

# Getting Ready for Community Practice: An Evidence-Based Preparation Course for Kenyan Practicum Students

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*Practicums provide opportunities for students to connect theory with practice through experiential learning and hands-on work experience. While recommended for students in Kenya, there is little research on the practicum experience. This article describes evidence used to prepare students for practicum experiences. Interviews and focus groups (FGs) were conducted with three stakeholder groups in two phases. Findings informed the development of a practicum preparation course that covers topics including (i) becoming a reflective professional and/or practitioner; (ii) articulating practicum learning goals; (iii) mental preparation for demanding field-based situations; and (iv) developing confidence in interpersonal communication. Phase two evaluated the initial impact of the course through FGs and follow-up interviews.*

**Keywords:** *higher education; field placements; practicum; community-based learning; professional practice; Kenya*

Experiential learning opportunities for undergraduate students are an integral component of higher education (HE). This powerful form of learning helps students learn in domains that take them beyond the academic content of courses. However, student learning is maximized through guidance and structure. Student preparation for community-based practicums should reflect the realities of the community contexts utilizing evidence-based strategies. Programs which prepare students to work in human services for children, youth, families, and communities also require an understanding of stakeholder needs and values, balancing those with the best practices available. The current body of community-based learning (CBL) literature in Home Economics reveals

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some gaps, particularly in developing countries. For this paper, we use Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition for service-learning as a basis for our definition of CBL, substituting community for service in keeping with Jacoby (2015). CBL is a . . .

... course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112)

This study was part of a larger research and international development project aimed at evidence-based curriculum development in conjunction with the enhancement of research capacity between two university programs in Canada and Kenya.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is evidence that CBL helps produce a skilled workforce while providing opportunities for students to apply theory to practice (Ballard & Carroll, 2005; Bilsland, Naggy, & Smith, 2014; Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Forenza, 2014; Thomson, Smith-Tolken, Naidoo, & Bringle, 2011; Webber, 2000; Weeks & VanLeeuwen, 2006). However, there is limited research focusing on how African students are prepared for CBL and what preparation should entail. Literature does not provide a holistic view of CBL in Africa. Pedagogical approaches and curriculum development need to reflect the needs of African students, the resources available to their university faculty and departments, as well as the needs and desires of families, local communities, and human service organizations. While there is a cluster of CBL research focused on South Africa (Dorasamy & Pillay, 2010; Naidoo & Devnarain, 2009; Roos et al., 2005; Thomson et al., 2011), there are few relevant studies conducted in Kenya (Kathuri-Ogola et al., 2015; Opiyo-Newa, 2012; Tumuti, Mule, Gecaga, & Manguriu, 2013).

The Kenyan government places high priority on education that leads to employment (King, 2007). Higher education in Kenya is undergoing rapid and dynamic change to align with national priorities in the development blueprint *Kenya Vision 2030* (Republic of Kenya, 2007). Education and training are expected to be the principal catalyst toward realization of Vision 2030 as the government focuses on matching education and training with the demand for the skills required in the workplace (Republic of Kenya, 2013). Practicums are one way that HE can respond to and meet emerging job market needs and enhance employability of graduates. Practicums also encourage development of social responsibility while generating sensitivity to relationships and connections to the community (Garcia-Reid et al., 2014). Bridging the gap between academic programs and job market needs can be supported through well-designed practicum programs (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Gower & Mulvaney, 2012; Kopera-Frye, Hilton, Wilson, & Rice, 2006).

In this article, the development, implementation, and evaluation of an academic course for third-year students in a human service program that

prepares graduates to work with families and communities in nongovernmental and community-based organizations throughout Kenya are described. Researchers collected evidence to support the creation of a practicum preparation course. The article presents (i) the rationale for this curriculum development project, (ii) processes used to gather data and key findings and recommendations from various stakeholders that informed decisions about course topics, and (iii) an outline of the steps involved in the development and implementation of the course.

### RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPING A PRACTICUM COURSE

The Department of Community Resource Management at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, focuses on preparing graduates to deliver social services and community education to individuals, families, and communities. This department is similar to North American undergraduate programs in Family and Consumer Science. Emphasis is on improving the welfare of people through community-based outreach programs. In order to prepare students effectively, Community Resource Management students complete a mandatory 12-week block practicum at the end of their third year.

The practicum is a structured work experience in a professional setting during which the student both applies and acquires knowledge and skills. It is intended to build upon students' coursework by linking theory with practical application. Each student is supervised by a field supervisor (FS), who is employed by the host organization. Prior to this curriculum development project, preparation for practicum was confined to a single session to review the practicum handbook and distribute letters of introduction for potential FSs. Student evaluation was based on evaluations by both field and university supervisors, students' log books and written practicum reports submitted by students to the department at the conclusion of the practicum. There was a strong belief that the perspective of FSs and students should be reflected in the development of the course, and consideration of needs specific to the Kenyan context needed to be included. This second point was important to assure and ensure that the research study was not viewed as recolonization since two members of the research team were Canadian and not from Kenya. The team recognized that generalizations and extrapolation of needs and practices drawn from primarily North American literature would not be sufficient.

### METHODOLOGY

The research team was composed of faculty from similar human service programs at universities in Kenya and Canada. The four Kenyan researchers had prior interactions with all study participants while the two Canadian researchers had no direct prior connections with study participants. See Table 1 for a summary of the evidence collected in phase one including a literature review, interviews with practicum coordinators and FSs, and focus group discussions with students.

In phase two, a preliminary evaluation of the course was conducted. This is shown in the second table. The Research Ethics Boards at Kenyatta University

**TABLE 1: Data Collected Prior to Course Implementation to Inform Course Development: Phase 1, 2013**

| <i>Data Source</i>                                | <i>Summary of Data Collected</i>  |
|---|---|
| Literature review                                 | Review of research on best practices for practicums for students in human service programs<br>Reports of prior curriculum review work undertaken by the Community Resource Management Department<br>Resources about preparing students to participate in a practicum and tools for field supervisors to orient students and provide constructive performance feedback to students   |
| Interviews with practicum coordinators (PC)       | 45- to 60-min interviews with two females conducted by a team member not involved with practicum supervision of students<br>Interview questions included perceptions and observations of student readiness for practicum, challenges, areas where things were going well, and characteristics of ideal practicum organizations  |
| Interviews with field supervisors (FS)            | 30- to 60-min interviews with 5 females and 10 males who worked with 14 different nongovernmental organizations and 1 government agency<br>Supervisors were purposively sampled from organizations that hosted practicum students from May 2013 to August 2013<br>Selection was based on (i) organization had hosted students more than once; (ii) individually provided daily supervision to students<br>Interview questions included perceptions and observations of student readiness for practicum, challenges encountered by students and themselves in supervising a student practicum, characteristics of ideal practicum student, areas where students were adequately or inadequately prepared, and suggestions for addressing identified inadequacies |
| Focus groups with practicum students (FG 1 and 2) | 2 groups with 12 females and 4 males, ages 20–25<br>Random sample of students who had completed the practicum<br>Questions included preparation for practicum, the process of being matched with an organization, prior expectations about the practicum, learning experiences during the practicum, and recommendations for improving the practicum experience   |

and University of Prince Edward Island granted approval to conduct the research. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in data collection. The need to protect students' confidentiality was of concern; thus, FGs were utilized rather than individual interviews to ensure that students could not be singled out or disadvantaged by their participation. This was an important consideration since data collection was conducted prior to degree completion.

All interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used which allowed themes to emerge directly using inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It is particularly useful in understanding influences and motivations related to how people respond to events (Luborsky, 1994). Thematic analysis lends itself well to exploring the perspectives of various stakeholders in course development. The data coding process involved generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes. The process resulted in thematic codes which represented patterned responses within the data set and which provided a narrative description of the content of each subtheme illustrated by representative quotes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four of the six researchers (three Kenyan and one Canadian) coded data using NVivo10 software using

appropriate procedures to ensure consensus (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This included developing and defining themes that emerged from the data, followed by the four researchers independently coding the data and later working together to come to consensus on the codes assigned to the data.

