

Evaluating Teachers' Perceptions of Student Centered Learning in Ministry of Health Institutes in Oman

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الخلاصة:

تعتبر هذه أول دراسة من نوعها في عمان حيث يتم دراسة إدراك المدرسين العاملين ضمن ملاك المديرية العامة للتعليم والتدريب في وزاره الصحة العمانيه حول بالتعليم الذي محوره الطالب. إن التعليم الذي يكون محوره الطالب أصبح مهما لأنه يشجع الطالب على أن يقوم بالجزء المسؤول في عمليه التعليم إذ لم يعد التعليم مرتكزا على المدرس بل ان للطالب مسؤول عن جزء مهم منه. /الهدف: لتقييم إدراك المدرسين العاملين في معاهد التمريض التابعة لوزارة الصحة العمانيه عن مفهوم التعليم الذي محوره الطالب. /النتائج: كانت نسبة ٥٦% يويدون أن هذه الطريقه ستحسن مستوى الطالب في تعلم المواد الدراسيه وان نسبة ٥١% من العينه تتفق ان هذه الطريقه ستساعد يقوم الطالب بالتهيئة للدرس بشكل أفضل. /الخلاصة: كان هناك رغبه من المدرسين لممارسه هذه الطريقه في تدريس مواد التمريض والمواد المسانده وعليه يستلزم الأمر اقامه دورات لهم ليتمكنوا من تطبيقه بشكل صحيح والحاجة إلى دعم وزاره الصحة لتكون أهداف المناهج تؤكد على طريقة التدريس الحديثه وان يوجه الطلبة من خلال البرنامج التقديمي عند استقبال الطلبة الذي يكون عند بدايه التسجيل لدى معاهد

مفردات /البحث: الطالب محور التعليم. المدرس. وزاره الصحة العمانيه. ادراك. تقييم.

Abstract:

This is the first study done in Oman in assessing the perception of Directorate General Education & Training DGET's institutes teachers towards Student centered learning (SCL). This can be used to encourage the student to part-take in his/her own learning.

Objectives: this study is to assess teachers' perception of students centered learning in teaching nursing students at Ministry of health's institutes. *Results:* 56% of teachers agreed that SCI will improve the ability of the students to learn the material.

51% agree that that the students have to prepare differently for the class. *Conclusion:* the teacher are willing to practice SCI in teaching nursing and allied courses. The teachers should be given continuing education program to the benefits of SCI, and student must be guided through an orientation program that can be conducted in the beginning of their enrollment in the DGET's institute

Keywords: Student Centered Learning, Teachers, Ministry of health In Oman, perception. assessment

Introduction:

Student centered learning (SCL) is a principle used in order to encourage the student to part-take in his/her own learning. Many changes in responsibility of teachers, learners and administration takes place in order to apply this principle. The new Omani diploma level nursing curriculum encourages student centered learning. There are five main key standards that were suggested by Weimer (2002) that should be considered in institutions that are interested in paradigm shift from teacher centered to learner centered approach. These are: students gain more power when the classroom becomes more democratic and stress free. The content is used to make the students to think about the big question in the profession rather than giving facts only. The teacher becomes a facilitator rather than a dictator. Students become more responsible for their own learning and more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Evaluation methods are more than simply giving grades. They are used to encourage or enhance learning (Weimer, 2002).

Student Centered Learning (SCL). SCL is a widely used terminology in teaching and learning literature. This term is used interchangeably with learner centered learning, experiential learning (Burnard, 1999), self directed learning or flexible learning (Taylor, 2000). The use of these different terms to mean student centered learning has resulted in confusion in the use of terminology as different people mean different things with it. The concept of student centered learning is derived from Hayward from 1905 and Dewey's work in 1956 (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). Carol Rogers was thought to expand the use of this term into a theory of education. Piaget and Malcolm Knowles were also known to be associated with the term student centered learning. This approach of changing from teaching to learning has moved the power from the teacher to the learner (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005).

Definition of Student Centered Learning (SCL). Many authors defined SCL. McCombs and Whisler (1997) described student centered as the approach that links the learner with all his/her experiences, backgrounds, skills and abilities to learning and what is related to it from the knowledge, effective practices and motivation as well as learning achievement. This relationship then helps in making decisions related to education.

