

Bridging the Gap in Indigenous Australian Languages Teacher Education

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Introduction

The Master of Indigenous Languages Education (MILE) at the University of Sydney has provided the only degree-based training for teachers of Indigenous languages in Australia since 2006. It is an innovative professional development program that responds directly to the disparate state of health of Australian languages by offering generic units of study in linguistics, languages pedagogy and classroom-based research to Indigenous Australians with a teaching degree, allowing them to add Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander languages teaching to their methods. Whilst the program was primarily designed to facilitate development of the skills necessary for graduates to become effective language revivers and teachers implementing culturally sustaining and revitalising pedagogies, it has also succeeded in fostering the development of a significant number of

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leaders in local language revival; and graduates have also gone on to become university lecturers, consultants, administrators and activists, as well as presenting in international fora and entering research higher degrees. This chapter begins by setting out the historical context and structure of the program including some of the systemic challenges that needed to be negotiated along the way and, in some cases, still limit it to this day. It then offers an appraisal of the success of the course based largely in an Indigenist dialogic research process of ‘yarning’ between lecturers and a group of graduates who now occupy an array of classroom, community and government roles.

Background

Although ‘good news’ stories occasionally appear in the media and on conference programs, the overall state of Australian languages is dire, and most are no longer heard. Only a handful are still spoken by all generations and being learned as the first languages of their children. Even for the healthiest languages the future is, at best, uncertain (Hobson, 2004). In this environment Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in many locations are engaged in valiant struggles to revive their languages (Amery & Gale, 2008). Although there is substantial variation in approach across the continent, the majority currently relies on school education as the principal strategy to increase their speaker population. Whilst this may be potentially problematic in terms of broad and sustainable revival across communities in the longer term (Fishman, 1991; Hornberger, 2010), training language teachers remains an area of substantial skills development need for those that seek to have their own members as language teachers, as almost all do (Hobson, 2014).

In the time before contact, of course, Indigenous languages were the first languages of communities and therefore not ‘taught’ but rather naturally passed on via everyday use. After the arrival of Europeans, and the brutal policies that effectively destroyed everyday Indigenous language use in many places in Australia, the only ‘teaching’ in Australian languages was almost exclusively constrained to advancing missionary goals. It was not until recent decades that second language programs for Australian languages began appearing in schools, colleges and universities (Amery, 2007; Gale, 2011), and bilingual schooling for native-speaking children briefly flourished in the more remote northern regions (Harris & Devlin, 1997; Simpson, Caffery, & McConvell, 2009). Revival programs, however, remained largely localised and without substantial recognition until early in the new century when language-specific curriculum began appearing in South Australia (Hercus & Wilson, 2004; Tunstill, 2004), and the watershed New South Wales (NSW) *Aboriginal languages K-10 syllabus* was published (Board of Studies New South Wales, 2003). Within a few years it was reported that 46 schools were teaching almost 5,000 students in 11 different languages in that state alone, and the urgent need for co-ordinated language planning and teacher

training was being recognised (Hobson, 2004; Rhydwen, Munro, Parolin, & Poetsch, 2007).¹

In response, the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney implemented a number of strategies including the incorporation of a languages methodology unit of study in its existing initial teacher education course, and a survey to determine the views of community revival agents in relation to languages education training, and how these views might be balanced against relevant accreditation regimes (Hobson, 2004). Responses to the survey identified a number of expectations about the prospective broad-scale delivery of languages curriculum in NSW schools that were either largely impractical, in conflict with regulatory requirements or, at best, unlikely to produce substantial educational outcomes. These included that a very small and increasingly frail population of untrained elder speakers, anticipated technological innovations, or the (then) largely untrained staff of a few small community language programs would be able to take on the task of languages education without the need for further substantial preparation (Hobson, 2006). There was little enthusiasm for a 4-year initial teacher education degree that would take at least 2 years to establish and a further four to produce its first graduates. There was, however, clear interest from qualified Aboriginal teachers already in the field to further develop languages-specific teaching skills.

