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Partners As Newcomers: Mixed-Role Partnerships As Communities of Practice

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A growing body of scholarly work, including this journal, highlights the transformative possibilities of student-faculty partnerships in higher education. For example, Pat Hutchings and Mary Taylor Huber from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching conclude "an expanded conception of the student role in the scholarship of teaching and learning clearly brings significant benefits for those involved" (2010, p. xiv). We believe that this extends beyond student-faculty to other mixed-role partnerships in higher education, including those between K-12 teachers and university faculty. Catherine King and colleagues (2010), for instance, analyzed partnerships between K-12 teachers and college faculty in three different states, finding that these also provide a "middle ground" for critical conversations about learning and teaching. A variety of mixed-role partnerships, the emerging research seems to suggest, have the potential to produce powerful outcomes in our classrooms and in our institutions.

Drawing on the "communities of practice" conceptual framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this article offers two case studies of the experience and practice of mixed-role partnerships in higher education. This framework, specifically its emphasis on participation in overlapping communities, highlights important aspects of the in-between-ness experienced by people in mixed-role partnerships. Power operates in particularly complex ways in such partnerships, since some participants will have considerable power in one community and little in another, while others may be newcomers in multiple communities. Further, participants will hold different types of power within their various communities of practice. By exploring two distinct experiences with overlapping communities of practice, we intend to shed new light on the ways the power and other factors enable and constrain full participation in mixed-role partnerships in higher education.

Mixed-Role Partnerships: What the Literature Says

The literature on mixed-role partnerships acknowledges both the potential and the difficulty of such partnerships. Mixed-role collaborations complicate traditional notions of status and responsibility, and challenge conventional roles and behaviors for the individuals and the institutions involved. Often they raise troubling questions about power and ethics (Decyk et al., 2010). Navigating the role shifts involved in partnership, moving between sometimes widely varied identities and crossing status hierarchies, may leave participants feeling uncomfortable and uncertain. The in-between experience of mixed-role partnerships, Cook-Sather and Alter contend (2011), can be understood through the lens of liminality. This anthropological concept typically refers to a transitional or threshold period between two well-defined social states, such as adolescence and adulthood. Anthropologists emphasize the power of a liminal state, when boundaries are fluid and norms are challenged, and also the perils of that status, when a person is so in flux that nothing seems stable or certain.

Cook-Sather and Alter study a particular aspect of liminality in student-faculty partnerships, when undergraduate students are trained as pedagogical consultants to university faculty. While these student consultants have slipped out of the traditional undergraduate role and into a space between student and faculty, those same consultants are *not* necessarily transitioning *from* student *to* faculty status. Instead, the consultants "take up a liminal position between student and teacher not with the goal of transitioning from the former to the latter but rather with the goal of accessing and acting on the insights that such an indeterminate state affords and the potential that crossing and recrossing the limen has to transform ongoing teacher-student relationships" (p. 38). Cook-Sather and Alter identify this type of liminality as one effective way both to understand mixed-role partnerships and also to democratize teaching and learning in higher education.

The literature on Communities of Practice (CoP) provides another useful framework for exploring such relationships. The term "communities of practice" is relatively new, but the experience described by the term is familiar: "Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor" (Wenger 2006). Having a "domain" means that participants have a common interest or competence that sets them apart from others who are not participants in the group (e.g., artists, surgeons, high school teachers). Being in "community" means that participants share information and engage in domain-related activities that help all of them to learn and grow in this particular area. Having a "practice" distinguishes this group from others who simply have passing but common interests or passions; members of a CoP "develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" (Wenger 2006). Mixed-role partnerships in higher education vary considerably, but regardless of particulars these relationships seem to align well with the definition of CoP since each has a clear domain, community, and set of practices.

