

## Wands or Quills? Lessons in Pedagogy from Harry Potter

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*“The real world, then, becomes somewhat illuminated by these characters who can span both worlds. For example, teachers at Hogwarts can be imaginative and compassionate; they are also flighty, vindictive, dim-witted, indulgent, lazy, frightened and frightening. Students are clever, kind, weak, cruel, snobbish. Lessons are inspiring and tedious—as in the best and worst of real schools” (317).*

– Roni Natov from “Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary”

When I first began teaching first-year college students in 1994 as a graduate student, I was in my mid-twenties, not much older than my students, and a product of the same popular culture. I frequently made reference to that pop culture and used it for comparison, analysis, and discussion to help my

students develop their thinking and writing skills. Every year, I grew older and a new class of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds began their first year at the university or college at which I was teaching. The popular culture of my teens and twenties became a part of the great depth and breadth of events encapsulated in the common student phrase “back in the day,” as the double atrocities of “reality” television and movies based on toys began to capture my students’ interests and as the World Wide Web further atomized those interests. Slowly, but surely, I found myself less skilled and less successful at using pop culture in the classroom as a touchstone or an example.

But then there was Harry Potter. After a slow conversion, I, like many of my students, eagerly awaited each new book and even went so far as to wait in line at midnight for book seven, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. I read it in twenty-four hours. Once again, I had a text that I could refer to in the classroom that the majority of my students were familiar with, either from reading the books or watching the movies. Sadly, I am afraid that this interlude of once again being able to connect with my students over a popular culture touchstone will soon be coming to an end. No doubt, I will continue to re-read the books and re-watch the movies, just as I have done with *The Lord of the Rings*, *His Dark Materials*, and *The Secret Garden*, but their usefulness in the classroom as a communal text will slowly decline and eventually vanish as a generation of students who grew up with Harry, Hermione, and Ron is replaced with a generation of students who grew up with Bella, Edward, and Jacob from the *Twilight* books or trying to keep up with the Kardashians.

Despite its declining relevance to my students, I am sure that I will continue to find the Harry Potter series useful to my pedagogy because of the models of teaching and learning that it provides. As I have expanded my research focus to include the scholarship of teaching and learning, I have become interested in the ways in which the Harry Potter books highlight a diversity of learning and teaching styles, privilege active experiential learning and problem solving over passive rote learning, and emphasize the benefits

of collaboration over competition in a learning environment. In the books, I recognize an effective argument for inquiry-based, active learning, but only when coupled with a supportive, non-threatening, non-competitive learning environment in which risk-taking is rewarded.

I am not the first academic to examine the models of teaching and learning in Harry Potter. Renee Dickinson was one of the first to address the books as a source of pedagogical inspiration and modeling in “Harry Potter Pedagogy: What We Learn about Teaching from J.K. Rowling,” published in 2006. An English professor who teaches composition, Dickinson uses Bloom’s taxonomy of learning domains as a tool for measuring the effectiveness of the instructional methods of eight educators at Hogwarts. Andrea Bixler’s 2011 article, “What We Muggles Can Learn about Teaching from Hogwarts,” re-visited Dickinson’s conclusions after the publication of *Deathly Hallows* and re-evaluated the educators at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry based upon three pedagogical principles derived from *How People Learn*, published by the National Research Council in 2000 for science educators. Based upon these principles, she writes, “Hogwarts does not live up to my standards for quality instruction” (75). Jennifer Conn focused more specifically on how the first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, might help clinical teachers hone their pedagogical approaches by using the teachers at Hogwarts as, alternatively, positive role models and examples of what to avoid. Although many scholars have analyzed educational themes and the representations of teaching and learning in the books, most—like Roni Natov who is quoted in the epigraph—find that the most significant learning experiences in the Harry Potter books often occur despite, rather than because of, classroom instruction, and all occur outside of the classroom setting. Dickinson finds Harry Potter and Headmaster Albus Dumbledore to be two of the three most effective instructors in the book despite the fact that neither is officially a teacher at the school or teaching a class in the required curriculum and writes, “Hogwarts’ learning culture, however, favors the annihilation of direct instruction in preference for practical life experience. The

