students often spend their time in the lecture diligently copying lecture notes and examples but if they are quizzed at various points during the lecture they had difficulty translating the principles to practice. This indicated that they were geared for rote learning rather than developing any analytical or evaluative skills.

Perhaps this might simply be interpreted as meaning that these students were not active learners, however as Kyriacou and Marshall (1989) found, “active instructional strategies do not automatically foster active learning experiences, just as traditional lecturing does not automatically lead to passive learning experiences.” For a number of years our school has been presenting lectures by using Microsoft PowerPoint or videos. These are only cosmetic changes, as the medium for the static dissemination of facts is transformed from hand or type written overheads to coloured slides with graphic images and sound effects. These slides may capture the student's attention for slightly longer periods however we have seen little evidence to show that these additions have significantly improved students’ ability to understand and absorb the material presented. They can potentially be used as a tool for developing active learning if they are supplemented with handouts, which summarise the lecture and allow for complementary material to be added. This then addresses the needs of visual as well as aural learners. According to Hillman (1989) the use of an interactive style of delivery is particularly important when the content comprises abstract, complex or detailed information. The problem of dealing with complex issues increases where large groups are involved, and the opportunity for interaction and involvement from students is diminished.

In our experience this philosophy is supported by the fact that we often have 30%+ failure rates in our more conceptual and highly technical units (e.g. introductory accounting units), particularly when they are taught using the traditional style of lecturing with the textbook as the main tool of reference. In units where students are exposed to new and highly technical material they struggle to engage with the lectures as they are often too long, overburdened with content and the topics too complex. This is evidenced by their comments in tutorials and consultations after the lecture. Student evaluations also reflect their negative attitudes to the lecture material. The question thus remains as to how best to counteract the current atmosphere of negativity in the lecture? For complex units, the deconstruction of the text may provide a more simplistic, culturally oriented, yet still accurate, meaning of the unit.
matter. This may reduce their apprehension and fear of the unit. “Because teachers must be able to work with content for students in its growing, unfinished state, they must be able to do something perverse: work backward from mature and composed understanding of the content to unpack its constituent elements.” (Ball, 2000:245)

The feeling that the hours of preparation for lectures results in only minimal value to the student has prompted research into a more effective style of lecturing for the discipline. Firstly the basic components of instruction need to be addressed. These include the course content to be covered, the learning outcomes required, the instructional methods used and the instructional media used. The learning outcomes are a necessary part of any instructional process. It may be useful to define the learning objective first and then identify the necessary knowledge and skills to achieve those objectives (Clark, 1990). Lectures should state up front the outcomes to be achieved by the end of the lecture, this gives students some role in determining whether they have achieved those outcomes or not.

One area that could improve the relevance of the lecture is to adopt a more thematic approach. “Instead of trying to cover the entire textbook, teachers should also select material thematically to help students master a unit and apply important concepts to new problems and situations.” (Avery & Avery, 1996:26) Each lecture topic could be considered as a theme, which then has to be developed as the lecture progresses. This could be accomplished by example and application to specific problems. For example in presenting an introductory accounting unit it is often best to begin with a scenario or issue familiar to the students and develop the theme and from there, gradually introducing terms and technical material. Similarly in a final year unit it is important to ensure students have the requisite skills necessary to evaluate and critique the data and language presented with the more complex issues surrounding the discipline.

There are many aspects one needs to assess in order to determine the best teaching style for a particular unit or course. Current educational literature offers a plethora of styles that may be used by lecturers ranging from the more formal inflexible delivery, centred around the lecturer or instructor, to a more informal, flexible delivery, which is far more open and interactive. The majority of researchers (Freire 1978; Bruffee 1987, 1993; Rhoads and Black 1995) lean heavily towards a more interactive, holistic approach to instruction. “The use of interactive lectures can promote active learning, heighten attention and motivation, give feedback to the teacher and the student and increase satisfaction for both. It involves an increased interchange between teachers, students and the lecture content.” (Steinert & Snell, 1999:37) The delivery of a lecture should include the teaching material but should also address a number of other impacting factors, such as the availability of resources, the cultural environment in which the course is offered, student motivation for choosing the course, their motivation for learning and their prior experiences of learning, the social and emotional experiences of both lecturer and students etc. All these issues impinge and or impact on the learning process. It would seem that “the best learning occurs when it can be interwoven with students’ prior knowledge, even if that knowledge is not directly related to the course discipline.” (Alley, 1996:6).

