

Teaching history to large classes in a disadvantaged school

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Introduction and context

According to Duncan Hindle, the Director-General for Education, the *de facto* size of classes in South African schools is in all probability 70 learners per educator.¹ In reality the schools that generally bear this brunt are those who which the most disadvantaged under Apartheid. Proof of this positive correlation is provided by *Emerging voices – a report on education in South African rural communities* commissioned by the Nelson Mandela Foundation from the Human Sciences Research Council.² The lack of infrastructure, facilities and support, amongst others, for these previously disadvantaged schools, as outlined in the mentioned report, is supported by other research available in the public domain.³ In a comparative study between schools in Gauteng and the Limpopo Province serious discrepancies in the material and physical infrastructure were revealed. To highlight some of these: while the schools surveyed in Gauteng generally had phones, copiers, libraries, laboratories, OHPs, a hall and computers for learners those in Limpopo Province were lacking. This study also found a positive correlation between the lack of physical and material infrastructure and teacher/learner ratio. While the teacher/learner ratio in Gauteng was 1:29 in the Limpopo Province schools it rose to 1:36.⁴ In addition to the large classes, and the lack of infrastructure facing the educators in the majority of the 28 000 public schools in South Africa, they are also confronted with challenges such as a lack of source and other teaching material, dysfunctional school structures, lack of support from parents, lack of new technology, violence and the Aids pandemic, continuous policy and curriculum changes culminating in the implementation of the “new” FET Curriculum in 2006.⁵ Apart from the above, History educators, also face challenges peculiar to their subject. These include the extended reading and writing expected of learners - mostly in a second language, implementing the new FET Curriculum, making a subject often labelled as “dull” or “boring” digestible and attractive by creating a useable past, getting learners to master skills, values, competencies in a learner-centred manner, complete copious volumes of assessment, master new knowledge and methodologies and compete with subjects viewed as much more empowering for the global village.

The reality of the challenge facing History educators teaching large classes is driven home by the comment made by a young History educator during a focus group session on teaching History to large classes:

The class is crowded with about fifty learners; there are no major classroom resources (OHP, projector, etc.). The learners have no resources themselves. They stay in a poor community where even their parents have little or no money. I, as the teacher, have to teach these learners about the Industrial Revolution of which they have no background knowledge. Where do I start?

Within the educational context outlined above – how should History educators in typical South African schools teach, other than “reading from the textbook” and “teacher-tell”, so as to achieve the ambitious policies put forward by the educational authorities and policy makers? Within this article I will explore some of the methodologies that could be employed to teach History in an OBE manner to large classes. Throughout the point of departure will be pragmatic, aiming to empower History educators with skills, abilities and competencies to teach their subject effectively and with confidence to large classes. As a result, apart from investigating some of the available models on teaching large classes, case studies of workable methodologies will be presented. Before embarking on an attempt to put forward some strategies on how to teach History to large classes in disadvantaged schools, it is worthwhile to understand the international perspective on teaching large classes. Unfortunately very little research exists on how to teach large classes in school, let alone how to teach them History. As a result this article relied heavily on the experiences of universities in teaching large classes, which, although not ideal in nature, does supply useful insight into the challenges and solutions in dealing with this specific scenario.

The international context – Literature review

The available body of research on how to teach large classes primarily emanated from the rapid growth in class sizes at universities in Europe, the USA and Australia during the last decade. Growth in student numbers was, however, not accompanied by a corresponding growth in staff and resources, while at the same time large classes meant more administration and management tasks. Although the proliferation in class sizes seems to be a global problem, the nature of the challenges faced differs vastly according to geographical region and the phase of education.⁶ While the core challenge of teaching a large class may be the same across the globe, the notion of being disadvantaged differs vastly between the north and the south. Invariably information technology, teaching and administrative assistants and other support structures

