



Rethinking anthropology's contribution to development studies

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Abstract

Recent work exploring student reactions to the anthropology of development highlights the importance of going beyond simply imparting practical skills, or alternatively delivering content that offers an unrelenting critique (Djohari 2011; Handler 2013). In this paper, I argue that by casting an anthropological eye *on* the classroom, teachers can provide a learning environment in which students transform into reflective 'novice' practitioners equipped for lifelong learning. This involves making explicit the processes of knowledge construction in the classroom, and by extension, the development field. It entails providing the resources through which students can become social beings in the development sector, with attention to expanding the possibilities for the formation of multiple identities.

Introduction

Two recent articles raise critical concerns about students' experiences of the anthropology of development that rarely get discussed in the literature. Handler (2013) writing from the University of Virginia, laments the lack of critical reflection of students in the inter-disciplinary development studies programs. Personal biographies, often including time in the *Peace Corps*, have sparked students' passion for global service, but it is a passion largely oblivious to the power relations inherent in development projects. Djohari (2011) has encountered the obverse (and for me more familiar) problem at the University of Sussex. She found that students of development studies were disheartened after confronting anthropological critiques of development. The experience caused them to question their life projects and self-identifications, as their backgrounds and aspirations in the development sector were tainted by anthropological revelations. While presenting contrasting problems, Handler (2013) and Djohari (2011) both speak to the issue of what kind of graduates emerge from our courses and programs. Neither the naïve idealist nor the disheartened cynic graduate seems appropriate for development practice or research.

Such a concern is not limited to anthropological approaches to development studies. The department of Development Studies at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia, is a multi-disciplinary group of scholars. We share an interest in development, but from different scholarly backgrounds including international relations, sociology, environmental science, and anthropology. Striking a balance between critical engagement with development, without foreclosing pathways into development practice, is a central concern of our undergraduate program, and one that has been the topic of reflection within our team. This paper is my contribution to these reflections, drawing upon three years of experience teaching master and undergraduate students in anthropology, development studies and cognate fields of Asian Studies and Globalisation studies. I suggest anthropologists teaching in Development Studies should consider their contribution as being more than offering a "critical" approach to the project of development, and/or enabling students to "add" culture to development interventions. Instead, I argue that anthropological dispositions of curiosity and appreciation of alterity are foundational for all development studies students, regardless of their core disciplinary background. Further, anthropological theories about learning, knowledge construction and identity formation can usefully guide pedagogy within inter-disciplinary teaching teams.

This paper is a starting point to reflect on anthropology's contribution to the teaching of development studies, with relevance for other sub-fields within anthropology. I draw on the literature in anthropology and higher education to consider not what we should teach within the anthropology of development (the implicit question of Handler 2013 and Djohari 2011), but rather the types of learning that we make possible in our courses. By this I mean to shift the focus from questions of content towards considering how the experiences of the classroom produce graduates able to act upon the world in constructive ways. This entails creating a learning environment in which students transform into reflective "novice" practitioners, equipped for lifelong learning with an anthropological lens.

What can students of development learn from anthropology?

In interdisciplinary fields within the "neoliberal" university, it is easy for decisions about curriculum to be based on criteria of efficiency (resource availability), rather than ensure that students receive the training and knowledge necessary for the field. In other words, anthropologists need to be clear as to the specific and important contribution that the discipline provides for students of development studies. The aim is to identify "didactic scholarly knowledge", or how the subject should be "best learned and taught", rather than scholarly disciplinary knowledge "won as a result of their own studies and research" (Booth 1997: 139). The question raised by Handler (2013) and Djohari (2011) and within our own discussions at UNSW, is to what extent we provide a critical approach to development, and in what ways does that influence students preparedness to become development practitioners. This reflects a distinction between the "anthropology of development"—ethnographic inquiries of intentional development often "characterised by a critical distance and basic hostility" (Lewis 2005: 1)—and "development anthropology"—an applied field in which "culture" and poor people's voices are incorporated into development projects (Escobar 1991). This distinction is blurring in practice (Lewis 2005), but it nonetheless remains an uncomfortable presence when reflecting on what we should teach in development studies.

