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## Common Hurdles in Second Language Writing Mistake or Message? *by Judy Youngquist, ESL Specialist*

College-educated, intelligent, perceptive individuals may be thrown into a state of chaos and disorientation if familiar symbols, signs, and sounds disappear from their surroundings. Even in a large city where things seem familiar on the surface, there may be vast differences in language and culture. "Where's the pharmacy?, How do I make a phone call?, How do I find something to eat?" are ordinary questions that can become quite troublesome if travelers can't read the words, speak the language, or understand the local dialects around them.

Even if travelers have studied a foreign language for several years, dialects and rapid speech can make a muddle of hard-won linguistic "competency." If asked a question, visitors might be able to respond in a few choice phrases, but discussing substantive issues intelligently in the foreign tongue is often another matter.

As an ESL specialist at Saginaw Valley State University's Writing Center and an instructor in the English Language Program, I have a unique opportunity to examine ESL students' mistakes and underlying messages in their writing. These students are often painfully aware of the gaps between the sophistication of their ideas and the limitations of their linguistic skill in the target language. This gap is articulated with comments such as "I have complicated ideas, but only simple language," or "I feel like a child when I try to speak or write in English."

*"I traveled  
halfway around  
the world -  
and now I'm  
illiterate."*

*Christopher Boies  
SVSU student in Taiwan*

International students know that even though they are literate and well-educated in their home culture, native speakers may view them as being less literate, and perhaps less intelligent, than they are.

Compounding the linguistic limitation is lack of cultural knowledge. These limitations may manifest themselves in simple, everyday activities. Take, for example, Masahide, a Japanese ESL student, who was invited to a potluck during the first month of an intensive English program. Not quite knowing quite what a potluck was, he asked a fellow student about it. "Just bring a dish to pass," he was told. Following what he thought were clear instructions, he did just that: he took a single plate to the potluck. When he realized that "dish" meant "food to share," he felt foolish and ashamed. This was a painful lesson in American English and culture.

Even those who have studied a foreign language for many years may find that there are contextual discourse restraints that impede them from achieving their communicative purpose. This struggle is readily apparent in second language writing where the use of unfamiliar lexical and cohesive elements can disrupt a clear message.

Diverse ethnic and linguistic groups bring with them all kinds of different assumptions that may lead to communication breakdown in written communication. As they are acquiring the target language and learning Western style rhetorical strategies, ESL students have to deal with presuppositions, cultural assumptions they assume the audience shares with them. Communication breakdown can occur when the student is either too explicit, citing the obvious, or too implicit, allowing the reader to interpret concepts (often incorrectly) from what seem to be unrelated sentences and paragraphs. With time and practice, however, students can and do learn to code shift into an appropriate mode of the target language.

How much information to include in a composition is a judgment that native speakers have to make as well, but limitations in knowledge of the target culture can make these judgments very difficult for second language writers. An ESL student might write, "Here are some tips that make these classes easier and easier to get A's for students who

## What International Students Have Taught Me

by Diane Boehm, Director (University Writing Program)

*The mature male graduate student from India had tears of humiliation and anxiety in his eyes. His SVSU instructor had failed him for plagiarizing on a major paper. As we reviewed the paper, his confusion was evident: "How have I plagiarized? All my sources are listed on my References page. Why is the instructor talking about failing me for the course?"*

When we teach and work with the 282 non-Canadian international students from 51 countries who currently attend SVSU, sooner or later we are likely to personally experience the mis-communication which can result from cultural differences. The crossed signals I observe frequently begin with our unconscious assumptions that the many protocols and expectations which characterize American higher education are universal. And because many of our international students come from cultures in which a teacher is an absolute authority, never to be questioned, we may be totally unaware of any communication snafues.

Our assumptions about the universality of protocols and practices take many forms. When I work with a student on a resume, for example, my first instinct is to pull out our Writing Center file of model resumes from SVSU grads. But I have learned that I need to ask a critical question first: in what country will you use this resume? I have only to recall the 5 a.m. phone call from my daughter in Germany, with a long list of questions about our family history, including the towns in which her father and I were born, to recognize that the personal background which is inappropriate for a U.S. resume is required for anyone applying for a job in Germany and some other countries.

