

“Utilising ODL Technology in Case Based Teaching and Learning – Empowering Learners in OUM’s BBPS 4103”

Wardah Mohamad, Open University Malaysia

wardah_mohamad@oum.edu.my

Mansor Fadzil, Open University Malaysia

mansor@oum.edu.my

Mohd Rizan Ruslan, Open University Malaysia

mdrizan@oum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Case studies have long been used in renowned business schools such as Harvard Business School in the United States and Curtin Business School in Australia as a tool to develop students’ critical thinking and analytical skills. The success of using case studies in capstone courses that cover a multitude of subjects have been well enumerated especially in the area of Strategic Management. However, most of these successes have been in conventional classrooms where discussions take place and students present their ideas and views in front of their peers. The Faculty of Business and Management, Open University Malaysia has taken this a step further by offering their BBPS4103 Strategic Management course fully-online where the teaching and learning is all done via videos and forums, supported with other learning materials, but with no face-to-face contact at all. This paper will present an overview of the project and how it has transformed the learning environment for our learners and resulted in a higher level of engagement. Learners are empowered to learn by themselves and can take learning a step further by being able to apply their critical thinking skills and theoretical concepts to a real-life case. Learning is done at their own pace through the use of on-line videos and a learner-centred forum. A comparison of the assessment results achieved by learners in the previous blended mode of learning and the new fully on-line mode is presented, along with an analysis of how the project has saved costs for the university. The paper concludes with recommended strategies for future improvements in utilizing ODL in case based teaching and learning.

Keywords

Engaging learners, transforming learning, empowerment, case studies, on-line learning

INTRODUCTION

Engaging learners is of strategic significance in terms of achieving learning outcomes set in the subject curriculum as well as to evaluate whether actual learning has taken place. One of the key success factors in determining the success of an e-learning program is engaging learners actively which requires learners to have a high degree of self motivation (Ali, 2009). At tertiary level, difficulties in engaging learners online are a problem that needs to be addressed. Due to the National Agenda of wanting to be a developed country by year 2020, the success of this endeavor partially lies in encouraging creativity and innovation. Thus, Malaysian citizen needs to inculcate the values of openness which embraces critical thinking and encouraging risk taking and experimentation (Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2011-2015). Learners need to be encouraged and nurtured to be innovative, creative and analytical. As such, the use of ICT in particular with regard to collaborative educational technology especially at tertiary level could be promoted and marketed as enjoyable. Using case studies have proven to be one such delivery method in learning that could enhance learners to hone on their critical thinking and analytical skills.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Malaysian employers in the corporate sector have constantly voiced their complaints regarding the employability of local graduates as our local graduates are said to lack critical thinking skills and analytical abilities. Taking this in mind, the Faculty of Business and Management of Open University Malaysia has embarked on a project to overcome this problem. The project is geared towards transforming the teaching and learning of learners by engaging them in lessons and empowering them to manage their learning on their own. This is done through the implementation of the BBPS4103 Strategic Management course fully on-line – thus learners learn at their own pace but are able to interact and get assistance from their e-tutor. This study discusses the implementation of the project and its initial outcome.

BBPS4103 STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Delivery Mode

Strategic Management is widely recognized as the capstone course of Bachelor of Business programmes all over the world. Most universities utilize the use of case studies in Strategic Management as case studies can capture learning from all the various business courses that students have sat for. Moreover, case studies encourage critical and analytical thinking whilst developing decision making ability amongst students. Recently, it was decided that the strategic management course in the university utilize this case study method and be delivered fully online by full-time academicians who specialize in this area. This would not only ensure uniformity in the delivery but ensure that quality of teaching and learning is maintained at all times. Offering the course fully on-line is also in line with the university's vision of being a leading provider of ODL – successful implementation of this course would serve as a benchmark for other courses in the faculty.

Assessment Format

Learning should always be guided by assessment. Thus, the assessment for this strategic management course is designed to ensure that learners are able to grasp the learning outcomes of the course via formative assessment in the form of three written assignments. The first assignment is worth 30% and divided into two short exercises based on the application and analysis level.

The main assignment carries 70% of the total marks and also covers the whole video lectures and topics in the module. This assignment is pegged at the synthesis or evaluation level and consists of a full case write up.