Central to CoP theory is the idea of participation. When someone joins a CoP, the newcomer begins peripherally, on the outskirts of the community. Over time, that person might remain on the periphery, or she might move towards becoming a full participant. This movement toward the core is complex, but it typically has more to do with the quality than the quantity of a person's engagement with a CoP; it's not about how much time you spend in the community, but how you spend that time. Often, the experience of being a newcomer is liminal, feeling unstable and in-between as the person seeks to understand the practices and identity of the community. Depending on the experience, *peripherality* can either be empowering or disempowering. If a person can access the resources of the community, including other members who hold varying levels of experience, the newcomer has developed "legitimate peripheral participation." At that point, the newcomer can begin to construct an identity (which Lave and Wenger define as "long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice", 1991, p. 53) and master the knowledge associated with the group. In other words, legitimate peripheral participation, while often feeling unstable and in-between, enables learning within a CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Such a trajectory, from newcomer to legitimate peripheral participant, seems to capture a common experience in mixed-role higher education partnerships.

This movement is complicated by the fact that individuals rarely if ever are members of only one community of practice. Instead, most people participate in several, often occupying different roles in different groups (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sometimes these roles and communities are overlapping, such as when a professional musician also teaches music at a college; at other

times, these can be tangential, involving roles or communities that have little to nothing in common, such as a music faculty member who also is a member of a quilting club. Participation in one CoP can provide a person with knowledge, skills, or attitudes that make it more or less likely to move off the periphery in another CoP. Overlapping communities, of course, are more likely to have complementary aspects, although sometimes individuals are able to draw on capacities developed in one CoP to move toward full participation in a very different CoP.

The Literacy Study Group (2010) provides an example of how participation in overlapping CoPs can both empower and disempower people. The Literacy Study Group involved a cohort of 15 primary and secondary school teachers pursuing Post Graduate Certificate in Education at a university in the UK. As part of the certification process, these teachers were included by their faculty in designing and implementing a research study, bringing them into a mixed-role CoP. While the teachers generally characterized their experiences within this research community as "a support network of the likeminded" (p. 15), they also noted that some aspects of other overlapping CoPs were marginalizing and negative. For example, one teacher wrote, "[I] certainly felt on the periphery of what was going on and at times, that I was intruding" (p. 11). Similarly, Cwikla (2007) found that in-service teachers in a specific US middle school who participated in overlapping CoPs encountered difficulties, as the "boundary encounters" between members of competing CoPs created friction within the school.

The attention in CoP theory to enabling and constraining provides a new lens for analyzing mixed-role partnerships. Like liminality, the CoP framework anticipates and normalizes the instability and uncertainty common as these partnerships begin – and is essential as a source of their transformative power. CoP theory extends this by providing insight into ways newcomers experience the activities and language of a community, often through behaviors, intentional or not, that demonstrate the power of other community members. The two case studies below explore particular instances of the newcomer experience in mixed-role partnerships, illustrating both the light CoP theory can shed on such work and also the complex ways that power shapes these partnerships.

Two Case Studies: Mark and Maggie

In the first case study, Mark, a veteran teacher who participated fully in a specific high school CoP, along with other master teachers, experienced newcomer status in a university research cohort. Such membership, as noted above (Cwikla, 2007; The Literacy Study Group, 2010), may or may not be empowering, and Mark's story illustrates that complexity. In the second case, Maggie explores how she moved from being a newcomer to a more full participant in several overlapping mixed-role communities of practice during her time as an undergraduate at Elon University. In both cases, Mark and Maggie focus on the experience of being a newcomer who attempts to enter more fully into participation within a mixed-role CoP in higher education.

Mark's Case:

In the fall of 2008, I joined the Elon Teaching and Learning Partnership (ETLP), a grant-funded project that brought together high school teachers and university faculty to design and implement research projects within their classrooms. As an experienced high school English teacher who

was considering whether to seek a Ph.D., I had for some time been interested in advancing my understanding and skills in areas of education I had not previously explored – namely in classroom research. I had taken preliminary steps in that direction by pursuing National Board of Professional Teaching Standards licensure. This process requires teachers to begin to think as researchers and affords a certain level of professionalism that typically is not accessible to those without its certification. More than this, though, ETLP more deeply immersed me in research by providing a dynamic mixed-role partnership between high school teachers like me and university faculty.

