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Citation: Secker, J. & Macrae-Gibson, R. (2011). Evaluating MI512: An information literacy course for PhD students. *Library Review*, 60(2), pp. 96-107. doi: 10.1108/00242531111113050

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Evaluating MI512: an information literacy course for PhD students

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Biography:

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Keywords: information literacy; researchers, support; doctoral students; teaching

Structured Abstract:

Purpose: Provides an overview of a six week information literacy course for research students that was redesigned following the librarians undertaking the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education

Design/methodology/approach: Case study and evaluation of the impact of a teaching programme

Findings: Research students appreciate and value the expertise of library staff and are prepared to devote considerable time to an information literacy programme. Programme received excellent feedback

Research limitations/implications: No summative assessment associated with the course so no quantitative measure of improvement in learning.

Practical implications: Resource implications of running a six week programme.

Originality/value: Provides a model programme other librarians can adapt for use at their own institution. Extended doctoral level information literacy courses are relatively uncommon and demonstrates the benefit of this type of course to research.

Paper Type: Case study

Introduction

This paper examines recent work to restructure library support for PhD students provided by the Library and the Centre for Learning Technology (CLT) at London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The course, *MI512: Information literacy; tools for research* is six, two hour, hands-on workshops, supported online using Moodle. It aims to equip students with the skills to find, evaluate and manage the information they need for their doctoral studies. The tutors are completing a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching Higher Education, so have developed this course in light of their studies. Course evaluation questionnaires suggest this course is more beneficial to students than attending standalone courses, as progression occurs and more advanced skills are developed. It also allows the students and the tutor the opportunity to develop a more sustained relationship and increases the profile of Library support. Support for researchers is a key issue, with several important reports (Rowlands et al 2008, RIN 2008) highlighting that researchers lack a variety of information skills and struggle to use library databases effectively. MI512 provides a model of support for doctoral students that should be useful for other librarians and ensures LSE research students are equipped with the skills they need in their career.

1. Background and context

This paper describes recent work at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) to redevelop an information literacy course for research students. At LSE a separate department called the Methodology Institute (MI) offer a range of courses for students undertaking research at doctoral and masters level. The course *MI512: Information Literacy - tools for research* is one such course, although for historical reasons it is non-credit bearing. The course is taught by Library staff and is aimed at students undertaking a detailed literature search for the first time. Historically the course has operated as a series of standalone classes run in the autumn term and adapted from the general Information Skills programme. PhD students were free to attend any of the classes and it was advertised via the Library website. Classes aimed to introduce students to various library databases that were useful when conducting a literature review, improve their internet searching, learn citing and referencing skills and to use Endnote. Attendance had been declining over the past few years, despite a growing awareness that PhD students were struggling with their literature searching and that the Library should be providing them with more specialist help and advice. There was also a recognition that many new web 2.0 tools could be usefully employed by researchers and the Centre for Learning Technology were running a range of 'Digital Literacy' classes which were open to PhD students. However one off classes were difficult to plan as students attending were of mixed ability and rarely attended more than one class. The class tutors, who were usually Liaison Librarians or Learning Technologists, often felt they needed to try and cover many different aspects of library research skills in a short space of time. As different trainers ran each class, they were not aware of the content or structure of other classes so some content overlapped. There was also no overall branding of the programme or the training materials.

Following a focus group in Summer 2008 to inform the development of online resources in Moodle to support research students, feedback indicated that more face to face training and support was welcome. This influenced the decision to redesign the programme and the course was launched in the autumn term of 2008-9 as a six week programme which students were encouraged to sign up to in its entirety. After the first term the programme was evaluated to consider attendance figures and student feedback. Two of the course tutors also registered for the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education, to help inform their teaching and the course design. MI512 served as the basis for the assignments they completed during 2008-9 and several teaching observations were carried out as part of the requirements for their course, which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy.