pedagogies of the teachers, rather than educating the students in their subjects, often force the students to teach themselves” (240). In the end, Dickinson finds this to be a positive trait of a Hogwarts education, rather than a negative one, and advises her fellow educators to follow Dumbledore’s lead in “creating a (mostly) safe atmosphere in which the students are given basic tools and then are encouraged to discover on their own and apply and practice their learning” (244). Margaret Booth, an educational psychologist, and her eleven-year-old daughter Grace, make the same argument in their jointly-authored article, “Tips from Harry Potter for American Schools,” published in 2004. The Booths and Dickinson praise the curriculum of Hogwarts for its emphasis on real-world, practical problem-solving (Dickinson 240; Booth 10). Mary Black and Marilyn J. Eisenwine, who approach the books through the discipline of education, agree on this point, as well as with the Booths’ observations about the importance of cooperative learning to student success at Hogwarts (Black and Eisenwine 32 and 34; Booth and Booth 9-11). History professor, Kathryn McDaniel, offers a dissenting view on the efficacy of indirect, learner-centered instruction and makes a case for the power of lecturing, despite Professor Binns’s ineffective techniques in the History of Magic. Building from these foundations, I will engage in an analysis of the classrooms teaching styles and pedagogies of Professors Binns, Umbridge, Snape, McGonagall, Lupin, and Sprout. These analyses will illustrate that students do indeed learn a great deal in the classroom at Hogwarts, but learn best when a pedagogical approach such as active learning is coupled with a supportive, non-threatening, cooperative learning environment in which critical thinking and risk-taking are encouraged and rewarded.

What do we mean by active learning? As defined by Charles Bonwell and James Eison in their foundational article, “Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom,” active learning means that students are doing more than passively listening in class. They are reading, writing, discussing, or solving problems. Some have argued, including McDaniel, that listening and note-taking—if they are engaged in

actively rather than passively—might also qualify as active learning (292-293). Considering the classrooms of Hogwarts, only those of Professor Cuthbert Binns and Professor Dolores Umbridge stand out as the absolute antithesis of active learning or of what Dickinson describes as “the ultimate example of direct instruction” (240). Professor Binns is described by Rowling as follows:

Professor Binns, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, droning voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weather. He never varied the form of their lessons, but lectured them without pausing while they took notes, or rather, gazed sleepily into space. (Rowling, *OoP* 228-229)

Binns’s lectures are not designed to provoke critical thinking or even interest, as is illustrated in *Harry Potter in the Chamber of Secrets* when he responds with amazement to Hermione’s question about the Chamber of Secrets and the class’s interest in his response (Rowling, *CS* 148-150). Professor Binns’s subject, History of Magic, is unlike many of the other more practical or technical courses the students at Hogwarts take because it focuses on teaching students a body of knowledge rather than a particular skill needed to practice witchcraft or wizardry. This distinction, his dull lecturing style, and the fact that he can’t remember his students’ names may help explain why his students don’t find his lessons very interesting. Since he is deceased, he may not have had the opportunity to improve his lecture techniques through faculty development opportunities or training in clicker technology. Professor Umbridge, who teaches Defense Against the Dark Arts when the Ministry of Magic takes over Hogwarts in Harry Potter’s fifth year, has no such excuses.

Despite teaching a practical or technical subject—how to defend oneself against the use of the dark arts—Professor Umbridge actively discourages hands-on application of the lessons being taught in her classroom. At the beginning of each lesson, she instructs students to put their wands away and take

out their textbooks and quills. Her lessons consist of having students read portions of the textbook and take notes and she explains to the students that, “it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about” (Rowling, OoP 243). Concerned not only about the practical portion of the exams for which she will be required to perform defensive spells, but also about the threats of Lord Voldemort, dementors, and other dangerous magical creatures, Hermione convinces Harry to tutor other students in practical Defense Against the Dark Arts Lessons. A small group of students ironically calling themselves Dumbledore’s Army meets regularly for these lessons in the Room of Requirement, a magical room in Hogwarts castle which appears at need, until they are put to a halt by Professor Umbridge ascension to Hogwarts High Inquisitor and then Headmistress of Hogwarts.