For me, ETLP was a site of overlapping CoPs, since I was simultaneously an experienced high school teacher and a *not-quite-researcher*. As a newcomer in this mixed-role CoP, I struggled with peripherality and definitely felt the in-between-ness of liminality. My identity within a CoP as a teacher who had 16 years of experience overlapped with my identity within another CoP as a researcher with very little experience. In short, ETLP became a site of liminality where my varying identities, like the CoPs, overlapped. Thus, similar to Cook-Sather and Alter's (2011) student consultant, whose position was "ambigu[ous] and indetermin[ate]" (p. 43), I took up a position which at times was uncertain.

As a member of a 14-person ETLP cohort (7 high school teachers and 7 university faculty) I attended monthly planning meetings to learn how to design my research study and critique other members' studies. My research project, I had hoped, would help me learn how best to support my tenth grade remedial English students. Going into the project, I had as my goal to implement an interventionist strategy that I could test for its effectiveness. I wanted to find out if using certain kinds of technology would facilitate student acquisition of writing skills. In the end I did, in fact, find that some word processors were more effective than others. And this was in itself a useful finding in that it could significantly affect my students. But, surprisingly, I also found that the ETLP experience was powerful in a different way, in that it served to significantly affect how I defined my own identity within   two overlapping CoPs as a high school teacher, as a participant in a research community, and as a hybrid of the two.

During ETLP it seemed as if I were joining a world that I had previously only visited – either for a workshop, or as a student, or as the token public school teacher on the university education committee – a world that for me only represented future potentialities. Although the university faculty welcomed me into the ETLP partnership, I still felt as though I were on the periphery, a visitor or even a spectator, as though I did not fully participate in any active or meaningful way. While my central professional identity was as an experienced teacher (i.e., English Department head, Leadership Team member), in ETLP I participated as a newcomer, not fully understanding the research process and its attendant jargon. Despite my goal of becoming more like a researcher, remaining a teacher meant that, as a participant, I did not necessarily move completely toward full participation; rather, I enacted multiple and at times overlapping identities within two CoPs (for examples of similar experiences, see: Light & Nash, 2006; Morton, 2012).

As Lave and Wenger (1991) note, this tension between partial and full participation is related to the ways the activities of and language in a CoP shape the experience of a newcomer associated with membership in a particular CoP. For me, acts of welcoming acceptance by the university

faculty enabled my sense of partnership and my emerging identity as a teacher-researcher. Although I took on this in-between role and despite the fact I had never conducted research, I was still treated as part of this community. In fact, due to my role as an experienced teacher in an overlapping public high school CoP, some faculty positioned me as a valuable member of the new research cohort, legitimizing my participation in ETLP. For example, I remember talking with one English professor who wanted to know about high school teachers' expectations for student writing. She characterized some of the first-year college students as 13th graders and wondered at their struggles with basic college writing skills. In this conversation, and others like it, I provided insight into the characteristics of future college students' development as writers, what skills they are taught in high school, and which would most likely need remediation. I also helped the faculty member, and others like her, to better understand the affective characteristics of the typical high school student – his interests, habits, and dispositions. As one professor told me, this information helped him "get a handle on who it was that sat in [his] freshman classes."

What these faculty members *did not need* from me was help in understanding how to conduct research. However, what they *did need* from me was help in understanding the personal, academic and social histories of their students. For me, this was an important point, because as Lave and Wenger (1991) note, it is not always the relationship between the master and apprentice that is most important for peripheral participation. Rather, it is "the issue of conferring legitimacy" (p. 92) and opportunities for the newcomer to engage in the practices of the community. This point was true for me; it was in the conferring of legitimacy (based on my identity as an experienced teacher) and on the opportunity to practice (at gathering and analyzing data as a novice researcher) that facilitated my learning. Instances like these indicated that, although my identity in the ETLP community may have been as a newcomer, my identity as an experienced member of an overlapping community of high school teachers was empowering, in that I was not always treated completely as a novice. Thus, my overlapping identities, in this respect, functioned to enable my participation.

