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MUTUAL AID IN THE CLASSROOM: AN INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY APPLICATION

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The purpose of the study is to examine the use of instructional technology in creating a mutual aid environment in the classroom. By developing and exploring Internet-based exercises designed to promote interaction in a distance education environment, the authors tested the hypothesis that instructional technology offers opportunities to promote mutual aid among students. This article describes these exercises and presents the results of a student survey about the application of mutual aid in distance education.

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS have described the traditional classroom as a mutual aid system where the teacher's role is to mediate interactions between learners and the course material (Shulman, 1970). This depiction places an emphasis on the way that students bond to achieve productive learning. Students demonstrate these mutual aid processes through dialectic discourse, data and course design sharing, peer group feedback, and the sanctioning of discussions in taboo areas. The teacher acts as a catalyst and a resource to stimulate interaction that can enhance productive work.

Interaction among students and between students and instructors influences learning. In Wulff, Nyquist, and Abbott's study (1987), students reported that interactions with other students facilitated learning and that lack of instructor-student interaction was one of the

biggest impediments to their education. Huff (1998) emphasized the importance of student-student and faculty-student interaction by observing that educators promote opportunities to interact. Classroom interaction promotes a sense of connectedness among class members. This allows for the development of mutual aid and thus a greater potential for learning. Through the use of Internet-based course exercises and analysis of a student survey, the following discussion will examine some ways in which distance learning and instructional technology affect opportunities to interact.

Fostering interaction in a distance education environment serves important purposes when done with forethought and consideration. Moving beyond simple interaction toward the more dynamic process of mutual aid through progressive Internet-based exercises

may enhance curriculum delivery in graduate-level social work education. This study seeks to extend Shulman's (1970) model by testing mutual aid constructs in a distance learning environment.

Mutual Aid as a Framework in the Social Work Classroom

Because mutual aid is a process of people helping each other (Shulman, 1986), the group is an enterprise in mutual aid. The interdependence among individual members is an inherent and vital ingredient of the group process, and individuals can benefit from others in the group setting. Thus, mutual aid is also a consequence of what people experience as a result of being in the group (Moysse Steinberg, 1997). The opportunity for mutual aid, potentially present from the moment a group meets, does not come about automatically. Group members must have both the capacity and opportunities to communicate and interact with each other.

The classroom is the group context for this study. Reynolds (1942) was one of the first social work educators to acknowledge the class as a group in social work education. She emphasized social relationships within groups of learners as a key factor in creating educational opportunities. Shulman (1987) extended Reynolds' proposition by positing that hidden groups exist in every classroom. As evidence, he identifies several group characteristics that he suggests are inherent to every class. For instance, Shulman notes that communication between class members is present at all times and each class has group climates that underlie these communication networks. Both students and instructors are

aware of its tone and such communication often influences course outcomes. As a result, sub-groups begin to emerge. Another supporting feature is the phenomenon of "strength-in-numbers." As a group, students develop a certain amount of power relative to their teacher, which is greater than the sum of their individual strengths. Finally, other group properties, such as norms, taboos, roles, and external relations to other systems, quickly become apparent in classrooms, suggesting further that a class of students is a group in process.

Ten interactive processes or dynamics make up a system of mutual aid in the classroom (Shulman, 1999). This article concentrates on five of these processes—data sharing, the dialectic process, the discussion of taboo subjects, mutual support, and individual problem solving. Each process plays a major role in group outcomes, particularly with regard to a distance education environment. These five processes are defined below.

Data sharing involves the exchange of information, resources, and experiences as a step in building a network of support in groups. The fact that it occurs among students demonstrates that the instructor is not the only source of information. Students bring life and practice experience as well as previous knowledge that extend well beyond what the instructor can offer.

Taking the risk to debate ideas and to be open to new ways of thinking are part of the second mutual aid dynamic, *the dialectical process*. The dialectical process allows students to raise questions, to challenge one another, and to be challenged. Students learn

to risk by sharing their thoughts and feelings and to critically evaluate their own beliefs and the beliefs of others.