2. Literature review

Several recent studies (Rowlands et al 2008, RIN 2008) have highlighted the need for information literacy training and support for doctoral level students. Students struggle with finding, managing and evaluating information about recent research suggests that teaching information literacy to

researchers will remain an important role for librarians, but they do need to ensure there is sufficient take up of the services they offer. (RIN, 2007, p.49). There is also a need to differentiate the support for researchers from support offered to undergraduate or taught Masters students to highlight the higher level skills and to teach researchers the 'tricks of the trade' (RIN, 2007 p.49). Rowlands et al (2008) argued that the notion of a 'Google generation' being distinct from other generations is a myth, but questioned whether we too late to change the 'ingrained coping behaviour' that students have learnt from relying heavily on internet search engines. (CIBER report, p.23). The CIBER report also found that students consistently overestimate their information skills which leads them to avoid attending training (CIBER report, p.24). While motivation is an important issue in terms of encouraging students to attend optional training, at doctoral level LSE have found this is less of a problem. Nevertheless much literature suggests that embedding information literacy into the curriculum and teaching it within the context of a discipline are often the key to success in information literacy programmes. Finally, reports (CLEX, 2009) predicted what future students will expect from their university education and library services, given their experience of using Web 2.0 technologies, i.e. technologies that enable communication, collaboration, participation and sharing. It found that the use of Web 2.0 is pervasive across all age groups and has already "had a profound effect on behaviours"; "using Web2.0 technologies leads to development of a strong sense of communities of interest" but "has also led to impatience ... to a casual approach to evaluating information and attributing it and also to copyright and legal constraints". The report recognised that "information literacies were a "a significant and growing deficit area".

3. Set up and organisation of the course

Based on the findings from the literature and the experiences of the focus group, work was undertaken in Summer 2008 to redesign the support for researchers offered by the Library and Centre for Learning Technology. The decision to make the MI512 course six consecutive workshops meant that student progression could be monitored and the skills and knowledge learnt in early classes could be built upon over course. The curriculum design was also influenced by the SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy. (SCONUL, 1999) which is widely used in UK higher education. The course outline is presented in more detail below.

3.1 MI512: Course Outline

Each session is a two hour workshop. Online support is available through LSE's virtual learning environment, Moodle. The workshops include:

Week 1: Introduction to Literature Searching: finding books and journals, using Cross Searcher (LSE's federated search engine), using IBSS and using ISI Citation indexes, finding materials not stocked at LSE.

Week 2: Going Beyond Google: Quality issues, using Google Advanced Search, using Google Scholar and Google Books, iGoogle, other search engines, using Intute and Delicious.

Week 3: Finding newspapers, thesis, conference papers: Using Nexis, using the Index to theses/Ethos, using ZETOC, what are pre-prints and finding research publications including LSE Research Online.

Week 4: Citing and Referencing for your thesis: Introduction to the Harvard method, managing your references, citing books, journal and web pages, using Delicious to store web references.

Week 5: Using Endnote: Introduction to Endnote, adding records manually, importing records from the Library Catalogue and from IBSS, producing a simple bibliography, selecting and applying a range of bibliographic styles.

Week 6: Keeping up to date and next steps: Setting up e-mail alerts, citation searching in ISI, Introduction to RSS, using Google Reader to read feeds, social networks and e-mail lists. Getting help in the future.

3.2 Class structure

Classes were structured to include a combination of presentations, live demonstrations and time for hands-on activities. Following feedback from a teaching observation in the autumn term, the class structure was modified in January 2009, to include shorter presentations and demonstrations

from the tutors and more time for hands-on activities. The tutors aimed to present and demonstrate for no more than 15 minutes before allowing hands on practice – usually talking for just 5-10 minutes with brief explanations of accessing resources, a quick tour of how to use them and most importantly why they are relevant for the students to use. Students were encouraged to watch the presentations during this time and not to start trying the exercises until the allocated time.

Activities were grouped so that students had longer hands-on sessions, instead of illustrating each activity separately and then allowing for a few minutes for each activity. This made it clearer which parts of the session were for activities and which parts students should be facing the presenters screen. By grouping activities together it also enabled the more advanced students to skip those exercises with which they were familiar and to concentrate on the parts which were new to them. Grouping the hands on exercises together in longer segments also enabled the tutors to spend longer providing roving help and answering student queries. In all the activities students were encouraged to carry out real searches related to their research topic, rather than run searches as directed by the tutors. This meant that students often left the session having found new material for their literature search.