Without disregarding the importance of the question as to how students can learn how to *do* development alongside the problems with the overall project itself, I argue that a focus on this dilemma detracts from the more important contribution anthropology can make to development studies. The National Network for Teaching and Learning in Anthropology (NNTLA) in 1995 described anthropology teaching as being

oriented towards promoting the recognition of the relevance, viability and dignity of cultures in their diversity... This enables the recognition of the embeddedness of social relations in wider socio-economic frameworks, and develops the potential for comparative analysis (Mitchell 1996: 24).

Anthropology allows us to go beyond considering different subjective perspectives of the same reality, to, perhaps more radically, reveal different ontologies and realities altogether—what Hage (2012) describes as a "radical cultural alterity". In highlighting that there are other realities, anthropology reveals that our own "reality" is only one of a number of possibilities.

Anthropology thus establishes a disposition, or *habitus* (Coleman 2011), which includes a recognition and appreciation of other ways of being and living. It is this disposition that has prompted anthropologists to be foremost in the critiques of the post-development school (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1992; Grillo and Stirrat 1997), and in particular the rejection of singular ideas of "modernity" based on Western ontologies. While teaching the history of anthropology's contribution to these critiques is central to Development Studies curriculum, as critical is students' development of an anthropological *habitus* that makes such insights "natural". In other words, rather than teaching the "anthropology of development" as a means to disrupt assumptions about the virtuousness of the development project, it is perhaps better to first teach appreciation of cultural diversity and alterity as a means for students to arrive at similar conclusions. This imparts a criticality, but without resorting to unrelenting critique.

Didactic knowledge also needs to include the capabilities to use these understandings in practice. Grillo (1996) realistically assessed the need to offer courses of applied anthropology in conditions of a tightening job market and at a time when only a small percentage of graduates continued to higher degrees. The need to appeal to students by offering relevant degrees that can get them a job, shifted the perspective of what should be taught, so that: “Anthropology should be seen as a transferable skill, or enskilmment, rather than a body of knowledge” (Mitchell 1996: 24). Coleman (2011), however, observed in his cohort of anthropology students that instrumentality was but one motivating factor for students to take on certain degrees. Many of his students were what he describes as “bricoleurs”, who “enlisted their anthropology as part of a more ambitious project of self-building” (2011: 6), and which share characteristics with the naïve idealists that Handler (2013) teaches, and describe much of the student cohort in development studies at UNSW. For both types of students, however, they are often motivated towards action. It is therefore not enough to *see* the world as an anthropologist, one needs to know how to put this vision to use in various occupations.

The answer need not be, however, teaching applied anthropology to produce “useful” knowledge. Strathern (2006) regrets current pressures to only produce knowledge that is ‘relevant’, and that leads to action. Anthropology, she insists, is valuable for its curiosity that leads to rich contextual knowledge not bound to answering particular questions. The “residual” knowledge may be “useless” in that its immediate worth is not recognised, but it also has the potential to reveal previously hidden relations. It is this “curiosity” that I suggest is often, at least in my experience, missing when teaching development from an anthropological perspective. Rather than learning how to produce anthropological knowledge for development with a particular audience in mind (policy makers, donors, development agencies), a better approach may be to instil a curiosity about “development contexts” (sites embedded within relations and thick with the discourses and institutions of development) and more broadly processes of societal change. This is not to preclude working in interdisciplinary teams to answer particular questions, but to make explicit anthropology’s contribution as being found in the extraneous bits of knowledge that does not always fit into a predetermination of usefulness.

Prior to the question of how to teach anthropology’s engagement with development as either critique or application, is the ways we enable students to develop the dispositions and *habitus* of the anthropologist. This includes an appreciation of cultural diversity and alterity, as well as a curiosity that extends beyond the production of “useful” knowledge. While this is most useful for students who decide anthropology is the disciplinary foundation for their study of development, such dispositions are also important for graduates involved in development research or practice from different disciplinary perspectives. What I suggest is not a “delivery” of a body of knowledge, but enabling the development of skills for a lifetime of learning, re-learning and un-learning (Weimer 2002: 49). Both the development sector, which values (at least rhetorically) learning, and anthropology, in which seasoned practitioners spend much of their life as cultural novices, are perhaps particularly equipped to provide such an education.

