The Basic Course: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know? Where Do We Go from Here?

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Recommended Citation
Buerkel-Rothfuss, Nancy L. and Kosloski, David L. (1990) "The Basic Course: What Do We Know? What Do We Need to Know? Where Do We Go from Here?," Basic Communication Course Annual: Vol. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol2/iss1/15

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Each year, thousands of students pass through a variety of "basic courses" in speech communication. Some of these basic courses present an overview of the field of speech communication and an introduction to the research and theory that form the basis for our field. Others are hybrid or blend courses than provide information about at least three basic content areas: interpersonal communication, small group communication, and public speaking. Still others are considered the "basic" course because they provide the introduction to a specific topic area: interpersonal communication, public speaking, small group communication, organizational communication, intercultural communication or mass media.

Whatever their specific form and content, basic courses account for a very significant percentage of student credit hour generation in speech communication (Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray 1989a, 1989b, 1990). Most important, they provide what may be the first — and last — taste of the field of speech communication for the vast majority of undergraduates at a given institution. Basic courses serve as the recruiting ground for majors and minors and they provide information about our field for nonmajors; what students perceive to be true about speech communication as a discipline, and whether or not they value that information, may well have been learned in a basic course.
To date, the research that has been conducted in and about the basic course both in speech communication and in noncommunication disciplines has been fragmented and generally nontheoretical. Although many studies have been reported, most are either opinion-based or are limited to experience with a specific program. Very few have examined variables from more than one basic course. Most important for this paper, few systematic attempts to integrate findings and propose a program of basic course research for the future have been made. Seiler and McGukin (1989) drew the following conclusion: "Our examination of basic course literature reveals that instructors and directors do not have sufficient empirical support on which to design the course. The basic course . . . is organized . . . on tradition and experience rather than theory or research. The net result is that we do not know what is the most effective approach to organizing and teaching the basic course" (35).

The general goal of this paper is to begin to address this needed research agenda for the 1990s. In particular, two reviews of literature underlie the methodology herein: a review of literature on basic courses outside of speech communication and a similar review within this discipline. The reviews were undertaken with the intent of attempting to identify the array of variables that have been investigated relative to the basic course and to provide guidelines for how research might proceed in the next decade. Both reviews have been organized into a single research typology to better serve this purpose (see Table 1).

The specific goals for the paper were the following: 1) to identify variables related to the basic course that have been studied outside of our field; 2) to identify basic course variables investigated by speech communication writers/researchers; 3) to provide a typology of basic course variables that may be studied in the future; 4) to identify several theoretical frameworks within which to conduct some of this research; and 5) to identify a research agenda for the
1990s. In particular, the process of identifying a research agenda was one of suggesting possible theoretical frameworks not currently used in basic course research as potentially fruitful avenues for exploration. Since much of the research reviewed for this paper tended to be from education-based or interpersonal perspectives, the theoretical frameworks presented include some from organizational communication: an area not yet fully explored in terms of its heuristic value for basic course researchers.

A TYPOLOGY OF BASIC COURSE VARIABLES

To identify key variables related to research within speech communication basic courses, as well as outside of the discipline, all materials 1) published in journals or newsletters, 2) published in book form, and/or 3) available through the ERIC data-base system during the past 10 years were selected for the analysis, as well as materials presented at the most recent SCA conventions that may not yet be available through the ERIC system. In some cases, older materials were included if they appeared to be of special significance to our goals.

