

# ***Tools vs. Textbooks: Comparing the Impact of Alternative Break Trips and Classroom-Based Learning***

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Mixing and pouring concrete for the foundation of a house in Tijuana, Mexico is not your typical college spring break experience. Neither is hiking through fair trade coffee co-ops in Nicaragua or weatherproofing trailer homes on a Lakota American Indian reservation in South Dakota. However, students on college campuses across the country have increased opportunities to participate in and develop leadership skills on these Alternative Spring Break (ASB) programs.

While students often return home saying, “The trip changed my life!” there is a need to examine what elements make the experience transformational and if the same learning experience can be transferred to students in a classroom environment. The purpose of this study is to examine the learning outcomes of student participants in a Providence College ASB program compared to students in classroom-based instruction with a focus on intercultural service and global citizenship. Interviews of pre- and post-trip participants were analyzed using five different learning objectives defined in the course curriculum to identify what program elements were most effective in achieving student learning. Participants showed differences in cognitive and psychological outcomes, demonstrating the importance of both traditional classroom-based and experiential learning as well as the benefit of developing students as co-educators both in and out of the classroom.

## **Global Service-Learning: An Introduction**

The increase of global service-learning programs on college and university campuses across the United States is being used as a method to enhance classroom participation and understanding, civic engagement, and overall student development. While the term lacks a formal, universal definition within the international education field, Hartman, Kiely, Friedrichs, and Boettcher (2014) offer one definition of global service-learning as:

a community-driven service experience that employs structured, critically reflective practice to better understand common human dignity, self, culture, positionality, social and environmental issues, and social responsibility in global context. It is a learning methodology *and* a community development philosophy. It is also a way of being in that it encourages an ongoing, critically reflective disposition. (11-12)

### *Benefits*

The opportunity for critical reflection, when paired with experiential service, allows students to confront assumptions, ultimately leading to changed perspectives (Kiely 2004) and on the global level, encourages learners to develop a sense of shared global citizenship (Annette 2002). This global perspective is a necessary proficiency for college students, researchers say, to effectively live and work in a world with diverse cultures (Prins and Webster 2010; Braskamp,

Braskamp, and Merrill 2009). Not only does this ability help develop broad personal skills and attitudes but it also addresses the specific need for “intercultural maturity” and the ability to communicate effectively in pluralistic and diverse environments (Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill 2009, 102).

In addition to increased global citizenship, the benefits of global service-learning include an educational element as it provides “a holistic and integrated academic program for participants wherein there is direct correlation between what is experienced through participation and what is learned theoretically” (Woolf 2008, 29). Service-learning programs, like the one offered through the Department of Public and Community Service Studies at Providence College, requires students to complete a certain number of hours of community service throughout the semester. This hands-on community work introduces students to real life application of themes discussed in class, enriching their classroom experience with yet another “text” to use in discussion and reflection. Participants are therefore involved in a continuous cycle of experiential and reflective learning, where one informs the other (Berry 2002), allowing participants to revise perceptions and beliefs throughout the process. Perhaps most importantly, however, global service-learning allows for “border crossing” and understanding between academia and the outside community. Community engagement opportunities provide students and community members with an environment in which they can break down barriers and enhance interaction and communication between the two parties (Woolf 2008).

#### *Short-term Immersion: Alternative Breaks*

While heavy course loads and full academic schedules pose a challenge for students who seek these hands-on, out-of-the-classroom experiences, short-term “alternative breaks” offer students another opportunity to develop their sense of social responsibility, global competence, and civic engagement. Break Away, a national nonprofit organization that supports the development of quality alternative break programs, defines such a program as a service-learning trip, typically a week in length, for college students to engage in voluntary community service (Break Away 2012). Over the past two decades, these alternative break programs have been growing in popularity in an effort to establish the presence of community service on college campuses; statistics from 2010 show that over 72,000 students participated in these programs in that year alone (2012). By partnering with local nonprofit organizations, students also fulfill the academic component of service-learning by examining a variety of social issues, including topics such as poverty, education reform, refugee resettlement, and the environment, while also critically thinking and reflecting on service. Research by Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997) supports this claim that essential transformational learning occurs when students are involved with people experiencing the social problems they study.