Arizona Faculties Council (2000) has defined learner centered teaching (LCT) as the approach that puts the learner at the center of focus. It starts with the learner's background and continues with teachers' evaluation of the learner's achievement of

the objectives set forth. It places an emphasis on lifelong learning and shifts the responsibility of learning to the learner. The instructor becomes a facilitator that creates the environment that facilitates learning. LCT is not bound to any time or place and is more individualistic, flexible and based on competency achievement (Arizona Faculties Council, 2000).

Dupin-Bryant (2004) defined LCT as the style that is flexible, democratic, problem-based and collaborative between the learner and the instructor. Both, the learner and the instructor, can contribute in decision making process about how, what and where learning can occur. Paris & Combs (2006) aimed to uncover the lived meanings of learner-centeredness by analyzing teacher narratives of personal and professional histories collected in open-ended interviews. They found three main broad and simple meanings of learner-centeredness and these were the student is the starting point for curriculum development; the teacher and students are co-participants in the learning process and the teacher strives toward intense student engagement with the curriculum (Paris & Combs, 2006).

For the purpose of this paper SCL is considered a teaching strategy that focuses on the learner. The learner contributes to the process of learning with all his background knowledge, heredity, skills, abilities, attitudes and talents. The teacher on the other hand functions as a facilitator and a guide. She/ he prepare the environment that is conducive to learning. Learners are encouraged to learn and practice in an open fearless environment where no pressure or fear is imposed on the learner. The ultimate goal of this process is attaining the goals and objectives set forth by the learner guided by the teacher. The learner therefore, is evaluated based on the degree of attaining competency and meeting the criteria for achieving the objectives.

Difference between Students Centered Learning and Teacher Centered Teaching. Changing the direction of education towards more student centered approach is not to admit the traditional teacher centered approach's failure (Huba & Freed, 2000). It is just to say that they are not as effective as student centered approaches (Huba & Freed, 2000). SCL is different than the teacher-centered teaching in that it focuses on learners. The learners construct the knowledge by active participation and synthesis of knowledge through skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and communication. However, in the old traditional methods of teaching a teacher is the focus of attention. Knowledge is transferred from the teacher to the learners as passive recipient of it. SCL emphasizes communicating acquired

knowledge in real emerging situations and the teacher acts as a coach or a guide to facilitate the process of learning and a partner in the evaluation process with the learner. Teacher centered approach on the other hand is focused on gaining knowledge that is used outside the context in which it is taught. The teacher works as the information giver and the evaluator of learning. In SCL the evaluation and learning process works together. The evaluations are used in order to promote learning and find out problems in achieving goals and errors are used as opportunities for learning. Whereas, in the traditional methods, teaching and evaluating are separate process and evaluations are used for evaluating learning and right answer is the main concern. In SCL learning is assessed directly but in the old traditional way, learning is assessed indirectly. SCL can be used with interdisciplinary investigations but teacher centered approach is focused only on one discipline. Both teacher and the learner learn in SCL but in teacher centered approach teachers are not considered learners (Huba & Freed, 2000).

Benefits of Learner Centered Approach. Student Centered Learning is found to be effective by many researchers (Lea et al., 2003). This approach of teaching has several benefits to the learners as well as to the teachers.

For Learners. Many researchers assessed the use of Student centered learning in many settings. For example, Cheang (2009) used SCL approach in teaching a third-year pharmacotherapy course in a doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) program. It was found that the students' intrinsic goal orientation control of learning beliefs, self efficacy, critical thinking, and metacognitive self-regulation improved. Students preferred learner centered approach. Kramer et al. (2007) also found similar results when applying learner centered approach for students of occupational therapy. They found that students became more independent in their learning and shown accountability. The students developed their skills in performing in the community and preferred jobs in the community.

Although the learners might be slower in the beginning but they will develop better understanding and study skills when using student centered learning (Lonka & Ahola 1995). In addition, student motivation and participation are enhanced (Hall & Saunders, 1997). Some students feel more respected, excited and confident when they enroll in courses using student centered learning (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003).Learner centered approach was found to increase students' motivation towards accomplishing learning goals (Harpe & Phipps, 2008; Schiller, 2002).

