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This document contains Volume 2 of 2 of the papers of the RWL12 – Toronto International Conference held July 13 to 15 (2022). At the end of this collection a listing of all conference registrants is provided.

Papers and panel submissions are aligned with the theme of this year's conference: Work, Learning & Social Change. Conference presenters span six continents and consist of researchers exploring contributions to theory, policy and practice relating to work and learning. The multi-disciplinary character of this research (including but not limited to the following: Adult Education, Labour Education, Higher Education, Vocational Education, Human Resource Management, Business Studies, as well as the full range of human sciences scholarship where matters of both work and learning are concerned) is evident in the papers in this volume.

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Paper 45: Exploring student perceptions of existing learning communities of practice within a Degree Apprenticeship to enable the greater adoption of inclusivity principles for work-integrated studies

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Abstract

Degree apprenticeships (DAs) have been introduced in the United Kingdom as a form of employer funded work-integrated learning within specific occupational job roles. This paper focuses on how the applied concepts of learning communities of practice can be developed to support the DA student experience and enhance existing tuition surrounding inclusivity. A small case study of a Business to Business Sales DA reviewed existing programme materials and carried out a mixed methods survey exploring apprentice perceptions of their studies and lived experience regarding inclusive practice. Findings showed that apprentices had an awareness and appreciation of how learning communities operated and raised some valuable insights about the benefits and limitations of learning within a university setting. DA communities of practice have differing dynamics as they include a range of workplace professionals. Apprentices prefer tuition that allows them to participate in social learning with peers, in-person and online, and that accommodate their sales role with shared interests as employee learners. As a result of the research, there is a greater sense of the part that learning communities play in framing inclusive practice within DA provision that could be further aligned to institutional and programme aims.

Introduction

The presence of learning communities are an established feature of higher education provision and are recognised as being a key institutional performance indicator for student experience. This paper focuses on how learning communities of practice operate within higher education degree apprenticeships (DAs) gathering data from a small case study within a university business school setting. The concept of engaging with the social learning within a learning community has been an important planning element for the work-integrated learning (WIL) and relates to the basic pedagogic principles of practice-based provision designed to facilitate and assess learning that occurs within the workplace.

In the DA students are viewed as employees in the workplace, making the concept and application of *community* for these apprentices more complex. As well as the DA tripartite (Gray, 2001) including the apprentice, the learning provider and the employer, additional stakeholders involve human resources, learning development, apprenticeship coordinators, business customers and professional membership and contacts. Learning interaction tends to be a more continued professional development style that emphasises cultivating social learning elements for professional practice.

As a part of understanding how learning communities are perceived and demonstrated through lived experience, a small case study focusing on a Business to Business Sales DA sought to understand student perspectives on how study groups and cohorts operate in apprenticeship contexts where employers and other stakeholders contribute to work-associated networks. The project set out to explore the context of the DA and how individual apprentices perceived their own learning communities, and the ways in which this might enhance the development of inclusive practice in a changing workplace context which could still present barriers involving diversity and inequality (CIPD, 2018). It is particularly important to study the communities within DAs due to the growth of DAs as an influential form of WIL studentship within the United Kingdom (UK) and to re-evaluate practice after the added isolation experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A stimulus for the project came from two key questions about learning communities that were a part of the National Student Survey (NSS) given to final year undergraduates. The questions, listed as *Learning community*, ask students if they feel like they are a part of a community of staff and students and if they have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course (OfS, 2022). As the DA experience has differences from mainstream higher education, the challenge is finding ways to evaluate communities and networks within DAs in order to plan a more inclusive study experience.

The research is a part of an internally funded Enhancing Education project supported by the institution's central academic practice team and one of the University's research centres. The intention of this case study was to gather evidence that could frame existing practice and provide recommendations for more inclusive practice tuition. The research gathered data about the lived experience of a small sample of apprentices and examined community building online (Ardichvili, 2008; Abedini et al., 2021) and as a part of a formal learning environment that could be associated with other work-integrated studies (e.g. Blanchard et al., 2018). The findings and analysis provide new data about the apprentice experience and recommends pragmatic steps that could enhance the development of more inclusive practice within the DA context.