Mutual aid is also apparent as students tentatively begin to *discuss taboo areas* related to developing assessment and practice skills (Shulman, 1987). This process presents opportunities for group members to talk about subjects usually avoided by the larger culture. These areas are often sensitive and outside of accepted norms for safe subjects of discussion.

Mutual support, an integral dynamic of mutual aid, is the expression of caring, support, and empathy within the group context. Also referred to as emotional support, this particular process appears in the classroom in both concrete and affective ways because students offer help with specific activities and provide reassurance and empathy for each other.

Individual problem solving is apparent when people request assistance with problems related to course content. As other students begin to offer suggestions, they benefit from the interaction. This process enhances the general learning of all group members through participation in the specific problem-solving work of another individual.

The classroom group has the potential to become a mutual aid system. This transformation involves several processes that define interaction among students and between students and instructors to create a stimulating learning environment. These specific processes represent an important aspect of the mutual aid system and are central to the current study. The context, nature, and purpose of the group, which is affected by the classroom setting, will guide how these dynamics develop.

Review of the Literature

Interactive learning. The benefits of student-student and student-instructor interaction to enrich learning in traditional classrooms are well documented (e.g., Brookfield, 1987; Knowles, 1990; Meyers & Jones, 1993). Adult-learner models define learning as an active and dynamic process, and an important corollary is that students learn best by finding meaning in or applying the subject matter to their own lives. As Meyers and Jones note, "when we involve students in activities that lead them to discuss, question, clarify, and write about course content, we not only foster better retention of subject matter but help expand students' thinking abilities as well" (p. xii).

Distance education. Graduate education in social work has experienced a significant transformation over the past decade. Increasingly, schools across the country are offering a variety of ways for students to complete their MSW programs, with distance education emerging as an alternative for students who live outside of a reasonable commute to the university. As a consequence, social work educators have raised several questions regarding the effectiveness of distance education, especially with regard to opportunities for interaction on behalf of off-site students (Freddolino, 1996; Thyer, Artelt, Markward, & Dozier, 1998). Overwhelming evidence shows that student-student and instructor-student interaction in distance education is critical to student satisfaction, enhanced learning, and overall course success (Forster & Washington, 2000; Fulford & Zhang, 1993; Van Soest, Canon, & Grant, 2000; Wagner, 1997). The success of distance education de-

pendes largely on a class structure that enables the building of relationships and facilitates interaction among students and between students and instructors.

Instructional technology. In tandem with the emergence of distance education, instructional technology presents new opportunities to interact. Internet-based course tools, in particular, serve as vehicles to connect students and instructors outside of the classroom setting (Wernet, Olliges, & Delicath, 2000). Moreover, interactive websites create learning environments that build on traditional classroom opportunities. Van Soest et al. (2000) described how they used an interactive online forum in a master's level foundation course. Their focus was on facilitating discussions among students about cultural diversity and societal oppression. Engaging students in these discussions is often challenging. As Van Soest et al. state, "conflicts can arise at the interpersonal and intergroup level as students encounter conflicting beliefs and experiences among themselves and the instructor" (p. 464). The educators found that the Internet served as a useful tool to promote discussion of taboo subjects, to enhance student participation and learning, and to generate new ways of thinking about diversity and oppression. Instructional technology offers opportunities for teaching and learning that enhance current MSW education.

Method

Design and Sampling

This is an exploratory study conducted at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. The authors used a post-test, alternative treatment, control-group design simi-

lar to that used by Thyer et al. (1998). A total of 103 students were enrolled in the course, "Theories of Organizational Development." Of that total, 82 students completed the survey. Those who did not complete the survey were in the section in which the instructor passed it out and told students to drop it off at her office at a later date. Out of 24 students enrolled in that section, four (17%) submitted a completed survey. Six sections were offered, three of which were connected via interactive television. The televised-instruction sections included one on-site class and two off-site classes. The face-to-face sections included one on-site class and two off-site classes. Three instructors taught all six sections, with two instructors teaching one section each using the face-to-face instructional method and a third instructor teaching the three televised-instruction sections and the other face-to-face section. Each section met once a week for three hours over a 14-week semester. The course was supported by a website that joined all six sections.