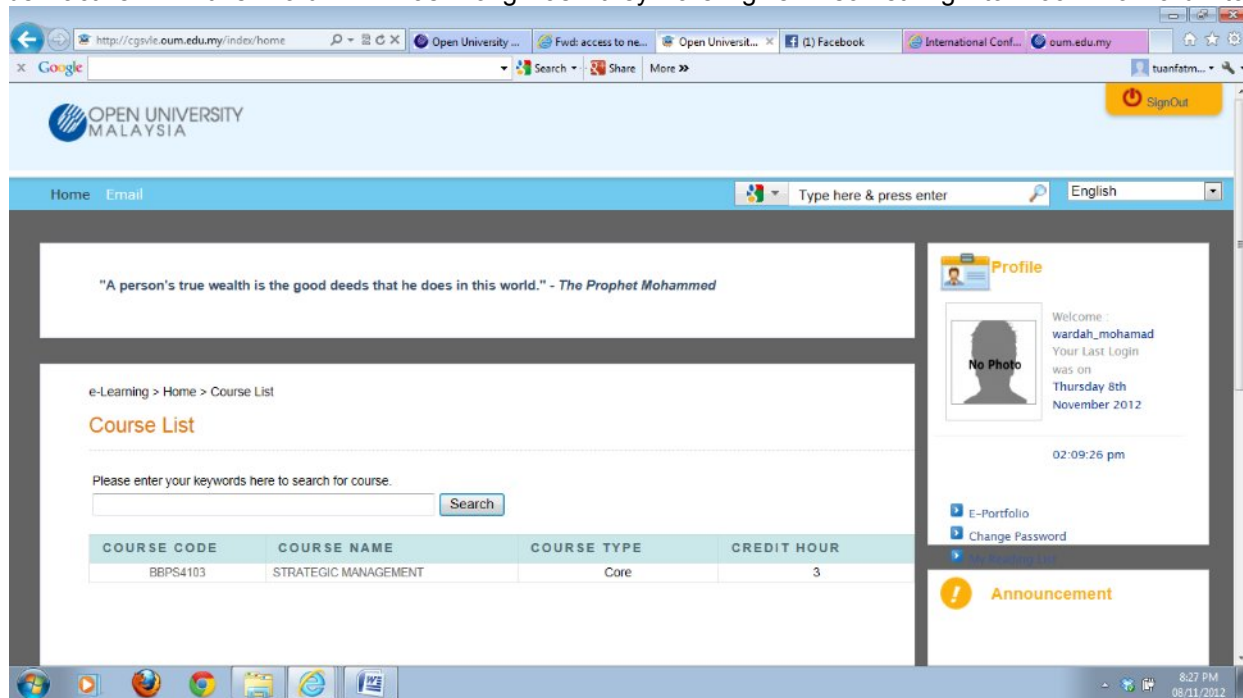
All these assignments are related to problem based learning especially the main case study as they situate learning in a meaningful task (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Here, learners' learning are self-directed and they learn to apply their knowledge and evaluate the scenarios given in light of what they have learnt (*ibid.*).

EMPOWERING AND ENGAGING LEARNERS IN BBPS4103

Tolmie (2001) argued that a context-sensitive approach is needed to be adopted both for the introduction and evaluation of ICT in education. Dewey (Smith, 2007) iterated that education must involve engagement for exploration, thinking and reflection. Taking these views in mind, the BBPS4103 Strategic Management course has been designed to encourage learners' to actively participate in the learning process and most of all, to actually enjoy the learning process.

The content for the course is delivered to the learners mainly through video lectures. These videos are uploaded onto the faculty's new learning platform along with the assessments for the semester. This platform has been designed to be not only user friendly but the emphasis is on encouraging the learning process and motivating learners to engage themselves in the learning process. In a normal classroom setting, students' learning is structured according to the classes that they attend. In this setting, learners are empowered to learn at their own pace and at their own time.

The top of the screen highlights quotes of the day – either inspirational quotes from leaders or motivation quotes from the faculty's programme coordinators. In this way, learners will find something new every time they enter the forum and this will encourage them to go in often! The e-tutor's and learners photos will appear each time they post in the forum. This will give learners a chance to know each other and feel as part of the team. If they can participate so actively in social media, there is no reason that they cannot be active in this forum – as long as they are given something to look forward to!



