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About the Journal

Founded in 2013, the Journal of Teacher Action Research (ISSN: 2332-2233) is a peer-reviewed online journal indexed with EBSCO that seeks practical research that can be implemented in Pre-Kindergarten through Post-Secondary classrooms. The primary function of this journal is to provide classroom teachers and researchers a means for sharing classroom practices.

The journal accepts articles for peer-review that describe classroom practice which positively impacts student learning. We define teacher action research as teachers (at all levels) studying their practice and/or their students' learning in a methodical way in order to inform classroom practice. Articles submitted to the journal should demonstrate an action research focus with intent to improve the author's practice.

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REFLECTIONS: EXPLORING STUDENT WRITING SELF-EFFICACY IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract Many studies have been conducted that address writing self-efficacy; however, few studies address writing self-efficacy in the online environment. Through this action research endeavor I sought to understand whether student online writing self-efficacy changed from the beginning of the course to the end with intentional, targeted assignments: authentic, informal, and formal writing. Students were administered the SEWS instrument and were asked to complete it anonymously at the beginning of the course and at the end. Data was calculated for percentage of change for each aspect of the instrument. Results showed that positive changes in student writing self-efficacy can occur over the course of a semester.

Keywords: teacher action research, online learning, self-efficacy, writing, higher education, historically black colleges and universities, teacher reflection

Introduction

Online education enrollment has increased exponentially within the last decade. Vilkas & McCabe (2014) suggest that innovative practices are needed to improve quality instruction, and that one area that needs further research is promoting online students' self-efficacy. In my current practices, I have learned that many students who enter online college writing courses do so out of necessity and not out of personal desire. I have further learned that, many students do not have high self-efficacy pertaining to writing, coupled with the fact that many of them are really not comfortable taking online courses. They may have enrolled because it was listed next in the sequence of courses they need to take, they decided to take the course as a last-ditch effort to graduate, or the traditional offering of the course was full, so they opted for the online version. Whatever the case, many students are in the online course and have low self-efficacy regarding the writing processes in the online environment.

Through this action research project, I sought to understand student writing self-efficacy in the online environment within a writing intensive literature course, with 45 students in a historically Black college in the Southeast United States. The first semester I taught the course, I noticed that several students withdrew from the course, failed the course, and many barely passed due to neglecting to complete many of the writing assignments. There were many students who passed, but the number of struggling students was alarming. This led me to reflect on the types of writing assignments, the required elements of the assignments, and the grading of the assignments. After reflecting, the main thing I decided to employ for the next semester was to incorporate a blend of authentic, informal, and formal writing. While I tailored the writing assignments, I also found it beneficial to track student writing self-efficacy as this could have been a contributing factor to either student completion of writing assignments in the previous semester. This reflective action research study details the processes of seeking to improve the course while tracking student writing self-efficacy for change as a result of those improvements.

Reflection on Practice. “In common-sense terms, reflection lies somewhere around the notion of learning. We reflect on something in order to consider it in more detail” (Moon, 2001, p.1). With this in mind, I thought it necessary to learn from my experiences of teaching the course to improve it for my future students. It is through reflection that I was able to ascertain points of correction, development, and improvement. Rogers (2001) placed the focus of reflection on the learners’ professional growth. I decided that reflection on this course was important place for my professional growth. Upon realizing that many of my students were largely unsuccessful in the course, I decided that it was more important to me that students were successful and that they learned pertinent writing skills that would impact their writing self-efficacy. Therefore, I constituted non-negotiable standards as improvements for the course. I decided that students would participate in authentic writing, formal, and informal assignments tailored for this online course, which are described in the following sections.

Authentic Writing Assignments. Authentic writing is writing that causes students to move beyond their prior knowledge (Kixmiller, 2004). Students were required to complete a critical essay in which they were to critically analyze a text, research and synthesize critical sources, cite textual evidence, adhere to grammatical standards of English, and employ conventions of writing. This assignment required students to move beyond their prior knowledge, while reading literature, thinking critically about it, using Modern Language Association (MLA) format, and using a rubric to adhere to assignment parameters.