Further discussion with stakeholders and a review of potential models overseas led to the decision to establish a course for already qualified teachers as soon as practicable. Although originally proposed as a graduate diploma it was ultimately deemed of sufficient rigour under prevailing qualifications standards to be considered a professional development masters, and so MILE was implemented in 2005, taking in its first cohort in 2006. In 2007 further development was undertaken to incorporate an articulated graduate certificate and graduate diploma in the program, at 0.5 and 0.75 equivalence to the full course, respectively (Hobson, 2008a, 2008b, 2011; Hobson & Poetsch, 2009).

Challenges

The development of the program faced many hurdles, some initially seeming insurmountable. Greatest amongst these was the diversity of languages, learners, educational contexts and their locations. Small, widely distributed populations and revival programs in different stages of development dictated that an appropriate course should be as accessible and flexible as possible if it was to have the greatest benefit. Prospective students had the potential to present from almost any part of

¹Most recently the draft national *Framework for Aboriginal Languages and Torres Strait Islander Languages* was released for consultation by the Australian, Assessment and Reporting Authority and the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW released the *Aboriginal Languages Stage 6 Content Endorsed Course Syllabus* (Australian Curriculum Assessment & Reporting Authority, 2015; Board of Studies, 2015).

Australia hoping to teach any of a broad array of languages—currently over 40 nationally (Hobson, 2014). These languages were likely to be at significantly disparate levels of revival, have widely divergent histories of teaching, and to vary internally on those indices from location to location. Similarly, whilst some students might have extended histories of learning and speaking their languages, others could just be embarking on their journey, including those intending to be the first to formally teach theirs. For the University to attempt to deliver such an array of languages to its students would be an impossible task. Selecting one or two and excluding all others, as some suggested, would only privilege strong languages and be completely contrary to the goals of cultural revival motivating prospective students.

These circumstances also often meant that little, if any, curriculum and resources for particular languages would be readily available to prospective students or the staff proposing to teach them, and there might be only limited documentation for them to access. Staff responded by recognising that both their task and the program must necessarily be inherently developmental. In this they were, albeit unknowingly, following the precepts of what has become known as *culturally sustaining and revitalising pedagogy*, that:

... attends directly to asymmetrical power relations and the goal of transforming legacies of colonization, ... recognizes the need to reclaim and revitalize what has been disrupted and displaced by colonization [and.] ... recognizes the need for community-based accountability. (McCarty & Lee, 2014, p. 103)

That the course was proposed by, and to be developed and delivered by the university's Koori Centre was central to this stance. For over 20 years the autonomous, Indigenous-managed Centre had trained Indigenous education assistants, delivered Indigenous Australian studies, supported the university's Indigenous student population, and been its principal contact for Indigenous communities (Cleverley & Mooney, 2010). Decolonisation for, empowerment of and accountability to Indigenous communities were amongst its core values. Indeed, feedback from students over the years has indicated that evident Indigenous ownership and control were amongst the program's most valued features. But, this was also the cause for considerable internal angst. Professional development programs for teachers had traditionally been the province of the Faculty of Education and Social Work, some members of which felt that it held proprietary rights over courses with education in the title, especially any Master of Education designations. They, for the most part, had quite conservative views about how such a course should be structured—it should include a minor in a specific language (three units of study equivalent to 0.375 of a full-time year), as well as in relation to matters of ownership and control—the Faculty should have both. Such a square peg as this was bound to be an anathema to them, and it soon became apparent that the Koori Centre would need to go it alone—a strategy that the Faculty attempted to block at the highest level, but in which it ultimately failed.

The NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) took a similar stance in relation to accreditation. They were insistent that, to be accredited by them for

teaching purposes, candidates would need to complete a minor in a particular Aboriginal language or, at worst, a combination of languages. That just a handful of languages were currently being taught in their schools (none of them to senior years) and only one or two in universities (only at beginner level) seemed to make no difference. Given that Aboriginal languages teachers were already doing the job across the state without languages accreditation, the decision of program staff was simply to privilege Indigenous communities' priorities and not apply for accreditation.

A final, critical issue in obtaining the necessary assent to offer such a novel program was its 'sustainability'. In a financial model that values only monetary benefit and cost, a course catering to a minority interest within a minority population in a sparsely populated continent was always going to be marginal. If secondary (but no less important) benefits, such as increased Indigenous participation rates, consequent community profile, national and international prestige, were not assigned some value the course would likely never achieve break-even point. Fortunately the Koori Centre had the flexibility to respond pragmatically, and cross-subsidise its teaching from other income streams (Hobson, 2014).