Course Website and Exercises

The course website was developed to provide easy access to course-related materials and to offer on- and off-site students Internet-based opportunities to interact. The course syllabus, class schedule, assignments, and instructor contact information were posted on the website. It also provided hyperlinks to reserve readings and course-related Internet sites.

Opportunities to interact were provided in a discussion board format. The intent was to promote communication and connectedness between on- and off-site students. Stu-

dents could read, post, and respond to messages on a general discussion board, a discussion board for their particular section, and a discussion board for the other sections. The design of these discussion boards provided students with the opportunity to interact and establish collegial relationships. Students could access these discussion boards at any time.

Students were required to complete a series of six progressive, bi-weekly Internet-based exercises. Mutual aid constructs were applied in each exercise. Discussion follows regarding the specific application in each exercise of the constructs through the use of technology.

Previous research has shown that lack of knowledge about and discomfort with computers can negatively affect student attitudes toward the use of technology in the classroom (Svanum, Chen, & Bublitz, 1997). Thus, the purpose of the first exercise was to help students increase their level of comfort with their computer, the Internet, and the course website. Students were asked to create a link to an Internet resource related to the course content. These links were available for students to use throughout the semester. This exercise introduced the notion of sharing data as one of the mutual aid processes.

The second exercise was designed to further develop students' technology skills and to continue to promote data sharing opportunities. Students were required to post descriptions of the websites of various public organizations using course-relevant concepts. They were also encouraged, but not required, to respond to other students' postings.

The purpose of the third exercise was to build on the second exercise through data sharing and fostering discussion of taboo subjects. Students were directed to find organizations that did not represent social work values and ethics because of their discriminatory beliefs. Using the discussion boards, the students were required to discuss the nature of this discrimination and the ways that these beliefs furthered the organizations' agendas. This exercise moved students from applying organizational concepts such as mission and culture to evaluating how these concepts linked with the goals of the organization.

Using the energy generated by the third exercise, the fourth exercise introduced interaction as part of the assignment. Students posed questions about certain theories that integrated practical experience and course content, and then they responded to the questions of students in other sections. The intent of this exercise was to advance opportunities for interaction by promoting data sharing and engaging the dialectical process as a part of mutual aid.

For the fifth exercise, students used discussion boards to post ideas about their final assignments and to offer feedback to other students. They shared topics and ideas about their papers, and they responded to other students' postings by questioning the information presented, adding ideas, and suggesting resources. These efforts involved data sharing, mutual support, individual problem solving, and involvement in the dialectical process.

The final exercise focused on ethics and required students to discuss with each other ethical matters and dilemmas. Students were

asked to challenge each other about the ethical choices that were made in either a real-life or pretend situation. The purpose of the sixth exercise was to offer opportunities for students to engage in each of the five mutual aid processes.

Measurement

The authors designed a survey to gather information about student perceptions of the ways in which the Internet-based exercises supported mutual aid in the classroom. In addition, students were asked to estimate their frequency of access to the website and their level of satisfaction with it.

Prior to administration, students were informed that participation was voluntary and that responses were confidential and would only be shared in aggregate with instructors after final grades had been submitted. No identifying information was requested.

The survey was administered during the final class in all but one section. In this section, one of the three face-to-face sections, the instructor distributed surveys at the end of class, requesting that students complete and return them to her office at a later date. Seventeen percent ($n=4$) of the students in this section completed their surveys. In the other two face-to-face sections and in all three televised sections, every student ($n=78$) who attended the final class completed the instrument. This response-rate difference holds implications for interpreting the findings and is addressed in the discussion section.

Data Analysis

The approach to data analysis included an examination of overall medians, averages, and comparisons by instructional method. For the ordinal-level data (frequency of use of the website), we used the Mann-Whitney U test to explore differences between the face-to-face and televised-instruction groups. Within-group differences were assessed using the Friedman and Wilcoxon tests. For the interval-level data (satisfaction and mutual aid), we used the t test for the independent-samples procedure to evaluate differences by instructional method and the paired-sample t tests procedure to examine within-group differences. The Bonferroni procedure was applied to adjust the level of significance for comparisons between multiple pairs. For all other analyses, the accepted level of significance was established at .05.