In contrast to the stultifying classrooms of Binns and Umbridge, students are engaged in active learning in the classrooms of the other Hogwarts professors: making potions in Snape’s and Slughorn’s classes; re-potting mandrakes in Professor Sprout’s greenhouses; practicing charms and transfigurations in Professor Flitwick’s and McGonagall’s classes; confronting a boggart, casting defensive spells, and re-caging Cornish pixies in Professor Lupin’s, Moody’s, and Lockhart’s Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons respectively; reading tea leaves in Professor Trelawney’s attic, and meeting Hippogriffs and feeding flobberworms in Hagrid’s Care of Magical Creatures lessons. As these examples show, Hogwarts has largely embraced an active learning classroom pedagogy, but it is also clear that students are more successful in some subjects than in others for reasons unrelated to the distinction between active learning classrooms and more traditional lecture-based ones, which brings us to a related question: How do we measure pedagogical efficacy?

If we are consulting Professor Umbridge or looking to American schools for an answer to this question, the answer would surely be test scores. As in our world, Hogwarts measures student progress

with standardized exams obviously modelled on British O and A Level exams. In their fifth year at the age of fifteen, Hogwarts' students take their O.W.L., or Ordinary Wizarding Levels exams, to determine which subjects they will continue to study at N.E.W.T. level in their last two years of school. In their seventh year, students sit for their N.E.W.T., or Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests, to determine their future careers. Based on the O.W.L. results of Harry Potter's class, who then is the most effective instructor? According to the Harry Potter Wiki's entry on students who are reported to have passed various O.W.L.s in the novels, the answer appears to be the many Defense against the Dark Arts instructors the students encountered in their five years at Hogwarts: Quirrell, Lockhart, Lupin, "Moody," and Umbridge. However, these results are a bit skewed by two things. First, we do not have complete data for the results of the students in Harry's class as Rowling did not include the exam results for all students in the texts. Secondly, Umbridge's year as Professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts was also the year in which Harry taught the subject to his fellow students. Based on his methods and his results, Dickinson argues that Harry is one of the most effective teachers at Hogwarts (242) and Bixler contrasts him favorably to Rubeus Hagrid, the groundskeeper who is promoted to instructor of Care of Magical Creatures (76). However, neither is looking at O.W.L. scores as a criterion for pedagogical success. Although the students do, as the Booths observe, receive strong messages from their professors and other adults about the importance of these exams and spend a great deal of time and energy studying for them (7), the students themselves, with perhaps the exception of Hermione, find the threat to their world posed by Voldemort and the everyday concerns of Quidditch, puberty, and adolescence to be of far more importance. Rowling repeatedly illustrates that success on the tests is not a guarantee of professional success, personal happiness, or ethical citizenship. Fred and George Weasley manage to do impressive magic, battle evil, and run a successful business despite performing poorly on their O.W.L.s and leaving school without taking their N.E.W.T.s. On the basis of his O.W.L. results Percy Weasley, who betrays his

family and sides with the Ministry of Magic in the ouster of Dumbledore, was made Head Boy as was Lord Voldemort (Tom Riddle) himself. And finally, perhaps most damningly, the patricidal Death Eater Barty Crouch, Jr. who disguises himself as “Mad Eye” Moody, the auror and newly hired Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor, in order to infiltrate Hogwarts and murder Harry Potter out of loyalty to Lord Voldemort, reportedly received twelve O.W.L.s (Rowling, *GoF* 227 and 556). If we cannot rely upon O.W.L. results as an indicator of pedagogical effectiveness, we might then look to classroom observations and student evaluations as more reliable measures.