For Teachers. Learner centered approach is helpful in teachers as well. It helps the teachers by promoting their creativity (Kramer et al., 2007). Student centered learning has shown a change in teaching behavior on subject areas, planning, teaching process, classroom management, communication and evaluation skills in teachers (Kilic, 2010).

The Barriers and Constraints of Using Learner Centered Approach in Education. Yilmaz (2009) has evaluated the problems and constraints faced in Turkey in implementing SCL. Yilmaz found that the unified, centralized and rigid education system made implementation of Student centered learning nearly impossible. In addition, the colleges of education by themselves did not provide the education necessary for graduating teachers to enable them to use SCL approaches competently. Moreover, teachers who were in practice faced several different problems such as: difficulty changing the thought of the education system being a “bottom-up” approach rather than a “top-down” one. They also have difficulty in accepting the idea of being a co-learner, a guide and a facilitator who focuses on student learning rather than content delivery. In addition to the teachers, students were thought to face difficulty in engaging themselves in higher level of thinking as they were used to memorization and recall in their education system. Turkish educators anticipated that the students might not be willing to be the centers of instructions. Students would have had difficulty in becoming active learners and prefer passive teaching methods which has less work to be done by the students. Some teachers thought that the students might exploit the use of the freedom provided by the SCL approach. In addition, student centered learning is individual centered and requires resources for its implementation (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005).

Ministry of Health in Oman has 15 institutes. Among these 12 are nursing institutes (MOH, n.d) one of which was closed in 2003 (MOH, 2008). Nursing institutes produced 5224 nurses by year 2008 (MOH, 2008). The nursing program is 3 years long in which a student attends theory, lab and clinical sessions. In order to achieve competency, one of the principles that can be used is student centered learning. Accordingly, Directorate General of Education and Training (DGET) at MOH encourages active learning. However, there is lack of assessment done among the institutes’ acceptability and affordability of practicing student centered learning. In addition, despite the current literature on SCL, none of the studies have evaluated the SCL principles effect on the teachers’ perception of SCL. The aim of this study is

to assess teachers' perception of student centered learning in teaching nursing students at the MOH's institutes. This study will add to the knowledge related to SCL especially SCL approach use in Omani nursing and allied health institutes.

Methodology

Subjects.

The subjects in this study were teachers from different MOH institutes. They taught nursing, allied health, science and English language courses. They were both Omani and Expatriate teachers. The sample of this study was a convenient sample.

Data Collection Tool.

This study used a survey to collect data using a questionnaire that was adopted from a study by Harpe and Phipps (2008) to evaluate pharmacy students' perceptions of a drug literature evaluation course implementing learner-centered teaching principles. It was developed by the course coordinators and university required evaluations. The questionnaire was initially tested in a pilot group and wording was changed based on the feedback. The final questionnaire had 20 items assessing the opinion and perception of the students' of the course structure, policies, preferences for learner centered approach and preparation for class, examination and four general questions. All questions measured on Likert scale from 1 to 5 with one being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The students were asked questions for comments on their experience.

For the current study, the questionnaire was modified to suite teachers rather than students as this is a new approach to DGET's institutes and is not practiced very often. The questions were changed. The validity of the questions was examined by sending it to teachers' experts in the field. The questions were modified according to the feedback received from them. A total of 130 questionnaires were sent to the institutes. Except for Oman Nursing Institute, 10 questionnaires were sent to each institute in the period of May 22nd 2011 to June 12th 2011. A total of 96 questionnaires were returned. The response rate was 73.9%.

Data were analyzed manually. Mean, Standard deviation and the percentages were calculated for each question individually. Tables were formulated and data were interpreted.

Results

Description of the Sample.