The screenshot displays the Open University Malaysia learning platform. At the top, there is a quote: "A person's true wealth is the good deeds that he does in this world." - The Prophet Mohammed. Below the quote is a navigation menu with "Home" and "Email" options. A search bar is present with the text "Type here & press enter". The main content area is titled "Course List" and includes a search input field with a "Search" button. Below the search field is a table with the following data:

COURSE CODE	COURSE NAME	COURSE TYPE	CREDIT HOUR
BBPS4103	STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT	Core	3

On the right side, there is a user profile section for "wardah_mohamad" with a "No Photo" placeholder, a welcome message, and login information. Below the profile are links for "E-Portfolio" and "Change Password". At the bottom right, there is an "Announcement" section with a yellow exclamation mark icon. The browser's address bar shows the URL "http://cgsvle.cum.edu.my/index/home".

Figure 1: Learning Platform for BBPS4103

With this in mind, ten videos were recorded - nine covering topics on strategic management and one on how to conduct a case analysis. Activities, questions and assignments are also uploaded onto the course forum to enable active and immediate discussion. Functional cases and full-cases are also uploaded and learners are taken through each case through various activities and forum discussions.

The videos have been designed to attract learners' attention and engage them in the learning process. Unlike the normal i-lectures previously produced by the university, these videos go a step further by including animated graphics, real-life case examples and also exercises. This is in line with Ulrich's (2008) observation that dynamic elements should be used in learning resources and these would include animations or interactive simulations which replace static pictures in the original course content. The team

producing the video even went out to shoot some sections outside to make the presentations more interesting to the learners. The faculty staff also contributed by “acting” in some scenes! This is important, as in e-learning, the content should emerge based on learners’ interest and the nature of group interaction (Susilo, 2008).

The construction of matrices, for example, is specially designed so that learners are attracted to the process. Each matrix is presented to learners in different forms – some using different colours for each quadrants or the learner is taken through the construction of the matrix step by step using animation. Narrations accompany how the particular matrix can be constructed in the background.

Presentation of facts is not only in oral form but also in picture form as well as it is known that a picture speaks a thousand words. Animated words appear on screen to catch learners’ attention and hopefully help them to remember the main facts. In cases where the subject matter is quite heavy or boring, cartoon characters are used to help brighten the video presentation. Music is also added to certain parts of the videos to promote thinking and help learners absorb important facts presented.

In certain important topics, additional videos are also added. This would include Michael Porter talking about his Five Forces Model which is available in YouTube. Video clips or slide presentations of successful business leaders and their strategies are also included to show learners real-life examples and inculcate their interest in the subject. The example of Ah Weng, a mechanic who succeeded in opening up his own workshop through implementing differentiating strategy was exemplified through real photos of him and his business. Examples of other real-life businesses shown include the fish market in Japan and also retail shops on Mount Fuji! Famous businesses which have been successful are also included in the video so that learners have a chance to reflect and ponder upon these successes and use these examples to help them with the questions and small scenarios embedded in the videos themselves.