The classroom as a site for co-construction of knowledge

“Development...is fundamentally a “knowledge industry”” (Powell 2006: 19). Development practitioners and researchers will be engaging in a career in which knowledge is produced for, and about, development. Further, awareness, consciousness raising and “sensitising” (changing perspectives) are pervasive development activities (Jakimow 2012), all of which are based on (the assumption that) learning takes place in the development “field”. It is therefore critical that teachers of development studies prepare students for a lifetime of learning, and to understand the very processes through which learning and knowledge construction take place. I argue that this preparation begins by presenting the classroom as a site in which students learn about the social processes of knowledge construction by becoming active participants.

Anthropological perspectives on knowledge and learning are useful starting points to reflect on the ways our teaching practices do, or do not, achieve this. Pelisser states that “teaching and

learning—the social processes involved in constructing, acquiring, and transforming knowledge—lie at the heart of anthropology” (Pelissier 1991: 75). Research in areas such as cultural transmission, knowledge generation and apprenticeship examine in various ways how learning occurs in everyday life, and in institutional settings such as universities. Central to an anthropological understanding is that learning is social—learning occurs not as an individual pursuit, but in interaction with others including through texts (Booth 1997; Hansen 1982; Jarvis *et al.* 2004; Pelissier 1991) and in relationship with the phenomena itself (Ramsden 2003). Learning occurs within a cultural context, and while individuals have cognitive abilities and intellectual capacities, “all of these develop in interaction with, indeed by means of, dense cultural contexts” (Hansen 1982: 190).

In an early review, Hansen (1982) preferred the term knowledge transmission to the anthropology of learning, but I feel that knowledge construction is a more appropriate terminology for understanding what occurs in the classroom. This moves beyond out-dated notions of knowledge (or culture) being “delivered”, filling students much like an empty vessel, to consider how interactions between teacher and students, and students and students, lead to the construction of knowledges (in the plural). Such an approach is complementary to the so-called “knowledge agenda” of the development sector (Jakimow 2008) that has emerged in response to post-development critiques. Learning is a dominant “buzzword” (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth 2000; Hoyalnd 2003; Pasteur 2006), and development practitioners are expected to be reflective, consultative, and open to revising their assumptions. An appreciation of the processes in which knowledge is constructed, particularly power (of which more is said below) is central to this agenda.

In the higher education literature, a phenomenographic approach considers the ways that people experience phenomena in various ways (Booth 1997), or in anthropological terms, how individuals’ subjectivities mediate how people interpret the world and their experiences. As Booth (1997) argues, students’ prior perspectives and experiences mediate how they approach content, resulting in a difference between teacher intentions of what students learn, and what they actually learn. A positive move in both anthropology and the higher education literature is a recognition of the role of emotions, feelings, senses and affect in learning (Andersen 2003). Individual subjectivities are not solely an amalgam of concrete experiences and social identities, but also affective dispositions; ingrained feelings and emotions are central to our ways of seeing the world (Ortner 2005; Moore 2007). Emotions not only shape people’s perspectives and thereby their engagement with learning, the context of learning also evokes emotions that can be either an assistance, or a hindrance to learning (Nasir and Cooks 2009).

The point that individuals experience phenomena (such as learning) in varying ways may be obvious to anthropologists, yet is not always imparted as a lesson in development studies—a field in which people must appreciate, and in some ways reconcile the multiple perspectives of people from different cultures, experiences, classes, gender and so on. Lange (2013: 49) argues that anthropology has an “epistemological flexibility” and an openness to other people’s way of knowing. Anthropology “deals not only in knowledge about others, but also in *the knowledge that others possess*” (Lange 2013: 48 emphasis in original), thereby making it particularly well suited to inclusiveness in knowledge construction. Anthropologists teaching development studies can use the challenges of an interdisciplinary and culturally mixed classes, to reveal these different perspectives, to demonstrate how these mediate understandings, and to impart skills of bringing together different epistemological perspectives.

A critical role of the teacher is therefore to provide opportunities for the expression of students’ perspectives (Booth 1997), but for purposes that go beyond correcting misunderstanding. In addition, turning the classroom into an illustration of how different perspectives shape knowledge(s) helps students to respond to Chambers (1997) important question *Whose reality counts?* in development projects, and the critique in development more generally that so-called ‘experts’ ignore local knowledge in the imposition of their solutions. Different perspectives

include not only culturally specific 'rationalities', but also the emotions that people bring to the subject matter, and which is generated in the class/field itself.