One current approach to teaching that attempts to incorporate all aspects of the learning environment is commonly referred to “student-centred learning”. Although this terminology is arguably a misnomer since all learning by students is by its very nature student-centred and the implied meaning is more a technique, method or approach focused on “student-centred teaching”. Specifically, the approach is focused more on empowering students to take charge of their learning and, just as importantly, reassigning the role of the lecturer to one of collaborator/facilitator of the learning process. Research has indicated that “Programs based on student-centred learning have shown that a well structured course which integrates content and process results in high student participation and satisfaction.” (Oliver& Morrison, 1991:151).
The student-centred approach may be identified as consisting of a list of features that promote student learning as opposed to instructor-centred teaching, such as:

- Students discovering knowledge rather than faculties simply transferring information to students
- Learning includes student-driven episodes, not just scheduled class lectures.
- Students help define the questions rather than instructors simply handing out facts
- Student takes active and proactive roles in learning versus being passive audience or just listening to lectures
- Student learns collaboratively versus being rewarded for individual, competitive performance.” (Alley, 1996:4)

This approach of teaching, is claimed to address the many deficiencies currently in practice in the Accounting discipline. The benefits may be achieved by employing the techniques of indoctrination as espoused by Jones, Caird & Putterill (1989):

“It is important that students are deliberately and carefully socialized from the beginning of their tertiary studies into active, involved modes of learning which will maximize both understanding of material and an acceptance of personal responsibility for one’s own learning. This socialization into participatory learning may be especially important for commerce students, who appear to have a clear tendency towards vocational/utilizing motives for learning, rather than aiming to internalise and understand information.” (Jones, Caird, & Putterill, 1989:2)

The student-centred approach of teaching allows for the development of a link between content and practice and provides a more interactive process. The way in which the material is prepared and delivered is important in allowing the students the time to elaborate and apply principles to practice. “A well-balanced education should, of course, embrace analysis and the acquisition of knowledge. But it must also include the exercise of creative skills, the competence to undertake and complete tasks and the ability to cope with everyday life; and also doing all these things in co-operation with others” (From the manifesto of the Education for Capability group [Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts Manufacturers and Commerce, 1991:5)

The Importance of Language to Lecture Delivery

In a discipline such as accounting, there is a risk of becoming carried away with transferring the content of a course rather than selectively concentrating on those elements that underpin its thesis and then building upon them. The language used is highly technical and problematic being influenced not just by societal mores but also more consistently by changes in business practices. The professional bodies, with which the course has a strong affiliation, more often than not govern the type of material that is to be taught and monitor any changes in course structure. This intervention places an additional burden on the lecturer to ensure that the units taught comply with professional demands. Compliance with these demands may lead the lecturer to use selective language which results in students adopting a more mechanistic approach to the material without understanding the multiple interpretations or meanings available to the construction of the accounting data. It is possible to ameliorate such restrictions by carefully monitoring the level of technical jargon used and consciously structuring the language to suit a hands-on approach to learning. “Most people learn through hands-on activities, group interaction and personal discovery. Students need structure and substance presented in context so they can see the application of their learning to real-life problems.” (Avery & Avery, 1996).