3.3 Teaching Materials

Lesson plans were used to plan and structure each class and they were modified after each term, but particularly following feedback from a teaching observation in November 2008. The tutors prepared class handouts and a PowerPoint to use during the session, although live demonstrations of various library databases and search tools were also used. After the first term of teaching, the tutors became aware that student abilities were varied and they decided to develop a pre-course assessment form, which has been used since January 2009. This form ask students about their background, their experience of library databases and their confidence in several areas. A post-course assessment form was also devised to gather feedback at the end of the programme and by comparing the results, progression could be monitored.

In the autumn term of 2008, short activity sheets were given to students along with copies of the PowerPoint slides which contained considerable amount of extra details. Again following feedback as part of a teaching observation, the activity sheets were revised to become class workbooks. The tutors found students did not follow the activity sheets and sometimes waited to be shown what to do. Much essential information also previously appeared on the slides, and so these were reduced in terms of the quantity and amount of text they contained. The tutors decided to make the slides available via Moodle rather than give out handouts. The workbooks now include handy hints and tips, such as reasons why the featured database is useful, further activities for those more advanced or already familiar with the featured databases, screen shots and clearer instructions.

The tutors found following this modification students found it easier to follow the class tasks and to understand why they are useful. The students all found useful information and resources for their thesis during the activities as they were encouraged to search for material on their topic. Another advantage of clearer course workbooks was that students could download them from Moodle and work through them at their own pace if they missed a session.

3.4 Use of Moodle

LSE use Moodle as their institutional VLE, with most undergraduate and taught masters courses having a presence. The model of blended learning, where teaching is largely face to face with additional support provided in Moodle is widely used across the School. The tutors felt that providing online support for MI512 would be valuable in the classroom, but would also support students between classes and after the programme finished. The course was structured so that each weekly section contained links to the class workbook, PowerPoint and quick links to relevant resources. Moodle was integrated into the classroom with interactive tasks and quick access links to resources such as the various databases that were being used. In any academic year, students from each of the three cohorts (the course now runs once each term) retained access to Moodle after the end of the course. This was upon the request of students taking the course. A screenshot from Moodle is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: MI512 in Moodle

The screenshot displays the Moodle interface for the course 'MI512: Information Literacy: Tools for Research'. At the top, it indicates the user is logged in as 'Jane Secker'. The main content area includes a welcome message, a list of class teachers (Rowena Macrae-Gibson, Jane Secker, Clive Wilson), and a list of activities such as 'Announcements Lent term', 'MI512 Lent Term pre course questionnaire', 'Feedback Form', 'News Forum (Autumn 2009)', 'Pre Course Assessment form', 'Announcements', and 'Lent Term 2010 Post course feedback'. A sidebar on the left provides navigation options like 'People', 'Activities', 'Search Forums', and 'Administration'. A right sidebar contains 'Library Resources', 'New research selected by LSE Library', and 'Upcoming Events'.

In addition to providing resources and teaching materials, the Moodle discussion forum was used to deliver news and reminders to students which Moodle also delivers via e-mail. Each week a discussion forum for the class where students could raise issues or share useful anecdotes with each other was available.

3.5 Research Feedback

Since January 2009, all students on MI512 are asked to complete pre-course assessment which included a space for them to provide more information about their research topic. By completing details of their research topic, the tutors had a better understanding of the subjects represented. However the form was also an incentive for students to see the benefit of the course at the outset and to encourage them to remain engaged after the first class. Each student received feedback from their liaison librarian on their research topic which indicated the more appropriate databases to search (and how they could be accessed) useful websites, other libraries and advice on their search strategies. The feedback form also helped the tutors deal with the different subject specialisms as they were now able to give more detailed advice to students during the hands on exercises.

3.6 Team teaching

Each workshop in the programme has been team taught by two members of staff to allow the sessions to accommodate up to 25 students at a time. This has included three liaison librarians and the Learning Technology Librarian, but where possible the same two members of staff teach for the entire six weeks. Team teaching has allowed the tutors to provide support for each other and it also allows for more variation in the class. Both tutors provide roving help to students during the hands on sessions This is particularly helpful when dealing with mixed ability groups as trainers can encourage students working at different levels during the hands on exercises. It is also useful

to have several staff available so as to provide cover during sickness or absence. However the students clearly appreciated having the same trainers throughout the term to built-up a rapport. They also called upon the staff expertise occasionally outside the classroom.

