



# Teaching Ethics in the University through Multicultural Online Dialogue

Educación ética en la Universidad a través del diálogo multicultural online

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an international collaboration on ethics teaching for personal and professional values within the area of formal higher education using new communication technologies. The course design was based on the dialogic technique and was aimed at clarifying the students' own values, defining their own positions related to ethical dilemmas, developing argumentative strategies and an ethical commitment to their profession and contribution to society. The online dialogue between heterogeneous groups of students based on their cultural background –the main innovation of this training– was possible thanks to the technological and administrative support of the participating universities. To analyze the effect of this innovative training we employed a quasi-experimental design using a control group, i.e., without the option of online dialogue with students from another culture. University students from Spain (University of Cantabria) and Chile (Universidad Autónoma de Chile) participated in this study. The positive results, which included better scores and positive assessments of both debate involvement and intercultural contact by students who participated in the new teaching program, support the main conclusion that the opening of international dialogue on moral dilemmas through new communication technologies contributes significantly to improve ethics training in higher education.

## RESUMEN

En este trabajo se presentan los resultados de una colaboración internacional para la formación ética centrada en valores personales y profesionales dentro de la educación formal superior empleando las nuevas tecnologías de la comunicación. La formación diseñada basada en la técnica dialógica pretende que el estudiante clarifique sus valores, se posicione ante dilemas éticos y desarrolle estrategias argumentativas, así como un compromiso ético con su profesión y contribución a la sociedad. La principal innovación de esta formación es la incorporación del diálogo online entre grupos de estudiantes heterogéneos por su origen cultural, esto fue posible gracias a la colaboración de dos universidades y al apoyo tecnológico y administrativo aportado por las mismas. Para analizar el efecto de esta formación innovadora se ha empleado un diseño cuasi-experimental con grupo control, en el que se formaba en valores pero no existía la posibilidad de un diálogo online con estudiantes de otra cultura. En este estudio participaron estudiantes de la Universidad Autónoma de Chile y de la Universidad de Cantabria (España). Entre los resultados obtenidos destacamos las mejores calificaciones y positiva valoración de la participación en los debates y del contacto intercultural por parte de los estudiantes que siguieron la formación más innovadora. Estos resultados permiten concluir que la apertura internacional del diálogo gracias al uso de las tecnologías de la comunicación contribuye de forma significativa a la formación ética en la educación superior.

## KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Online dialogue, ethics, high education, teaching values, educational innovation, cultural interaction, critical thinking. Diálogo online, ética, educación superior, formación en valores, innovación educativa, interacción cultural, pensamiento crítico.



## 1. Introduction

The contribution of higher education institutions for the training of professionals with strong ethical convictions is a subject of special interest. It is fundamental that higher education institutions, besides focusing on professional preparation, should also consider the development of personal skills such as critical thinking (Nussbaum 2005). In this sense, the Global Declaration on Higher Education (UNESCO, 2009: 2) has recognized that present society lives in a deep crisis of values, and therefore, «higher education must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defence of human rights and the values of democracy». Ultimately, ethical education becomes a necessity, and the University has been identified as one of the entities responsible for this education, in European as well as American contexts (Escámez, García-López, & Jover, 2008; Esteban & Buxarrais, 2004; Jover, López, & Quiroga, 2011; Muhr, 2010; Petrova, 2010).

This teaching of ethics in university classrooms is especially necessary in the case of future professionals in the fields of Psychology and Education, as their professional work is, to a great extent, a pillar on which the development of the rest of the members of society rests. However, this training, as shown by Bolívar (2005), becomes a «null curriculum» of the university degrees, in the sense that it is part of the curriculum by omission when the necessary dimensions are not explicitly included for its future application in professional practice. Guerrero and Gómez (2013) have confirmed the absence of teaching of ethics and morality to the students in the Latin American region. Especially in the degrees of Psychology and Education, the great importance that the students and professional schools have given to professional ethics in their education has been noted, at the same time that they have mentioned the scarce or non-attention given to this in their university training (Bolívar, 2005; Río, 2009).