Combining the variable identified in noncommunication publications with those identified for speech communication, it would appear that researchers in our discipline have considered many, but certainly not all, of the concepts identified by researchers outside of our discipline. In particular, the category scheme presented in Table 1 includes all variables identified from the combined reviews of literature.
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### TABLE 1

**Research in the Basic/Introductory Course in Speech Communication and Noncommunication Disciplines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Category</strong></th>
<th><strong>References</strong></th>
<th><strong>Comments</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical Approaches (Non-communication)</td>
<td>1. Larson and Nappi 1976; Irion 1976.</td>
<td>1. Comparison/contrast of approaches to the basic course.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**TABLE 1 (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Strategies in the Basic Speech Communication Course</th>
<th>1. Use of humor and immediacy.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Strategies (Non-Communication)</th>
<th>1. Self-paced instruction.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Hotchkiss and Nells 1988; Moore and Silverman 1980.</td>
<td>5. Overcoming a variety of student problems in the large lecture format.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effects of Taking the Basic Speech Communication Course</th>
<th>1. On self-concept.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Trank and Steele 1983.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**TABLE 1 (continued)**


**Effects of taking the Basic Course (Noncommunication)**


**Affective Outcomes of the Basic Course (Noncommunication)**


**Instructor Variables in the Basic Speech Communication Course**


| 5. | On perceived improvements in communication skills. |
| 6. | On attitudes toward various communication skills and course components. |

1. | On student's misbeliefs about the discipline. |
2. | On attitudes toward the discipline. |
3. | On student political participation. |
4. | On student attitudes toward research and/or further study in the discipline and on career choice (variety of disciplines). |

5. | On development of critical thinking skills. |
6. | On reading, writing, and study skills of the traditional student. |
7. | On skills of the nontraditional student. |

1. | Class participation. |
2. | Course satisfaction. |
3. | Student anonymity. |
4. | Instructor satisfaction. |
5. | Differences between supportive and competitive instructors. |
6. | Relationship between instructor degree status and students' final grades. |
7. | Instructor interaction and credibility. |
8. | Student expectations of teacher affect. |
9. | Relationship between instructor social styles and student learning styles on perceptions of instructor credibility. |
10. | Perceived instructor sexism and students' perceptions of classroom climate. |
11. | Use of GTAs in public speaking courses. |
12. | Comparison of GTA training in communication vs. noncommunication depts. |
13. | GTA autonomy. |
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TABLE 1 (continued)


Instructor
Variables (Non-
communication)

1. GTA involvement in textbook selection.
2. Investigation of a range of instructor variables.
3. Information about various instructor "types" teaching the basic course.

1. Amount of preparation in tenured vs. non-tenured faculty.
2. Writing legibility and lecture effectiveness vs. course satisfaction.

Student
Variables in the
Basic Speech
Communication
Course


Student
Variables (Non-
communication)

1. Level of political awareness.
2. Misconceptions about the discipline.

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TABLE 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Background Variables (Non-Communication)</th>
<th>Environmental Variables in the Basic Speech Communication Course</th>
<th>Environmental Variables (Non-Communication)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

3. Attitude toward course content.

1. Various demographics.

2. Socioeconomic status.

3. Student heterogeneity in the classroom.

4. Differences between students' expectations in public vs. private schools.

5. Voice amplification in large lecture and class size.

6. Degree to which courses tend to be interpersonal, small group, public speaking, or hybrid in U.S.

7. Presentation of several models.


9. PSI and Structured Model of Competency-based Instruction (SMC).

10. Students' perceived achievements in public speaking and basic "blend" courses.


12. Courses best-suited for the high communication apprehensive.

13. Use of computer-assisted testing center.

14. Effectiveness of large lecture vs. small group or a mixture of both.

15. Video-entitutorial instruction.


17. Peer-evaluation.

18. Team-teaching.
### The Basic Course: What do We Know?

**TABLE 1 (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Content Variables in the Basic Speech Communication Course</th>
<th>Course Content Variables (Non-communication)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staffing in the Basic Speech Communication Course</th>
<th>Staffing in the Basic Speech Communication Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Use of graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants.
2. Personalized System of Instruction (PSI).
3. Incorporation of speaking/writing into public speaking courses.
4. Advocation of a focus on communication functions and related competencies.
5. Integration of English & speech.
6. Argument for use of student journals.
7. Argument for use of case studies for teaching small group communication.
8. Argument for use of plays and novels as case studies in the basic course.
9. Argument for inclusion of a unit on relationship termination.
10. Argument for inclusion of a unit on ethics.
11. Requiring students to read public service announcements over public radio to reduce communication apprehension.
12. Emphasis on public speaking as means of teaching critical thinking.
13. Argument for use of student evaluations to assess course curriculum.
15. Teaching argumentative writing and speaking.
16. Interdisciplinary "hybrid" courses.
17. Sequencing of essays to facilitate knowledge retention.
18. Exploring research questions in the basic course.
19. Division of basic course into individual courses of concentration.
### TABLE 1 (continued)