International students frequently lack the schema, the cognitive

**Recognizing the many factors involved in working with international students, both our course planning and our day-to-day interactions merit some reconsideration.**

framework or "active knowledge structure" which serves as an "organizing principle" (Best, 1999) to understand and predict American higher education practices. They may lack the schema not only for content, but also for the context and processes of learning here. The student accused of plagiarism had precisely followed handbook guidelines for APA format on a References page. But he had never learned to use in-text citations, for no paper during his entire undergraduate education in his home country had ever required such documentation. In fact, the entire concept of intellectual property seemed "wrong" to someone trained in a collaborative culture, where "borrowing" words and ideas from an expert in the field was a high compliment and a way to demonstrate that you were basing your presentation on the most authoritative sources available. How could this possibly be considered academic dishonesty?

Assumptions about background knowledge create problems for international students as well. Last semester, I spent over an hour with a student who was trying to summarize an article about racism in America. He had question after

question: who is Rodney King? where is Watts? what is the debate about affirmative action? what does "backlash" mean? Even with the help of my *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, the student simply had no cultural frame of reference to begin to understand the article's allusions or argument, making summary virtually impossible.

Similarly, the Muslim student trying to understand Judy Brady's satirical piece "I Want a Wife" was frustrated, but not only because he couldn't understand the satire; rather, the domestic role of American women which Brady was satirizing was precisely the role his mother and sisters and extended family honored! And the young woman from Belarus who enthusiastically embraced the new teaching ideas she learned in a course about teaching writing faced a serious dilemma: were she to use any of these practices when she returned home, she would risk expulsion from her program, for such methods were contrary to the "approved" methods which were rigidly enforced.

Cultural differences influence many classroom interactions. Because they come from countries in which higher education is highly prized, many international students are astonished by the cavalier attitude toward learning they frequently see in their American counterparts. Though an assignment may take non-native speakers of English two to three times as long to read and comprehend, they commit their evenings and weekends to be able to succeed. When their studious behavior is interpreted by classmates as an attempt to "brown-nose" the instructor, however, they may be shunned by classmates.

As every teacher knows, a student's emotional well-being directly influences that student's ability to

perform at his/her highest level of capability. "Learning of unfamiliar or more complex material is undermined by even moderate levels of anxiety," observes Andy Swihart, a Teacher in the Writing Center who frequently works with international students. These students may face many stressors: anxiety about their ability to succeed; culture shock as they try to become accustomed to food and dress and people and behavior and attitudes which are totally unfamiliar; disorientation, as the very classroom behaviors which were prized in their home culture (e.g., respectful silence and reticence) are frowned upon in the American classroom, in which free-wheeling discussion is the norm. As one student put it, "It's hard to be extroverted in a culture you are not familiar with."

International students are often astonished to find that America's culture of "second chances" extends even to education. Many of them have survived highly competitive weeding-out processes to gain entry to higher education. American patterns of "dropping out," or returning to school in mid-life, or re-training for a new profession, are completely impossible in their home cultures. If they fail in college, second chances are rarely an option—and the shame of failure would be felt not only by them but also by their families. The pressure to succeed and maintain their student visas has even led some students to risk unethical behaviors.

Many international students come with other heavy burdens of expectations from their home culture. They may have been the best and the brightest; perhaps they are fulfilling the dreams of their family; they may be painfully aware of the great sacrifices made by their families to send them here. One Russian student's grandmother had sold her prized dacha and moved into the tiny apartment of family members so that her granddaughter could attend an American university. Another Indonesian student worried constantly about her mother when the Indonesian economy dis-

integrated two years ago and rioting forced her mother's businesses to shut down. Was it right to fulfill her mother's wish for her to graduate from an American university when her mother's livelihood and very life could be in danger?

Recognizing the many factors involved in working with international students, both our course planning and our day-to-day interactions merit some reconsideration. Many questions arise. One of the first is the question of "standards": should the writing and speaking of international students be judged by the same criteria as the language of native speakers? The research on second language acquisition suggests that such an expectation will likely be impossible to meet. As the human brain develops, a series of windows to language learning open at various ages. In its early years, the brain develops a language "template" based on the characteristics of the language(s) it has learned (Pinker, 1994).