Whilst team teaching can be seen as a staff development opportunity, a chance to train up a less experienced member of staff, it is important to stress that both staff play an active role in each workshop. The member of staff not actively presenting needs to keep an eye on the room, check that all students are understanding the demonstration and also to be ready to chip in with relevant examples and illustrations if required.

3.7 Reflections on MI512

Running MI512 as a six week course helped the tutors build a relationship and greater understanding of the needs of individual students. Simply knowing a students' name and more about their research improved the relationship between library staff and students. The tutors found their confidence as teachers increased, partly from undertaking the PG Cert, but also from seeing the same group regularly and building a rapport. Consequently the tutors were able to adopt a more informal manner in the classroom which is more difficult to achieve in standalone classes.

Progression was an important factor in MI512, with student attending weekly classes. They built on skills and their confidence grew week by week in way not seen in other one off library training sessions at LSE. This meant the training had a greater impact on students and developed their skills to a higher level. One important factor that contributed to the success of the programme was student were able to use their own research topic in the hands-on activities. This can be harder to achieve in standalone classes as tutors usually prepare generic searches. Feedback from students also revealed that they were happy to attend a programme of classes and many commented that they set aside the time each week to build up their skills.

4. Attendance, students feedback and observations

Interest in MI512 was high throughout 2008-9 and it has been fully booked in 2009-10 despite no real change to the publicity that is used for other information skills classes. The course was advertised via the Library website, via direct emails to departments by Liaison Librarians, and by email via the Teaching and Learning Centre. The course is also publicised alongside other Methodology Institute courses in the LSE online calendar, which lists details of all the courses at LSE. After the first term, word of mouth and personal recommendations from other students was an important way that students found out about it. Given the popularity of the course waiting lists were kept each term and students on the list were given first refusal for booking on subsequent terms.

4.1 Student attendance and engagement

The bookings and attendance were

- Autumn Term 2008: bookings 25:
- Spring Term 2009 bookings 28: (16 people on waiting list)
- Summer Term 2009 bookings: 19 : (10 people on waiting list)
- Autumn Term 2009: bookings 27
- Spring Term 2010: bookings 27
- Summer Term 2010: bookings 18

The decision to run the course three times was based on its popularity in the first two terms and had not been anticipated. Summer term attendance was lower than in the first two terms, as may be expected, but news of the course still generated interest amongst the students.

Another benefit of building up a rapport between tutors and students and in having a more formalised programme was that students did send apologies if they were unable to attend and they did study course materials for weeks they had missed due to illness.

4.3 Evaluation

Evaluation forms were circulated to all participants to gather feedback on the course each term. Natural feedback in the classroom captured by the tutors as part of the reflection they did for their teaching qualification, also suggested there was a positive atmosphere, with high levels of student engagement.

Feedback forms from the Michaelmas and Lent term showed that all students rated the course Excellent or Good with all classes highly rated but classes 2, 3 and 6 had highest ratings. In the second two terms student progression was measured as students were asked to evaluate their skills before and after attending. The results were impressive showing clearly increased confidence and they were presented at a recent conference (Macrae-Gibson & Secker, 2009):

Student confidence before attending the programme:

Finding published literature – 2.9

Searching the internet – 2.85

Student confidence after attending the programme

Finding published literature – 4.5

Searching the internet – 4.3

This success was repeated in the Lent term 2010

Student confidence before attending the programme:

Finding published literature – 2.23

Searching the internet – 3.11

Student confidence after attending the programme

Finding published literature – 4.06

Searching the internet – 4.00

Whilst there can be drawbacks with self assessment as students can over or under-estimate their own (Walsh, 2009 p. 23 cites Maughan (2001) on this further) this does clearly show that the students felt they had benefited from the course and that the learning outcomes had been successful. Qualitative feedback from the forms was also enlightening and showed a high level of engagement with the course. Some sample quotes have been included below:

I liked that this was a 6 week course and you could build up your information literacy ... I liked the pre-course needs analysis form and individual suggestions for search sources. ,

I thought the teaching was excellent. [The tutors] were approachable and I liked the interactive nature of the classes.,

Since it has been 12 years since I was last doing this kind of stuff this was a real eye opener in terms of what is out there to help with research. It was well organised and an excellent combination of explanation and exercises.