**Staffing in the Introductory Course (Non-Communication)**


**Grading issues in the Basic Speech Communication Course**


**Grading issues (Non-communication)**


**Evaluative Methods in the Basic Speech Communication Course**


**Evaluative Methods (Non-communication)**


**Administrative Variables in the Basic Speech Communication Course**


| 3. | Use of TFAAs as group facilitators. |
| 4. | Degree to which TFA self-perceptions match evaluations provided by instructors. |
| 5. | Minority faculty issues. |

| 1. | Occurrence of higher vs. lower instructor ranks. |
| 2. | Using informal "group leader" as a form of peer instruction. |

| 1. | Contrast of analytical with trait and holistic approaches to grading journals. |
| 2. | Degree to which status of instructor correlates with grades given. |
| 3. | Student perceptions of the meaning of grades. |

| 1. | Use of peer evaluation. |
| 2. | Argument for allowing students to repeat assignments for improved grade. |
| 3. | Grading for grammar vs. content. |

| 1. | Methods for evaluating the basic course. |
| 2. | Using the small group for speech evaluation. |
| 3. | Student vs. teacher evaluations of public speaking behavior. |
| 4. | Evaluation in the basic course. |

| 1. | Relationship between student evaluations and instructor improvement. |
| 2. | Measuring instructor attitudes toward students. |
| 3. | Use of evaluations to determine student instructional preferences. |
| 4. | Objective vs. essay tests. |
| 5. | Use of frequent tests over less material. |

| 1. | Test-out procedure for basic course requirements. |
| 2. | Variables associated with directing the basic course. |
| 3. | Administration of the basic course. |

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Trying to synthesize the variables just discussed into a single theoretical framework for future investigation is an impossible task. The potential relationships for research consideration, while intriguing, are not easily organized and clearly exceed the limitations of any single model of basic course instruction. Nevertheless, basic course variables that have received little consideration in the communication literature (i.e., interdisciplinary team-teaching, instructor peer-evaluation, instructor attitude toward students, etc.) do warrant attention under some theoretical perspective. Similarly, the sheer numbers of variables investigated seem to suggest unlimited new hypotheses that might begin to address the need for systematic research. The value of the task seems apparent.

Our recommendation for a starting point is the identification of several theoretical bases from which future research might develop. On particular, we recommend consideration of perspectives from organizational communication, because so much of the activity involved with directing, teaching, and learning in the basic course is tied to the department and school organizational environments. Thus, many of the variables in Table 1 might become more logically connected using such a contextual framework.

The following section of the paper offers several such perspectives. Naturally, the discussion of each perspective is brief and meant to provide suggestions only. Many more variables and hypotheses are possible within each perspective than the scope of this essay.
THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

It requires very little imagination to envision the basic course as part of a hierarchical system that could be considered an "organization." Certainly, the university or college is one form of organization. In many cases, the very elaborate staff (department chair, faculty, basic course director, assistant basic course director(s), instructors/adjunct faculty, graduate teaching assistants, undergraduate teaching assistants, students, etc.) associated with a specific multi-section course is its own organization. Research which focuses on the number of subordinates who report to a given supervisor, the "height" of the organizational hierarchy, and other structural variables (e.g., formal and informal communication channels, networks, etc.) could be applicable to studies of the basic course. Nor is it difficult to imagine a multi-section basic course program as a rule-based "culture," amenable to some of the approaches used to study other cultures and organizations. Basic course staff members share "horror stories" as a way to establish their identities as instructors, use nonverbal "markers" to identify their territories, create a common language, and develop patterned expectations for each other. Given the similarities between many basic courses and organizations, perspectives such as Theory Z/Theory Y (McGregor, 1960), rules theory, Blake and Mouton's managerial grid (1964), Ouchi's organization types (1981), Schein's internal integration model (1985), network analysis (Albrecht and Adelman, 1987), social support analysis (Albrecht and Adelman, 1987), and interpretative perspectives (Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983) all offer potential resources for basic course researchers.
Theory X/Theory Y