Structure

To respond to these and other issues a unique course structure was developed. The MILE is a 1-year, professional development degree for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduate teachers. It has no language proficiency requirements for entry or exit and is delivered in a mixed mode combining intensive residential classes and distance methods, referred to locally as *block release*. An embedded Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma provide exit points for those who do not complete the Master's.

The provision of an Indigenous enclave course responds directly to the voiced concerns of prospective students. Whilst non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous Australian languages do exist, they are rare, and normally have a recognised long-term commitment to a particular community and the revival of its language. Otherwise local protocols normally preclude outsiders, including from other Australian language groups, from being teachers of Australian languages (Hobson, 2014). Filling classes with non-Indigenous students, possibly even foreign fee-paying ones would likely result in reduced participation by Indigenous candidates for whom the course was originally developed.

Block delivery in three week-long blocks over two semesters allows students from across the continent to attend the University campus whilst retaining employment and maintaining family and community obligations. Blocks are timed to coincide with school holidays where possible to minimise the impact of candidates' absences. A Commonwealth funding scheme that meets the cost of students' travel, accommodation and meals for approved block release programs also makes this possible.

Table 1 MILE units of study

Linguistics for Australian languages	Languages education theory	Languages education praxis
Semester 1		
Sounds & writing in Indigenous languages		
Words & meanings in Indigenous languages		
Sentences & text in Indigenous languages		
	Theories & methods in Language learning	
Semester 2		
	Language curriculum development	
	Technology & language teaching	
		Research methods in languages education
		Research project in languages education

The application of imposed standards of linguistic performance, subject to arbitrary assessment by a university, was viewed as antagonistic to the goals of language revival and the need to cater to groups at all stages of their journey, as well as being completely impractical given the potential diversity of languages students might present. Similarly, there was no possibility of program staff being able to teach students their own re-awakening languages. It was determined instead that the best strategy would be to respond directly to the revival process for each language and provide students with: sufficient linguistic skills to access whatever documentation might exist for their language, and derive their own knowledge from it on an ongoing basis; an understanding of the typology of related languages to use as models for reclamation of their own, and; a foundation in languages education adequate to sustain the development of their own language teaching materials and skills.

The eight units of study that constitute the Master's are thus organised sequentially and thematically into the broader topics of linguistics, theory and praxis (Table 1).

The three linguistics units of study respectively canvass issues of phonetics, phonology and orthography development; morphology and semantics; and, syntax and discourse. In each iteration lecturers are required to acquaint themselves with accessible resources for each language expected in the class, and adapt the content of their teaching accordingly. Wherever possible, generic concepts and typological understanding are developed through students' direct engagement with realistic data.

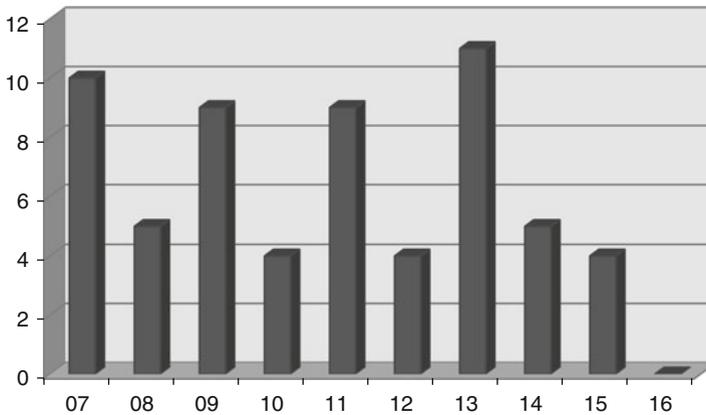


Fig. 1 ILE graduations, 2007–16 ($n = 61$)²

The theory units provide students with an understanding of first and second language acquisition, and theories and methods of languages teaching; the skills to structure engaging and varied developmental curriculum from available syllabi, and; the capacity to productively apply a broad range of technologies to language learning.