Practical Elements of Degree Apprenticeships

The standards-based DAs are a fairly recent phenomenon that are paid for through an Employer levy (Powel, 2020) where occupational competence is assessed within a specific employment context (IfATE, 2022). DAs are formally set for 20% off the job learning hours where the workplace "becomes a site for the development and generation of knowledge, understanding, skills and professional behaviours rather than just a site for their application" (QAA, 2019, p. 4). The pedagogic principles for DAs include teaching disciplinary content that enables apprentices "to develop professional/occupational competence within a defined occupation and apprenticeship pathway" (QAA, 2019, p.4). An integrated apprenticeship has the same academic programme outcomes as the apprenticeship standards. Each apprenticeship has areas of practice that define what is being taught, with a pedagogic legacy from employer-centred work-based learning (Nottingham, 2016) and using practice-based threshold concepts like environment, material mediation, relationality, situatedness, emergence, co-construction (Boud, 2012). Policy for DAs is found in the Quality Assurance Agency descriptors (QAA, 2014) that cover a broad range of work-based studies (QAA 2018; QAA 2020).

Learning Communities of Practice

Learning communities have been an important element for planning the WIL curriculum. Lenning et al. have said that the concept within education developed naturally over a period of time as "an intentionally developed community that exists to promote and maximise the individual and shared learning of its members. There is ongoing interaction, interplay, and collaboration among the community's members as they strive for specified common learning goals" (2013, p. 7). Jessup-Anger (2015) refer to Meiklejohn and Dewey as providing the structural foundation of contemporary learning communities and they credit Dewey with envisioning the pedagogical foundations to be student-centred and promote active learning. There is also long history of organisational and practice-based theory that further speaks to the evolving notion of communities of practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger, 1998). Fuller and Unwin (2005) critiqued the concept of peripheral participation and engagement and pointed out that newcomers are not "tabula rasa" (p. 66) but bring to CoPs existing identities that can add to the community as well as being changed by it, a notion that resonates for DAs. Wenger (1998) determined three main CoP operational features as mutual engagement (interaction and shared meaning), joint enterprise (working toward a common goal), and a shared repertoire (common reference points) which later added engagement, imagination and alignment as ways position the self in a landscape of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Recent CoP thinking supports smaller value-driven directed engagements (like projects) within social learning settings (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

While CoPs present some contested areas of practice, (e.g. Handley et al., 2006) the application of CoPs provides a good way to investigate the pedagogic boundaries inherent in WIL. Conceptualising boundaries can be a source of learning with new insights and radical innovations that consider issues of power aligned to mutual negotiation. Wenger-Trayner clarified the conceptual scope of CoPs as local and "occupying a mid-level between moments of individual experience and broad social structure… where the individual and the social are in interplay and learning is theorised to happen as they constitute each other" (in Farnsworth et al., 2016, p. 11). CoPs can inform the production of identity within a social learning group, "Learning is not just acquiring skills and information; it is becoming a certain person – a knower in a context" (Farnsworth et al., 2016, p. 181).

Pedagogy and practice context using concepts of inclusivity

The project focused on University priorities to embed inclusive practice to all institutional curricula, considering notions of race, gender, demographics, social mobility, and thinking around legal and social aspects. Hockings referred to inclusive education as: "the ways in which pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all" (2010, p.1). An inclusive curriculum features the principles involving equality diversity and inclusion (EDI) in judging how 'placement' provision is understood in terms of themes such as social justice (Thompson and Brewster, 2022). Hanesworth suggests creating an educational environment with belonging and engagement, establishing a collaborative space where power differentials are managed by insuring that "teaching methods and assessments do not place students at a disadvantage" (2015, p. 9). Considering demographic socio-cultural identity within DA cohorts could be used to develop more adapted content and learning tools. McCrindle (2014)

refers to Generation X (1965-1979), Generation Y (1980-1994), and Generation Z (1995-2009).