The ability to acquire the template of a new language is greatest prior to the age of six; by the end of adolescence, the brain will have destroyed unused synapses and the language template will be much more difficult to modify. Thus the native speaker's "ear" for the nuances of language will not be available when a non-native speaker revises and edits. While the syntax and phonetics and patterns of a new language can still be learned, such learning will be much more difficult, and native speaker fluency may be an unrealistic goal.

Another fact to be considered is that many international students come with limited academic writing experience. Their previous college experience is more likely to have been in the lecture-and-test mode, leaving them unprepared for both the quantity and the variety of writing tasks they are likely to encounter. Or perhaps they come from a language rhetoric which is far different from ours. If, for instance, they were taught to place important concepts at the end of a paragraph, rather than at the begin-

ning, as American academic writing does, they must both unlearn previous patterns and become fluent with unfamiliar structures if they wish to survive.

Given these many complexities, what do international students seek from us, their instructors? Research by Barbara Kroll at California State University, Northridge, has identified five characteristics which international students seek in effective instructors:

- Be approachable and encouraging.
- Be sensitive to students' cultural backgrounds and interested in their cultures.
- Fill in "gaps" so that students are prepared to do course work successfully.
- Be clear and explicit on assignments and assessment; offer options if background knowledge might create a problem.
- Recognize students' fear of making mistakes and being embarrassed and create a classroom environment which minimizes such situations.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these same characteristics enhance our teaching effectiveness with native speakers as well!

Most Americans pride themselves on dispelling the myth of The Ugly American. When we value what international students bring to our campus—and what we give them in return—we contribute to the positive perceptions and vivid memories which international students are likely to hold for a lifetime. And we learn many things which enrich our lives as well.

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## More Than a BOT: Thinking on Your Feet and In Your Seat Extending Course Interactions to the Online World

by Daniel Tyger, Web IT Specialist

A contemporary definition of literacy should embrace the powers of digital technologies. Literacy, by nature, is always in a dynamic state, lapsing in idle times and strengthening during periods of growth and practice. Instruction that strives to improve literacy will espouse (and require) methods that generate interest in reading, writing, and communicating, as well as provide the student with many opportunities to practice. Students increasingly mediate a large percentage of their literacy and language learning through electronic media. A computer is a valuable resource and is, in many cases, students' lifeline to learning.

Microfiche, hard-copy journals, newspapers and even bound books are increasingly more difficult to access, as many publishers try to meet the demands of supplying copyrighted material in digital format. Ease of transfer, cost effectiveness, and customer convenience all contribute to the demand for digital access to the written word. Data store companies abound, competing to supply texts, articles, essays, poems, images, movies, recordings, and more. Trips to the library now mean logging in, authenticating, searching and downloading articles that students and instructors seek. Ask a local librarian how much he or she allocates from the annual budget to digital expenditures this year as compared to 10 years ago.

A student might remark that the text you picked for your 201 class this year "didn't even come with a CD." Those who have a computer and software and know how to use them have advantages. Information technologies advance so rapidly that it becomes a constant struggle to remember which version of the software you have been running and whether not is compatible with your colleague's. One question

might occur to educators: How do I get my students to use technology and develop literacy skills without having to spend my waking life learning how to do it myself so I won't feel uncomfortable in front of them trying new things? Or what if you are one of the lucky ones who is approached by your dean or department chair in the hallway with this inquiry: What do you think about taking that course online next year?

Though the task is daunting, it can be done. Although the line is blurred between physical presence and cyber-induced learning, it is a mistake to believe that an online class is automated. Respectable accrediting agencies would never allow courses where a student and instructor "... never even meet." In fact, they meet more often than in traditional paradigms. Good online learning requires small class size, a community of learners, student-student and student-instructor interaction, and a lot of communication, all of which are human, full of gestures, tone, rhetoric, advice, encouragement, and academic rigor.