The first praxis unit provides students with an opportunity to develop a proposal for a research project based in their own classroom teaching that is conducted and reported on in the second unit, providing a capstone for the degree. Classroom observation of each candidate by a visiting member of program staff also provides a quality control mechanism.

Successes

From 2007 to 2016 the Indigenous Languages Education (ILE) program has graduated 61 teachers, all but a handful with the Masters (Fig. 1). We assert this alone is sufficient to declare the program a resounding success. There have been very few non-completions consistent not only with the developmental ethos and culturally sustaining and revitalising pedagogic stance of the program, but also commensurate with the considerable abilities of our students.

There have also been several instances of graduates presenting in international fora and some publications, often in collaboration with program staff, for example Cameron (2014); Cameron and Poetsch (2013); Edwards and Hobson (2013); Hobson and Laurie (2009); McNaboe and Poetsch (2010); Oakley and Hobson (2011), and at least three graduates have subsequently been admitted to research

²The course was not offered in 2015, hence the absence of graduates in the current year.

degree programs. However, success comes in many forms, not all of them academic, and staff have always been aware of other highly valuable outcomes such as career advancement for graduates; enhanced community revival activity; and significant social, emotional and cultural transformation for individuals.

In order to collect some qualitative data on these less direct outcomes the authors undertook collective, introspective research using the culturally grounded, dialogic method of ‘yarning’ (Bessarab & Ng’andu, 2010; Geia, Hayes, & Usher, 2013). Whilst yarning would traditionally assume the synchronous presence of all participants, the distribution of authors across three states and conflicting schedules meant that meeting face-to-face was not feasible. Nor was there much enthusiasm for attempting video conferencing between multiple locations that was almost certain to be frustrated by technical failures. We thus decided to make use of contemporary social media to permit authors to contribute individually and asynchronously, but still readily engage in discussion—we set up a Facebook group.

It was assumed the reduction of our discussions to written text with participants separated in space and time would significantly shift the dynamics of yarning, in that the conversation would be deprived of the nuances of stress and tone, and the familiar paralinguistic elements of gesture, body language and eye contact. It also raised concerns about individuals making enduring, semi-public comment on the thoughts and feelings of others. However, given that social media is thoroughly normalised for all authors, who are also all highly experienced, professional educators, it was felt that such potential disadvantages did not outweigh the clear advantage of being able to collect the data, which could not reasonably be considered to be fatally compromised.

A series of stimulus questions were developed and put to group members over time, allowing for comprehensive responses to each before proceeding, although backtracking and cross-commenting were always possible. These questions canvassed personal and professional impacts, changes to teaching and other work practices, impacts on community revival activity and the ‘defining character’ of the program. All were intended as points of departure, rather than bounding constraints.

The role of facilitator was assigned to the graduates’ former lecturer (Hobson), as the team member most experienced in social research, although the process remained collaborative and consultative at all times. Notwithstanding ongoing professional relationships and, indeed, friendships between participants, the bias inherent in teacher apparently interviewing former students must therefore be acknowledged.

Graduates’ contributions were summarised and reflected to them both as a reliability measure, and as a means of identifying themes in the data. Cross-commentary by other participants, and editing and elaboration of points by participants allowed for richer data to be developed. Ultimately, all participants, as authors, were accorded editorial rights in their representation. All felt that the course had had significant personal impact on them as expressed below in participant’s comments:

Natalie suggested the greatest personal impact of MILE was that it gave her a sense of belonging, and a clearer, stronger identity within her own community.

She saw that as something she was seeking from the outset—her main motivation, *I felt lost, I had no idea why I felt lost. Attending MILE helped me gain a sense of belonging in this big world.*

Melissa said she attained, *a greater appreciation of the complexities of Australian languages generally and an understanding of how I was going to learn my own language.*

Michael noted that it had helped him come to a better understanding of his own ‘language journey’ and that the considerable pride that he feels in his language and his imperative to share it were both celebrated and nourished by the course.

I enrolled not knowing what to expect, what I was getting myself into. During the course, and finding out about the linguistics of language, Gumbaynggirr really started to come alive in me. Phonology, syntax, grammar, semantics were like a different language that made me think about how mine worked, and I loved it. It has opened up many doors across all facets of my life and has given me back my pride as an Aboriginal man. I am passing on my knowledge and skills to other Aboriginal people so they can feel the way I feel—more connected to my language, my homeland, my people, the spirits and, most of all, to my ancestors.