As employees DA apprentices are inducted into the workplace and must follow organisational employment rules as well as any ethical requirements from professional bodies. "Social mobility, widening participation and increasing diversity were all widely supported aims, and several institutions and employers emphasised the importance of DAs in creating alternative routes to higher education and professional careers" (Lester, 2020, p. 708). While social mobility and widening participation are central factors for DAs (Crawford-Lee, 2019), the implications are that there are gaps in how DAs are delivered even though "learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds benefit more from apprenticeships than those from non-disadvantaged backgrounds" (Battiston et al., 2020, p. 7). Concepts such as intersectionality (Rodriguez et al., 2016) present a greater amount of complexity for educators working with DAs. Approaches to exploring intersectionality include a focus on highlighting the texture and consequences of inequalities experienced by individuals and groups, such as this case study (Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Research Methodology

Case study research was conducted within a large city-based university using business to business sales DA as an intrinsic case study, to investigate a particular case, and an instrumental study, where the research will be used to provide insight for other cases (Stake, 2010). The main research questions were: How do learning communities operate within the DA? and What inclusivity principles and practice play a part in the University apprenticeship provision? The research used mixed methods (Creswell and Creswell, 2018) which aligned to gathering data within 'communities of practice' where descriptive data can be used to understand the phenomena being studied (Denscombe, 2008). The researchers included past and present programme leaders who were familiar with the provision and based in Education and the Business School to create a cross-faculty approach. Ethics approval and permissions was obtained from University gatekeepers. All of the participants were over the age of eighteen, and able to give full informed consent. Two additional stakeholders included an external partner, in this case providing specialist sales education, and the apprenticeship employers. Data gathered from the apprentices alluded to stakeholders, but names (including organisational names) have been anonymised.

A review of evidence included course materials (documenting academic design and delivery) and descriptive data-sets about the programme (size, setting, processes involved as a part of a learning community). Primary research with apprentices in the form of an anonymised questionnaire was undertaken to explore the existing presence of learning communities and to analyse apprentice perceptions and experience; and to develop a practical approach for applying apprenticeship and institutional inclusivity principles within the apprenticeship programming. The questionnaire (20 questions) was sent to apprentices/alumni (N = 161) during a four week period by administrative staff in the Business School; an extension to the invitation was sent out by the programme leader. Returned questionnaires were only directly accessible to the researchers. Qualitative data were analysed using an interpretivist approach (Ritchie et al., 2013,Mason 2018) where the anonymised perceptions and lived experience of the participants was coded and thematically analysed. The project included the participation

of a research assistant who commented on the anonymised data in relation to other materials gathered.

Findings

Review of programme materials

A literature review was undertaken using keywords within the University's Library Search system that related directly to the project aims involving learning communities, CoPs, DAs, and inclusivity. Policy documents and relevant University research project reports and strategic plans focussed on inclusivity and social mobility. A limited case review of learning materials such as module handbooks and datasets related to the DA provision was undertaken in order to evaluate the existing curriculum. One module called *Learning and Studying at Work* asked apprentices to map their own CoPs using Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) CoP theories. Another module centred on the *learning journal* and introduced reflective theory and British values as required curriculum for the DA. These study sources are cross-referenced with the knowledge, skills and behaviours from the programme outcomes and DA sales standards. Apprentice reflection throughout the DA provides evidence of theory application and change as well as self-evaluations based on performance, and provide points of reference for the employer, apprentice and University during formal tripartite meetings.

Within the sales specific modules for the DA, sales specialist partners introduce sales models and theory, reinforced in practical workshops, that can be applied to the sales job role. Business and sales literature provide a groundwork for practice, and the apprentice takes on a work-integrated/work-based approach to understanding situated knowledge that tested and measured through community and networking engagement. Using academic argumentation within reflective writing and reports develops communication skills and heightens the ability to analyse data effectively. Interpersonal sales communication competence in business to business sales are highly rated as needed in the contemporary international sales context (Koponen et al., 2019). University work-based project modules focus on enabling apprentices to reflect on and display their sales skills and behaviours as well as more transdisciplinary graduate attributes.