A somewhat aging but still useful theoretical distinction was made by McGregor (1960) in his description of Theory X (traditional model of organizational communication) and Theory Y (the human relations model), which refers to assumptions that managers make about their employees. According to Theory X, people are generally unmotivated and willing to settle for the least possible challenge. Theory X managers use strategies such as threats, punishment, and monetary rewards to keep employees in line. Theory Y managers, on the other hand, view employees as ambitious and capable of participating in organizational decision-making. Work is seen as natural and enjoyable with success bring its own reward.

Recognizing the assumptions made by faculty, basic course directors, GTAs and others in the basic course hierarchy using these “theories” may lead to interesting research questions. Perhaps a content analysis of course syllabi would predict which theory basic course directors hold, given the assumption that one’s attitude toward students would predict pedagogical choices? If samples of both Theory X and Theory Y basic course directors could be identified, studies could be developed which focus on many of the variables from Table 1: student variables (e.g., motivation, communication competence, attitudes toward the course and subject matter, academic background, gender, and preferred teaching styles), content variables (e.g., type of course, units covered in the course, assignments tied to the course syllabus), and instructor variables (e.g., attitude toward students and course content, communication ability, academic rank, credibility, power). Similarly, it might be enlightening to compare theories used by other faculty (which would influence their expectations for how the basic course is structured) with the theory used by the basic course director. Perhaps poor match-
ups between these two world views explain difficulties basic course directors encounter when they fail to meet departmental expectations for the basic course? Perhaps basic course directors who use Theory Y find it frustrating to administer basic courses that are highly prescribed and rigidly designed because of the implied Theory X aspects of those courses?

The focus of the research also could be directed at instructors and/or GTAs within one basic course program. Do instructors in this course view students as being in class to learn and grow? Or are they suspicious that their students are there because it is a required course? Instructors who view students from Theory X might highlight tests and grades as a way to control students in the classroom. Conversely, instructors who tend to believe in Theory Y might highlight tests and grades as a way to control students in the classroom. Conversely, instructors who tend to believe in Theory Y might allow more participative decision-making in the classroom and might encourage more class participation. An investigation that categorizes instructors by these perceptions and then compares their classrooms, their syllabi, their communication strategies, their teaching styles, and various effects on student attitudes and learning in those sections may yield useful information.

Understanding the linkage between basic course director viewpoint and various GTA variables (including their tendency to use Theory X/Y), might help researchers predict working relationships that will and will not be effective. Similarly, recognizing viewpoints held by GTAs may help basic course directors better train and supervise individuals within a given program. Knowing when and how predispositions conflict with course philosophy will aid basic course directors in anticipating problems.
Closely related to the notion of Theory X/Y is the assumption that how an instructor (or basic course director) views his or her and the role of students in the class may be evident from the rules created for that class. Rules theory calls for the identification of prescriptions that guide (but do not always ensure) behavior in the classroom. Some rules are implicit and followed without discussion or even conscious knowledge; others are explicit and may be open for discussion. Some rules are negotiable and others are not. In all cases, rules are prescriptions for how people "should" behave but cannot guarantee that those people will, indeed, behave in a way that complies with the rule. The degree to which the behavior is observable and consequences of rule following (or violating) influence the predictive power of this construct.