Extending your course environment into cyberspace will provide students with an elastic, virtual classroom where they can practice communicating, reading, acquiring vocabulary, and critical thinking and writing skills. Students repeatedly can view the online demonstration or lecture you post with streaming audio and / or video. A debate may go on for hours after class. You will be amazed at the quantity of writing and communicating that will occur in an online course. There won't be any more questions about where the student stands when the grades are available to him or her 24 hours a day. Posting assignments and announcements is made possible by simple, web-based fill-in forms. Students can exchange files collaboratively,

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email one another, and chat live to discuss their projects. Receive homework, papers and projects through the digital dropbox. Instructors can access student discussion forums where students interact with one another, exchanging thoughts and commentaries regarding course content and assignments. Uploading documents is a snap. Hyperlink your lecture notes to related, external web resources you have found in your cyber travels to expound on the topics. Online office hours could be in your future. A study group won't require physical presence to be in attendance. Migrating materials to a virtual classroom can be a fairly painless experience. You'll need a little time, motivation and support and the help of some intuitive software.

Education has become a collaborative endeavor. An academically qualified professor works with instructional technologists to combine quality curricula which is electronically deliverable, creating the ideal solution for commuters and professionals who want to improve in their fields of study. Software has become so advanced that one needn't become a programmer to learn

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## Taking Advantage of the Writing Center

by Ellen Herlache, Writing Center Mentor

SVSU has experienced a tremendous amount of growth in recent years. As a result, the SVSU Writing Center has seen an increase in the number of student mentoring sessions, so much so that at peak hours, there are often students waiting for available mentors. There are a number of ways that faculty can play a key role in helping their students to have high-quality sessions in the WC.

The Writing Center is prepared to help students with papers from any area of study. The Center currently employs 23 student mentors with a variety of academic backgrounds, from education to political science to nursing. Additionally, there is a half-time ESL specialist on staff, as well as faculty members who volunteer in the Center.

In order for students to take advantage of the services the Writing Center has to offer, they need to know that it exists. Many students, especially graduate students, are simply never made aware that the Center is available. If professors inform students at the beginning of the semester about the Writing Center, students are much more likely to go there and seek help with papers. Tours and classroom presentations can also be arranged.

Professors can help both student writers and the mentors working with them by taking time to design assignments so that students will be more likely to follow through on the various steps of the writing processes. Faculty should briefly outline the various techniques that will help students with specific assignments, as well as what material from this process students are required to turn in (e.g., students who are required to do prewriting often have a better grasp of the material they are writing about, and thus produce better papers). To ensure that students follow the

*The Writing Center is prepared to help students with papers from any area of study*

steps outlined, and do not put the assignment off until the last possible moment, faculty may require multiple drafts from students. This also helps mentors, because students are more likely to seek help with papers early in the process (rather than wait until the day the assignment is due) when multiple drafts are required along the way.

Most important, however, faculty need to thoroughly explain their assignments. Providing explicit written expectations for documentation, content and style, as well as the grading rubric that will be used, helps students (and the mentors working with them in the Center) to be sure that all requirements are met. If faculty members expect that many students from their class will be coming to the Center for help with an assignment, it is helpful to send an advance copy of the assignment to the Center, so that mentors can familiarize themselves with the assignment ahead of time.

If professors notice a student having problems in any specific area of writing, they can refer the student to the Writing Center, where mentors can provide students with in-depth explanations regarding the problems observed and how to correct them in the future. Mentors are prepared to give advice regarding

almost any topic in writing, from prewriting techniques, to continuity and organization, to thesis statements, to teaching writers how to catch and correct repeated grammatical mistakes (a variety of WC handouts explaining common grammatical errors, including fused sentences, comma splices, sentence fragments, and transitions, are available).

However, professors and students alike need to know that the Writing Center does NOT do proofreading! Rather, the purpose of the Center is to develop better writers (not better papers) by modeling effective strategies for student writers, and helping each student to identify and develop his/her own writing strategies.

A noticeable trend in the Writing Center has been an increase in the number of sessions with students who come in simply because "it is required by the professor." These students often want no more out of a session than to get their requirement out of the way. Because they are not coming of their own volition to get help for a specific, identifiable problem, they are often unclear about what they wish to accomplish in the session (if anything).

Faculty members considering requiring their students to visit the Writing Center need to think about whether this policy will result in better writers and papers; and, if visits will be required, how to ensure that students will be prepared to actively participate in sessions.