The case study included a review of the bi-annual Programme Voice Group meeting minutes. In one meeting, a cohort Programme Voice Leader pointed out that apprentices would like more direct information about university events going on at the campus so that they can feel more included in university life. The central team has recently started a yearly Apprenticeship Learner Satisfaction Survey for all DAs within the University that was reviewed. A joint review of programme leaders' meeting notes with teaching staff and employers included consultations with mentors, managers and apprenticeship coordinators and notes from tripartite reviews.

Data from the apprentice survey

Completed questionnaires were returned from sixteen participants (n =16), which was approximately 10% of the total. A range of cohorts was evident with 4 from Cohort 1-2, 2 from Cohorts 3-4, 4 from Cohorts 5-7, and 5 from Cohorts 8-10. One participant preferred not to say. Cohorts in this programme were generally around 20 apprentices, but this could vary dependent on the cohort. Overall demographic information showed that the sample had

7 male and 7 female with 1 person preferring not to say and one not reporting. While each cohort differs, recruitment for the DA, initiated by the University partner and employer actively recruit females to the sales programme. There were three generational ranges self-reported within the sample with 1 Generation X (DA4), 3 Generation Y (DA5, DA8, DA10), 11 Generation Z (DA1, Da2, DA3, DA7, DA9, DA11-16), and one participant who preferred not to say. The majority of participants were younger professionals in Generation Z.

As an initial question, participants were asked to use their own experience to define learning communities of practice. Responses showed a good understanding of the concepts for social learning defined by common interests, sharing and interacting. A shared learning community experience **(**Lenning et al., 2016) within the university teaching context was seen as key:

> A group of people that come together to talk about a common interest and learn from each other's experiences (DA4).

CoPs were often seen as social learning spaces for practitioners. In this framing of the CoP, value driven interaction became a participant focus for those "caring to make a difference, engaging uncertainty, [and] paying attention" (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 17). Other responses included study as a way to better work practice within a particular role (DA8, DA13) which is appropriate to purpose of the DA, applying learning in a practical manner (DA8) and studying within a 'network of people you can learn from' (DA9). Some participants favoured a synchronous experience with peers, be that in person or online (DA5).

For a number of DA participants, the definition of a learning community included a wider community of practice.

> I feel that this is primarily my cohort and tutors that I interact with through the course workshops and learning and extends to other students in other cohorts that I have met at wider events and other academics and professionals that I have learnt from in talks/workshops. I would also include my work colleagues in this definition, especially those that I have worked with closely for assistance with assignments and learning (DA16).

Further participants' insights noted social learning with other DAs brought out sense-making in academic contexts and at work using *local* significance (Wenger-Trayner in Farnsworth et al., 2016). DA5 expressed the view that "I have worked with students from other businesses on projects and it has helped with ideas in my own place of work".

In another question, participants were asked if they felt that they were a part of a larger community of practice using their own definition and what that meant to them. On this question a Net Promoter Score (-12.5) was applied. While some answers strongly agreed as 4 *promoters* (9-10) there were a number of 7 *passive* (7-8) and 6 *detractors* (1-6) scores, so as the sense of being a part of a larger community group was not strongly indicated. However in analysing the data, it is recognised that when answering these questions apprentices may have considered the numerical designation of a 7 being seen as an affirmation of support rather than a passive response. With that in mind, more apprentices could be said to affirm some sense of belonging (Hanesworth, 2015) to a larger community.

To enable a comparison about where DA participants fit in with the mainstream NSS question (21): Do you feel like a part of a community of staff and students? (Ipsos Mori and

OfS, 2022) participants were asked if they felt like a part of the community. The main mean score was 58.13 which can be compared to a departmental mean score of 52 (NSS question 21); so a little bit higher but similar, and with the University the mean score of 58. The second NSS question (22) asked if people have the right opportunities to work with others on the course (Ipsos Mori and OfS, 2022). DA participants in this study responded with a mean of 64.69 compared to the department mean of 75, compared to the whole University mean of 76. This would give some indication that having the right opportunities to work within communities may not be as apparent to the DA participants or this question may be too complex to respond to in this format.