Findings

Descriptive Results

Eighty-two of 103 students completed the survey for a response rate of 80%. Response rates for individual items varied due to missing data. Fifty-five respondents (67%) received instruction through a televised medium. Twenty-seven (33%) received face-to-face instruction. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic differences between the groups. We conducted chi-square and t tests to evaluate these differences and found that the groups were similar with respect to gender, enrollment and employment status, and years of previous computer experience. About 89% of the students in both groups were female, approximately 79% were employed full-time,

about 98% were enrolled in the MSW program on a part-time basis, and almost all of the students (98%) reported that they owned or had access to a computer. We found significant differences in age and race. The average age for the face-to-face group was 32 compared to 36 for the televised-instruction group ($t=2.043$, $p=.05$). Sixty-seven percent of the students in the face-to-face group identified themselves as white, compared to 96% in the televised-instruction group ($\chi^2=11.83$, $p=.003$). We suspect that these differences reflect the racial composition of the geographic areas where the course sections were taught. However, the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the study preclude further inferences.

Frequency of Web Access

The frequency of use of the website was measured using a 6-point scale with response options of "never," "biweekly," "more than biweekly but less than weekly," "once a week," "more than once a week but less than daily,"

and "at least daily." Ten questions were asked in order to assess: an estimate of how often students accessed the website, for what purpose (reading messages, posting messages, or responding to messages), and to which discussion board (the general board, their own section, or other sections).

As Table 2 indicates, students reported that they were more likely to use the website to read messages than to post their own messages or to respond to other messages. The Friedman test statistic indicates that the medians are significantly different, and the Wilcoxon test shows that the differences between reading-posting and reading-responding are significant at the adjusted level for three pairs ($p=.017$). The medians for posting and responding to messages were not different (-1.42 , $p=.156$). These findings did not differ by instructional method.

Analysis of the overall frequency of use of the website indicates that students reported accessing it about once per week ($M=3.13$). The Mann-Whitney U test was used to deter-

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Student Sample

Variable	Type of Instruction					
	Total		Face-to-Face		Televised	
	(N=82)		(n=27)		(n=55)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Female	73	89	25	93	48	87
White*	71	87	18	67	53	96
Full-time work status	65	79	22	81	43	78
Part-time student status	80	98	26	96	54	98
Computer access	80	98	26	96	54	98
	Total		Face-to-Face		Televised	
Average age*	35		32		36	
Average yrs. social work experience	10		9		11	
Average yrs. computer experience	3		4		3	
Average hrs. per wk. current computer use	13		10		14	

* Significance tests indicated differences at or below .05

mine frequency differences between the face-to-face and televised-instruction groups. On the first question, students who received televised instruction reported that they were more likely to access the website relative to the face-to-face group ($z=-2.77, p=.006$). None of the other comparisons reached significance at the .05 level.

Satisfaction

Student satisfaction with the website was measured using a 4-point scale with response options of "very dissatisfied," "somewhat dissatisfied," "generally satisfied," and "very satisfied." Students were asked to respond to a statement about their overall satisfaction with the website and to rate their satisfaction with the website for accessing course tools (reserved readings, syllabus, and assignments), technology resources (Internet, hyperlinks), and opportunities to interact with students in their own sections, in other sections, and with the instructor.

Table 3 provides a comparison of the student responses by instructional method. Students reported that they were "generally satisfied" to "very satisfied" with the course website in all four categories. They also reported that they were more satisfied with the website for access to course tools compared to technology resources or opportunities to in-

teract. These reports did not differ by instructional method. The results of the t tests for independent samples indicate that the differences are not significant at the .05 level. However, substantively the findings suggest that, on average, the students who received televised instruction reported higher levels of satisfaction than the students who received face-to-face instruction, even though these differences are not statistically significant.

Mutual Aid Analysis

Student use of the website to engage in mutual aid processes was measured on a 5-point scale. The scale consisted of five response options: "never," "rarely," "occasionally," "fairly often," and "very often." Students were asked to respond to 15 statements about their use of the website to engage in each mutual aid process: individual problem solving, involvement in the dialectical process, data sharing, mutual support, and participation in taboo discussions.