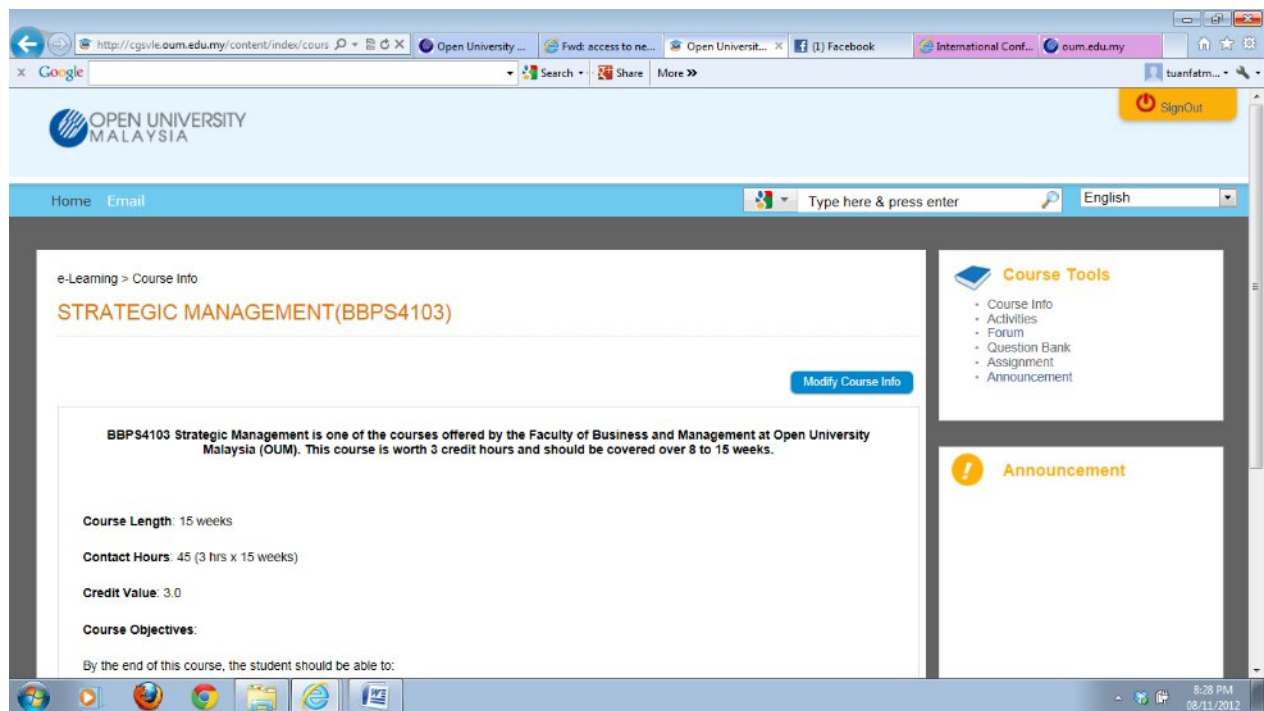


Figure 2 Features available in BBPS4103 _ Course Tools

As part of the formative assessment, exercises and assignments are also imbedded in the video presentations. For example, a short video captured the scenic panorama of Mount Fuji and questions

posed on what business learners could open in the area and what strategies they would use to compete with competitors. Learners are also given scenarios and topics to talk about in the video to which they could respond to via the Strategic Management forum. This would engage them in the learning process as it would promote active discussion amongst the learners in the forum. This is in line with Smith *et al.*'s, (2008) view which advocates the sharing of experiences through debate, critical reflections and problem solving tasks linking the subject material to application in practice.

Apart from the videos, power point slides are also available on-line so that learners can skim through anytime they are free. The case studies for discussion and submission are also uploaded in the forum to ensure that learners actually enter the forum and engage in discussion. These case studies may be short, functional case studies which focus on certain topics or comprehensive case studies which require lengthy discussion and analysis. The idea here is that learners are involved in the learning process every step of the way. This focus is in line with the aim of delivering an effective, stimulating and high quality learning experience, which is crucial to any university's success (McDonald and Hall, 1996).

The use of the videos, problems and the engagement of students through activities and forum discussions also support the anchored instruction approach (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). In this approach, video-based narrative is used to highlight a complex problem, in this case the final case study. The case study is used to provide shared experience to learners so that they can apply they acquired knowledge. The process of learning is actually self-directed and learners are empowered to learn at their own pace, but there is guidance and support from the e-tutor. In this way, learners are engaged and are able to utilize their problem-solving strategies whilst at the same time being provided with content instruction when needed. Negotiation of ideas and strategies to be used are also evident in the analytical discussions in the forum provided. Where tools are concerned, learners use to problem specific tools provided in the nine strategic management videos provided including the SWOT Analysis, Porter's Five Forces, BCG Matrices and the QPSM Matrix.