In comparison to other types of service trips, alternative break programs place a heavy emphasis on pre-departure preparation and “learning about the social issues addressed during the trip, learning about the community, becoming oriented with the mission and values of the organization, training for any skills [the students] may need while on the trip, and team building” (Break Away 2012). This program model is validated through research by Weiler, LaGoy, Crane, and Rovner (1998) that calls for pre-service activities and reflection in a sustained immersion experience to achieve desired learning outcomes. This deeply reflective and participatory approach therefore marks a shift away from “service-only” programs and instead embraces a more critically engaged method of learning from community interaction.

### *Transitioning Towards a Critical Approach*

One of the biggest criticisms of service-learning programs is that the experience replicates and perpetuates, rather than challenges and reverses, perceptions of hierarchical power and privilege in traditional service practice (Catlett and Proweller 2011; Green 2001; Ash and Clayton 2009; Camacho 2004). However, in an effort to combat these weaknesses, practitioners have developed a critical service-learning theory, which requires participants to reexamine accepted roles of power and privilege in service-learning relationships (Rosenberger 2000) through dialogue and discussion of those power dynamics (Mitchell 2008). This can cause participants discomfort as they explore the intersections of race, class, and service (Green 2001) and ultimately “it requires confronting assumptions and stereotypes, owning unearned privilege, and facing inequality and oppression as something real and omnipresent” (Mitchell 2008, 56). The process of recognizing the privileges of a specific lifestyle leads to transformation as participants begin to question their previously accepted cultural norms (Kiely 2004). Furthermore, this intentional learning is an ongoing process throughout the service-learning experience as students recognize their role as learners, rather than experts contributing to the community (Woolf 2008).

### *Global Service-Learning and the Classroom*

In addition to examining the perception of power between participants and community members at service sites, noting the power hierarchies within the classroom is also necessary. Because of its nature, service-learning challenges the labels of “students” and “teachers” and works to de-center authority in a classroom setting (Butin 2005). Addes and Keene (2006) even go so far as to suggest a “professor-less” environment where students and community participants confront issues of power dynamics, knowledge, and identity without being pressured or influenced by a classroom instructor.

However, research on student study abroad learning outcomes presents conflicting evidence about the role of teachers and classroom facilitators in international education. Because students find themselves in new and unfamiliar environments while abroad, teachers and classroom facilitators provide essential support for student transition and learning. A study conducted by Vande Berg, Paige, and Hemming Lou (2012) shows that learning does not happen automatically while students are studying abroad or immersed in another culture. Instead, these researchers call for intentional, strategic, and well-designed interventions from an educator to help students with their intercultural development, which only then leads to effective learning. Ultimately, the results show “that students learn and develop considerably more when educators prepare them to become more self-reflective, culturally self-aware, and conscious of “how they know what they know”” (Vande Berg, Paige, and Hemming Lou 2012, 21), proving the need for educator-led instruction in a global context. Engle and Engle (2003) also report the need for cultural mentoring and “guided reflection on the students’ cultural experience” to effectively cultivate this idea of intercultural development.

This research leads to the following questions: Can global service-learning programs that do not have the accompanying required course component be as effective in helping students achieve the desired learning outcomes? Conversely, how do these learning outcomes compare to

students with exclusively class instruction on intercultural service and global citizenship? Is a faculty-led course the only way to develop intercultural competency in student participants?

### **Research Design**

In order to address these questions, this study focuses on the learning outcomes of Providence College students participating in ASBs compared to the outcomes of students involved in a structured curriculum centered on service immersion experiences. Case studies of individual participants were used to collect their perspectives and analyzed to explain the impact of certain learning outcomes of global service-learning experiences. Due to the small sample size, pre- and post-trip interviews gave qualitative information to evaluate students' learning outcomes against curriculum objectives.

#### *About ASB Programming*

Fifty Providence College undergraduate students, including seven student coordinators, and four faculty advisors participated in various week-long service trips, working with local nonprofit organizations in one of four locations: Pine Ridge, South Dakota; Tijuana, Mexico; Monte Cristi, Dominican Republic; Managua, Nicaragua. Each ASB program had a unique social issue as its focus. In the weeks leading up to the immersion experience, ASB student participants prepared during weekly group meetings consisting of fundraiser planning, orientation, and teambuilding exercises.