The results regarding the Teaching degree students were especially interesting (Bolívar, 2005), as it evidenced the generalized absence of the moral character of the teacher's education and the professional teacher's ethics, as the focus is more centred on providing the teachers with contents and technical skills than with a critical social conscience. As for Psychology, and specifically in the Chilean environment, research by Alvear, Pasmanik, Winkler and Olivares (2008), shows that these professionals have a preference for using their own personal judgement before taking into consideration deontological ethics when

making decisions that are ethical in character. With this in mind, Pasmanik and Winkler (2009) argue that this tendency is probably due to the ethical training received during the university years, characterized by being scarce, theoretical and decontextualized, neglecting reflection and debate.

It is also relevant to point out that the didactic developments that truly specify how to deal with the teaching of values in the classroom are scarce (Molina, Silva, & Cabezas, 2005; Rodríguez, 2012). Most of the literature available is focused on reflections about the need to teach values in higher education, or analyzes the perspectives of different agents that are involved in it (Buxarrais, Esteban, & Mellen, 2015; Escámez & al., 2008; García, Sales, Moliner, & Ferrández, 2009; Jiménez, 1997). Even fewer in number are the publications that discuss the joint participation of universities from different countries, using the possibilities that new communication technologies have opened for this, although these have been exploited for the learning of other content, with positive results (Zhu, 2012) and have therefore confirmed that discussions online can be a powerful tool for the development of critical thinking (Guiller, Durdell, & Ross, 2008).

By taking into account what was discussed above, we developed a proposal for the teaching of ethics in higher formal education through the development of a dialogic methodology and the use of new communication technologies that allow for contact between students from different cultures and degree programmes. The final aim of this training was to teach the university students to rationally and autonomously construct their values so that they may develop their own well-reasoned ethical principles. This will not only allow them to position themselves with arguments in face of society's demands, but will optimize their professional performance. The quasi-experimental, international and applied character of this contribution, which centres on the teaching of ethics at university, is a key piece that can push forward the purpose of higher education.

### 1.1. Innovating in ethics education

The training designed for this research creates an active methodology that is based on dialogic techniques that intend for the students to clarify their values and use them to take a stand on a subject, avoiding indoctrination in the resolution of moral conflicts. The basis of this dialogic methodology lies in the cognitive theory of moral development by Kohlberg (1981) and other theoretical developments that bring together feelings and cognition (Benhabib, 2011), and that defend

a moral education that helps individuals to «confront the other viewpoint without losing the possibility to accessing or appealing to universal horizons of values» (Gozálvez & Jover, 2016: 311). Therefore, the need to facilitate a framework and a procedure so that values can be experienced, constructed and lived, is raised. The dialogic technique is an appropriate active methodology, as values are inserted into the dialogue (as it requires judgement by the other) and at the same time, through listening, reflection and reasoning, these same values are approached. Also, the students, through reflection and the clash of opinions on conflictive situations that are of personal and professional interest, re-structure their reasoning, thereby enhancing their moral development (López, Carpintero, Del-Campo, Lázaro, & Soriano, 2010; Meza, 2008).

The training designed herein also tries to bolster reasoning strategies, as the psychological processes of argumentation are especially linked to ethics, and the mastery of the reasoning process has great importance for family, social, political and academic life. Yepes, Rodríguez y Montoya (2006) have described reasoning as the use of words to produce discourses in which a position is taken in a reasoned-with manner when confronting a topic or a problem. They have also argued that it is part of the thought process that involves the laws of reasoning (logic), the rules of approval and refusal (dialectics), and the use of verbal resources with the aim of persuading with reference to feelings, emotions and suggestions (rhetoric). The characteristics of the argument are linked to learning about values, as the argument implies the opposite of accepting obtuse, fanatical positions that cling to a single point of view.

On the other hand, the procedure designed highlights the special care that is given to the preparation of the debate, its management, and the creation of collaborative groups. Good dialogue requires that the participants freely express what they think, feel and believe, and many can show resistance when facing this risk (Barckley, Cross, & Howell, 2007). The participa-

tion of the students in a rewarding dialogue implies a challenge in contexts that are characterized by the fomenting of a passive attitude, which is characteristic of old models of higher education. Therefore, it is important to make efforts to achieve an adequate management of the classroom that guarantees an environment of trust that can stimulate the participation of all the students in the debate. The procedure selected to reach this objective was the progressive panel debate technique. As Villafaña (2008) has pointed, it allows for the delving into the study of a topic, following through and optimizing ideas or conclusions; it weighs

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the contributions of all the participants, and brings together the members of a group around a common topic.