On the other hand, other aspects of being a newcomer to the ETLP research community constrained my participation in this partnership. In particular, my limited knowledge of educational research practices and terminology regularly held me back. For example, I remember in the beginning feeling frustrated at not knowing what this term "IRB" was and why it was so important. I felt intimidated by the new language and by the experience the university faculty brought to the project, experience I didn't even know existed. After hearing my research idea, one philosophy professor said to me that I should use "a think aloud protocol" as a data collection strategy. I remember that while nodding my head up and down and up I was thinking: *What in the world is a think aloud? What is a protocol? I can't do this. I'm a fraud.*

This feeling, in some respect, can be understood as a newcomer's struggle to access a CoP. While residing in the in-between state, my limited repertoire of research skills and knowledge constrained my full participation in ETLP. Furthermore, taking on a new identity as a teacher-researcher highlighted a specific aspect of liminality – that of feeling unstable and uncertain. For instance, the first time I tried to take field notes in the five minutes between two of my classes, all I could think about while writing furiously was: *I know I'm leaving stuff out, I need someone here to help me, I'm not sure I can do this.* Even though I was developing new research skills

that were shared by other members of this CoP, I still *felt* like an outsider and an imposter in this CoP (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011).

Lave and Wenger note that such constraints may be a function of power differentials among participants within the CoP. They suggest that peripherality can be disempowering if the newcomer is prevented from or limited in his participation by others within the community, whether intentional or not. Because I was not versed in the language and activity of research, at times my participation was constrained – even when encouraging colleagues used that language to introduce me to the norms of the CoP. However, at other times (or even simultaneously) I felt valued for my expertise as an experienced high school teacher and, thus, enabled, and even empowered.

Ultimately, the identity that I had established in one CoP served to influence my membership, and my developing identity, in another overlapping CoP to the extent that it became a vehicle for my participation. Over time I did learn about think aloud protocols and other data collection techniques, and I developed some skills in research design and coding qualitative data, which further enabled my process of moving toward full participation in the research CoP. The more I interacted with the university faculty the more I learned the language and skills required for access to this CoP. Thus, what was at first constraining and disempowering, eventually became enabling and empowering. As I took on the teacher-researcher identity more strongly, I gained the confidence to pursue a PhD in Teacher Education. And, in part, because of my developing experience with the ETLP cohort, my initial dissertation topic focused on that in-between position, as a teacher-researcher conducting classroom research. It is clear to me, then, that who I am is not completely who I was; my identity is in flux. Since I now am pursuing a PhD in Teacher Education, I am neither solely a researcher nor am I solely a teacher. I am somewhere in-between.

Lave and Wenger suggest that we construct our identities and knowledge by participating peripherally in the kind of experience I noted above. They contend that such participation does not mean that there is necessarily "such a simple thing as 'central participation'" (p. 35). Rather, participation, whether peripheral or full, is a far more complicated notion, one that involves constantly changing relations that can (even at the same time) afford or prevent deeper engagement with a CoP. Additionally, Cook-Sather and Alter (2011) emphasize that taking up a position of liminality allows the participant to "access and act on the insights that such an indeterminate state affords." In the end, for me, the newcomer process was, indeed, empowering. Although at times it felt uncomfortable or even alien, it provided a vehicle for gaining access to a community that I previously viewed as closed to teachers. Over time, in addition to my identity as experienced teacher and as novice researcher, I lost my sense of being a newcomer and, in the end, took on a yet another identity, that of being a teacher-researcher.

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Maggie's case:

May 2012 marked my graduation from Elon University—a private liberal arts school of about 5,000 undergraduate students located in North Carolina. Being one of about forty philosophy

majors provided an educational environment where my relationships with my professors entailed daily interaction and collaboration. Since many of my philosophy courses consisted of just a handful of people, often nearly the same people, this intimate setting developed my confidence and my relationships with faculty, both of which were essential as I began to enter into student-faculty partnerships focused on teaching and learning. Ultimately, in my four years at Elon I became part of several overlapping CoPs, as a student, a philosopher, a co-teacher, and a scholar of teaching and learning. While at some point a newcomer to and peripheral in all of these CoPs, over time I became a more full participant in a few—such as student and co-teacher—while remaining peripheral in others.