In a similar way, a constructivist approach to learning helps us teach more effectively, while also providing an important illustration of ongoing processes of knowledge construction in development. A constructivist approach considers how "learners construct knowledge with their own activities, building on what they already know" (Biggs and Tang 2007: 21). Learners have something to contribute from their own experiences, and the teacher is not the sole repository of knowledge (Jerram 2002: 370). Unreflexively drawing on experiences is not enough, however, to develop new understandings and to construct new knowledges. Andersen (2003) argues for an experience-based learning, in which "learners analyse their experiences by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it...in order to draw meaning from it in light of prior experience" (225). Rather than merely 'add' to existing knowledge, learning transforms understandings and perspectives, reconstructing knowledge anew.

A constructivist approach and experiential based learning achieve two objectives in the teaching of anthropology of development. First, when time is given to reflect on the processes of knowledge construction, students gain further understanding of how knowledge is constructed in the development field. Second, a constructivist approach helps students to understand how the deconstruction of development through an anthropological lens is the starting point for the production of new (and hopefully improved) knowledge; that is, how the anthropology of development is useful to practitioners. Djohari's (2011) students, and many of my own, have experienced the critique, and deconstruction of development as disheartening, and unproductive. I suggest that a constructivist approach, in which students are explicitly asked to draw upon their experiences (including in the classroom) to tackle 'real-life' stimulated problems of development can demonstrate the relevance of their knowledge. The classroom changes from a site in which students learn 'fixed' knowledge, to inviting students to participate in the production of new knowledge, based on their experiences and interpretations and drawing upon the additional content that teachers provide. Students do not learn new content, they *use* content to produce new / revised knowledge (Weimer 2002).

The social construction of knowledge is not, however, a power neutral process. Knowledge is distributed unevenly in society, and power relations determine what is considered appropriate knowledge, how this knowledge is distributed and how it can be used (Barth 1990; Foucault 1974; Hansen 1982). Processes of knowledge production and distribution also reaffirm social relations, such as Barth's (1990) famous examination of Gurus and conjurer in Bali and Melanesia respectively. Teaching and learning therefore contribute to the production and maintenance of hierarchical relations, a contribution no less evident in universities and patently obvious in the development field (Chambers 1994; Escobar 1995). While Bastide (2011) argues that teachers must "find the right power distance" (62), a more effective approach comes from Weimer (2002: 9), who seeks to "redistribute power in the classroom". This acknowledges that power imbalances can be a detriment for learning, but perhaps more importantly, acknowledges the classroom as a site for shifting power relations beyond the classroom. I suggest that teaching and learning can become vehicles for social change as Weimer argues, through explicit inquiry into the way knowledge is constructed.

As noted above, the "knowledge agenda" in development explicitly seeks to acknowledge and address power differentials in the construction of knowledge for and about development (Jakimow 2008). I suggest that the classroom can become an illustration of how knowledge is constructed in practice, recognising the power of the teacher to direct knowledge construction and the privileging of their perspective. Purposeful exercises and roleplays bring these abstract lessons to life, as students are invited to experience how status (poor, uneducated, expert, privileged) enables and prevents them to contribute to knowledge construction, and the frustration when one's knowledge is ignored. Exercises in which knowledge dynamics are acknowledged, and reversed, not only lead to better student enjoyment, they are important

lessons as to the empowering potential of being included in knowledge production that are transferable to the development field.

The cultural context of learning is one of the most important lessons we can impart to our students. Anthropological theories of learning and knowledge construction can both usefully guide pedagogy, as well as provide students with analytical lenses through which to view these ubiquitous practices in development. Knowledge is introduced not as fixed, but contingent upon different understandings and open to contestation and transformation. We need to invite students into this (re)construction of knowledge, producing *new* knowledge in the classroom, rather than imparting all that we know. Such an approach presumes, however, that students will be willing to question their own cultural bases of learning, and their (upon graduation) privileged role in knowledge production: that is, that they will assume an appropriate role and identity in development. It is to the opportunities for students to acquire such an identity that we now turn.