Formal and Informal Writing Assignments. Students were also required to complete formal and informal writing throughout the duration of the course. In each of these types of assignments students were required to adhere to conventions of Standard English, refrain from grammatical errors, and use MLA format. Formal writing assignments included a poetry explication assignment. For this assignment, students were to read the assigned poetry and write an analysis. The analysis included discussion of literary elements,

explanation of the structure of the poem, and comparison and contrast to other chosen poems and literature assigned in the course. A rubric was provided that outlined the assignment parameters.

Several critical paragraphs were assigned where students wrote a brief critical overview of the assigned literature and cite textual evidence. A rubric was provided for these short assignments. Lastly, a formal assignment in the form of a virtual, oral presentation was assigned. A rubric was also provided for this assignment. Students were to create an oral presentation that detailed the life and works of one literary figure of a specific time period studied within *World Literature 204*, such as *The Age of Reason* or *The Romantic Period*. Students were to essentially research and explain how the chosen author's work was representative of the period and the literary impact of the author's legacy. Students then created a screen recording of presentations of their research and uploaded it to YouTube for viewing and grading.

Discussion posts were considered informal assignments. Students read the assigned literary texts and responded to the texts through instructor created prompts of their choice. These were assigned bi-weekly. Students wrote a substantial amount on the literary piece, respond to two other classmates in a manner that moved the post forward, and discuss their opinion while providing textual evidence. I hoped that through the completion of these writing intense assignments and the implementation of rubrics that students writing self-efficacy would be positively impacted in this online course.

Literature Review

Self-Efficacy and Writing. Much research has been done concerning self-efficacy. Research on self-efficacy started in the 1970s. Yet, this literature review will not attempt to discuss all research in the area; however, it will present those studies most closely related to self-efficacy concerning writing and online courses. To begin, Bandura (1986, p. 391) defined self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances." In other words, self-efficacy is one's confidence in his or her abilities. Therefore, self-efficacy and learning is critical (Hodges, 2008). When people believe in their ability to execute something, they tend to think positively about doing so. Consequently, "people who have strong beliefs in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided" (Bandura, 1997, p. 39).

This concept applies to writing. In a study concerning writing and self-efficacy, Klassen (2002) concluded that student perceived self-efficacy was one of the strongest predictors of writing competence. When students are confident in themselves as writers, they tend to be more competent writers. In a study to examine how writing self-efficacy changed over time, Webb, Vandiver, and Jeung (2016) found that student writing self-efficacy affected the final course grade in middle and high school. They also noted that students reported a higher level of confidence in their writing at the end of a writing intensive course. Jalaluddin, Paramasivam, Husain, and Bakar (2015) argued that writing is not an easy task as it is a highly complex and demanding task that requires a number of skills to be performed. The

authors noted that writing performance is dependent on writing ability perception. Students who are not very confident in their writing may not feel that they possess the necessary skills to write successfully.

Online Writing Self-Efficacy. Bruning et al. (2013) stated that writing self-efficacy differs by type of writing and writing context. Student writing self-efficacy differs in the online environment because it is an online context instead of the face-to-face context. Much research has been performed on online learning; however, very little has been conducted on student writing self-efficacy in the distance learning style. Nevertheless, Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland (2014) offered that online courses differ considerably from traditional instruction in the way students interact with the instructor. Students cannot readily access the instructor and therefore must self-guide their learning of much of the material including writing assignments.