Before adopting changes to our teaching strategies we observed that the final year students were conversant with the elements of accounting but were ill equipped to
analyse and evaluate data. They demonstrated a very surface approach to learning and constantly tried to standardise their interpretation of the different scenarios put forward in the lectures without trying to deconstruct, define or interpret the elements. They failed to familiarise themselves with the language being used and the multiple interpretations that could be derived and consequently found the learning curve exceptionally steep and often overwhelming. This observation was confirmed when these students sat for the mid semester exam. Whilst the area examined was discussed at length in the two weeks prior to the exam, the wording of the scenario set for examination was changed slightly from that to which they were familiar. Students floundered because they had not previously sighted the problem worded in this manner, although it still contained the basic elements of accounting that they had been taught throughout their degree. Their failure was not in their lack of preparation for the exam but in their lack of identification and interpretation of the language used. The material presented in the lecture must therefore not only be up to date and relevant to the topic but, it must be capable of being deconstructed to identify its core elements and their various correlations in drawing specific conclusions. The interpretation of various scenarios provides the lecturer with multiple opportunities to project different views of the data. This highlights to the students that accounting data had many avenues of interpretation depending on its context and time frame. It must be remembered that language can either elucidate or mystify meaning depending on how well it is analysed and presented.

Last semester we changed the style of lecture delivery. Students were encouraged to question the material as it was presented. At various intervals the lecture was paused and problems were presented to the students in connexion with the topic under discussion. Students were required to break down the problem and discuss their interpretation of the issues and concepts with the students sitting adjacent to them. They were then asked to apply these concepts to the problem stated. The class collectively addressed the issues and the lecturer elaborated on those points that appeared to have been missed. Students had the benefit of being able to apply the principles to ‘real-world’ situations. As the students comprise of either full time students with part time jobs or part time students working full time, they were able to align the unit matter with their work situation, which sparked good discussion and reinforced the association between theory and practice.

This technique was not as successful with common first year commerce students. This may possibly be due to the students not being familiar with accounting principles and for the majority) not looking for a career in accounting. They required more discussion and constant reinforcement of the elements before they demonstrated any understanding of the unit matter. At the introductory level the majority of students neither had a functional knowledge of the area of accounting nor were they equipped with the appropriate analytical skills to allow them to make assumptions or form opinions.

They consistently floundered with the material presented, not just because time restricted the amount of exposure to the content, but also they displayed little or no training in communication skills. For them to grasp the fundamentals of the unit it became necessary to constantly repeat and or rephrase the points at issue using as many different scenarios as possible. At the introductory level course material aligns strongly with the conditioning aspect of learning.

Students seem to have learnt best when given situations that provided a clear link to their background and the most successful style of delivery was found to occur when the basic accounting concepts were couched in everyday language to ensure the intended meaning was received. This is consistent with the proposition espoused by Lee (1997:3), that “We are familiar with the idea that learning begins with experience at the level of simple conditioning, but even the most complex development of judgment based on reasoning that involves high levels of conscious involvement and control also begins with experience.”. Accordingly, attempts were made to link the
basic elements to those cognitive aspects that the students were most likely to be familiar with. However, this became time consuming and reduced the amount of information that could be worked through with the students. The size of the group also hampered any attempt at role-play or simulation.

There are two themes that underline the units taught throughout an accounting degree, these being accountability and decision-usefulness. The accounting degree itself is a tool of communication. People use this information to aid their decisions and justify their practices. However for any accounting information to be of value it must be assigned some form of meaning that can be interpreted by others. Validity of the information comes from its ability to be understood and assimilated. If there are no commonalities with respect to the thought and interpretation of meaning then its efficacy becomes restrictive and possibly valueless. To signify any form of beneficial meaning the written or spoken word must be able to be replicated by parties other than its originator. Its reproduction, although not necessarily exact in all ways, must be able to impart the same intent as that identified by the author otherwise meaning can be distorted or lost completely on translation. “The author is not the cause but an effect of the text, or rather, of a particular way of reading, of structuring the text. They do not determine or limit its significance.” (Barthes, R., translated by Stephen Heath. 1977:147) This signifies an important point where accounting information is considered. The identification, interpretation and production of accounting information is only validated when placed in context and students need to be aware that it is they who define its context based on their interpretation of the data provided.