For me, the necessary first step toward participation in *any*university CoP involved gaining critical thinking skills and recognizing myself as a serious thinking person who can create change. My transformation as a student began when I was enrolled in Ann Cahill's Critical Thinking course in the spring of 2009. Unlike any course I had ever encountered, the material was taught using a scaffolding pedagogy where I was unable to move on to new material before mastering the particular skill at hand (Cahill & Bloch-Schulman, 2012). One day during class—when I was working one-on-one with Ann—she posed the question, "What do you think?" I habitually turned back to the exercise I was working on in order to report what was in the argument. Ann stopped me, "No, what do *you* think?" This was the first time one of my educators authentically asked me this question. Previously, I had been trained to translate that question into meaning, "Report what you have read." It was an entirely startling and groundbreaking question, one that I could not immediately answer.

Critical Thinking became my primary focus that semester, and as I worked harder on the material, Ann worked with me more and more. Upon the completion of the course, I had started to transform into a more active and engaged student. I also gained more confidence. Accompanying these new skills and sense of confidence was a shift in my experience of power in the classroom. No longer was I consistently intimidated to raise my hand in classes, or break from or combine the material provided in classes to form my own, individual opinion; I had developed the ability effect change in the classroom. This experience marked my move from a newcomer to a more central participant in the CoP of Elon University undergraduates.

Because the course had such a huge impact on me, Ann and another professor, Stephen Bloch-Schulman invited me to share my experiences at the American Association of Philosophy Teacher (AAPT) conference during the summer of 2010. The two were giving a presentation regarding the pedagogy of the course and felt a student perspective would provide insights they could not. This was challenging for me as a student because I did not understand how I could say something useful that my professors were not already planning to say. After the presentation, however, I found myself not only answering questions from the audience, but also reshaping how my faculty co-presenters (Stephen and Ann) understood the course. Both my experience during the session and later conversations with Stephen and Ann about the session enabled me to shed some of my newcomer status in this mixed-role CoP. Still, my discomfort in and unfamiliarity with the conference setting reveals how my newness to a CoP of student-faculty partnership overlapped with, and was enabled by (and enabling of), my role in the student CoP. While my first impression of presenting to philosophy professors was that I'd be completely powerless, the ultimate outcome continued to help me recognize the power I held as a student.

I began to move away from being a newcomer in student-faculty partnership when Stephen invited another student, Frank Stiefel, and me to co-teach an Ethical Practice course with him. While the opportunity was necessarily initiated by Stephen due to his position as a faculty member, the execution of actually co-teaching would largely depend on whether or not Frank and I followed through on our commitment—whether or not we made the necessary arrangements to engage in extensive research on content and pedagogy over the following two and a half years. Due to the accountability we all held to one another we were able to eliminate much of the traditional hierarchical characteristics of student-faculty relationships. Here, we were all very conscious of the power differences based on our positions as either student and faculty, and along with that recognition came a commitment to both challenge and utilize the power of our positions. In fact, we were so conscious of these power differentials that Stephen eventually acquired the nickname "the Iron Hen." In instances where Frank and I were clearly barred from accomplishing a task due to our student status, we would call on the Iron Hen to use his "special, magical faculty powers," helping us all stay light-hearted when our mixed-role partnership was challenged, and challenged, the boundaries of existing CoPs. When entering a CoP focused on co-teaching I was certainly a newcomer, but the extent of the commitment I made caused me to move from the periphery to become a fuller participant, with more expertise, than did presenting at a conference.

The co-teaching experience was transformative. Throughout our years of preparation for the course we all learned from one another, engaging and playing off our particular strengths in both skills and content-knowledge, indicating that we all grew as thinkers and facilitators together. In other words, this deeply collaborative work transformed all three of us. By the conclusion of the Ethical Practice class that we taught together, I believe each of us became firmly—or more firmly—committed to the importance of working with others, recognizing how invaluable different perspectives and skills can be in an educational environment. As Lave and Wenger (1991) articulate that learning and identity changes in one CoP will affect your experience and participation in another CoP, the commitment we made to collaborative work impacts the methods I take up in my other CoPs.

The student-faculty partnership not only changed each of us, it also altered our proximity to opportunities that otherwise would not have been afforded to us. For instance, Stephen's role as a faculty member made him aware of professional conferences, and gave him access to funding, that were out of reach for Frank and me. Without the partnership I would not have been able to present at multiple academic conferences as an undergraduate, nor would I have established the professional connections I now have. In this sense, my legitimate peripheral participation in one CoP enabled access to participation in another CoPs. Further, my partnership with Stephen made it possible for his research interests to expand in ways that intersected with my own research interests, productively challenging the boundaries of student, faculty, and student-faculty partnerships, as well as the power differentials that exist between these roles.