#### *About Global Studies Course*

The semester-long course was designed for students to consider power, positionality, history, and policy in relation to the South Dakota and Nicaragua communities that the ASB participants visited during spring break. A strong emphasis was placed on communicating effectively about relevant social justice issues and integrating lessons learned with global citizenship philosophy and habits.

#### *Study Subjects*

The group of participants within the study was comprised of students involved in the Providence College Feinstein ASB program as well as those enrolled in the Global Studies course. Participants were chosen from 3 groups:

- One student participant from each of the four ASB locations
- Two students exclusively enrolled in the Global Studies class
- Three students enrolled both in the class as well as an ASB program

Students participating in the interviews were selected from their appropriate groups as those with the least amount of previous international travel experience, excluding the three students involved in both classroom-based instruction and immersion experiences.

### **Methodology**

The central hypothesis in this study is that there would be greater gains in learning outcomes for the students participating in both the formal class setting and immersion experience than for the other study participants. Pre-trip interviews with ASB participants were conducted prior to departure to inquire about expectations and anxieties of the trip. For those enrolled in the class, the interviews were also used to identify a baseline understanding of students' perceptions about international communities. These pre-departure interviews were used to establish a researcher-subject relationship that would allow the participant to open up more in the later interview and result in deeper reflection (McElhaney 1998, 76). Individual follow-up interviews were conducted with all study participants within two weeks of returning from the ASB, arranged so that the class-based students had time to reflect in class on the first-hand experiences of their peers.

### **Findings/Results**

The information gathered from the individual interviews was evaluated against the five academic objectives of the Global Studies course in order to compare learning outcomes between students who participated in an ASB, those who were enrolled in the course, and those who were involved in both programs.

#### *Objective 1: Develop Understanding of and Competency with Intercultural Service*

Findings suggest the class experience offered opportunities for individuals to make meaning of intercultural service and put these students at an advantage over those not enrolled in the course. Two participants noted how they specifically chose the course to “extend the ASB learning experience beyond a week” or to “compliment my participation in the ASB” to understand the implications of intercultural service. One participant reflected on how the course “reminded me of my personal privileges which prompted me to ask my host family about how they felt having students come to serve.” Even without the experiential service piece, students made cognitive gains regarding intercultural service through class discussion. A class-only participant reported a change in how he felt connected to this type of service, saying:

Initially I associated international service with bigger scale projects and therefore the need for money and large institutions. It just seemed logical. However, after our class discussion I recognized the importance of asking the community members what they wanted out of it and find the root of the problem.

However, for those participating solely in an ASB program without a classroom component, there was a struggle to give an explicit definition of intercultural service. One student summed up these feelings of uncertainty saying, “I’m still not sure how I feel.” These results suggest that students in a curriculum-based course aimed at increasing the understanding of intercultural service made greater cognitive gains than those who were not enrolled in the course.

#### *Objective 2: Increase the Ability to Identify Connections Between History, Policy, Identity, and Culture*

This objective was evaluated through self-reporting of how students felt they made these connections through either traditional class-based or experiential learning methods. Interviews showed that while students recognized the importance of being informed before engaging with a new community, they did not usually seek out academic resources (books, articles, news sources, or documentaries) unless it was required. Those in the course reported increased cognitive learning from classroom instruction, noting, “I didn’t know a lot of what I’ve learned so far. What I’ve learned about the culture of Nicaragua, especially the political implications, I’ve found through the required reading.” Another shared how “I was completely unaware of some of the social statistics and now through the materials provided in class I’m continuing to find out more.”

In comparison, an ASB-only participant admitted prior to leaving on the trip, “I should probably know more. I don’t know much about the area.” Although all ASB trip participants noted that their weekly pre-departure meetings were “helpful,” they were “mainly used for logistics, planning, and fundraising,” rather than in-depth discussion and orientation to the culture. One member shared that “the pre-trip meetings prepared me for what to bring, but I could never fully anticipate what to expect. I was thrown completely out of my comfort zone and was shocked when I witnessed the poverty.”