Certainly the course syllabus sets up a framework for classroom interaction and course completion. Perhaps an instructor requires attendance or established a late paper policy or allows rewrites for certain papers; all of these examples constitute one type of rule. Similarly, rules for classroom interaction develop: Do students interact spontaneously or is it required to raise hands? To what degree may students critique each other's work — and each other's communication abilities? To what degree may they provide feedback to the instructor about his/her communication skills? What are the sanctions for not reading prior to attending class? What are the rewards for being prepared? To what degree are the rules open for negotiation? How do students learn the rules? Does knowing the rules result in better performance and higher satisfaction for students? If so, which types of rules are most implicated in this relationship?

Perhaps, classifying basic courses by "type" using some sort of rule-based coding scheme could provide a variable that would be of value to basic course researchers. Are rigidly-
defined basic courses qualitatively different than courses that evolve through group negotiation? In what ways? In what ways are rule structures and rule-following related to class cohesion and climate? Is there a “type” of rule structure that leads to maximal learning in basic speech communication courses? Certainly the degree to which instructors make rules known and the degree to which students follow established rules are ways to differentiate sections of the basic course. Consequences for rule violation also serve to differentiate basic courses. The adaptability of rules might be tied to instructor variables (power, status, credibility, academic rank, etc.) and to student variables (attitudes, participation, involvement, etc.) and effects of the course (on students’ attitudes, communication abilities, decision-making skills, etc.). Perhaps a rigidly defined course results in lower student motivation than a more flexible course? Or perhaps a course in which rules are primarily explicit creates a more “safe” and comfortable environment for risk-taking than one in which the rules seem uncertain and changing? Perhaps lack of attention to rules at the beginning of the course leads to more dogmatic behavior from instructors later in the term? All of these are possible questions framed from within a rule-based perspective.

Blake and Mouton’s Managerial Grid

Blake and Mouton’s model (1964) is based on the need for balance between concern for people and concern for getting the job done. From their perspective, managers who are able to balance interpersonal needs with task needs are likely to be most effective.

Again, it would be possible to frame a study that would look either at basic course directors across all basic courses or instructors/CTAs across a multi-section course at one
institution. Characterizing those individuals according to task and maintenance messages and strategies might serve as a variable for investigating GTA performance, learning as a result of training provided by that basic course director, attitudes toward teaching, attitudes toward students, and student performance and satisfaction. Identification of a tendency toward one or the other also might serve as a way to screen possible applicants for GTA and/or UTA positions within a given course, if the data do, indeed, substantiate the hypothesis that a balanced perspective will yield the best results in the basic course context. Investigations of conflicts that emerge as task-oriented basic course directors attempt to work with maintenance-oriented GTAs (or vice versa) might yield interesting suggestions for managing (or avoiding) such conflict.

**Ouchi’s Organization Types**

Yet another model for contrasting organizations, developed by Ouchi (1981), deals with the “culture” that evolves and changes as the organization grows. Type A organizations are considered to be typical of most American organizations: characterized by individual independence, responsibility, and specialization. People in the organization advance through their own initiative and creativity. In Type J organizations, typical of those in Japan, employees anticipate lifetime employment, participate in consensual decision-making and collective responsibility, and follow nonspecialized career paths. Everyone benefits from the labors of their fellow workers.

Because of the many common goals and needs associated both with graduate school and with teaching multi-section basic courses, it may be the case that some basic course “cultures” have abandoned some of the Type A characteristics
in favor of what Ouchi calls Type Z organizations. Researchers might investigate relationships between the leadership style of the basic course director, the "culture" of the basic course organization, and various outcome and satisfaction variables for GTAs and students enrolled in the courses. Certainly, identification of culture variables may serve useful in eventual categorization of basic course hierarchies. Furthermore, identifying the rules and rituals for entering the culture may help basic course directors better socialize new GTAs for their roles, especially in departments in which GTAs teach the same courses for more than one year and, thus become "mentors" to the newcomers. Certainly, recognizing the variables that help new GTAs or instructors "identify" with the organization would allow basic course directors to more effectively manage the transition from undergraduate student to GTA.