Over the summer, the staff at the Writing Center has been working to expand the types of services offered to students. One of the most often-addressed topics in mentoring sessions is MLA and APA citation. In response to this, student mentors have put together multiple handouts regarding these troublesome

**ADVANTAGE** continued on page 6



# Linking Literacy and Community

The English Club Goes Digital *by Elizabeth Rich, Department of English*

According to some, the students who opt to major in English have a choice among "52 strands" of specialization. Perhaps there are fewer choices for them than 52, but the various kinds of programs that the English department offers (and will offer) span a variety of interests, and many of our students embrace more than one of them. The various programs include or may include (when the major is revised) English Education, Applied Writing, Creative Writing, and Literature. In addition to the interests of the students, there are differences in students' lives. Some live on campus while others commute, sometimes rather far to make it to campus. Because of the diversity of our student body, creating a unified vision for the English Club is not easy, and, as the students have decided, may not be completely necessary.

With the addition of an on-line component, the English Club has decided to form a unique governing body that will reflect the needs and interests of its members. The structure of the English Club is evident on its Blackboard site that has enrolled (and embraced) every sort of English major. Although there is a President, treasurer, secretary for general meetings, and Blackboard administrator, there are secretaries and vice presidents for four divisions, each having a forum in which students can participate from home or from school.

Students can exchange and critique creative writing virtually or in real-time workshops and receive feedback from their advisor Ms. Melissa Seitz. Students also can discuss their process of applying to graduate schools or participate in an on-line book club. With the help of Mr. Chris Giroux, Co-op Coordinator, students can learn about part-time and summer jobs that will provide them with

valuable experience in the Applied Writing program or in other English programs. Education students are another important part of the club. While the Education division will offer a forum dedicated to discussing pedagogy and sharing experiences, the forum's moderators plan to take the lead and act as mentors in the Club, who will advise first-year English majors and get them off to a strong start.

After our most recent meeting, I was informed that the English Club will link to the community of Saginaw by publishing the days and times for its Book Club

meetings in Barnes and Noble's newsletter. The meetings will consist of a student-run discussion, held each month. Although the on-line discussion in Blackboard will be for English Club members only, the discussion that will occur at Barnes and Noble will be open to the community.

The group's first theme will be "Books that We Have Always Wanted To Read." The first selection will be *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

For more information, please contact Adrienne Lewis at [glory-light@netzero.net](mailto:glory-light@netzero.net).

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topics. Students needing help with citations can either work on them during a session, or simply stop by the center to pick up these handouts. Handouts covering APA in-text citations, references, title pages, abstracts, table of contents, and headings are currently available; handouts outlining MLA rules for the above topics, and APA and MLA citation of on-line resources, are in the works.

In its continuing efforts to reach as many students as possible, the Writing Center is in the finishing stages of setting up an on-line mentoring service. The service will be run through the Blackboard system, which will allow mentors to provide several unique services. Students will be able to send papers (and information regarding the context of the assignment and specific problems to be addressed) to the Center, and mentors will be able to upload them, give comments, suggestions, and reflective questions, and send them back to students. Additionally, the Center plans to run discussion boards and "virtual sessions" (using the virtual chat function of the Blackboard course site). Students will even be able to

post questions and concerns that do not require a draft to be submitted; mentors will respond promptly to these, and the posts will be archived so students can find answers to previously-asked questions at any time. To use this service, students will need to gain access to the Blackboard system. The Writing Center plans to have this service operational by Winter '01. By making students aware of this system, faculty can increase the odds that students (especially those that commute from long distances) will make use the Writing Center's resources when writing papers.

The Writing Center is committed to working with faculty members to teach students to become the best writers possible. Faculty members who would like feedback regarding assignments, or ways to deal with recurring writing problems in student work, are encouraged to contact Diane Boehm or Erik Trump at the Writing Center. For more information regarding what the Writing Center can do for faculty members, or to schedule a tour or classroom presentation, contact Erik Trump, Writing Center Coordinator, at 249-1662.

have desire." In this case, the reader might assume that the tips will help students get A's very easily. However, the student means to say that the tips will 1) help the classes become more understandable and comfortable for students and 2) make it easier for students to get an A in the class. The coordination of easier and easier is likely to be interpreted by American readers as intensifying the growing easiness of the class. Instead, the Arab writer is trying to show two separate points.