Table 1 Response Rate according to the Institutes

S#	Institute	Sent	Received	%
1	SUR	10	9	6.9
2	RUSTAQ	10	10	7.7
3	OSNI	10	9	6.9
4	SALALAH	10	8	6.2
5	IHS	10	6	4.6
6	IBRA	10	5	3.9
7	DAKHILIYA	10	5	3.9
8	SOHAR	10	6	4.6
9	OIPH	10	6	4.6
10	DHAHRA	10	8	6.2
11	MNI	10	10	7.7
12	ONI	20	14	10.77
TOTAL		130	96	73.9

Table 1 show the distribution of number and percentage of teachers responded out of the 10 questionnaires sent to each institute except for Oman Nursing Institute as the number of staff is more than other institutes. The sample was mainly female (77.1%). This is representative of the DGET workforce as there is more female working at the institutes than male. The sample included teachers teaching different courses including Nursing, Allied Health and English courses. Approximately, more than half of the sample were expatriate (52.1%) vs. (47.9) Omani. This result varies from one institute to another as there are institutes in the interior of the country which has more Omani staff than expatriate.

Table 2 Teachers Response toward Course Structure and Activities.

S#	ITEMS	Strongly Agree	%	Agree	%	Not Agree Nor Disagree	%	Disagree	%	Strongly Disagree	%	100%
		5		4		3		2		1		
1	The students' ability to learn the material presented in class will be improved and increased.	33	34.38	54	56.25	8	8.33	1	1.04	0	0	100
2	The students will have to prepare differently for the class.	49	51.04	40	41.67	5	5.21	2	2.08	0	0	100
3	The students will be provided with increased opportunities to demonstrate that they had learned the material.	47	48.96	35	36.46	12	12.5	2	2.08	0	0	100
4	The students will have to study differently for exams.	26	27.08	30	31.25	23	24	16	16.7	1	1.04	100
5	The students will be in a less stressful learning environment.	25	26.04	37	38.54	17	17.7	15	15.6	2	2.08	100
6	The students will have increased opportunities to demonstrate mastery of course material.	28	29.17	53	55.21	10	10.4	3	3.13	2	2.08	100
7	The students will be provided adequate feedback to guide their learning throughout the course.	35	36.46	50	52.08	5	5.21	5	5.21	1	1.04	100
8	The students will have more control in determining their overall course grade.	22	22.92	29	30.21	28	29.2	14	14.6	3	3.13	100
9	The students will have less pressure to perform well on every exam or assignment.	21	21.88	35	36.46	17	17.7	20	20.8	3	3.13	100
10	The students will be able to focus on learning rather than just getting a good grade on an exam or assignment.	43	44.79	33	34.38	10	10.4	8	8.33	2	2.08	100
11	The students will be able to learn the material and obtain the grade they desired.	11	11.46	47	48.96	22	22.9	15	15.6	1	1.04	100
12	The students will be able to focus on learning rather than just getting a good grade in the course.	32	33.33	37	38.54	17	17.7	8	8.33	2	2.08	100
13	The assignments will help reinforce the material presented in class more than studying alone.	40	41.67	49	51.04	6	6.25	1	1.04	0	0	100

Table 2 summarizes the feedback received on the questionnaire from the sample on course structure and activities. Around 34% and 56% of the teachers strongly agreed and agreed that SCL will improve the ability of the students to learn

the material presented. They strongly agreed (51%) that the students have to prepare differently for the class and that they will have increased opportunities to demonstrate that they had learned the material (50%). 31% of the teachers agreed that the student have to study differently for the exams and 38.5% agreed that the environment will be less stressful for learning. More than half of the sample (55%) agreed that the students will have increased opportunities to demonstrate mastery of course material. Around 52% of the teachers agreed that SCL will provide adequate feedback to guide their learning throughout the course. The teachers agreed (30.2%) that the students will have more control in determining their overall course grade. 36.5% agreed that the students will have less pressure to perform well on every exam or assignment but 20% disagreed on that. Around 44.79% strongly agreed that the students will be able to focus on learning rather than just getting a good grade on an exam or assignment. The teachers also agreed (48.96%) that students will be able to learn the material and obtain the grade they desired. In addition, 38.5% agreed that the students will be able to focus on learning rather than just getting a good grade in the course. Furthermore, (51%) of the sample agreed and (41.67%) of the sample strongly agreed that the assignments will help reinforce the material presented in class more than studying alone.