In the early years of their accounting degree, students often come with the perception that accounting information is definitive and easily replicated. As students progress through their degree they realise that accounting is no less creative in its interpretation of meaning than any other discipline. Meaning is highly dependent on the context in which the data is being viewed and can only be interpreted and understood within the framework of that time period. The language used has meaning only if associated with a defined environment. For example an item under discussion may be viewed as an asset by one organisation and an expense by another and in fact can be converted within the same organisation depending upon the circumstances. It is this area of creative licence that causes the greatest confusion amongst students. Thus it is vitally important to educate students to become analysts as opposed to mere repositories for information.

The aim of any linguistic expression is to reduce the possibility of misinterpretation or misunderstanding so that the intended audience receives the message meant. Danger arises when the lecturer assumes students can apply meaning when they do not have or have not grasped the basics. Thus, as a preamble to the technical material to be taught, the first lecture should be spent identifying the potential level of understanding amongst the student group.

**The Use of Gestures**

In addition to the language used, informal cues such as the personality of the lecturer (be they serious, happy, verbose, comedic etc) and their interpersonal skills can also influence the effectiveness of the lecture. To assign a specific connotation or interpretation to a word or phrase one needs to have predetermined, through some means (either through the act of performing the event or some other gesture) what this event or act signifies to them. In writing, association with other words often assigns meaning or gives structure to the sentence. For example the word ‘read’ can either be associated with the past or the present depending upon which supporting word(s) are used. Another example is the word ‘good’ which has multiple meanings. It can be a state of wellbeing or something pleasant or nice or a summary term used in business to describe a product or collective of products used to sustain human existence. Simplification of the language is helpful however students will best absorb the information if some nonverbal signals are also adopted.
When a lecturer speaks, they can assign meaning not only through the words used but also through the tone in their voice or the manner in which they deliver the words or even the way in which they look. Verbal gestures are often used to emphasise the relevant importance of a particular topic or element and may even be used to discourage students from using an inappropriate technique or practice. Non-verbal gestures can enhance interpretation by setting the atmosphere for the lecture. “It’s not what you say but how you say it that conveys your credibility, confidence and enthusiasm. Smiling, standing upright, using appropriate gestures, meeting the eyes of the students, raising and lowering your voice are just some of the non-verbal signals that let your students know that you are firmly in control.” (Murphy, 1992:13)

Control of the students and their engagement with the material is captured by adopting an eclectic style of delivery through the use of a number of these gestures. Non-verbal gestures can even act as catalysts for motivating students to contribute. Some lecturers use humorous gestures such as mime, flamboyant hand movements and or comedic facial expressions as a means of capturing the students’ attention or reinforcing pertinent points in the lecture. Others may adopt more distractive techniques such as darting around the lecture theatre, or throwing out sweets to retain student attention and or emphasise their message.

The use of gestures in a lecture can no doubt be beneficial to the students’ learning however care must be taken not to privilege these non verbal signals above content. They should act as reinforcers of meaning not identify a different agenda such as indifference or apathy or confusion. To better understand the visual effect of lecturer presence in the lecture room video recordings were made of our lectures. They presented as being somewhat rigid and formal with closed stances and sombre facial expressions that did little to convey an atmosphere that was welcoming to students. One lecturer felt her own demeanour to be too serious; with unconscious arm movements beating out the rhythm and emphasis of the lecture yet she was not comfortable injecting humour in her lectures as she felt it would introduce an additional strain by forcing her to perform in a manner alien to her disposition. Other lecturers presented a show, capturing student attention with pop questions and throwing out sweets for correct responses. The style of delivery of a lecture must incorporate the personality of the lecturer and the resources available to them as well as topic content.