After returning, however, interviewees commented that the experiential component of the ASB offered participants something that traditional classroom learning could not – specifically the physical connection to the community and a first-hand understanding of the culture. A non-class ASB participant shared how “my ASB experience allowed me to see how [the history] played out in the community. I witnessed first-hand the rivalry between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and the resulting economic disparities within the schools.” Additionally, an ASB participant working on the Pine Ridge reservation reflected on the challenge of confronting historical wrongdoings within another culture, saying “During the pow-wow, our host was making comments about the white culture and how ‘we’ brought alcoholism into ‘their’ culture. It was unsettling.”

Furthermore, during the post-trip interviews, many ASB participants compared community life they experienced on the immersion trip to their daily life at home, reporting experiencing strong social bonds within their host community and an intention to adopt these practices once back at home. One student shared:

I felt genuinely welcomed there when people came out of their homes to thank us. This made me recognize how community oriented the culture is there, versus my neighborhood at home, where I only talk to a few people. I came to see the importance of appreciating the people around you.

Analyzing the interviews based on this objective suggests the benefits of requiring students to be engaged in an academic setting to effectively prepare for a cultural immersion experience. However, while not an explicit cognitive outcome in the course, students who participated in an ASB reported greater gains in developing a connection to the community and an intention for personal development through experiential learning.

*Objective 3: Develop an Enhanced Understanding of Global Citizenship*

Participants were asked to give their definition of “global citizenship” in both the pre- and post-trip interviews in order to analyze changes in their perception of this term. The post-trip conversations showed that the class-based participants felt more comfortable and confident in offering a definition. They reported having reconsidered their initial understanding they held before taking the class and additionally noted how the class helped them broaden their conception of global citizenship. A class participant explained:

I initially thought this referred to a sort of “dual citizenship” for all countries, yet after our class discussion I see it as being aware that not everyone is from the U.S. and not everyone has been through the same things as you. So, it is necessary to be aware and open. There is no “normal.”

After engaging in class discussion over the course of the semester, students reported feeling more aware and prepared to discuss this concept. In comparison, the pre-trip interviews were the first time the ASB-only participants had been asked to explicitly define the term “global citizenship.” The responses gathered were vague and the interviewees reported with little confidence.

Yet in the post-trip interviews, when asked again about global citizenship, ASB participants chose to elaborate on their experiences with diversity. This was not a substantial point of reflection for those enrolled exclusively in the class. Participants shared their initial discomfort of being viewed as “the other,” reporting:

Being the only white people, being stared at, took some getting used to. When we were walking on the sidewalk, people who drove by stared. A girl in our group was pulled aside in the airport and was told she was “beautiful” because she had the fairest complexion.

It was easy to be aware of the personal differences. We experienced being called “gringo” and hearing catcalls when we walked around but it didn’t seem to be a big deal as long as you didn’t flaunt your privilege.

For another student who identified as African American, this feeling of “otherness” was a critical moment of her ASB experience. Prior to departing to the Pine Ridge reservation, she anticipated being “a person the community members could empathize or identify with because of similar forms of historical discrimination.” However, upon her return home, she shared:

I was surprised at the reaction I received. When I was working in the elementary school, this was the first time many had seen an African American and called me “freaky looking.” This used to happen to me when I was little and this experience kind of brought me back to that. The kids didn’t identify with me like I expected. Even at the pow-wow recognition ceremony, the comments made by the host made me feel uncomfortable. At times it seemed like I was being exploited because of my skin color. I really felt like an outsider and that I didn’t belong.

The participant reported that the interview was the first in-depth reflection of her “otherness” she experienced while on the trip. “I didn’t bring it up during evening reflections

because I didn't want to seem like a distraction. Although we were there to experience different things, I didn't want it to be all about me." This evidence suggests the need for deeper integration of intentional academic reflection before, during, and after service immersion experiences to uncover all implications of intercultural service and global citizenship. The success of understanding academic concepts is a strength of the classroom environment and can be mirrored in experiential learning programs, just as sharing these realizations from direct service can offer another angle for cognitive learning in a class.

*Objective 4: Enhance Their Abilities to Apply Global Citizenship Theory to Their Lives*

The post-trip interviews regarding this objective imply a greater emotional connection to the community member's point of view, as well as a recognition of one's own privileged status for ASB participants compared to class-only students. ASB students told how experiencing the living conditions of people in the community were pivotal moments and many noted the disparities in comparison to the culture they were familiar with. Students reported their initial shock upon witnessing these conditions, reporting:

I've never seen a trailer in that kind of condition – tires were used to keep the roofs from blowing off and trash was used as skirting. One of the days we were building an outhouse and it bothered me to do this because they didn't have electricity or running water.