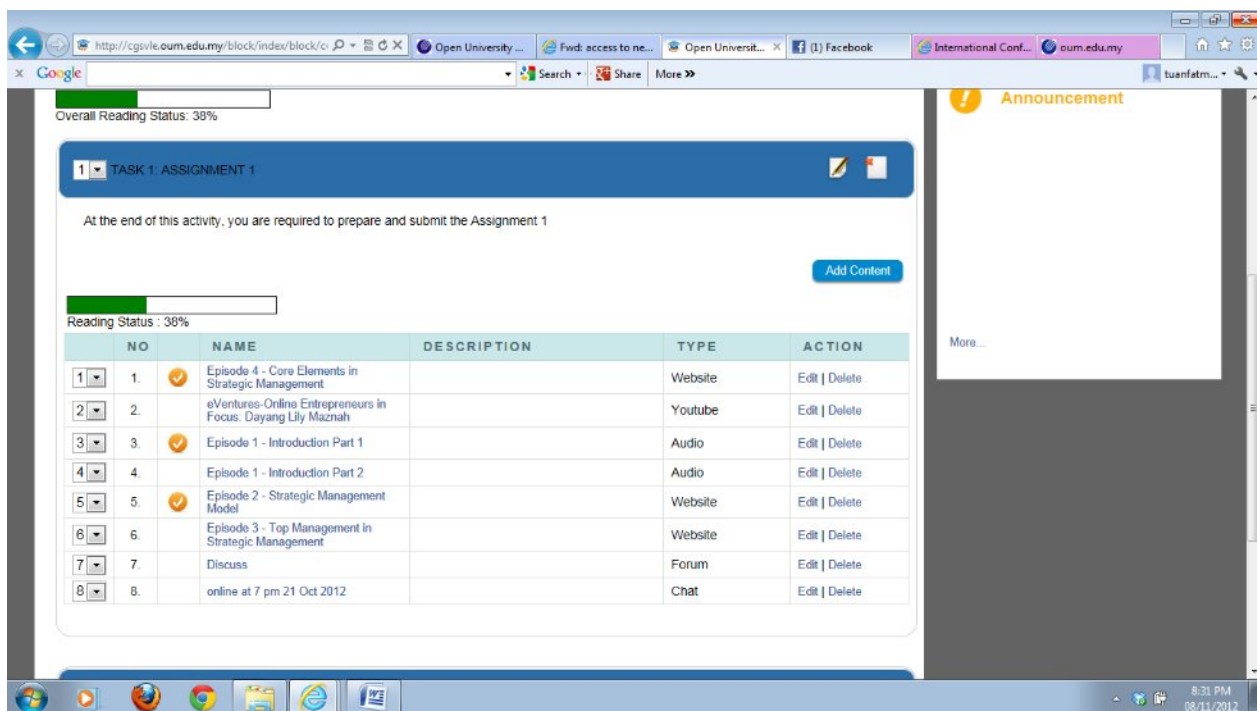


Figure 3 Activities available

Jarvis (2008) too iterated that the art of teaching is still possible in distance education through the people who design the teaching and learning process. According to him, the art of teaching lies in our empathising with the learners and thus entering into an interpersonal relationship with them. Teachers and designers have to embrace a human perspective, learn of methods, experiment with them and develop techniques using the available methods (*ibid.*). This is also supported by Richardson and Newby (2006) who suggested that academics and practitioners should explore how teachers or tutors can influence learning designs and strategies in order to engage learners in their learning activities.

The academicians or e-tutors in charge of this course should be experts not only in the subject matter but have the ability to facilitate active discussion. They should give full support to the learners as there should be support from teachers or experts to guarantee the efficacy of the learning model employed (Chaves, 2009). Teachers or tutors should encourage independence in the learners and motivate them to construct their learning (Abas and Fadzil, 2008) as the success of an online community depends on the crucial roles played by the designers, teachers and learners (Karunanayaka, 2008). This is especially important for OUM as Abas and Kaur (2004) found that OUM learners depended on their tutors to ensure their success in online learning.

The BBPS4103 Strategic Management course has been specially designed to provide learners with an exciting learning experience where learners will be engaged throughout the whole course. This is important as the quality of programmes and the desired level of learning transfer are achievable only with the necessary academic and social engagement aspects made possible through the right kinds of curricula design (Chaves, 2009). The assessment, the module, the videos, power point slides and the discussion in the forum should be of the highest quality as quality is the “lifeline of open universities” (Deming, 2008).

INITIAL OUTCOMES

The project was launched in January 2013 and the initial outcome of the project seems to be positive. Results from the assignments and final examinations show that there is an improvement in the performance of the learners.