Down in the dungeons, Professor Severus Snape conducts his potions classes with a singular style. As noted earlier, students are clearly engaged in active learning in these lessons—actually making the potions themselves rather than just reading about them or watching the Professor demonstrate them. However, no one has ever argued that Professor Snape is an effective teacher in the classroom setting. Although he clearly does teach Harry several important lessons outside of the classroom about secrecy, loyalty, and bravery by the end of the series, he is frequently criticized by Harry and Ron over his favoritism toward the students in the Slytherin house and his poor treatment of Harry and Hermione. Indeed, Snape’s methods in the classroom have been faulted by Black and Eisenwine, Dickinson, the Booths, Conn, and Bixler for a variety of reasons. Black and Eisenwine identify him as “an authority figure and disseminator of truth in the perennial/behaviorist tradition” (35), and Dickinson also observes his desire to exercise his power over students, noting that he is not interested in “creating a community of learners” (241). The Booths criticize the way in which he monopolizes the classroom—not allowing students to contribute, and by playing favorites (9-10), and both Conn and Bixler criticize his questioning style which aims to humiliate rather than to illuminate (Conn 1178; Bixler 76). Bixler also notes that Snape employs the usually effective pedagogical technique of meta-cognition as punishment rather than as a learning tool when he has the students write essays about where they have gone wrong (78). His

classroom is, for most students, an unpleasant environment in which students are expected to keep quiet and follow directions while being harshly criticized. Cooperative learning is actively discouraged, as is shown in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* when Hermione is punished for helping Neville with his shrinking solution (128). Despite the fact that they are allowed to practice potion-making, Snape's students are not actually given instruction or advice by Professor Snape in doing so. Their only guidance is a textbook or recipe on the board to follow and a series of what seem to be expository or informational essays whose aim is to have students regurgitate information rather than pursue research questions or formulate arguments. For example, in *The Order of the Phoenix*, he assigns "twelve inches of parchment on the properties of moonstone and its uses in potion-making" (234). While it is evident that Professor Snape is a gifted potion maker, he is not interested in helping his students to achieve his level of skill, but merely to flaunt it to intimidate them. This becomes clear when Harry finds Snape's old textbook in *The Half-Blood Prince* and uses Snape's annotations to make potions more successfully than Hermione, who closely followed the printed directions (194). Whereas Snape, as a student, obviously engaged in experimentation and critical thinking about the best way to make various potions, he does nothing to encourage this in his own students. So despite the fact that his classroom might be termed active, or, in Bixler's terminology "technical," it is not a successful learning environment (75). As we learn in *The Order of the Phoenix*, it is even more stressful than an O.W.L. exam: "With Snape absent from the proceedings [Harry] found that he was much more relaxed than he usually was while making potions. Neville, who was sitting very near Harry, also looked happier than Harry had ever seen him during a Potions class" (716). As the authors of *How Learning Works* observe, an instructor's tone in the classroom, or the "course climate," is just as important to student success as faculty expertise and active learning methods (Ambrose et al. 176). Although course climate seems to have almost no effect on the learning of exceptionally gifted students, like Hermione Granger, more average students like Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Neville Longbottom

are very good barometers of the impact course climate can have on learning. Rowling's characterization of these four students' responses to various instructors' teaching methods, and particularly Neville's, makes a powerful argument for the effects of both course climate and cooperative learning on student success.

For most of us, students like Hermione are rare, but we may encounter many Nevilles every year, particularly if we are teaching first-year students. Despite being a "pure-blood," Neville Longbottom is not well-prepared for the educational rigors and the independent living of a Hogwarts education; he lacks confidence in his own abilities and his grandmother is a "helicopter parent" who attempts to direct and control his academic choices. He has difficulty acclimating to his new environment and is frequently the target of bullies. In addition, he is suffering from the emotional trauma of his parents' injuries at the hands of Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters and their prolonged committal to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. In the early years, he is timid and fearful and it takes very little to crush his spirit, but as we learn in *The Deathly Hallows*, he overcomes these deficiencies to emerge as a leader of Dumbledore's Army and the rebellion at Hogwarts and to eventually become a Professor of Herbology at Hogwarts. Undoubtedly, much of this transformation is due to his becoming a part of the D.A. and the core group around Harry, but he also thrives in the lessons taught by Lupin and Sprout, and gains enough confidence in Professor McGonagall's class to scrape an Acceptable on his Transfiguration O.W.L. (Rowling, *HBP* 173).