At this point it is also convenient to point out that the role of the teacher in the managing of the dialogic technique in the classroom and online is essential. Therefore, taking into account the studies by Cantillo and others (2005), Meza (2008), and Bender (2012), we stress the inclusion of specific processes and resources at each stage. It is essential that the instructions make clear that the objective of the activity is to individually and jointly think and reason about possible moral solutions. For this, the dialogue and proposed questions and objections will be employed. In the debate, it is important that the teacher puts questions

that guide the discussion, starting with exploratory questions that confirm that the dilemma has been understood. It is also important that the students define their stand on a topic, make clear their thinking structure and have the opportunity to recognize that behind the same opinion, there could be very different reasons. Progress is made in the debate by increasing its complexity and stimulating a higher level of moral reasoning by, for example, bringing in new information, with questions about events that happened in its con-

critical thinking (Loes, Pascarella, & Umbach, 2012). Shared learning about ethics, then, sought to optimize the dialogic tool (through the debate on ethical dilemmas), guaranteeing diversity in the online group debate of the students thanks to the internationalization and support of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

The Spanish students were enrolled in the course named Teaching values and personal competencies for teachers, which was part of the coursework found in the Teacher Training for Early Childhood Education and Primary Education degrees. The general objectives of this course included the development of strategies for their socio-emotional and ethical development, promoting the teachers' well-being and coexistence in the educational community, as well as reflection on their or others' way of being.

The Chilean participants were enrolled in the Personal Development IV course of the Psychology degree, whose main objectives were the development of the psychologist's role and his/her commitment

to professional ethics. In this course, the students applied the personal and interpersonal skills knowledge acquired to group contexts in the educational environment. As this was their first professional practice of the degree, it was fundamental that they were conscious of the need for ethical preparation for the exercising of their profession.

**The active and dialogic methodology designed for this study allowed us to confirm that the possibility to debate in a structured and guided form about a moral dilemma with students from other cultures through the use of communication technology had favourable effects on the identification of values and stances, on the quality of argument produced and additionally on the participants' self-evaluation of their own contributions to the debates.**

text, and according to universal consequences. Also, in the online dialogues, it is important to explicitly clarify what is expected from the discussion (i.e. as related to the frequency and quality of the participation) and explain the style of the interventions online, as the debate is not typical of formal work (Bender, 2012).

### **1.2. International collaboration for the teaching of ethics in international higher education**

The teaching of the ethics procedure presented in this research work was applied at the Autonomous University of Chile and the University of Cantabria (Spain). The participating students were enrolled in class subjects that coincided with the teaching of skills such as socio-moral reflection, critical comprehension of reality, dialogue and argumentation, perspective-taking and an attitude of respect and tolerance towards other opinions, as well as the meta-knowledge of their own self and existence. The coincidence in the curriculum allowed for the joint creation of this teaching program, which would be further enhanced by the strength that cultural diversity provides in bolstering

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Research design and participants**

In this study, 226 university students participated in two groups. In the training group, 147 students participated, 69 from the Autonomous University of Chile (UA) and 78 from the University of Cantabria (UC). In the control group (they received ethics training without the option of online dialogue), 79 students from the UC participated.

The data on the academic results were analysed from the entire sample. The analysis of the evaluation of the training, on the other hand, was performed only on the 46 students who gave their opinion (13 from the training group in the UC and 24 from the UA, and

9 from the control group) as this was anonymous and voluntary.

## 2.2. Procedure

The following key stages in this innovative training in values were considered:

a) The creation of «twinned groups» –culturally heterogeneous- and the ICT. A collaboration agreement was established between the two universities to guarantee the protection of data and the confidentiality of the students, as well as to achieve the opening of the Moodle platform and the ICT, created by the Spanish university for this purpose, to the Chilean students.