Table 4 provides a comparison of the means, standard deviations, and sample sizes by instructional method. Generally students reported that they used the website "rarely" to "occasionally" to engage in mutual aid processes. Although the results are not different at the .05 level, substantively the data again supports the conclusion that, on aver-

TABLE 2. Summary of Statistical Frequency of Website Use

Comparison	Friedman	Wilcoxon
Read-post-respond	67.18*	
Read-post		-5.88*
Read-respond		-5.88*
Post-respond		-1.42

* $p<.001$

age, the students who received televised instruction reported higher levels of satisfaction than the students who received face-to-face instruction.

We used paired-sample *t* tests to examine average differences between each pair of mutual aid constructs, applying the Bonferroni procedure to establish an accepted level of significance for 10 pairs at .005. These results, shown in Table 5, indicate that students were more likely to use the website to engage in individual problem solving relative to mutual support ($t=4.241, p<.001$) or discussion of taboo subjects ($t=6.332, p<.001$). They were more likely to use the website for involvement in the dialectical process compared to mutual support ($t=4.771, p<.001$) or discussion of taboo subjects ($t=7.003, p<.001$), and they were also more likely to use the website for mutual support relative to discussion of taboo subjects ($t=3.037, p=.003$). Finally, the students were more likely to use the

website for data sharing compared to mutual support ($t=3.196, p=.002$) or discussion of taboo subjects ($t=5.714, p<.001$).

A comparison by instructional method shows that, for the televised-instruction group, differences in website use for mutual support and taboo discussion as well as mutual support and data sharing were not significant at the .005 level. For the face-to-face group, no differences were found between individual problem solving and mutual support. Overall, these findings suggest that students are more likely to use the website for individual problem solving, involvement in the dialectical process, or data sharing and less likely to use it for mutual support or taboo discussion. However, this seems to depend in part on the type of instructional method.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to explore mutual aid processes in traditional and dis-

TABLE 3. Student Satisfaction with Website by Instructional Method

Item	Face-to-Face			Televised		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall	24	3.13	0.68	53	3.25	0.65
Course tools	24	3.32	0.82	52	3.44	0.59
Technology	24	3.20	0.80	52	3.27	0.60
Interaction	23	3.01	0.85	50	3.21	0.70

TABLE 4. Mutual Aid Constructs by Instructional Method

Process	Face-to-Face			Televised		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Individual problem solving	26	2.72	1.06	50	3.03	0.96
Dialectical process	26	2.84	1.02	47	3.02	0.98
Data sharing	26	2.73	0.96	49	2.87	1.12
Mutual support	26	2.32	1.13	47	2.61	1.11
Taboo discussions	25	2.03	0.99	46	2.21	1.20

tance learning environments. Using a sample of 82 students enrolled in a graduate-level foundation course, we developed and tested six Internet-based exercises designed to promote student interaction. Results of a student survey indicated several interesting findings that can help to inform the use of a website to engage students in the learning process, especially those in a televised educational environment.

Analyses of student reports about the frequency of their use of the website indicate that the students were more likely to read messages rather than post or respond to them, regardless of instructional method. Reading messages is a fairly passive endeavor, but posting and responding to messages involves more activity and thus perhaps greater investment in interaction. By its very nature, mutual aid involves action and student-student and student-instructor interaction underlies each process. This finding has implications for those who might consider using websites to engage students in televised learning. Internet exercises should be

designed so that students are directed to post and respond to messages, as well as read them.

Student reports about the frequency of their use of the website indicate that they accessed it about once per week. Mutual aid requires both frequent and intense interaction to enhance the learning process. Thus, this finding provokes questions about the amount of website activity necessary to ensure that mutual aid processes are in place to maximize learning opportunities. These questions should be addressed in future research.