In addition to engaging students in active learning, some of the strategies that Lupin and Sprout employ to aid Neville in his transformation are to contradict the negative messages he has received, to validate and nurture his interests and successes, and to encourage his collaboration with Harry, Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and Luna. In the *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Professor Remus Lupin's first lesson in Defense Against the Dark Arts is a model of inquiry-based, cooperative, active learning and a direct

contrast to Gilderoy Lockhart’s one attempt at a “practical lesson” in which Cornish pixies wreak havoc in the classroom (132). It also highlights the qualities that make Lupin an effective instructor—credibility and authenticity—qualities which Lockhart notably lacks.<sup>1</sup> As defined by Stephen D. Brookfield in the chapter “What Students Value in Teachers,” “credibility is the “perception that the teacher has something to offer, and that whatever this ‘something’ is (skills, knowledge, insight wisdom, information) learning it will benefit the learner considerably” (56). Before he teaches his first lesson, Lupin has already demonstrated his expertise in his handling of the dementors on the Hogwarts school train and been praised for it by Madame Pomfrey (Rowling, *PA* 132). For his first lesson, he escorts his students to the staff room where a boggart (a shape-shifting creature which takes the form of the observer’s worst fear) has been spotted hiding in the wardrobe in order for them to practice their defense spells on it. His credibility is reinforced in his deft handling of the resident prankster ghost Peeves on the way to the staff room, to which Dean Thomas, “in amazement,” responds “Cool, sir!” (131). When Lupin arrives at the staff room with the students and interrupts Professor Snape, he establishes his authenticity, defined by Brookfield as “the perception that the teacher is being open and honest in her attempts to help students learn” (56). In response to Snape’s belittling comments about Neville’s skills, Lupin responds “I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation . . . and I am sure he will perform it admirably” (132). With this positive reinforcement, Neville does exactly that; he is the first to confront the boggart and the one who finishes it off. As Bixler observes, Lupin creates a “heartening atmosphere” for his students in stark contrast to “Snape’s negativity” (76). Although Lupin singles Neville out to help build his confidence, he has almost all of the students in the class take a turn with the boggart and solicits answers to questions from students other than Hermione. The way in which Lupin conducts this class aligns with four of the seven unifying principles outlined in Chapter Five of Ken Bain’s *What the Best College Teachers Do*, “How Do They Conduct Class?”: “1. Create a natural critical

learning environment 2. Get their attention and keep it. 3. Start with the students rather than the discipline and 4. Engage students in disciplinary thinking” (99-116).<sup>2</sup> Rowling only gives us this one example of Lupin teaching an entire class because his career is cut short when he is outed as a werewolf and forced to resign, but his teaching skill is frequently praised, both by his students and fellow faculty. Although Neville’s growing Defense Against the Dark Arts skills are somewhat stalled in *The Goblet of Fire* when Professor Lupin is replaced by “Mad Eye” Moody” who seems fixated on the unforgivable curses—one of which nearly destroyed his parents—Professor Sprout’s greenhouses present another positive climate in which Neville is able to blossom.

As head of Hufflepuff house, Professor Pomona Sprout represents the values of that house in her inclusiveness and concern for all students. As the Booths observe, Sprout’s pedagogy is “student-centered” rather than “teacher-centered” (8). Unlike Snape and even McGonagall, who prefer the students in their own houses, Sprout does not generally make such distinctions—although Harry notices that she is a bit cool to him after he becomes a Tri-Wizard Champion and dilutes Hufflepuff student Cedric’s glory as the sole Hogwarts representative in the tournament (Rowling, *GoF* 293). In *The Order of the Phoenix*, she has clearly overcome what was, at most, a very minor coolness, when she awards Harry twenty house points for passing her a watering can in defiance of Professor Umbridge’s censures of Harry (582). After Headmaster Dumbledore has been killed and Professor McGonagall is considering closing Hogwarts, Sprout says “I feel that if a single pupil wants to come, then the school ought to remain open for that pupil” (627), demonstrating her commitment to creating opportunities for every student to succeed. Sprout’s mentorship of Neville, and her praise of his Herbology skills to “Mad Eye” Moody (or Barty Crouch, Jr. in disguise) contribute toward building his confidence and his expertise (Rowling, *GoF* 220). He earns an Outstanding on his O.W.L (*HP* 173) and, during the Battle of Hogwarts, Sprout and Neville fight together side by side, bombarding Lord Voldemort’s Death Eaters with dangerous plants (*DH* 620).