Kuo et al. (2014) added that online learning requires that students be confident in performing internet-related actions and be willing to self-manage their learning process. When students have low Internet self-efficacy joined with low writing self-efficacy, it could be detrimental to the students' success. In a study concerning writing in a computer-based course, Park and Cho (2014) found that online writers who regularly took online courses tend to have higher self-efficacy and are more likely to incorporate feedback than non-online writers. Further, Shen, Cho, Tsai & Marra (2013) proposed that students' self-judgment about their capabilities is critical for their satisfaction with an online course. Additionally, Ergul (2004) showed that self-efficacy in distance education significantly and positively predicted students' academic achievement. Therefore, positive self-efficacy concerning writing and online learning is vital to student success.

Methodology

Participants. Participants were students from different programs of study ranging from sophomores to graduating seniors. This writing intense literature course had 45 students enrolled. There were 27 female students, and 18 were male students. The course is a part of the core curriculum with students from several majors enrolled. Students also had varying lineages of writing and online course experience.

Instrumentation. The purpose of this study was to examine whether online, college students would have a change in writing self-efficacy. The research question was: Does the level of student writing self-efficacy change from the beginning of an online course to the end of the course? To answer this question, I employed one instrument. The Self-Efficacy for Writing Scale (SEWS) consists of 16 items corresponding to three categories of writing related experience: ideation, conventions, and self-regulation (Bruning et al., 2013).

The study included 15 of the SEWS questions. The last question of the SEWS instrument was omitted to avoid student survey fatigue due to question repetition and to remain consistent with calculating scores for five questions for each aspect of the SEWS instrument. The instrument consists of 5-point Likert style questions where students provided the degree of

agreement or disagreement to questions such as: *I can put my ideas into writing and I can avoid distractions while I write*. The SEWS provides information about self-efficacy in identifiable dimensions of the writing process; however, it does not query self-efficacy for performance on writing assessments or any other specific writing task or genre. It has been validated and found reliable (Bruning et al., 2013). Although, the SEWS instrument was initially established for use with advanced and AP level high school students, I found it suitable for use within my lower level writing intense core literature course, as most students were sophomores. In addition, Ramos-Villagrasa et al. (2018), validated the instruments for use with college students.

Procedures. All students who were registered in the course were asked to complete the survey via Blackboard (Bb) survey the first day of the course. The survey was composed of 15 questions from SEWS, and 45 students completed the survey anonymously. Students took the questionnaire prior to completing or being exposed to any course assignments. Students were not coerced in any way to participate in the survey.

At the end of the course students were asked to complete the same survey via Bb survey. The survey was composed of 15 questions from SEWS. Due to student attrition, 42 students completed the survey anonymously. Students completed this survey after all other course assignments were completed and were not coerced in any way to participate in the survey. I obtained results from both the pre-course survey and the post course survey from the Bb survey tool and calculated by hand to obtain the percentages necessary to document any changes within the first and second writing self-efficacy survey data.

Setting. The setting for this study was a historically, predominately Black university in the Southeastern United States with an enrollment of 5,000 students. Admission requirements are ACT and SAT scores. The university offers degrees in engineering, humanities, communications, Master's level degrees, and doctoral degrees in elementary education.

Results

The results for each aspect of the instrument were assessed and calculated for percentages (as labeled aspects within the SEWS instrument). As a reminder, the three areas assessed by the instrument are conventions, self-regulation, and writing ideation. First, I reviewed each of the fifteen questions and ascertained the changes from the beginning of the semester to end of the semester. I thought it would be beneficial to explain the results in the context of the aspects measured by the instrument and for ease of comparison. It must also be noted that the *strongly agree and agree* and *disagree and strongly disagree* were percentages combined in the narrative for each section.

Ideation. Ideation is concerned with students' self-efficacy in generating ideas for their writing. Bruning et al. (2013) argued that writing cannot take place without ideas. Therefore, it is important that students feel confident in this area. Questions 1-5 were related to this

aspect of the SEWS instrument. The percentages of change from pre-course to post-course are depicted in the tables and narratives below.