Kym thought that the knowledge and skills she acquired through MILE allowed her to develop much greater confidence and pride in her own language abilities, and that those gains had strengthened her identity and reduced the shame she had previously felt.

As my knowledge and awareness of my language developed I felt a shift in my own identity as a Malgana person. I felt a greater sense of pride knowing that I was helping to revitalise my language and the shame factor disappeared. If you’re strengthening someone’s knowledge of their language, you are strengthening their cultural identity, and I don’t think you can separate culture and language—those two are intertwined.

Michael also felt the course degree gave him the opportunity to be employed as a language worker not only for his own community but also for other language groups around Australia.

The MILE course gave me the opportunity to understand linguistic terminology and the confidence to work with specialists in the field of linguistics. It gave me the knowledge, self-confidence and the understanding about how languages work, particularly my own language.

For Natalie, the course was clearly a transformative experience, and not just for herself.

MILE has had a huge impact on our community because I came home with higher self-esteem and a strong determination to be involved in the language revival process. I finished MILE wanting to change the world, policies and the attitudes of some people. While I haven’t changed the world I have certainly changed a few policies and attitudes locally!

Melissa asserted increased recognition for herself as an outcome of completing the course, as well as gaining a better perception of the field, *I feel that I can speak on a more confident level with my peers in the language revival world. I also feel that now I have a greater understanding of the unfortunate politics behind language revival.*

Kym saw the degree as an opportunity to move into working with a number of languages, and felt it gave her the confidence to apply for senior positions.

Getting this qualification meant I would have senior teacher status. If I knew the mechanics of our languages it would help with the consultancy work that I hoped to take on later, and people would respect what I had to say about Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal education.

Completing MILE has also given me the opportunity to work in a university as a teacher educator, mentoring other teachers. These days I am called upon to give lectures on Aboriginal education, and to give pre-service teachers an overview on Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English.

But, the presentation of my research in an international setting has definitely been the highlight of my career!

Michael felt the course, ... *changed my whole outlook on teaching, it gave me the opportunity to explore other teaching techniques and use them in the classroom.*

Similarly, Kym felt MILE, ... *unlocked how to teach language to others.*

I have gained so much by doing the program and have developed greater confidence in my language teaching abilities. I already knew the content of my language but the program elevated my understanding of the ways that second languages can be taught.

Natalie found her teaching practice changed dramatically, because she realised that, ... *teaching language and culture is the key to engaging disengaged Indigenous students. They gain a real sense of belonging and a want to learn more.*

We saw a dramatic decrease in suspensions and less behaviour issues when language and culture were taught. When we looked at the data and interviewed the students about why they thought their behaviour had changed they were shocked at first, then smiled and shrugged their shoulders stating they were proud to learn about their culture and their language.

All repeatedly referred to the impact of the linguistics knowledge they have acquired on their teaching. Kym went from not being able to answer 'the why questions' with more than, 'That's just the way we do it', to being able to develop a far more sophisticated understanding of her own language and having the conceptual tools to explain it to a range of learners in her community, from children to adults. *I loved learning about the linguistics! It helped to break down the barrier that was stopping me from fully understanding what was happening in my language.*

Michael also saw many ancillary benefits from completing the course.

It gave me high standing in my community to work with our languages. People looked for advice from me about the language. It also allowed me to talk to linguists and understand what they were saying about languages. And it gave me the experience to present at workshops around Australia.

Natalie identified unforeseen positive outcomes flowing from her participation in the course, like increasing interest in and knowledge of language and culture in her community, and improved outcomes for her students. She felt that her undertaking the degree has provided a stimulus to her community, and proven that something positive can be done. Others might say she became a role model.

While studying I took lots of opportunities to speak with elders and ask them about the local language. At first no-one wanted to talk because they too were embarrassed about not being able to answer questions about our culture and heritage. I could still sense the hurt and pain. After I began to teach the language to a few students they actually wanted to be a part of what was happening.

MILE has done so much for me, my community, and the future generations of our township. The elders can see that our kids are learning so much and are becoming more respectful of and sensitive to our culture, heritage and language. Without MILE my community would not be heading in the direction it is now.