There was evidence of engagement and sharing knowledge where the mode of learning was an important factor. Zoom breakout rooms for sharing in smaller groups and group learning activities in module workshops was said to be useful. Participants preferred regularity and interaction that had a connection to the outcomes and assessments. D11 said "My experience has been good I have mainly worked with my peers during the learning workshops at the university". However responses also indicated some limitations to engagement and dissatisfaction at the lack of broader mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998) outside of the formal teaching sessions (DA4).

Participants appreciated shared interests that related to the practical nature of their studies in sales. The benefits of speaking with people in differing sectors in smaller groups contributed to conceptualising sales work. Some DAs felt that in person workshops were more effective than online sessions as they provided a more active learning style (D12) that brought out shared interests within similar sales roles (DA14). There had been various amounts of exposure to sales, with some participants new to sales and experiencing peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Some participants did not have a sales background (DA8, DA3) and said they benefitted from working with others with a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) (D12, D14). D16 found the experience of starting the course at the same time as starting their first role in sales "a little daunting" but "learnt to feel more comfortable with this and embrace my fresh perspective and learn from the experiences of others".

Explaining about the employer support, participants said they received help from both colleagues and managers (DA9). DA12 mentioned that the 3-way university/employer/apprentices tripartite reviews "ensure my manager is in-the-loop". Managers roles were seen as key to DA employee learning by offering continuous development reviews to monitor progress and provide feedback (DA8, DA3, DA13, DA2). This mentor formative feedback is one of the hallmarks of the DA working more as a CoP.

> My manager gives me space and time to complete modules and is there for any questions or advice I may need. My work colleagues show interest in some of my work, especially if I am learning framework tools that will help them with their roles. Generally, they are all very supportive (DA4).

The tuition studied in Year 1 introduced popular business mapping models (DA12) to compliment sales theories and introduce social learning skills. The *Learning and Studying at Work* (DA4) and *Learning Journal* module did add some elements of learning theory with "The idea that you can learn from other people's experiences" (DA11) using the "process of reflection" (DA8). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner refer to the "value creation in social learning spaces" (2020, p. 6) which refers back to mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998).

LinkedIn has influenced the reach of the DA CoPs and was the most popular way of communicating within a professional sales network. Reference to the use of emails and video/Teams/ WhatsApp speaks to the new reality of working with mobile technologies.

While there is a requirement to cover British Values and inclusive practice within the DA, the extent to which overt inclusive tuition made a difference to the apprenticeship experience was not clearly known. Therefore, apprentices were asked how the programme could be made more inclusive. Participants wanted to move beyond the Covid mode of Zoom delivery (DA7) with more face to face sessions on a regular basis to debate inclusive issues "There shouldn't be a quiet student in the room, and if we are uncomfortable, we are learning. Students want to be challenged, as do professionals in their working life" (DA1). D3 suggested more "Organised events for these communities for everyone to get to know each other outside of work, more regularly, with everyone invited".

The apprentice perceptions of inclusion had various patterns, some apprentices already felt that inclusivity was a part of the community (DA11, DA14) and linked with the wider professional issues encountered as an employee in sales (DA13). The focus on the use of inclusivity within sales as an area of study, suggests a reflexive approach to applying intersectionality (Rodriguez et al., 2016). DA16 felt that the "Sales learning community is the untangling of the traditional, established, status quo of the industry and what that brings with it".

The concepts of 'British values' as a requirement for the DA were seen as embedded within the existing practice, many of the participants felt that the programme and their practice contained this already (DA14, D4, D13) although not always explicitly referenced, apprentices could align these with the organisational values (DA16).

> Democracy, Rule of law, Individual liberty, Mutual respect and Tolerance is generally a common theme through learning and can be applied through modules but aren't typically expressed explicitly (DA12).

However, several of the participants did not like the term 'British Values'(DA3). Others felt it was a policy-driven solution. DA8 said "I don't agree with the idea of British values - this was borne of the Prevent programme" suggesting that it was politically motivated and thus linked to issues of power within the English social-cultural context.

The Covid-19 pandemic actively engaged *meaningful* participation (Handley et al. 2006) as tuition went online. One question asked specifically about further university preparation for events like Covid-19. Apprentices appreciated that staff had acted to "mitigate the impact of Covid-19" (DA16). The larger context of the Covid was seen as a joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998).