Question 1- *I can think of ideas for my writing*. The number of students who agreed that they could think of ideas for their writing increased to 92% post course (see Table 1). In the beginning, 83% of students agreed that they could think of ideas for their writing. This was a small increase of 9% with 7% of students as neutral. There were 10% of students neutral in the beginning, and 8% disagreed. This was a 2% decrease in disagreement.

Table 1: Question 1 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	35	42	7
AGREE	48	50	2
NEITHER	7	0	7
DISAGREE	7	4	3
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	4	1

Question 2- *I can put my ideas into writing*. More students agreed in the second survey that they could put their ideas into writing (see Table 2). In the beginning, only 77% of students agreed that they could put their ideas into writing. At the end of the course 96% of students thought that they could do this. This is a 19% increase from the beginning to the end of the semester of students who felt that their self-efficacy increased in this area. No students disagreed. There was a 13% decrease in those who were neutral. 6% of student disagreed in the beginning. However, no students disagreed for the second survey.

Table 2: Question 2 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	32	42	10
AGREE	45	54	9
NEITHER	17	4	8
DISAGREE	3	0	3
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Question 3- *I can think of many words to describe my ideas.* There were more students who felt that they could think of words to describe their ideas before the course started hence the 5% percent decrease (see Table 3). There were also students who felt that they neither agreed or disagreed post course. For the second survey, 6% more students were neutral. Only 1% less students disagreed.

Table 3: Question 3 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	32	23	9
AGREE	42	46	4
NEITHER	13	19	6
DISAGREE	13	8	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE	0	4	4

Question 4- *I can think of a lot of original ideas.* Many students agreed that they could think of a lot of original ideas in the beginning (see Table 4). However, 5% more of students agreed that they could do so post course, hence a small increase. Only 7% of students were neutral in the second survey. There were 4% of students disagreed in this area. This is 12% less than those who disagreed in the first survey.

Table 4: Question 4 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	23	31	8
AGREE	61	58	3
NEITHER	13	7	6
DISAGREE	3	0	3
STRONGLY DISAGREE	0	4	4

Question 5- *I know exactly where to put my ideas in my writing.* There were 11% more of students who agreed post course that they knew where to put their ideas in writing (see Table 5). There were 69% of students who agreed post course that they felt they knew where to put their ideas. 8% more of students were neutral post course. Only 4% of students disagreed post course. This is an 18% decrease in those who disagreed.

Table 5: Question 5 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	10	19	9
AGREE	48	50	2
NEITHER	19	27	8
DISAGREE	19	4	15
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Conventions. Bruning et al. (2013) stated that the second dimension of the model is self-efficacy for writing conventions, which refer to a set of generally accepted standards for expressing ideas when writing in a given language. In English these would include agreed-upon ways to spell, punctuate, capitalize, and structure sentences. Questions 6-10 were related to this aspect of the SEWS instrument. The percentages of change from pre-course to post course are depicted in the tables and narratives below.

Question 6- *I can spell my words correctly.* Many students strongly agreed that they could spell words correctly pre-course, at 84% (see Table 6). However, post course, 3% more of students agreed that they could spell words correctly, at 87% post course. No students were neutral post course. There were 14% of students who disagreed to this statement post course.

Table 6: Question 6 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	42	29	13
AGREE	42	58	16
NEITHER	8	0	8
DISAGREE	8	7	1
STRONGLY DISAGREE	0	7	7

Question 7- *I can write complete sentences.* Most students agreed that they could write in complete sentences pre and post course, and there was only a 1% increase (see Table 7). 2% more of students were neutral post course. Only 4% of students disagreed post course, which was 2% less than students who disagreed pre-course.

Table 7: Question 7 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	29	31	3
AGREE	52	50	2
NEITHER	13	15	2
DISAGREE	0	4	4
STRONGLY DISAGREE	6	0	6

Question 8- *I can punctuate my sentences correctly.* Most students agreed that they could punctuate sentences correctly during the pre and post course survey (see Table 8). 87% of students agreed that they do this pre-course. There were 93% who agreed post course. There was a 6% increase in students who felt they could punctuate sentences correctly. There was a 3% decrease in those who were neutral. Only 6% less students disagreed.