At the same time, as an undergraduate, I often felt constrained and peripheral. Despite my numerous scholarly speaking engagements over the past three years, I still become incredibly nervous any time I must speak to a large group, and neither my public speaking skills nor my confidence have dramatically increased with practice. While some of this might be a function of my personality and the choices that I have made with my time, it also emerges at least in part

from my status as an undergraduate in a community comprised mostly of faculty with doctorates. In one case, for instance, a conference's online proposal process made it nearly impossible for me as an undergraduate to submit a session, although I had taken the lead in developing and writing the proposal. In that particular scholarly CoP, I could barely even participate as a newcomer, being literally outside the periphery, had it not been for the student-faculty partnership that ultimately enabled my proposal to be submitted, accepted, and presented.

Due to my position as an undergraduate the student-faculty CoPs I participated in were often simultaneously enabling and constraining. The working relationships I had with faculty undeniably put professional experiences on the horizon if I desired to take up and work towards those opportunities. Yet the extent to which I was able to fully participate in communities such as professional conferences often depended on faculty members other than my partners taking me seriously as a scholar, demonstrating that while my partnerships had often increased my sense of confidence and power, it was not consistent in all CoPs I participated.. In part, my attempt to move from newcomer to legitimate peripheral participant to full participant in untraditional CoPs for undergraduates challenged the existing practices and boundaries of existing CoPs, potentially impacting the position of others. For this reason, when mixed-role partnerships form CoPs it is probable that members of these and overlapping CoPs will be both enabled and constrained by the partnerships that are formed.

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The Complexities of Entering a New Partnership

These two cases highlight the complexities associated with entering a new mixed-role partnership in higher education. Mark's and Maggie's experiences illustrate how, as newcomers, they were both enabled and constrained by their participation in overlapping CoPs. Each of them at least initially were limited by feeling like an outsider, on the periphery of a new community of practice. In both cases, certain aspects of a CoP's language and activities (such as research jargon and conference submission guidelines) reinforced that peripherality, even when those more central to the CoP intended to be welcoming and inclusive. However, both Mark and Maggie demonstrated expertise they had developed in other CoPs (Mark as a teacher, Maggie as a student), thus acquiring legitimacy and access in the new mixed-role CoP. Ultimately, their experiences suggest that certain aspects of participation in mixed-role CoPs may be empowering while others may be disempowering.

These two cases suggest the potential value of analyzing mixed-role partnerships in higher education through a CoP lens. Both Mark and Maggie did not simply exist in a liminal space; instead, they operated in a complicated web of overlapping communities of practice, and their established identity in one of those CoPs shaped their experience as newcomers to a mixed-role partnership. These two cases, however, are more suggestive than definitive, prompting us to raise questions about the evolving identity of newcomers in mixed-role partnerships:

- How might the language and activities of a particular mixed-role parternship enable or constrain newcomers from moving off the periphery toward more full participation?

- How can those who are full participants in a mixed-role partnership most effectively welcome newcomers into participation? What should full participants avoid doing to ensure that newcomers do not become unintentionally disempowered?
- In what ways does the experience of having legitimacy within an overlapping CoP influence the development of legitimacy within a mixed-role partnership?
- Is the liminality experienced in these partnerships the product of being a newcomer to a community of practice, or are there other important aspects to that liminality? What experiences of liminality might the more powerful and established members of a mixed-role partnership experience as a result of newcomers joining the community?
- To what extent might institutional context (cultures and norms at a university, for example) influence a newcomer's participation within mixed-role CoPs?

We hope that our case studies will encourage others to analyze mixed-role partnerships within the context of overlapping communities of practice, especially in thinking about what it is that gets constrained or afforded as these communities overlap with one another. Mark and Maggie's experience of simultaneously being new (and perhaps novice) and being experienced (and perhaps expert) offers potential for further research into the nature of mixed-role partnerships in higher education.

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