> I think [the university] and [partner provider] did very well to keep us engaged and continue our development. Hopefully we don't have to experience another pandemic, however if we did, students would still struggle especially in year 1 with the working from home and lack of face to face engagement. This did not help us, however everyone was in the same boat. The obvious of making the most of Teams/Zoom and remote working/learning is the best we can do (DA1).

While a number of DAs saw the benefits of more interaction with university, others pointed out the limitations: "As our degree course is niche and delivered much differently than an average degree- i think there would be a disconnect" (DA12). All in all identifying with the University could be problematic for apprentices, DA13 remarked that they "Didn't really feel like I went to uni".

As a part of the Enhancing Education project, survey questions asked about the possibility of more interaction with other University students in other programmes as this data was also being used to inform future DA curriculum planning. Responses were mixed but the majority of DAs indicated that more interaction was of interest: Definitely yes (6), Probably yes (7), Might or might not (2), and Probably not (2). Links that were of interest included a response asking more interaction with Marketing Level 6 students (DA5). Going forward, the survey asked what community related engagement would be useful to cultivate, seen here in order of choice with total responses: University / Partner events (10), Programme website page (8), Career Development (7, University social gathering (7) Speakers various topics (4) Freshers Week (3), Centre for Apprenticeship and Skills (3), Student Union (3), Business School Events (3), Uni conferences (2) Research Seminars (1).

Discussion

This case study represents the practical implications, benefits, and challenges of evaluating how learning communities have been operating as a part of the DA curriculum. In the current university context, the addition of inclusivity principles (Battiston et al., 2020) within the tuition of apprenticeships is required, so findings focussed on identifying how and why certain approaches might work within a specific institutional setting. There is a recognition DAs provide access to learners "enabling learning pathways to be tailored to individual contexts, providing effective learner support that bridges between the institution and the workplace, and providing co-ordinated assessment and quality assurance" (Lester, 2020, p. 711). Learning communities provide a way to think about challenges and cohesion with DA programming, considering compliance data for accountability (DoE, 2021) as well as the effects of Covid-19 pandemic individual, group and cohort dynamics. O'Shea, Koshy and Drane (2021) pointed out that equity implications have risen as a result of Covid adding to issues like the risks of campus study, the digital divide, student mental health, study/life balance and the future of work. There is now a pressing need for ensuring the further integration of social mobility principles within this mode of study (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2022) that build on systematic collaboration and collective responses (Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020) such as those addressed in this research as communities of practice. The findings from this case study have shown that there may be a lack of in-depth knowledge about the apprentice experience to support these goals.

This study began with some comparative notions from the NSS learning community questions and the need to understand the particular issues that DA learning communities face at university. Many of the sales apprentices demonstrated a high level of agency and perceived their own learning communities to include a broader range of workplace managers and colleagues. The dynamic is different than a learning community that is just composed of staff and students. In discussing an intervention with business management students about belonging and engagement, Masika and Jones noted that it was important for institutions to consider "how curricula and teaching might be developed and reorganised to provide for

sustained engagement between teachers and students and facilitation of peer-to-peer interactions to enhance student CoP" (2016, p. 147). The professional expectations of delivering DAs within the university context involves due consideration, with staff 'juggling hats' (Martin et al , 2020) to lead and manage improvements to the apprentice experience.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This results from the study have provided a critical and detailed view of some of the issues surrounding DA learning communities and has provided some specific ways to critique the impact of inclusive practice using apprentice experiences of tuition and programming. The research focussed mainly on the apprentice experience within the university setting, but future research exploring the complexities of working with DA community partners and employers could add to this story. In this case, the recent addition of an Employers Forum, championed by the specialist sales partner, could provide a useful context for further research with employer stakeholders. As the findings examined represent an exploratory sample, larger in-depth practitioner research that includes direct reference to social mobility would be useful as a way to further understand the connections and layers (Mason, 2018) of DA learning communities. Finally, using the data gathered, there is now an opportunity to develop post-Covid teaching practice that addresses institutional and programme aims while using the structuring of the learning community to allow for greater DA engagement with mainstream services.

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