Table 3 Teachers Response toward Course Roles

S#	ITEMS	Strongly Agree	%	Agree	%	Not Agree Nor Disagree	%	Disagree	%	Strongly Disagree	%	100%
		5		4		3		2		1		
14	Course rules and objectives will be transparent (i.e. clearly stated and openly available).	42	43.8	46	47.9	6	6.3	1	1	1	1	100
15	Course rules and objectives will be supporting the students' learning in the course.	41	42.7	46	47.9	3	3.1	5	5.2	1	1	100
16	Course rules and objectives will help the students to obtain the grade they desired.	24	25	39	40.6	23	24	9	9.4	1	1	100
17	If given the option, I would rather teach a course using a learner-centered approach than a course with a more "traditional" approach.	50	52.1	33	34.4	11	11	2	2.1	0	0	100

Table 3 shows the teachers' response toward course roles. Approximately 48% agreed that the course rules and objectives will be transparent (i.e. clearly stated and openly available) and will be supporting the students' learning in the course and 40.6% agreed that they

will help the students to obtain the grade they desired. More than half of the sample strongly agreed to teach a course using a learner-centered approach than a course with a more “traditional” approach.

Table 4 The Mean and the Standard Deviation according to each Question

	Course Structure and Activities													Course Rules			Preference of SCL
Question No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Mean	4.24	4.42	4.32	3.67	3.71	4.06	4.18	3.55	3.52	4.11	3.54	3.94	4.33	4.32	4.26	3.79	4.36
SD	0.68	0.82	0.88	0.93	1.27	0.93	0.93	0.90	1.14	1.12	1.06	1.18	0.57	0.81	0.95	1.01	0.83

Table 4 specifies the mean and the standard deviations of each question. When looking at the teachers’ perceptions of the course structure and activities, the item with the highest level of teachers’ agreement (mean +/- SD) related to the assignments’ reinforcing the material presented in class more than studying alone (4.33 +/- 0.57). Meanwhile, item 14 was the item with highest level of teachers’ agreement in the questions related to course rules. This item was related to the transparency and availability of the course objectives and rules (4.32 +/- 0.81).

Table 5 Barrier Categories and Examples on them as Perceived by the Teachers

Barrier Category	Examples
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of students’ learning skills and abilities that prepares them to part-take in SCL • Misperception of the students regarding SCL • Lack of students’ willingness to apply it • Lack of students’ motivation • Students’ perception of the learning process (they are focused more on grades) • Lack of students’ readiness • Psychological barriers • Students’ workload
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of teachers’ experience and qualifications such as a nurse teaching nursing without a certificate • Lack of teachers’ willingness to apply it • Teachers’ heavy workload
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resources e.g. library, spaces, labs, computers • Lack of advanced technology (e.g. internet connection) • Lack of appropriate teaching environment
Curriculum & the teaching system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time • Lack of clear curriculum objectives and rules • Rigidity of the system

Table 5 shows the most frequently faced or anticipated barriers that are experienced by teachers’ in the DGET’s institutions. These barriers

are related mainly to four areas: students, teachers, resources and the curriculum. The most frequently noted barrier for the students is lack of learning skills and abilities for part-taking in SCL. Similarly, lack of experience and skills in practicing SCL was the most frequently noted barrier for teachers. Lack of resources was the most frequent barrier noted by most of the participants. In the curriculum area, lack of time was the most commonly cited barrier by the participants.

Discussion:

In this study most of the teachers agreed that the student learning ability will increase. This finding is congruent with Kramer et al. (2007) where they found that the students become more accountable and independent in their learning. It will reinforce the material presented in class more than studying alone. Teachers perceive that SCL will improve the ability of the students to learn the material presented. It will increase the opportunities to demonstrate mastery of course material so they will be more focused on mastering their task rather than improving their grades only. They will have to prepare for the class differently and will have more opportunities for demonstrating their learning as Lonka and Ahola (1995) found in their study that despite the slow learning in the beginning of their program, students' understanding and study skills improved.

Students will have to prepare differently for the exams and will have a less stressful learning environment and less pressure in the exams. SCL is thought to provide more control to the students in determining their grade. This finding is similar to what Cheang (2009) found the SCL enhances the students' intrinsic goal orientation control of learning beliefs, self efficacy, critical thinking, and meta-cognitive self-regulation.