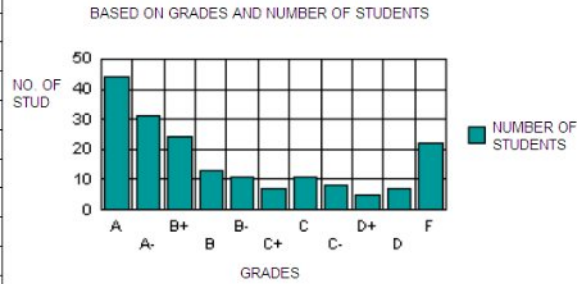
Figure 1 below show a comparison between the results for January 2013 after the project was implemented and the results in September 2013 where the original format of blended learning (face-to-face and on-line forum) was used and the assessment was 40% assignment and 60% final exam based on the module. No cases were used as part of the learning before January 2013.

In September 2012, the total number of learners who got A- and A totaled 22.36% whilst in January 2013, the total number increased to 40.98%. This might seem too high for normal courses, but for a capstone course with full assignments, the figure is actually encouraging. It shows that learners have grasped the learning outcomes for not only this course but for the overall programme.

In September 2012, 13.04% of learners failed while in January 2013, 12.02% of learners failed. The total number of learners who scored D also decreased from 7.45% in September 2012 to 3.83% in January 2013. The number of learners who scored D+ also decreased from 7.45% in September 2012 to 2.73% in January 2013.

JANUARY 2013 SEMESTER

Grade	No of Student	Percentage
A	44	24.04%
A-	31	16.94%
B+	24	13.11%
B	13	7.10%
B-	11	6.01%
C+	7	3.83%
C	11	6.01%
C-	8	4.37%
D+	5	2.73%
D	7	3.83%
F	22	12.02%
Total	183	100.00%



SEPTEMBER 2012 SEMESTER

Grade	No of Student	Percentage
A	51	15.84%
A-	21	6.52%
B+	24	7.45%
B	25	7.76%
B-	26	8.07%
C+	27	8.39%
C	46	14.29%
C-	12	3.73%
D+	24	7.45%
D	24	7.45%
F	42	13.04%
Total	322	100.00%

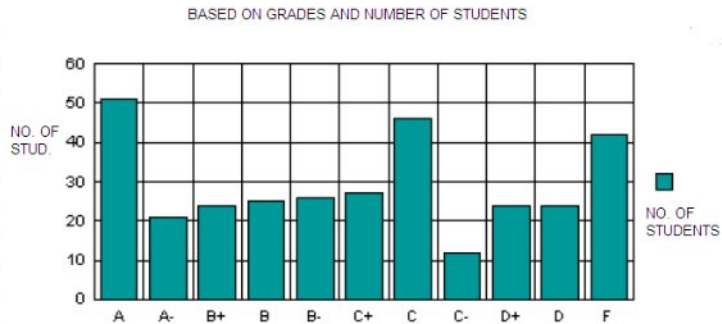


Figure 4: Results for jan 2013 and sept 2012

The implementation of the fully on-line course for BBPS 4103 has also resulted in a significant amount of cost savings for the university. Before the project was launched, face-to-face classes were conducted in 21 learning centres in Malaysia. This meant that at least 21 tutors were involved in the teaching of BBPS4103 for 8 hours each semester as the subject is offered in each learning centre. In some centres, there were probably more than one tutor due to different timetables of learners. At a rate of RM100.00 per hour, the total sum paid to tutors was RM16,800.00. After the implementation of the fully on-line course, only one e-tutor was facilitating the forum with around 400 learners per semester. As the e-tutor is a full-time academician in OUM, there is no extra teaching cost involved. This translates to a minimum cost savings of RM 16,800.00 per semester or RM 50,400.00 per year.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, the implementation of the fully-online Strategic Management Course has resulted in the following:

- (a) Learners actively construct knowledge in collaborative groups in the forum.
- (b) The roles of the tutor and learner are transformed with learners being more empowered in the learning process and more engaged. The tutor now serves as the facilitator and is no longer the repository of knowledge as in the previous blended learning scenario.

- (c) Improved overall results between September 2012 before the project was launched and January 2013 after the project was launched.
- (d) Increase in cost savings of more than RM 50,000.00 per year.

Overall, the project has resulted in positive outcomes. It is hoped that the success of the project will serve as a basis for more improvements to be made in the future and that more courses can be offered fully on-line.

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