This was excellent and came at exactly the right time for me (first year) and I have recommended it to lots of people. The feedback form was also thoroughly useful. Thanks!

Loved the way the instructors managed a good mix of lecturing and hands on experience on PCs. Length of talking was just perfect, whenever I got twitchy to try out their ideas on a PC, the opportunity just emerged - there was no frustration wanting to try something whilst waiting for teacher to stop droning on. Well done! Frankly all the classes were useful, simply because they made me aware of stuff I didn't know.

Finally one of the quotes the tutors were particularly proud of was:

Without exaggeration, this is the most well prepared, organised and professional course I've ever experienced in my life. The pre-class organisation is impressive, the Moodle resources outstanding, the hand outs just right, the co-teaching smooth and collegial, the follow-up effective. I will keep this course in mind as a model for when I prepare my own course in the future.

5. Benefits to students

There have been numerous benefits to running this course as a six week programme, which were partly gauged from the tutors' reflections and also from student feedback. The benefits to students included:

- The course was seen as a good investment of time, as it saved the students time in the long run and helped ensure they were using appropriate sources and databases for their research – concerns that they had been 'missing something' from the literature were common and students believed MI512 gave them the skills to know where to search.
- Students valued the feedback from liaison librarians on useful resources, search strategies and other libraries for their research topic provided via the feedback forms. Students were also put in contact with their liaison librarian so they could get ongoing support during their research.
- All class activities focused on the students own topics so that they built up research skills and find useful information in a safe learning environment. Each week they left the classroom having discovered new useful resources and articles and so could very quickly see the practical benefits of the course.
- Students were able to meet other research students from across the School and work together to help each other and share ideas – isolation is a particular problem for PhD students who may struggle to meet other researchers outside their department.
- Although the course is aimed at students who were starting an extensive literature search, others from different stages of their research attended and commented that they found it useful.

6. The Post Graduate Certificate and MI512

The lead tutors on MI512 decided to enrol in the Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PGCHE) in Autumn 2008 to gain a formal recognition of their role as teachers at LSE and for their own personal development. The course is accredited by the Higher Education Academy and run by the Teaching and Learning Centre at LSE. All graduate teaching assistants and new lecturers also complete this qualification. The course includes five modules covering: planning your teaching year, student learning, feedback and assessment, quality assurance and course design. More specific benefits of the PGCHE included:

- The Teaching and Learning Centre gave advice during teaching observations which helped the tutors amend the structure of classes and hands on practice sessions in 2008-9.
- Learning theory literature helped the tutors see how students engage with the class and course materials.
- As part of the module on student learning the tutors had to track student progress and consider their backgrounds and progress in far greater detail than would normally be the case with an elective class. This enabled us to understand the students more fully and to see how their backgrounds and prior knowledge impacted on their class attitudes and performance. Seeing the students as individuals helped develop tutor/student rapport
- The quality assurance module explored issues which impacted on LSE's information literacy training as a whole. If IL is to become more embedded in the curriculum or to be credit bearing then quality assurance measures will be vital
- The course design module enabled tutors to consider planning future sessions, and especially to reflect on how these could be embedded with sessions on academic writing more broadly

- Whilst MI512 is a voluntary course, the PG Cert enabled tutors to consider a whole range of assessment options including those for non credit bearing courses
- Completing the certificate also gave weight to the programme especially if the tutors decide to roll it out on a more formal basis. It demonstrates that the Library and Centre for Learning Technology are serious about providing quality training and supporting researchers.

7. Other improvements at LSE

There are a number of other benefits that the work on MI512 has had on library training more generally. For example, improvements to the structure of classes and training materials have been rolled out to classes in the Information Skills programme. MI512 also illustrated the value of using Moodle in classes and the importance of developing a blended learning approach to training (i.e. face to face in conjunction with online support). MI512 offers a number of opportunities to roll out training to specific departments, for example one tutor now runs a three week series of workshops for Social Policy PhD students, utilising the departments own pre-existing research seminar slots as a way of embedding information literacy into departmental study.