In the classrooms of each participating university, groups of four or five members were created, and these were twinned to a similarly-sized group from the other university. In the virtual platform Moodle, a wiki per twinned group was created, so that they could confidentially share, create and edit diverse types of content related to their approaches, as well as to talk and dialogue among themselves.

b) Design of the materials shared: bibliography, lectures, exercises, dilemma, and evaluation rubric. All the students had the same materials and bibliography available, and the professors employed the same presentations for their lectures. Also, a formative and summative evaluation was designed that contributed to the training of the students.

c) Implementation of the sessions and activities: The training was developed over a period of four weeks. The sequence of the sessions were carried out simultaneously in both universities and planned as shown below:

The first session (2 hours) started with a lecture on values and their importance for personal development and coexistence. It continued with training in consistent value clarification exercises to first identify the student's own values. Then, the identification of values and counter-values was performed using interactive processes found in ethical dilemmas. For the teaching of argumentative skills, identification activities of different types were performed, and the dialogic argumentative structure was practiced on controversial subjects of the student's own choosing (adapted from Yepes & al., 2006). This session culminated with the presentation of the ethical dilemma, which consisted on the trailer for the film «Into the wild», accompanied by a script in which the students are urged, through questioning, to identify and reason the values and counter-values present, and to reflect on their positions on it. This situation was chosen as a type of moral dilemma,

with the object of involving the students not only rationally, but also emotionally. These types of situations, which are close to the personal (private) environment, are considered to be the most accurate to work with when dealing with dilemmas (Meza, 2008).

In the second week (1 hour) the application of the progressive panel debate technique started. The students worked in small groups in the classroom, so that they expressed their thoughts individually; then, they debated and created a report that contained the viewpoints heard in the group. It was only in the training group where the students were urged to share this report with the twinned group through the Moodle wiki; in addition they were asked to dialogue online outside of the classroom for a week.

In the third session (1 hour) a great assembly took place in the classroom. The students developed their individual viewpoints post-debate, outside the classroom.

In the last week, the professors gathered the student's individual viewpoint reports that were created pre- and post-debate, to evaluate them according to the evaluation rubric.

Additionally, through an online poll, the training was evaluated using the students' perception of the training they received.

## 2.3. Instruments of evaluation

### 2.3.1. Evaluation rubric of the academic results

The evaluation rubric was composed of the following criteria, which were grouped into three sections that had a relative weight on the final mark (shown between parentheses).

a) In the individual pre-debate approaches, the degree in which the values and counter-values were identified was evaluated, as well as the quality of the argument used on their initial stance (25% in the training group and 50% in the control).

b) Regarding the participation in the online debate, the fact that the students published the report created in the small groups on the debate in the Moodle wiki, the quality of said reports and the comments from the twinned group in the wiki were taken into account (35% in the training group).

c) In the post-debate viewpoints, we took into account the addition of values and counter-values by students. We also looked at the extent to which the final viewpoints were developed, drawing from new arguments and/or delving into those that had been already present, starting with or identifying the stances that were shown in the debates (40% in the training group and 50% in the control).

### 2.3.2. Assessment of their own participation

The students evaluated their participation in the debates using two items: one on their participation in the class debates, and another about their online participation. This last was not applicable to the control group, as it did not include online debates. The scale of the response oscillated between 1 (nothing) and 10 (much). The items were: «How much did you participate in the debate created in the classroom? How much have you participated in the debate developed in the wiki?»

Also, the perceived quality of the participation was measured using seven items ( $\alpha=.77$ ,  $N=46$ ) taken from Cantillo & al. (2005: 69). The students answered by using a frequency scale where 1 indicated «never»; 2, «sometimes» and 3, «always». Some examples of these items are: «When I want to participate, I ask to have the word» and «I do not attack personally».

### 2.3.3. Evaluation of the training

Lastly, four open-ended questions were also asked, so that the students reflected on and gave information about the meta-knowledge they had acquired (i.e. what did you learn?), their preferences (i.e. what did you like best? And the least?), and also provided some suggestions to improve the methodology and the procedures in the future versions (i.e. what suggestions could you give to improve and innovate this training?).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Academic results

As we observe in figure 1, the students in the training group obtained better results as compared to those in the control group.

The Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric analysis applied due to the lack of homogeneity of variances (Levene test:  $F(2,223)=3.65$ ,  $p<.05$ ) confirmed that the differences in the marks obtained were significant ( $\chi^2(2)=22.76$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Pair-wise comparison of the

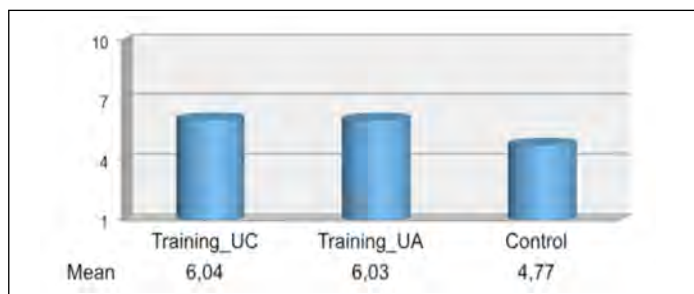


Figure 1. Average of the marks obtained in each of the groups (maximum score = 10).

training and control groups with the Mann-Whitney U test resulted in differences only when comparing the control group with the other two training groups. Therefore, the Chilean students ( $U=1657.5$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and the Spanish students in the training group ( $U=1927$ ,  $p<.001$ ) had better marks than the students in the control group.

### 3.2. Participation on the debates

First, the differences on the assessment of the participation on the debates performed in the classroom are presented. Non-parametric tests were performed, given that the assumptions of normality of the scores were not met, either for the participation in the classroom (Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S)=0.154,  $p<.01$ ) or the participation online (K-S=0.167,  $p<.01$ ).

The Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant differences ( $\chi^2(2)=11.78$ ,  $p<.01$ ) for the variable «participation in the classroom debates». Also, the Mann-Whitney U test confirmed that the differences between the three groups were significant when comparing the control group with the training groups composed by Chilean students ( $U=11$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and Spanish students ( $U=48.50$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Therefore, it was shown that students in the training group more positively valued their participation in the classroom as compared to the control group (figure 2).

For each of the conditions, the one sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test was applied, with the test value equal to the average from the answer scale (5.5). This test confirmed that the students in the control group had scores that were significantly lower than this value ( $T=5$ ,  $p<.05$ ), while the scores of the students in the training groups, the Chilean students ( $T=88.5$ ,  $p<.05$ ) as well as the Spanish students, had scores that were closer to this value ( $T=184$ ,  $p=.33$ ).

In respect to the online participation in the debates, the Mann-Whitney U test did not show significant differences between the two training groups ( $U=152.5$ ,  $p=.78$ ), as their scores were similar (Figure 3).

The one sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used with the test value set equal to the average from the answer scale (5.5). This allowed us to confirm that the scores from the Spanish students ( $T=238$ ,  $p<.05$ ) were significantly higher than this test value, and that the Chilean students' scores did not significantly differ from it ( $T=60.50$ ,  $p=.09$ ).

As the score's assumptions of normality were not met (K-S=0.169,  $p<.01$ ), non-parametric analyses were performed



Figure 2. Average of the scores from the assessment of their own participation in the classroom debates (maximum score=10).

med on the results of the study on the perception of the quality of participation. The Kruskal-Wallis test showed significant differences  $\chi^2(2) = 7.90$ ,  $p < .05$  between groups. The Mann-Whitney U test was significant when comparing the control group with the Chilean training group ( $T = 19.50$ ,  $p < .01$ ), as well as when comparing the two training groups ( $T = 222.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The one sample Wilcoxon signed-rank test with the test value set equal to the average from the answer scale (2), confirmed that the Chilean students' scores significantly differed from it ( $T = 85$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and therefore, they were the ones that had the best perception on the quality of their participation on the debates (figure 4).

### 3.3. Evaluation of the innovative teaching of ethics

The students' evaluation on the different elements of this innovative training program through content analysis of the answers to four open-ended questions is presented below.