## RESULTS

Across the data sources included in Table 1, the following themes emerged to inform the development of this course: supporting development of reflective practice, articulating practicum expectations, mental preparation for demanding situations, and confidence in interpersonal communication. Data sources are referred to first by the type of participant (i.e., PC = practicum coordinator, FS = field supervisor, FG = focus groups with students) followed by data collection year (if applicable), the participant identification number, and the gender of the participant.

### Supporting Development of Reflective Practice

Faculty in the department had previously acknowledged concerns around documentation of student learning during practicums. Current practice was for students to record activities and hours via a log book. However, there was interest in exploring options which would enable students to generate, deepen, and document their learning in meaningful ways. The review of research highlighted the importance of student reflection in order to maximize learning during practicums (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 2000; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004; Swaner, 2012). Several researchers have been exploring the dynamics between reflection and action in order to understand what kinds of factors intervene (positively and negatively) in student learning (Malkki & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012; Moon, 2004). Based on initial reading of literature exploring the use of learning journals, it became apparent that reflective journaling was an attractive and cost-effective pedagogical practice that warranted further exploration. Kenyan faculty members identified their need for supplementary knowledge around reflective learning theory, along with training to explore suitable approaches for formative and summative assessment of students.

### Articulating Practicum Learning Goals and Objectives

The literature review and FS interviews indicated that more information and guidance should be provided to partner organizations and students to ensure that practicums are meaningful learning experiences. One way to address this is to ensure that students have clearly defined learning goals and objectives early in the practicum experience. Suggestions included (i) ensuring students have a clear understanding and can clearly articulate goals, expectations, and objectives of practicum; (ii) students and FSs discuss practicum goals and objectives so that both have a clear sense of the broader academic, social, personal, civic, and professional learning that can be gained by students; and (iii) providing students with appropriate knowledge, skills, and tools to help them in this process.

Providing students with tools and skills to explain what they need and want to learn during their practicum was a frequent comment from FSs. Field supervisors are willing to facilitate learning opportunities within their organizations if they know what students need. Having students embark on practicums ready to share their ideas or propose activities that are congruent with the organization's mandate can ensure that the work is meaningful for both student and organization. This may require the student to gather knowledge about the organization and communication about their potential role in the organization during practicum: "When they are coming for attachment also to have clear, written out notes, their expectations" (FS 2013—05, male).

### **Mental Preparation for Demanding Situations**

Having a pragmatic understanding of the realities of community work with vulnerable families and communities was another theme. Many of these host organizations provide services for exceptionally vulnerable and impoverished children, families, or community groups in difficult to access rural or urban slum communities.

I could recommend that the students be open-minded because most organizations are working in the slum areas and you can imagine the security and that. So for you to be a field officer or field worker, expect hardship and insecurity. (FS 2013—12, male)

These settings can be challenging for experienced human service professionals. Thus, it is ideal to provide multiple occasions to support the growth of students' realistic awareness of the conditions faced by underprivileged families and communities so that students are better prepared for the psychological challenges they will encounter. Field Supervisors felt that students would benefit from opportunities to familiarize themselves with the challenges inherent in working in this field and tools that would help them process the more distressing situations so they become and remain effective helping professionals.

We get to see what is it that you think about the community when you go there and what is it that you know about it. So after their studies, they are already prepared psychologically to meet these things in the field, so they are prepared in all ways. So one of those I could recommend is that. (FS 2013—12, male)

Additional exposure can help students prepare to confront taxing situations and group dynamics in positive and proactive manners.

You have to go through a training manual and you go and now meet a group of youths, some of them are even drunk, but they are in a training, so yeah, so, it's a very ... if it's somebody who is not courageous or assertive, you see they feel a bit shaken. Yeah, but it takes a lot of time for them to learn, so I think, when this can be done; it can give them the confidence when they are coming for internship. They already know what they are going to face. (FS 2013—14, male)

### **Confidence in Interpersonal Communication**

Another theme, especially from FSs, was the need to develop student confidence in communicating with others, including staff within the organization, community members, or other stakeholders.