The classroom as a site for the development of identities

Learning not only involves the acquisition (or production) of knowledge or shifts in perspectives, but also the production and enactment of social identities. As Pelissier (1990: 82) notes “education, broadly conceived, is seen as the means by which individuals are recruited to be members of a culture, and by which culture is maintained”. From birth, we are socialised within a cultural context, learning how to use language and behave in certain ways that are mutually comprehensible and socially appropriate. Individuals learn the norms, beliefs and activities of that culture, and how one interprets and makes meaning of the world. This habitus (Bourdieu 1990) thereby not only develops abilities to participate in social and cultural practices, but also entails “shifts in ways of thinking” (Nasir and Cooks 2009) and the (re)framing of subjectivities. Learning is thereby critical to the production of social beings (Pelissier 1990).

While Pelissier (1990) was primarily referring to processes of socialisation and cultural transmission, learning in universities also contributes to self-becoming. The university can be considered an introduction and admission to a community of practice, requiring commensurate identities and ways of seeing the world (Wenger 1998). Identity is “a way of talking about how learning changed who we are and [that] creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (Wenger 1998: 5). Learning therefore becomes social participation, which “shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (Wenger 1998: 4). Students come to university with prior narratives about their social roles, self-understandings as “global actors” and “personal biographies” which get revised throughout the course of their study. The teacher’s role is therefore not only to impart knowledge, but to help students to evolve their understanding of themselves within a community of practice.

Most students on entering university feel anxious and a fraud (Weimer 2002). The initial period of ‘self-becoming’ therefore requires the development of capacities to participate in the practices and discourses of the discipline (Northedge 2003). Developing students’ ability to speak and think in specialist discourses are critical to their apprenticeship within a community of practice, and for students’ journeys from peripheral to full participation (Pelissier 1990). By transforming the ability of students to participate in this social world, it opens up possibilities for new identities (Nasir and Cooks 2009). Discursive capabilities are only one set of resources that learners draw upon in reframing their identities and claiming membership. Nasir and Cooks (2009) argue for the importance of material resources, “relational resources (interpersonal connections to others in the setting), and ideational resources (ideas about oneself and one’s relationship to and place in the practice and the world, as well as ideas about what is valued and what is good) (2009: 44).

These different types of resources identify the importance of factors beyond educational content. Nasir and Cooks (2009) highlight, for example, the importance of the relationship between expert and novice for learning outcomes, and in particular the emotional support and encouragement that the latter provides (see also Gieser 2008).

One can distinguish between providing the resources for identity formation and participation in a community of practice, and indoctrinating students into certain critical or celebratory perspectives. The challenge for teachers of the anthropology of development is encouraging a rethinking of one's positioning within a set of power relations as advocated by Handler (2013), without making students like "strangers in their own homes, unable to integrate themselves into former ways of life" (Coleman and Simpson 2004, cited in Djohari 2011: 22). Relationships within the classroom are crucial to enable students to use experiences of learning as resources in self-formation, rather than in a rejection of a former sense of self, or feelings of exclusion. As students seek to please their peers and their teacher, they adopt perspectives that will evoke a positive response (that being in agreement, even if in mutual anger or disappointment). In university classrooms, fierce critique of development often gains approval, while even mild optimism is seen as at best naïve, or at worse, neo-imperialist.

Universities should therefore not cultivate a singular "development practitioner", but enable multiple identities to emerge from within our courses. Processes of self-formation are in any case not predetermined; in the context of learning, people's prior 'being in the world' (Gieser 2008) and subjectivities will inform how students use resources in self-making projects. On the other hand, individuals are not free to cultivate themselves without cultural referents; they draw upon pre-existing cultural resources and become social beings able to contribute and remake this culture (Moore 2007; Foucault 1994). People therefore have agency to become members of a community of practice within a range of possibilities; our role as teachers should be to expand these possibilities, not close them off.

One form of self-understanding that I believe could be useful for all students of development, regardless of their political positions vis-à-vis the project of development, is that of "novice". This can be cultivated by considering the classroom as a model for how learning occurs in the development field. As learning and teaching is interactional, subject positions and identities are evoked between self and other (Hansen 1982; Jarvis et al. 2004). These are relational, with individuals acquiring the role of expert, skilled, knowledgeable, or novice, apprentice, ignorant. These social-positionings occur within the classroom, sustaining the 'power distance' between teachers and students (Bastide 2011). In the development field, these respective positionings reaffirm the role of the developer as expert, in the process, casting the "developee" as ignorant (Hobart 1993).