ESL students often have had extensive practice in grammar in their native countries but little experience writing and revising. As a result, they have difficulty focusing on what they want to communicate. They struggle to make clear to the audience the various relationships between individual clauses that make up the supporting information in the text and their connection to the core generalization of the writing.

Even once these relationships have been determined, ESL students are then faced with the question of how to weave the thread of their statements, arguments, or ideas in and out of the various levels of the framework to achieve an integrated piece of writing.

Once ESL students shift from structurally simple sentences to the production of more complex ones, they become increasingly dependent on semantic relationships which are often subtle, implicit and culturally bound.

For instance, Japanese students tend to use especially, now, and by the way as transition words because they have been taught that these words are general markers for a shift in topic. Thus, it's common for over-generalization to occur and for these words to be placed inappropriately in a text. In a sentence such as "By the way, the sun is usually situated between the earth and the moon during an eclipse," by the way is distracting since the reader is looking for a focus, but the expression implies something incidental.

This kind of over-generalization can apply to other vocabulary items as well. Shades of meaning may be sacrificed for a general idea. Take thinness, for example. ESL students might use a word such as skinny when slender would be a more appropriate choice if the aim is to show desirability. In the same way, students might not be aware that dollar and buck differ in formality, so they would use these words interchangeably.

For an ESL student, where does large stop and huge begin? How can an ESL student be expected to know? Dictionary definitions and synonyms often do not provide adequate connotative and cultural information. Connotations are important in written communication because they can reflect subtle value judgments and emotions of a culture. Native speakers understand these values and nuances from life experience in the home culture, an advantage that ESL students do not have.

Word forms in English are particularly challenging for ESL students. English contains many derivational suffixes which can significantly shift the meaning of a word. These endings can seem endless and arbitrary to second language learners. For example, is something childlike or childish; electrical or electric; economical or economic; affectless, affectionate, affectional, affecting, or affective? The dictionary can provide some guidance, but students often complain of circular or sparse definitions that aren't very helpful when they have to use a variant form. Also, participial adjectives such as confusing or confused, boring or bored, are often misused and misunderstood. It's not unusual for an ESL student to write, "I was so exciting about the party last night." because of different perceptions of active or passive roles within a sentence, the student doesn't realize that he or she is causing excitement instead of feeling it.

Increased ethnic and linguistic diversity is becoming the norm in

classrooms across the country. Clearly in step with changing demographics, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) has recently issued new guidelines for writing programs which include a statement that any course requiring writing "that enrolls any second-language writer should be taught by a writing teacher who is aware of and is prepared to address the cultural needs of second-language writers." Those who have studied in a foreign country and tried to write in a second language can appreciate the practicality of the new guideline.

Becoming more aware of what ESL students want to communicate in writing requires increased sensitivity and openness to variation in language. A mistake in an ESL student's composition may very well be a message, one that signals information about a different language background and cultural perception. Increased awareness and understanding are vital if students and teachers are to reach communicative objectives in global educational settings. If instructors can promote increased language consciousness and metalinguistic awareness in the classroom, the needs of a highly diverse student population can be met more effectively.

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as simple as choosing SAVE AS instead of SAVE. Most programs have export features that make material viewable from the web, including Power Point, Word, WordPerfect, Pagemaker, and many more. Even recording a multimedia lecture presented side by side with elaboration slides is recorded and web-ready within minutes.

SVSU has recently purchased the license for Blackboard, an online educational software package designed for instructors. There are already 175 courses and 100% of the student body enrolled in the system. More than 75 faculty members are currently experimenting with this new technology. Other student and faculty groups are interested in using Blackboard for meetings, idea exchanges, surveys and more. The response among students and faculty is overwhelmingly positive. Several pilot hybrid courses are currently meeting online and for as much as two-thirds of class time. Two-hour training sessions are available upon request for faculty who are considering migrating some of their course materials to the online environment. If you are interested in learning more about this exciting development, please contact Daniel Tyger at 497-4976 (dtyger@svsu.edu) for more information.

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