Sprout also encourages cooperative learning and problem-solving in her classes. For example, In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Harry, Ron, and Hermione work as a team to extract Snargaluff pods (280-283). In this activity, they have to solve the dual problems of how to extract the pods successfully from the vicious plant without injury and then how to extract the seeds from the pods. The injuries that Neville sustains and the struggle that the plant puts up show that there is clearly some risk in this activity, but Professor Sprout has provided the students with protective gear. While she is not afraid to correct students who are not getting down to work—as she does in this particular class on Snargaluff pods—Sprout does not do so to exhibit her power over students, but rather to advance their learning. Unlike Lockhart, Snape, and even McGonagall at times, Sprout does not exhibit or advertise her learning or expertise to illustrate her superiority to students. Instead, she displays a keen interest and competence in her field, clearly establishing credibility, but not displaying arrogance—the quality that Bain identifies as off-putting and detrimental to student learning, and which Snape and Lockhart possess in abundance (137-145).

Not only Lupin and Sprout, but also Snape, Hagrid, Slughorn, Flitwick, McGonagall<sup>3</sup>, and Trelawney all use active, experiential learning techniques in their classes, but most students learn more and most easily with Professors Lupin, Sprout, and Flitwick<sup>4</sup>, because they don't intimidate, humiliate, explicitly and publicly rank, risk serious injury to, or condemn the ideas and censure the input of their students. They have also established credibility and authenticity—qualities Trelawney<sup>5</sup> and Lockhart demonstrably lack as both are discovered to be largely frauds in both their magical powers and teaching abilities. Finally, Lupin, Sprout, and Flitwick all encourage cooperative learning in their lessons; engage students in inquiry, problem-solving, and critical thinking; and believe that all students are capable of learning—a quality they share with Professor McGonagall, who tells her class in *The Order of the Phoenix*:

‘You cannot pass an O.W.L.,’ said Professor McGonagall grimly, ‘without serious application, practice and study. I see no reasons why everybody in this class should not achieve an O.W.L. in Transfiguration as long as they put in the work.’

Neville made a sad little disbelieving noise. ‘Yes, you too, Longbottom,’ said Professor McGonagall. ‘There’s nothing wrong with your work except lack of confidence.’ (13)

Professor McGonagall and her pedagogy of encouragement are proven to be right when Neville emerges as the hero of the last book.

As I return to the classroom this fall, and meet my new crop of first-year students, I will hope for a Hermione whose achievements I can applaud, but I know that my true work will be with the Nevilles in the room, the students who, despite appearances and sometimes their own beliefs, can, with the right classroom environment, learn to succeed and eventually excel. So despite my admiration for Professor McGonagall’s no-nonsense Scottish frankness, pragmatism, and brusqueness, I will instead model myself on the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Lupin, and the Herbology Professor, Pomona Sprout, who create inclusive classroom climates conducive to learning.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Bixler for a critique of Lockhart's active-learning methods (77).

<sup>2</sup> Slughorn also exhibits many of these same principles in his first potions lesson, but his success as a teacher is undermined by his obvious favoritism of and expectations of *quid pro quo* from members of the Slug Club formed by personal invitation of students who excel or have promising family connections. For a discussion of the strengths of this lesson as part of a learning cycle, see Bixler (76).

<sup>3</sup> As she is the teacher with whom I most identify because of her high standards and no-nonsense demeanor, I would like to argue that McGonagall is one of the best teachers in the school, but I'm afraid that her lack of patience with incompetence and her clear favoritism of Gryffindor students and particularly the Gryffindor Quidditch team put her in the second string. However, she does make an excellent Head of House and Headmistress who unflinchingly speaks truth to power in defense of her students.

<sup>4</sup> See Booth and Booth for an analysis of the strengths of Flitwick's pedagogy (9).

<sup>5</sup> See Dickinson for a trenchant critique of Trelawney's pedagogy (241).

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