Other variables of interest might be conflicts between individual GTA needs and needs identified by the basic course director, interpersonal and communication abilities, administrative style, leadership, mentoring, and communication between and within subgroups. If certain aspects of Type Z organizations improve relationships, it might be possible to incorporate more of those elements into a program.
Schein's Internal Integration Model

In a greatly expanded view of the organization as a culture, Schein (1985) described many of the functions of culture in organizations. One model which might have particular applicability to the basic course is his model of internal integration of organizational members. Six sets of variables comprise this model: 1) common language and conceptual categories; 2) group boundaries and criteria for inclusion and exclusion; 3) power and status; 4) intimacy, friendship, and love; 5) rewards and punishments; and 6) ideology and “religion.” Any or all of these components could be investigated relative to how culture develops among GTAs in a multi-section program and the functions that culture provides for the development and maintenance of the basic course. Variables might include the jargon of training, strategies used by the basic course director and others to build group cohesion, verbal and nonverbal indicators of boundaries and coalitions, messages that convey power/status, roles that individuals play in the system/culture, degree of interconnectedness among individuals, strategies used by the basic course instructors, either as a whole or as subsets of the whole.

Network/Social Support Perspectives

Information flow studies which examine the hierarchy at various institutions and the ways in which messages move through the system might add insight into desirable models for basic course administrators. Both the formal, hierarchical and the more informal social networks (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Burt and Minor 1983) might be of interest to basic course researchers. Similarly, it would be possible to examine
effects on students and instructors from various “types” of information hierarchies of various social networks. A comparison among institutions using degree of interconnectedness of faculty, basic course director, department chair/head, GTAs, UTAs, interns, and students in the basic course might help basic course directors better train and supervise the GTAs or instructors working in their coursees (see, for example, McCallister and Fischer, 1983). Similarly, student learning and satisfaction may be maximized in some networks and minimized in others, based on availability and accuracy of information, support provided to instructors teaching the sections, and relative position of the basic course director in the organization hierarchy.

*Interpretive Approaches*

Thus far, the approaches discussed tend to focus on systems, relationships, actions, structure, and environment. They tend also to focus on quantitative research methodologies. Basic course researchers also might examine the basic course organization as “a social construction existing in an expressive relationship to its context” (Smircich, 1977). In other words, research questions might address ways in which basic course administrators strategically manage the system of meaning that constitutes the basic course, and they might do so by incorporating qualitative research methods. How do basic course directors influence the ways in which instructors in that course create their perceptions of the course? What metaphors develop in a given program that define (and potentially limit) that program? How do basic course directors negotiate shared meanings with GTAs? How do GTAs negotiate shared meanings with their students? What symbols tend to define the nature of the basic course program for the people in it? How are these symbols
interpreted and to what degree do they influence the successfulness of the basic course program? To what degree do GTAs view themselves as a collectivity and what symbols do they use to reinforce that view? These and many other questions could be posed to help basic course researchers better understand the nature of the basic course environment.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The frameworks just discussed do not begin to exhaust the many approaches that might be used to generate research questions about the basic course in speech communication. Many other theoretical perspectives from management, leadership, systems theory, organizational socialization, administrative behavior, industrial psychology and so on may be called upon as theoretical bases for basic course research. What was intended was to show the vast untapped store of resources available for faculty and administrators interested in investigating the basic course in speech communication and the many provocative questions that might be answered from these various perspectives. Rather than limit our investigations to the traditional variables associated with education (learning styles, teaching styles, class environment, etc.), it would be advantageous to begin utilizing variables from other communication contests, as well as from other disciplines outside of speech communication. Our research agenda for the 1990s must reach across contextual boundaries and try for a more holistic, generalizable, approach. In addition, collaborative efforts between speech communication researchers and basic course researchers outside of our field will add both to our theoretical and pragmatic progress in understanding and improving the all-important basic course.
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