The topic feedback forms have also been adapted and now form part of the Liaison Librarian's general support to PhD students via LSE Library's research postcard service. These postcards allow PhD students to complete brief details of their topic so that Liaison Librarians can send them feedback on appropriate databases and websites. Whilst not as extensive as the MI512 forms they have been a very useful tool in providing information to researchers and in developing the rapport between Liaison Librarians and their academic departments.

Another benefit has been the course is an excellent example of collaboration between learning technologists and Library staff and highlights areas where training overlaps the common interests of the two teams. The Digital Literacy programme which includes a range of complementary classes for staff and PhD students is another example of the two teams working collaboratively to provide training. The use of team teaching was also highly valuable and has allowed tutors to benefit from the skills and expertise of colleagues and to develop their own approaches as a result. Finally the course materials used in MI512 have been adapted to provide workbooks for classes on the general programme, thus avoiding any duplications of effort.

However, perhaps more importantly the work on MI512 has underlined the value of progression so that students have an opportunity to develop their skills over time. It has also highlighted the importance of embedding information skills into the curriculum at LSE. In light of the success of this programme, the course director for a new core course that all LSE undergraduate students will take from 2010-11 (known as LSE100) have recognised the importance of developing students' information skills. Of the ten learning objectives for LSE100, three are information skills, including: find and accessing information, evaluating information and managing information and avoiding plagiarism. The success of MI512 added weight to the argument that both the Library and CLT play a central role in teaching as well as supporting students learning through more traditional means.

8. MI512: building on success

MI512 has now run six times in total. Interest will be monitored to determine whether MI512 will run regularly three times per year. The staff commitment for this course is considerable, with classes requiring two trainers at least one of whom must be available for all weeks. Discussions are still ongoing about who should provide this support, as a sufficient number of staff are now familiar with the programme and, subject to availability, able to teach it. The time commitment is substantial with 12 hours contact time with students, plus additional time each week to prepare for classes and update workbooks and the Moodle course.

In terms of revising the programme it has run largely unchanged in 2009-10, so time planning classes and revising workbooks is significantly reduced. One area where the course does take up time is the administration at the start of the term and in photocopying course materials. Since March 2010, the User Education Team in the Library has a dedicated library assistant who provides additional support for the course, taking bookings and photocopying the workbooks. One

of the liaison librarians has become the course convenor in line with LSE practices and the CLT will continue to be involved in the course providing consultancy and acting as a tutor.

One logistical issue that has proved problematic has been finding suitable rooms at LSE to run the class as the Library Training Room only seats 12 students. Requests to the Timetable team are now submitted, which should improve the advanced publicity that can be sent to students about the date and location of the course.

In terms of rolling out the training of MI512 more widely to other training staff, the course benefits from experienced, sympathetic trainers. It is recommended that any new trainers in the team consider undertaking the teaching qualification. Staff not teaching on MI512 in any particular term are available for classes in the general information skills programme and can bring their extra expertise to the successful running of these classes.

9. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how support for PhD students at LSE has been improved dramatically through developing a six week information literacy course. Research students require support and training in a range of different areas which cannot be covered within the scope of a single class. Meanwhile, progression is important to build up the range of skills a researcher needs and yet currently this course is still optional and it is not credit bearing.

The Library have disseminated stories of the success of MI512 across the School with the hope that more library skills training can be offered within departments. All departments provide some form of research training for their PhD students but these do not necessarily include library skills, or if they do these could be limited to a single session or even just a lecture style presentation. Library skills could be embedded in the departments' provision by utilising these research seminar slots - as is the case with the three Library sessions that are run for the Social Policy department.

In the future there may also be a case for making these modules compulsory and attaching some form of accreditation to them to encourage participation. However, this will clearly take additional time for liaison librarians so resourcing this additional work may need to be considered. Information literacy is a key skill for the researcher of the future and it is vital that librarians play an active role in teaching in this area. MI512 illustrates LSE's commitment to enhancing the skills of its researchers through a dedicated programme.

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