Table 8: Question 8 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	32	31	1
AGREE	55	62	7
NEITHER	10	8	2
DISAGREE	3	0	3
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Question 9- *I can write grammatically correct sentences.* 87% of students strongly agreed or agree that they could write grammatically correct sentences pre-course and 93% agreed post course (see Table 9). However, 9% more students agreed post course than pre-course that they could write grammatically correct sentences. There was a 1% decrease in students who were neutral. Even though 9% of students disagreed that they could write grammatically correct sentences in the beginning, post course no students disagreed.

Table 9: Question 9 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	26	37	11
AGREE	52	50	2
NEITHER	13	12	1
DISAGREE	6	0	6
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Question 10- I can begin my paragraphs in the right spot. There were 75% of students agreed that they could begin their paragraphs in the right spot pre-course, and 81% post course agree (see Table 10). This was a 6% increase. No students strongly disagreed post course. 10% disagreed pre-course and only 4% disagreed post course. This was a 6% decrease. There was a 2% increase in students were neutral.

Table 10: Question 10 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	23	31	8
AGREE	52	50	3
NEITHER	13	15	2
DISAGREE	10	4	6
STRONGLY DISAGREE	0	0	0

Self-Regulation. Self-regulation is an important aspect of writing. It is good for students to be able to generate ideas and having confidence in their abilities to generate ideas. However, these factors can be useless if students are not confident in their abilities to regulate themselves while writing. Self-regulatory skills are needed not only to generate productive ideas and writing strategies but also to manage the anxieties and emotions that can accompany writing (Bruning et al, 2013). Questions 11-15 were related to this aspect of the SEWS instrument. The percentages of change from pre-course to post course are depicted in the tables and narratives below.

Question 11- *I can focus on my writing for at least one hour.* There were 55% of students who agreed pre-course that they could focus on their writing for at least one hour, and 58% agreed post course (see Table 11). There was an increase of 3% of students' self-efficacy in this area. However, 12% more of students were neutral post course. Finally, 10% less students disagreed.

Table 11: Question 11 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	13	27	14
AGREE	42	31	11
NEITHER	19	31	12
DISAGREE	19	12	7
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Question 12-*I can avoid distractions while I write.* There were 48% of students who agreed pre-course and 62% post course agree that they could avoid distractions while they write (see Table 12). This was a 14% increase, and 16% fewer students were neutral post course. Only 4% more students disagreed post course that they could avoid distractions while they write.

Table 12: Question 12 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	16	12	4
AGREE	32	50	18
NEITHER	29	15	16
DISAGREE	16	15	1
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	8	5

Question 13- *I can start writing assignments quickly.* There were 62% of student agreed pre-course that they could start writing assignments quickly. Yet, 61% agreed post course (see Table 13). There was a 1% decrease concerning this question, although students did report positively in this area pre and post course. There was a 5% decrease in those who were neutral. 6% of students disagreed pre-course and 12% disagreed that they could start writing assignments quickly. This was a 6% increase in students who disagreed.

Table 13: Question 13 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	10	15	5
AGREE	52	46	6
NEITHER	32	27	5
DISAGREE	3	12	9
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Question 14- *I can control my frustration when I write.* 81% of students agreed that they could control their frustration both pre and post course (see Table 14). There was no significant change in self-efficacy in this area. 13% more students were neutral. There was a 13% decrease in students who disagreed that they could control frustration while they write.

Table 14: Question 14 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	13	31	18
AGREE	68	50	18
NEITHER	6	19	16
DISAGREE	10	0	10
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Question 15- *I can think of my writing goals before I write.* There were 64% of students who agreed pre-course that that they could think of writing goals, and 77% post course (see Table 15). Overall, there was a 13% increase in students who agreed by the end of the course. There were 16% less students who were neutral. There was a 2% increase in students who disagreed that they think of writing goals before writing.