Prepare them on how to present ideas, their own ideas and the ones they collect from the community. That would help them to put their case in a better way. Whether they are reporting to the stakeholders or they're just presenting to themselves ... for the first time I think that is key. (PC1, female)

Interpersonal communication skills figured high on the list of areas that practicum students should be well-prepared in. While participants recognized that additional preparation does not remove challenges, they believed that this helps develop greater confidence in their work with diverse populations, who may have very different life experiences than they do.

You should prepare them ... ability to deal with people of all kinds. You know, in the community, there are different kinds of people that you should train them, you should show them that they should show them how to deal with the different types. Then there is the confidence, they should also work on that. (FS 2013—07, female)

### COURSE DEVELOPMENT

The lectures, lessons, and activities were developed over seven months. Professional development sessions on reflective learning and learning contracts were held with faculty to support their learning on these topics. Following these sessions, Kenyan faculty proceeded with course design, selecting content, and preparing instructional activities. Key content included taking ownership of learning as a professional, branding oneself for the workplace, becoming a reflective practitioner, managing conflict, ethical practice, working effectively with groups, and responsibilities during practicum. To enhance student knowledge and skills in facilitating small group sessions with community members, the course also included content on preparing reports, making presentations, and community event planning.

A range of active learning experiences was integrated into the entire course. These learning activities served as opportunities for students to express ideas in a safe, protected setting to bolster their confidence. Many activities involved case studies to provide opportunities to work through ethical dilemmas or reflect on their learning goals. Students identified concerns they had about practicum and discussed options for handling them. Students also had the opportunity to practice effective communication through role plays and delivering presentations.

### INITIAL COURSE EVALUATION

The Professional Development for Community Practice course was first offered in May 2014 and it has been offered annually since then. The authors collected survey and focus group data from students who completed this course prior to starting their practicum and follow-up interviews were conducted with FSs. Procedures related to informed consent, ethical issues, data collection, and data analysis were followed as previously described. Results from the initial evaluation featured knowledge of field placement stages, utilization of learning

contracts to clarify expectations and articulate learning goals, and expanding communication topics to incorporate counseling. See Table 2.

### Knowledge of Field Placement Stages

Several students indicated that their knowledge of field placement stages helped them realize that many of their concerns were typical experiences for student interns. "I can say I knew my expectations from the unit we did . . . because by being taken through the process from the beginning till culmination . . . I felt really prepared on what to expect" (FG3—student 4, female). Insights about field placement stages permitted them to work through discouraging circumstances, accomplish their learning goals, and complete the practicum on a positive note.

It really helped me because I realized, when I cannot agree with people or when I don't want to wake up in the morning, I knew what was going on with me and how to confront the problems and finally how to culminate my attachment, and leave everything in a good position. (FG3—student 1, female)

### Utilization of Learning Contracts

Results of this evaluation indicated that introduction of learning contracts has been a beneficial step. Developing a learning contract can help students identify and articulate their goals for their practicum experience and structure initial conversations with FSs, clarifying expectations for students, organizations and the university. Learning contracts serve the dual purpose of supporting students in taking charge of their learning during practicum and holding them accountable for their own learning. "With the introduction of a learning contract; you see now it's the learning contract that guides the student. Now they do not have to depend on me" (FS 2014—01, male).

**TABLE 2: Summary of Data Collected After Course Implementation: Phase 2, 2014**

| <i>Data Source</i>                                | <i>Summary of Data Collected</i>   |
|---|--|
| Follow-up interviews with field supervisors (FS)  | Two supervisors purposively sampled from organizations that hosted students from May to August 2013 and 2014<br>Selection is based on (i) participated in phase one interviews; and (ii) willingness to be interviewed a second time.<br>Interview questions included perceptions and observations of student readiness for practicum, challenges encountered by students and themselves in supervising a student practicum, areas where students were adequately or inadequately prepared, and suggestions for addressing identified inadequacies |
| Focus groups with practicum students (FG 3 and 4) | 2 focus groups with 15 females and 5 males, ages 20–25<br>Random sample of students who had completed the practicum<br>Questions included preparation for practicum, the process of being matched with an organization, prior expectations about the practicum, learning experiences during the practicum, and recommendations for improving the practicum experience  |

The learning contract allowed FSs to understand students' learning expectations and desired exposure to specific activities within the organization up-front. This gave them opportunities to remove learning activities that were outside the organizations' mandate or if the activity was one which was not under their immediate responsibility make arrangements with colleagues which allowed the students to have a fuller learning experience.