In the mutual aid analyses, students reported that they were more likely to use the website for individual problem solving, data sharing, or involvement with the dialectical process compared to mutual support or taboo discussions. Individual problem solving, data sharing, and the dialectical process are more typical dynamics in traditional learning environments. Mutual support, especially emotional support, and discussion of taboo subjects occur less often. However, each activity contributes to important aspects of learning in social work education (Van Soest et al.,

TABLE 5. Mutual Aid Constructs: Paired Comparisons

Construct pairs ¹	All Respondents		Face-to-Face		Televised	
	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
IPS-DP	-0.565	.574	-1.105	.280	0.060	.953
IPS-MS	4.241	<.001	2.318	.029	3.533	.001
IPS-TD	6.332	<.001	3.561	.002	5.192	<.001
IPS-DS	0.963	.338	-0.090	.929	1.211	.232
DP-MS	4.771	<.001	2.997	.006	3.599	.001
DP-TD	7.003	<.001	4.830	<.001	5.227	<.001
DP-DS	1.800	.076	0.826	.416	1.606	.115
MS-TD	3.037	.003	1.611	.120	2.555	.014
MS-DS	-3.196	.002	-2.675	.013	-2.014	.05
TD-DS	-5.714	<.001	-4.254	<.001	-4.085	<.001

¹ IPS=individual problem solving; DP=dialectical process; MS=mutual support; TD=taboo discussion; DS=data sharing

2000) and may in fact better prepare MSW practitioners. Internet-based exercises as informed by the mutual aid framework provide a venue to engage students in atypical yet beneficial learning activities that enhance their social work skills.

The most interesting finding from this study is the pattern of results that suggests students in televised learning environments had more favorable attitudes toward the use of a website for class instruction, including involvement in mutual aid processes, compared to students in traditional classrooms. A major concern in previous televised education studies is that students often feel a lack of connection to and thus disengagement from the educational process (Thyer et al., 1998). Substantively, our evidence begins to indicate that Internet-based exercises, designed to facilitate interaction through the mutual aid framework, may provide a way of helping students in televised educational environments to reinforce their affiliation with the educational processes that promote learning. However, this conclusion is only tentative, given the lack of statistical significance of the results.

An important limitation not explored in this study is the difference in the students' perceived needs and opportunities for interaction. Traditional educational settings provide opportunities for students to connect with a larger academic environment. Students in traditional settings experience relatively direct, ongoing, and easy access to each other, to their instructors, and to resources in the larger setting. This is not the case for students in off-site locations, who often rely solely on each other for interaction. These

differences in opportunity may be related to the students' perceived need for interaction. In other words, students in off-site locations may prefer instructional technology because it meets a need that may not be as important for students in on-site settings. Our design separated students based on instructional method, not classroom location (on- or off-site). As a consequence, differences based on need and opportunity were not explored but may be critical factors in student receptivity to instructional technology.

Another important limitation is that we are not able to examine the interrelationships with potentially powerful confounding factors, specifically faculty support of mutual aid processes and instructional technology. For instance, instructor differences were not examined, yet it is reasonable to assume that student use of instructional technology is related to instructor comfort with and investment in this type of learning tool. The added dimension of faculty support was not investigated in this study.

The intent of this study is exploratory, to determine whether mutual aid is a viable framework to develop interventions that address the issue of student engagement in distance learning environments. Thus, it is inappropriate to infer causality and to generalize beyond the immediate setting. Differences in survey administration resulted in a sampling distribution imbalance in which substantially fewer respondents received face-to-face instruction. Moreover, the instrument has not been tested yet to determine whether the measures are valid and reliable. Finally, in an effort to ensure student anonymity and maximize response rates, the research design

prevented survey responses from being linked to individual students, and we had to rely on self-reports of frequency of website use rather than on actual counts. As a consequence, frequency estimates may be under- or over-reported. The presented findings should be interpreted within these parameters.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a unique contribution to social work education. Building on Shulman's (1970) model of mutual aid, these results suggest that applications of instructional technology provide opportunities to engage students in the learning process. In particular, students in a televised learning environment, who may be most likely to experience a lack of connectedness in the educational arena, may benefit from these applications. In the context of the tremendous growth in televised education in social work, these issues need to be explored further to better understand the potential of instructional technology.

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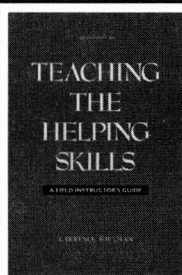
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