While scholars of development have critiqued these positionings in the development field, seldom do we model behaviour that would challenge hierarchies in our own classrooms. To do so does not mean to ignore teacher's knowledge and expertise and its usefulness to guide student learning (Northedge 2003), but rather to make explicit our own activities to continually learn from others, particularly from research respondents and development participants. As anthropologists, we often taking on a novice identity, as apprenticeship is both "the *object* and the *means* of inquiry" (Wacquant 2005: 465). That is, the process of learning from others to become a member of a culture is a method for knowledge generation and interpretation. These processes are important for development practitioners whatever their disciplinary backgrounds, crucial to combat top-down knowledge production and transmission, and as a counter to the regime of development expertise (Ferguson 1991). Students should not graduate as "experts", but as lifelong learners within the community of practice of development. Anthropology can help students develop a "novice" identity: a process that begins with an emulation of the teacher's own practices in the classroom.

Conclusion

Handler (2013) and Djohari's (2011) articles prompt reflection as to how to teach the anthropology of development in ways that achieve critical thinking without cynicism, and knowledge for action without naïve idealism. In this way they are connected to debates about anthropology's role in development more generally (Escobar 1991; Ferguson 1997; Lewis 2005;

Marsden 2012): the two perspectives of which (critique and practice) are often evident in the texts we use to teach (see for example Crewe and Axelby 2013; Nolan 2002; Schech and Haggis 2000). Without discounting the important of reconciling this issue, I argue that anthropology's contribution to development is more than just a matter of what we teach. It is also a resource for thinking about the types of learning we make possible in our classrooms.

I have outlined three contributions that anthropology makes to development studies at the undergraduate level. First, introducing students to the dispositions and ways of thinking of an anthropologist, including an appreciation of cultural alterity and a learnt curiosity, are useful for an analytical deconstruction of development, as well as the reconstruction of knowledge about development to improve practice. Second, explicit reflection on processes of learning and knowledge within the classroom will help students learn that a) knowledge is contingent, open to contestation and shaped by power; b) students', researchers' and practitioners' positioning within those relations of power, and; c) the ways knowledge construction becomes a site for the affirmation and formation of identities and social hierarchies. Finally, consideration of how identities are formed within the classroom helps teachers to provide the resources through which students can become social beings in the development sector, making possible the acquisition of multiple and different identities whether these be scholarly critic, development practitioner or others.

All these lessons are applicable, indeed critical to development as a field of action or research. Their relevance go beyond development studies, however, as the necessity to impart skills of inclusive knowledge production and enabling multiple identities are critical to a wide variety of disciplines and occupations. For example, Derges et al. (2012) reflect on a collaboration between anthropologists and mental health specialists in India, with one of their goals being a "greater understanding of what constitutes global health" (2012: 5). They highlight the need to critically enquire as to how learners and teachers acquire certain knowledge, particularly in post-colonial contexts where knowledge hierarchies and multiple life-worlds can silence some voices. Further, as increasingly work is undertaken in inter-disciplinary teams, an awareness and openness to other ways of knowing, and bringing together different perspectives, is an important contribution of anthropology graduates (Langes 2013). Anthropological dispositions and ways of seeing social phenomena such as learning and identity can therefore be useful in other sub-fields.

I have offered my reflections as to what anthropology can offer development studies students at UNSW Australia. More research is required, however, in order to guide and evaluate changed practices. I agree with Coleman's (2011) call for ethnographies of our classrooms, and in particular the necessity to trace the projects of self-becoming made possible through our degrees. The ways student identities change through the course of their study and beyond is an important topic for future research. So too are the changes in attitudes towards knowledge construction. Do second and third year students still hope to absorb the knowledge of their teacher (or guru) much like they did at high-school, or do they engage in collaborative practices of knowledge construction with their peers? Which learning activities and subtle messages help in this transition? How does this translate into different practices beyond the university? In short, I feel that we have only just scratched the surface of understanding anthropology's contribution to teaching development studies: a contribution worthy of further reflection, and promotion.

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