I was shocked and upset to see the landfill built up behind the health clinic and the houses that were perched on top. It's not fair.

Experiencing economic disparities was also a means of engaging with the concept of global citizenship. In an exercise where participants were told to purchase food in a local Nicaraguan market to experience the challenges of feeding a family on a limited budget, participants were confronted with the striking contrast to the lifestyles promoted by the "ritzy" shopping center located nearby. A student who was involved in the exercise reflected, "I recognized that we stood out as American students. We were in a place where I could spend someone's entire wages for the day on souvenirs."

These pivotal moments proved to be catalysts in changing trip participants' intentions and perceptions. One Nicaragua ASB participant noted how she understood her role as a "global citizen," reporting:

It was really interesting to be in the local community when Chavez died. People there were genuinely concerned, even though they were not Venezuelan. I put myself in their shoes and it was the first time I was forced to think about a global event impacting my own personal security in that way.

Another student recognized a change in mindset when she noted:

I learned that I took too many stereotypes at face value. Before the trip, my friends and I would joke about the "danger of Tijuana," but after coming home, I couldn't respond to these jokes the same way. It also makes me think about other

things that aren't true that I take for granted.

Although class-only participants lacked an intercultural service component, the post-trip interviews suggest that they benefitted from the "second-hand" experiences of the ASB participants. After classroom presentations of ASB trips, a class-only student remarked, "hearing about people's personal experiences has been helpful due to their emotional value and understanding the point of view of the community member. After this, I have been trying to put myself in their shoes." Others reported that these accounts complemented the required readings and documentaries, offering a more personal connection to social issues. Another remarked how these accounts "made me think how my life would be different if I had been born into this situation." Even as second-hand experiences, these pivotal moments inspired the class-only students to pursue a similar transformative experience for themselves.

*Objective 5: Strengthen the Capacity and Disposition to Contribute as Active Members to a Community of Learners*

A dominant theme that reoccurred throughout the interviews was the role of students as co-educators. One class-only participant predicted in a pre-trip interview, "I think the kids that are going on a trip will get more out of the course." The findings above suggest marked differences in experiential learning outcomes for those who participated in an ASB. However, there were also positive reflections of classroom engagement once the ASB participants returned to class. A student enrolled in the course without ASB experience shared his preference for a student-led class stating, "I find student perspectives more relatable." Another reported how he was impacted by hearing an ASB participant share her experiences saying, "I found that the books I read focused more on the past history and tended to be negative. Her accounts were much more touching and positive." Students returning from a trip also had favorable reactions to their role as co-educators, sharing they felt like mentors for those in the class who did not have the immersion experience. They also had a strong desire to share the stories of the community members they met.

The findings suggest that students can be effective mentors outside of the classroom setting as well. All trip participants gave positive feedback on having students as trip leaders and their effective role before, during, and after the trip. ASB participants appreciated the autonomy of a student-led trip and the ability to help prepare the itinerary leading up to departure, which they reported made the process seem "more organic." Students valued faculty advisors' "insightful perspectives," and viewed them more as an "equal" or "just another participant" rather than experiencing a traditional hierarchical structure. Participants acknowledged the role of the trip leader, expressing: "If I had a question, I'd ask the student leaders, rather than the faculty advisor." Student leaders also served as motivation for future student involvement, for a number of ASB participants returned and reported interest in becoming a future trip leader.

The findings also suggest the importance of having classroom space for weekly reflection and discussion, especially for students returning from an ASB experience. For the ASB participants who were not enrolled in the course, all shared in their post-trip interview that they were "still trying to make meaning" of the experience. One reported:

Getting things out in words during the evening reflections on the trip helped solidify the experience and brought to light new perspectives from others that I

may have forgotten throughout the course of the day. However, now that I'm back I've found it hard to talk about it with friends and figure out how to split my time between old habits and new ones.

In comparison, ASB participants enrolled in the course noted how they have used the class as a debriefing tool to help them articulate their experience. In particular, these students reported learning how to communicate with others who didn't share their experience. One student explained, "This is something I've always struggled with but being forced to explain it in 30 seconds has helped me learn how to convey these meaningful experiences. I don't think I would have learned how to convey these experiences without the class."