I have to go through those learning contracts, and just make sure they are not out of whatever we carry out as an organization. But there are cases whereby students have included things on their learning contracts and I am able to link with those other partners we work with. Like, if it's an issue that can be addressed by the children's office, I'm able to link them to the county children's officer. (FS 2014—01, female)

It appears that learning contracts served as an effective tool to support the process of communicating and clarifying expectations for both students and FSs.

My supervisor did not know exactly what my expectations were, but with the help of the learning contract, we were able to brainstorm and see how ... He was able to understand through the learning contract and we were able to come up with activities through the goals I had. (FG4—student 8, female)

Some students felt that their understanding of how to develop and use a learning contract was not as clear as it might have been. While it was intended to be a collaborative process with students taking the lead on the initial draft, some students misunderstood and did not do any preparatory work. This resulted in some issues when they attempted to place responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives on their FS. Students believed that some FSs were uncertain whether specific learning activities would be appropriate and valuable to students, thus they suggested course instructors play a more active role in developing learning contracts. Knowing that faculty members have reviewed the learning contract would provide confidence that the learning activities outlined were heading in the right direction.

The other suggestion I would like to make is that our lecturers have some input in our learning contract because they understand better the units we have done. I formulated my learning contract with my field supervisors but had to tell them units I had undertaken ... but if our lecturers aided in the formulation of the learning contract then went to the supervisor and added some things it would be better because the field supervisor complained of not knowing the units I had undertaken or whether the activities I had written down would be helpful. (FG3—student 1, female)

### **Making Connections through Reflective Learning Journals**

Students' comments indicated that, for many, journaling involved reflection on their emotional state, and initially, they had reservations about the utility of journaling for processing their impressions or reactions to individuals they interacted with or challenging situations they encountered.

I understood that you have to write all those feelings, down moments you have etc. But I doubted how that was helpful, writing down feelings ... but by the second

week, I was writing down all I was feeling ... it was good ... it helped. (FG4—student 6, female)

For most of the students, their perspective shifted once they got out into the field and had to deal with the realities of working in the community. During the FGs, none of the students mentioned using their journals to write about connections between their experiences in the field and their prior learning through coursework or informal learning through sports, student government, or volunteer work in the community. This highlighted the need to communicate this particular aspect of learning journals more clearly for future cohorts of students.

### **Include Counseling Content**

Students identified a need for enhanced counseling skills as part of this new course or their communication courses. Many were working with individuals with challenging behaviors, such as street children, complex health and family issues resulting from HIV and AIDS or drug addictions, or dealing with conflict management with community members in their practicums, and they believed that extra focus on developing counseling skills before practicum would be beneficial.

If it would be possible, people doing community resource management should be prepared on counseling because some will go to deal with people with HIV and AIDS ... and some it will be the first time they deal with an HIV positive person and instead of helping the person, come out of there shocked. So it is important. (FG4—student 4, female)

In sum, participants identified several ways to further develop the content and instructional processes used. Adjustments to further refine course activities are ongoing.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In summary, this article has described processes employed in developing a new course using evidence gathered from best practices reported in the literature and needs assessment of important stakeholders. The new course met the overarching goal of providing more comprehensive practicum preparation that reflected the Kenyan context for students. Evidence gathered in preparation for the development of the course provided initial direction of gaps that could be addressed through the development of a practicum preparation course for students in the Community Resource Management program.