Teachers perceived that the course rules and objectives will be transparent and supporting students learning to obtain the grade desired.

Teachers preferred to teach courses which use SCL rather than teaching using traditional approach. This finding is similar to what Kilic's (2010) has stated that SCL has produced a change in teaching practices including teachers behavior, planning, process, classroom management, communications and evaluation skills of the teachers.

Despite the perception of the benefits of SCL, teachers still noted some common barriers to applying this approach. These barriers were mainly related to students, teachers, resources and the curriculum. Teachers perceived the barriers that the students might faced as lack of learning skills and abilities and misperception of students regarding SCL. In addition, students' lack of willingness, readiness and lack of motivation to accept the workload imposed on them by SCL. This finding is supports an earlier research done by Yilmaz (2009) on Turkish students. He has found that students might face difficulty in becoming active learners and this might affect their willingness to partake in active learning. They might prefer to be more passive learners rather than active ones to reduce their workload.

Barriers related to teachers were mainly related to lack of teachers' training and experience in teaching using SCL approach. This might have caused lack of willingness among some of them to practice SCL. This might be due as Yilmaz (2009) pointed out, to teachers' difficulty to accept the notion of the change from the system being teacher centered to being a learner centered and being a co-learner, a guide and a facilitator who focuses on student learning rather than content delivery. The heavy workload has further complicated the situation making it almost impossible for some teachers to use this approach.

Lack of resources such as proper libraries, laboratories and classrooms as well as advanced technologies were the most cited barriers to resources. Resources are required in students centered learning. As

O'Neill and McMahon (2005) testified that the SCL is individual centered and requires resources for its implementation.

Curriculum and teaching system related barriers were: time, transparency of the curriculum objectives and rules as well as rigidity of the system. These barriers were similar to what Yilmaz (2009) noted. As the system of education in Oman is similar to the one in Turkey in its being a unified, centralized and rigid education system, these were also barriers to the implementation of SCL in Oman.

Limitations

Although this study has a high response rate, many of the respondents were unaware of the SCL concept as they were lacking proper training and experience. In addition, this study was meant to be done on both teachers and students. However, as SCL is not practiced in the DGET's institutes assessing students' perception of it was not going to yield valid results.

Implications

To our knowledge, this is the first study done in Oman assessing the perception of DGET's institutes' teachers towards SCL. It has listed all the barriers that can act as obstacles to implement SCL in DGET's institutes. This study can be the initial step in implementing SCL in DGET's institutes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the results and the findings of this study, it is clear that the teachers are willing to practice SCL in teaching nursing and allied health courses. However, several barriers are noted. In order to practice SCL in DGET's institutes in Oman, the authors recommend the following guidelines:

- Students must be guided through an orientation program that can be conducted in the beginning of their enrollment in the DGET's

institutes in order to prepare them for part taking in SCL activities and correct any misperception of this approach. This program should orient the students to the benefits of SCL in order to enhance their motivation and willingness to adopt this approach. Time management should be incorporated in this program in order to teach the students time management skills that can distribute the workload of the student evenly.

- Teachers should be given continuing education programs that can orient them to SCL and enhance their creativity. They should be oriented to the benefits of SCL in order to motivate them to apply SCL. Teachers should be encouraged to share their experiences in order to manage their time and the workload. Administrations should consider revising the workload of the teachers.
- A needs assessment should be done in all the institutes to assess the resources necessary in implementing SCL in DGET's institutes by a committee formed for this purpose which can prepare a list of resources needed that should be provided for the purpose of implementation of SCL.
- Ministry of Health should consider flexibility in working hours as well as in the curriculum in order to apply SCL in its system. Teachers need time to prepare and students need time to be active learners. The rigidity of the system does not allow doing so.
- Curriculum objectives need to be revised in order to accommodate SCL in it.
- As SCL is a new concept in Oman. It has just been recently adopted by DGET by the name of "self learning activities". These are activities which promote active learning. However, SCL is not fully promoted. This is due to the rigid curriculum and teaching system. Further studies need to be implemented in order to assess the

feasibility of applying SCL and the recommendations of this study needs to be considered. Reassessment of the teachers' perceptions should be done in order to elicit the benefits gained after applying SCL in DGET's institutes.

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