## **Discussion and Implications**

### *Benefits of a Structured Curriculum*

Overall, the findings show that students with a structured curriculum made more cognitive gains in the objectives as defined in the course syllabus, specifically in understanding the concepts of intercultural service and global citizenship. As a result, these gains suggest the need for facilitated discussion for all ASB participants to understand intercultural service and impact on the community. These discussions would prove to be especially helpful for those students participating in their first service-immersion experience. While it is unrealistic to assume that the implications of intercultural service would be completely revealed and understood through one semester of classroom instruction, it provides students with a structured and intentional opportunity to discuss and make meaning of these concepts.

Based on the feedback from both groups of students, participants recognized the need to be more informed before participating in an immersion experience. Yet they also acknowledged the challenge of voluntary preparation, suggesting that more structure is needed for pre-departure orientation to hold them accountable. It may prove beneficial to future ASB participants, particularly those with limited knowledge of the host culture, to require a cultural orientation prior to departure. Additionally, based on the assumption that an increase in awareness leads to an increase in effectiveness, this type of preparation would encourage deeper understanding not only of intercultural service but also of one's role as a global citizen.

### *Benefits of Experiential Learning*

While cognitive classroom-based learning is a necessary component to understanding intercultural service and global citizenship, experiential learning of ASB trips also had a positive impact on students who participated in a trip as well as on those whose experience was solely classroom-based. ASB participants expressed the transformative psychological impact of their immersion experience, particularly their feelings of connection to community members and exposure to diversity. While this psychological learning outcome is not explicit in the course syllabus, it can be argued that it is just as important for student learning and development, especially in regards to their participation as a global citizen.

### *Implications for the Classroom*

As a result, the personal sharing that occurred in the classroom can be modeled to engage students who experienced pivotal moments with those who lacked the immersion experience. The findings show that there is significant potential for in-depth cognitive reflection to accompany students' experiential learning. Further consideration should be given as to whether students must experience this connection to community and exposure to diversity for themselves or if this "second-hand" experiential learning in the classroom has as great of a psychological impact. The findings also prove that the classroom has the advantage of being a space for debriefing for ASB participants who might not have been able to previously fully reflect on the experience.

Furthermore, there is a need to consider the role of the faculty advisor on the immersion trip. Recognizing that not all ASB participants can fit this type of cognitive reflective class in their schedule, the faculty advisors may be able to help bridge this gap. While ASB participants noted the importance of students retaining their autonomy as trip leaders, there is also potential in using the faculty advisor to address the above course learning objectives in group reflections before, during, and after the immersion experience.

### **Discussion of Limitations**

Regarding these findings, it is important to note a number of potential limitations that may have impacted the study. In addition to the risk of self-reporting biases that are inherent in interview methodology, there was also the challenge of working with a small sample size. As a result, the findings in this study are individualized to the structure of Providence College ASBs and the particular learning objectives as defined by the Global Studies course. Throughout the interview process, it was evident that there were varying degrees of exposure to diversity and previous service experience within this sample. Providence College's Catholic and Dominican identity therefore promotes engagement with the community and service to the common good in an effort to foster more well-rounded and civically aware and engaged students. In addition, the results were collected within a limited time frame before the end of the course and therefore have the potential to lack the complete representation of semester-long expectations. There is also the challenge of distinguishing between what perceptions students held prior to taking the class and what additional gains they made, particularly for students with a Global Studies background who may have previously encountered these themes. Finally, the extent to which the students were emotionally and physically engaged in the immersion experiences is another variable; due to the fact that each ASB site had a particular focus, participants were engaged in a variety of ways and not all may have experienced the same frequency and intensity of interactions with community members.

### **Conclusion**

This study has given further insight into the importance of mixed classroom instruction for student engagement, the use of experiential learning in service-immersion programming, and the role of students as co-educators. Although this study addresses a small population of students at Providence College, there is the potential to hold larger implications for other ASB programs and the resulting learning outcomes. Additionally, if this study is continued, it will be interesting to identify what long-term impact of these ASB immersion experiences and classroom

discussions have on student cognitive and psychological development, particularly how it relates to future application of intercultural service and global citizenship to their lives.

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