The resulting course endeavored to provide students with appropriate knowledge and tools to enhance their learning during practicum. Consequently, learning activities were developed that supported the development of reflective practice, mental preparation for demanding situations, and confidence in interpersonal communication. Providing students with knowledge and tools that will develop their “use of self” can improve their learning (Hardwick, 2013). Offering an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning experiences has also been noted as a factor that encourages them to focus on their learning

(Moon, 2004). Incorporation of guiding questions to prompt students' reflections while in the field is another way to prompt student learning through their journaling activities (Boud et al., 2000; Moon, 2004). This provides a purpose for "checking in" beyond the once or twice a semester field visits to monitor student activities and progress.

Based on findings from all three participant groups, further refinement of the learning contract processes is warranted. Careful preparation and clear instructions on "negotiating" the learning contract in collaboration with FSs are important to the success of this activity. Students found that the learning contract helped them to effectively articulate their learning goals at the beginning of their practicum and take greater ownership of their learning. This is consistent with previous research that showed that clearly identified goals encouraged students to focus on their learning (Hardwick, 2013). The collaborative process of developing a learning contract can support students in their initial communications with their FS and help establish clear expectations for the practicum experience.

Clarity of expectations has been found to be a positive predictor of practicum success (Kathuri-Ogola et al., 2015; Olson & Montgomery, 2000). The process can enhance their confidence in articulating and advocating for their learning goals. Increased interaction between students, faculty, and FSs in the development of student learning contracts can provide assurance that the students' goals and objectives for their practicum fit well with those of the program, without creating undue stress on the partner organizations, along with flexibility to direct students to additional activities that would be beneficial to their learning and the organization's overall activities. Students also reported a sense of greater confidence in being able to interact successfully with unfamiliar, disenfranchised populations in the community, a finding corroborated by Garcia-Reid et al. (2014). Other research found that students involved in practicums took greater autonomy over their learning (Hardwick, 2013); this was true for students in this study.

Using this evidence-based process means that the course has been developed with a strong foundation. This is important as there has been increased scrutiny of HE programs by government and employers in the wake of the 2014 Kenyan Commission for University Education report which ordered universities to focus on ensuring ongoing quality of HE programs (Waruru, 2015). Improved knowledge of practicum preparation needs of Kenyan students is valuable in a broader, international perspective in view of increasingly popular study abroad programs and CBL in general. With the number of academic programs utilizing practicums and service-learning in their degree courses, this is an opportune time to consider creative best practices to optimize student learning.

### LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

This study involved students in one program at a public university in Kenya. In addition, the focus group facilitators were faculty members, consequently students might have been reluctant to share candid comments. Greater representation from some of the participant groups for the initial evaluation of the course would have been ideal, such as FSs. The data revealed a number of issues associated with logistical and administrative oversight activities that were not addressed in the practicum preparation course. These concerns were

acknowledged and noted for further discussion with university administrators as they would involve creative solutions.

The authors suggest future work in this area include more detailed examination of field supervision in several areas including facilitating development of students' professional knowledge and skill; how to effectively communicate expectations to students prior to their practicum; and the impact of student learning contracts in communicating student learning expectations to the FS. Additional research could focus on the role of student reflections, both during and after the practicum, in clarifying and examining their prior expectations, and explore student learning during practicum and the development of a professional identity as a new human service professional.

The improved availability of technology in human service workplaces throughout Kenya opens up new innovative opportunities for ongoing student support by university faculty or to conduct training sessions for FSs. Online delivery might address students' desire for frequent direct contact with university faculty, a current challenge when host organizations are located all over the country. Long-term evaluation and follow-up were beyond the scope of the original project and have been relayed to the university department as part of their regular curriculum review and renewal processes.

The authors believe that their findings may be useful for others working within developing countries. The results may be useful for those implementing practicums in human service programs in other countries where students will be working in challenging circumstances or with vulnerable populations or communities.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr. VanLeeuwen planned the study, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the article. Dr. Kathuri-Ogola, co-Principle Investigator on the study, was involved in all activities and contributed to revising the article for publication. Dr. Weeks was involved in planning the study, data analysis, and contributed to revising the article for publication. Dr. Kabaria Muriithi was involved in data collection and analysis and the dissemination of findings.

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