In respect of the first question, which referred to the aspects of the training that they most appreciated, the answer of sharing ideas with different students was noted for its frequency (i.e. due to the diversity in cultures and opinions). Variations of this answer were present in 50% of the Chilean students' comments and 57% of the Spanish students'. On the second question, which asked what they liked the least, 67% of the Chilean students and 100% of the Spanish students expressed their displeasure at the low amount of participation and interaction between them, as they would have liked to have had more expression of opinions and debate by all the students in the twinned groups.

The third question asked about what they had learned thanks to this training, and we found that the UA students, as well as the UC students, pointed to the opportunity to get to know and identify their own and others' values, debating

by reasoning their own stance, and the students specified: «to listen to the people better and try to understand them», «to not judge people due to their decisions, outlandish as they may seem», «having different points of view about the same topic».

Lastly, the fourth open-ended question allowed us to gather their suggestions for the improvement of the future application of this training program. The UC students pointed to the optimization of the coordination to foment participation and interaction (100%), and the UA students mentioned the inclusion of debate topics that were more related to the course, and the improvement of the coordination and time (100%).

## 4. Discussion

The pedagogic proposal in ethics education described here reflects on the need to plan and develop initiatives from this type of university environment, due to the positive reception by all the participants –professors and students- and as reflected by the results obtained. We believe that the proposal brings to light, in the university classrooms, the difficult task of training upright professionals that together with their scientific and technical training, allows them to build and generalize their social commitment and their humanistic training (Hodelín & Fuentes, 2014).

The active and dialogic methodology designed for this study allowed us to confirm that the possibility to debate in a structured and guided form about a moral dilemma with students from other cultures through the use of communication technology, had favourable effects on the identification of values and stances, on the quality of argument produced and additionally on the participants' self-evaluation of their own contributions to the debates. The students who were part of this training also expressed a great appreciation for the



Figure 3. Average of the scores from the assessment of their own participation in the online debates (maximum score=10).



Figure 4. Average of the scores from the assessment of the quality of their participation in the debates (maximum score=3).

knowledge gained and debating with different people who had different ideas, and the exercise of comprehension, reasoning and reflection that this activity entailed. These results were very significant as regards the number of intervention sessions, which led us to hypothesize that a more prolonged intervention would bring with it more positive results, and most probably, would be longer lasting as well. As for its application, it would be advisable to plan the online debate following the indications by Bender (2012) on the creation of questions that motivate the participation of the students, without forgetting the adequate management of the cultural differences found in online collaborative behaviour (Kim & Bonk, 2002). It is also important to attend to aspects of the experimental studies to guarantee their external and internal validity (Meza, 2008), for example by adjusting the timetable among all the participants. Furthermore, we believe that the results as a whole point to the need of greater openness and contact between the universities in the different parts of the world. In this sense, we believe that university teaching should offer training in the necessary skills for students' professional performance away from their own countries. The new communication technologies facilitate this type of training by allowing online interaction with people from all over the world (Merryfield, 2003).

On the other hand, the pedagogic design described herein implies the real application of the truly needed ethics education, which is currently difficult to work with in the university classroom. Thanks to the methodology applied, we overcame one of the limitations mentioned by the teachers when dealing with ethics-related work with the students, which is the possibility of indoctrinating certain values and specific practices (García & al., 2009). From the innovative training described, we uphold the deontological codes of the profession, as well as the universal declarations of human rights and values, so that from this point on,

the students are the ones who, through dialogue with diverse types of people, critical thinking and argumentation, solidly construct their personal and professional ethics (Gozálvez & Jover, 2016; Martínez, 2011).

Lastly, it is important to highlight that the internationalization of educational practices require a great effort by all the agents involved, as well as a complex bureaucracy due to the requirement of protecting the students' data at the universities. However, «if a higher education institution wants to have a teaching system that integrates tech-

nologies, it is crucial to have the right institutional technological support. Higher education institutions should provide lecturers and students with technological systems to enable an educational model that integrates technologies to be developed» (Duart, 2011: 11). Taking care of these aspects guarantees an adequate coordination, which is essential so that the educational practices described here become a reality. In this way, we hope that the pedagogic proposal described here serves as a guide, the results reached become the starting point for the reflection on ethics education in the university classrooms, and the difficulties mentioned become another incentive for the passion of training future professionals at the university, as the development of personal and professional ethics will be their best business card.

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