Table 15: Question 15 Results

RESPONSE	PRE-COURSE	POST-COURSE	CHANGE
STRONGLY AGREE	6	23	17
AGREE	58	54	4
NEITHER	29	15	16
DISAGREE	3	8	5
STRONGLY DISAGREE	3	0	3

Discussion

Overall, there was an increase in student writing self-efficacy in the online environment from the beginning of the course to the end of the course. Students mostly agreed or strongly agreed to the prompts of the SEWS instrument at the end course of course, whereas in the beginning they disagreed more. This indicated that their writing self-efficacy was lower at the start of the course. The greatest amount of positive change was for the following aspects: ideation and self-regulation. For example, 49% of students agreed that their writing self-efficacy in ideation was improved. The increase could be attributed to the fact that generating ideas for writing was a skill that presented itself through the informal discussion posts and the in-depth thinking students were subjected to through the formal writing assignments. These assignments encouraged students to share ideas and personal connections with the literature, which aided in the generation of ideas.

The aspect of self-regulation also yielded moderate changes in student writing self-efficacy. Yet 31% of students agreed that their writing self-efficacy increased. The increase could be attributed to the fact that students naturally have to show more self-regulation within online learning environments. When completing the writing assignments, the professor was not readily accessible for help or guidance. Students relied on rubrics and other means of self-guidance, self-help, and self-motivation for completing the writing assignments.

The aspect of conventions yielded the lowest increase in students who agreed that their writing self-efficacy increased in this area. There were 25% more of students agreed post course. Though the increase was relatively small, the increase could be attributed to certain

elements within the course. I graded heavily on conventions and even required students to revise work when necessary. I mentioned grammatical errors, spelling errors, and punctuation errors when marking assignments. Therefore, students received much practice in the area of conventions. I was surprised that the increase in self-efficacy in this area was not much greater.

Future research could include the ideas mentioned here. The relationship between age and writing self-efficacy in college students should be studied. This would provide insight into whether age plays a role in how students feel about writing, especially in the online writing environment. It is important to understand if there is an age group that has higher or lower writing self-efficacy in the online environment or if there is an age gap. Another idea for future research is the difference between writing self-efficacy in traditional courses and online courses for college students should be studied. It should be ascertained whether students feel more confident writing in the traditional course or in the online setting. Students may feel like better writers in one or the other.

Limitations

One limitation was that no qualitative data was collected to gauge the perceptions of the students. Collecting this data via interviews or even observations could have potentially provided more depth in this action research project. This type of data would have allowed for more concrete evidence as to what influenced the change in the questionnaire responses and the increase in student writing self-efficacy from beginning to the end of the course. However, my goal was to only ascertain if there was a difference in student attitude concerning their writing abilities in the online environment while being exposed to different types of writing assignments including formal, informal, and authentic to inform my own practices.

Conclusion

Conducting this research enlightened me. As I critically reflect on this action research study, I am aware that I was within my right as an education practitioner to perform action research as a means of improving my practices (Pine, 2009). This is what teachers do: critically reflect, study, and make improvements for the betterment and the success of our students. In the coming semesters, I plan to continue providing my students with authentic writing assignments, formal and informal assignments, allowing them to make connections to the literature we read in the course while still consistently enforcing the rules and guidelines of MLA formatting and standard English because the students overall writing self-efficacy did increase as a result of these assignments. Via the data collected through the experimental pedagogy described in this study, ultimately, I believe that even though students may have had an aversion to writing, were not totally comfortable with writing, and that this discomfort may have been heightened in the e-learning setting, students must be challenged and held to the same standards as those in traditional writing courses. This challenge may be the factor that increased student writing self-efficacy, which could positively impact the rest of their college career and even their lives concerning writing.

About the Author

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