Working in a large research library, Melissa was hoping to disseminate Australian language material that had recently been discovered in the collections.

MILE gave me a greater understanding of how manuscripts could be used in language revival. Not happy with just sharing material I wanted to make it more accessible to Aboriginal communities for language revival purposes by creating an educational website. My MILE qualifications were integral to me being able to develop that into a program that was effectively aligned to identified language education outcomes.

Asked about the defining character of the program, Michael said,

It is giving Aboriginal people the skills to work with and understand how they can help revitalise their languages. People from many language groups have done the MILE course and are now directly using their skills to work on their languages.

Natalie wanted every teacher, Indigenous and non-Indigenous to be part of MILE so they can all gain a better understanding of culture and heritage through language. *We don't need to learn just about colonisation, assimilation, etc., we need to embed language in our schools and through it learn about our culture and heritage.*

The staff were the best feature of the program for Kym.

They actually understand the way that language is the main component of our culture. Without this understanding it would be hard to develop respect between staff and student. The fact that all of the staff have been working in Aboriginal communities for such a long time means they have the right depth of experience to back up what they are teaching. Anyone can teach but if the teachers don't have rapport with their students they may never learn.

But she also had some praise for program graduates.

MILE graduates tend to become mentors in the languages and cultures that they are working with themselves. They often guide other speakers and train them how to teach their languages as well. They are often called on to showcase language and cultural practices.

For Natalie, becoming part of a community of learners and professional languages educators was a critical outcome.

Learning from each other and building a bond between each other to bounce ideas and make reflections was one of the best features of the program. MILE empowers Indigenous people to work collaboratively to achieve better outcomes for our communities. It provides opportunities for likeminded souls to work together to learn in depth about our language and in turn we learn more about other Indigenous languages and cultures.

On a practical note, Melissa identified some more structural advantages to the program design.

It was short, sharp and sweet, which for me was fantastic because it kept my interest. Block release was another winner for me. I've studied using that style before and it just suits the way I learn. And the lecturers were inspirational.

She also felt that, *Australian language revival at the point now where we really need fully trained educators, and this is where MILE is extremely important.*

Interestingly, not one of the respondents identified a negative outcome from having completed the degree!

There was ultimately also some significant success in respect of accreditation for the Master's. Faced with an operating degree from which its staff were graduating and seeking recognition, in 2007 the NSW DET reluctantly advised:

The NSW Department of Education & Training acknowledges the availability of the Master of Indigenous Languages Education offered at the University of Sydney and accepts this program as providing appropriate training for qualified Aboriginal teachers seeking additional approval to teach an Aboriginal language. Aboriginal teachers completing the Master of Indigenous Languages Education up to the end of 2010 will be eligible for approval to teach Aboriginal languages. In 2009 the Department will reconsider the Master of Indigenous Languages Education and any other available Aboriginal languages programs in terms of the requirements for Aboriginal languages teachers after 2010 (personal communication, 2007).

When, in 2010, the matter was revisited and it was discovered that the degree structure remained unchanged, the dated riders were deleted, and Master's graduates are eligible for appointment to designated languages teacher positions in NSW government secondary schools to this day. A departmental cadetship scheme was also implemented to pay the fees of candidate staff and provide coverage to facilitate their absences from school.

Conclusion

Whilst the Indigenous Languages Education program at the University of Sydney has produced just over 60 graduates in the decade of its operation, those graduates have, for the most part, gone on to significantly enrich the revival and teaching of Australian languages across the country and in their communities, as well as earning themselves substantial, and well-deserved prestige and recognition. Nevertheless, the provision of such a program with consistently low enrolments and high costs remains a tenuous proposition, especially in a climate of growing economic rationalism, and its future is unlikely to ever be certain.

Most Indigenous Australians currently engaged in reviving their languages in classrooms, are doing so without teaching qualifications. A concerted attempt to further develop the language teaching skills of those folk by developing an initial teacher education degree at Sydney with Australian languages as a method has yet

to succeed, largely through the confounding issues of cost and government-driven ‘standards’. The current program thus remains the only degree-based one nationally offering a bridge across that gap.

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