A successful strategy in maintaining student attention and participation is often found in the lecturer moving away from the lectern and mingling more with students. One lecturer felt that by mingling with the students, she put herself and the students more at ease portraying a learning atmosphere of collaboration rather than confrontation. This style also forced students to be more attentive in the lecture and to take responsibility for their learning pace as opposed to relying on handouts and or prepared material. Students view the lecturer as confident, capable and knowledgable when there is a relaxed informal atmosphere and the lecturer is not reliant on overheads or notes to get their message across. The best lecturers tend to be relaxed, clear, and eloquent in their delivery and show a deep and interesting knowledge of the unit.

The rapport between students and lecturer is almost as important as the content of the lecture. Non-verbal gestures can impact on student opportunity for learning. Hence the non-verbal gestures a lecturer adopts will indicate to the students how comfortable they are with the content of the unit. Lecturers can present as much material as they like but the meaning will only be transferred if the signals are in place. Students rely on a lecturer’s knowledge and anecdotal evidence to justify their faith in a particular unit. Facial expressions, hand gestures, stance etc are all indicators of lecturer confidence and understanding of the material. Merely because humour is injected into the discussion will not guarantee a successful transference of
knowledge. Lecturer attitude or non-verbal communicative behaviour will affect the students’ ability to understand and learn.

**Conclusion**
Currently lectures continue to be the main instructional method used by universities to introduce unit material. Whilst we recognise some limitations in traditional lecture style as a vehicle for developing active learning, we strongly support its continued use as the most effective tool used in developing student knowledge. We have identified a number of strategies that could be employed to improve its effectiveness and these too support the more currently preferred student centred learning approach by making the lecture more interactive and participative. Whilst we support student learning through various flexible deliveries such as on line learning and the provision of student notes, it is our opinion that with the lecture, students have the additional advantage of immediate involvement with the content and opportunity for clarification of confusing issues. In a sense it could be compared with on-line real time reporting.

As previously indicated, lecture delivery is dependant upon the use of both verbal and non-verbal language. Students need to be able to acquire, analyse and interpret a variety of data before they can understand its meaning. Accordingly, they need to develop linguistic and communicative skills to understand the material taught. The language used and the manner in which it is delivered is thus vitally important in helping them understand the unit content. If this is attempted through a written forum some of the meaning can be lost in the process with delays in clarification and interpretation occurring due to delayed interaction between the participants. Although the lecture generally follows the prescribed textbook, the practical examples in these texts cannot possibly cover all situations. The lecturer must have the responsibility of introducing the students to the art of interpretation and decision-making and the language chosen must go beyond that of the text. The lecturer needs to respond to student’s queries and obtain feedback in real time. An important benefit that can be derived from attending lectures, which is often forgotten by students in their endeavour to survive their course, is that lectures provide a forum for elaboration of important points and allow for discussion where students are confused or wish to ask questions. It is this physical interaction that provides the greatest benefit of the lecture to technology based instructional mediums such as WebCT or BlackBoard.

As Academics we must choose our language carefully and ensure that students are taught to listen, absorb and analyse what is said and not assume one interpretation will fit all situations. Language is an important communicative tool and the lectures will only be successful when we learn how best to use the language. Also of importance is the way lectures are presented. The way we stand, the tone, pitch and speed with which we speak. The facial expressions and the props we use all send a message to students. The literature supports the view that a pro-active, student-centred focus in the lecture is necessary to obtain the best results. “By using interactive techniques and strategies, students will become more involved in the learning process, retain more information and be more satisfied.” (Steinert & Snell, 1999:42). Whilst the size of lectures may in certain circumstances preclude the use of some interactive measures such as, role-play, there are other techniques which can be adopted. For example, mingling with the students, asking questions, inviting questions and or open discussion etc. These are some of the strategies we have adopted in our courses during the last semester. We found these strategies worked better with the more advanced cohort of students but with more research they could also improve student learning in first year students.

The art of teaching and learning is varied and changes depending on the group involved. We Academics, just like our students, must evaluate the unit and audience every time we deliver instruction to ensure we get the best out of both. Teaching is highly temporal and contextual and whilst history influences ‘the now’, the future is there to be moulded and improved.
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