exist in the First World which allow educators to not treat large classes as they do small classes. The challenges, as presented in the literature, are not dissimilar to those confronting History educators in South Africa. The biggest challenge facing educators is the planning for, and the administration of, large classes. Meticulous planning and preparation of the work to be done, teaching methods to be employed, teaching materials to be used, and procedural rules to be followed is necessary. However, even the most structured of courses are inundated by questions and queries simply because of the large number of students the educator has to deal with. This can be addressed in three ways: by creating support groups within the class; effective use of notice boards; or by providing on-going feedback at the start or end of the lesson.⁷ A second pedagogical problem with teaching large classes is that it tends to work against feelings of inclusion and value. Some of the available research claims that students generally tend to view large classes in a negative light and that their levels of motivation, perceived learning and teacher sensitivity were factors affected by class size. A solution put forward is one of peer tutoring whereby learners assist each other in the learning process. Using this model could result in a coordinated set of small classes which in turn could become a social support network. This could become part of the weekly planning of the educator or be an after school activity. An impressive body of research indicates that peer tutoring enjoys consistent success and generally leads to academic improvement. Part of the success of this methodology probably lies in the fact that learning, according to constructivist theories of learning, is a social activity during which learners must have the opportunity to position their learning in terms of life experience, previous learning and to share their learning process.⁸ Buildings and classrooms that are inadequate for teaching large classes, and for conducting both group and independent work, is a further obstacle against quality teaching.⁹ To complicate matters further, these classrooms are poorly maintained. Although using the school hall or the "outdoor classroom" may provide a general solution, educators should possibly try and make the best of the physical learning space available to them. C.R. Johnson, pragmatically, suggests that educators should practice where they will stand while teaching, practice using the equipment, and write on the board. They must then check whether the board work can be seen from the back of the room. He also recommends that arrangements be made timeously for whatever instructional equipment needed.¹⁰ When confronted by large classes, most educators would be tempted to lecture rather than engage in a variety of techniques.¹¹ Although research shows that lecturing is as effective as other instructional methods, such as discussion, in transmitting information, it is less effective in

promoting independent thought or developing students' thinking skills.¹² Lecturing also has another serious downside. The average student's attention span is between ten and twenty minutes if they are passively absorbing information. After that, students have difficulty concentrating on the speaker. As a solution it is suggested that for each lecture, plan to change the pace every fifteen minutes or so to relieve the monotony and recapture students' interest.¹³ In the light of the above, and since most lessons seems to run for an hour, teachers need to build in variety such as student questioning, buzz groups, learning cells, problem posting and other strategies as outlined in Table 1.¹⁴ This will stimulate active learning and maintain interest. The strength of such techniques is that learners are learning by doing, and that the retention of data will increase since multiple senses such as auditory and visual are used. Educators must therefore employ more than one learning style at a time when lecturing. In addition to presenting facts, they should also try to share complex intellectual analyses, synthesize several ideas, clarify controversial issues, or compare and contrast different points of view. What should be avoided at all costs is lecturing verbatim from a script. According to Day:

If you simply read from a prepared text, you will find yourself disengaged from the material (you won't be thinking about what you are saying) and your students will feel disengaged as well. Moreover, reading prevents you from maintaining eye contact with students, and it casts your voice down toward your notes instead of up and out toward the lecture hall. Writing out lectures is also extremely time-consuming. If you do feel the need to write out your lectures, reduce the completed text to a brief outline of key words and phrases. Lecture from this outline - you will naturally produce sentences more for the ear than for the eye, thereby making it easier for students to grasp the material.¹⁵

In general educators of large classes must do the same as those with small classes despite the difference in numbers. They must be systematic and organized, deliver quality learning, set and mark stimulating assessment tasks, provide personalized attention, motivate students, monitor student progress, promote active participation, and so forth. Although literature reveals, for those teaching at university level in the First World, that some support structures exist in terms of libraries, support staff and ICT, when teaching large classes the same cannot be said for the South African school context.¹⁶ No real policy or support structure exists for educators in general and History teachers specifically, on how to teach to large classes.

Those who face this daunting task are invariably educators from previously disadvantaged schools who are the least qualified and equipped to do so. Research conducted into teaching large classes at tertiary level provides a model (Figure 1 below) that can be used in teaching History to a large class in a disadvantaged school in a learner-centred manner and as a rigorous process of historical enquiry as called for by the latest guidelines for History teaching in the FET phase.¹⁷

Figure 1. The AUT User Centre for Educational and Professional Development strategies for interaction¹⁸

Method Description

Think – pair – share	Each learner considers the topic/question and writes down some ideas/answers. S/he joins with one other for discussion. This provides a good basis for wider discussion.
'Buzz' groups	Working in small groups (4-6), learners discuss an issue. Topics can include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much they already know about a topic • What they are not sure about • What they want the educator to cover next
Round	Every learner takes a turn to make a statement. Useful topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One thing I need to know about ... • Something that I learned today... • One important point (about the topic) ...
Case studies	A 'story' or scenario is presented to the group (often, but not always, as a handout). Groups discuss the story or work together on questions.
Group discussion	Groups (up to 6 learners) talk about a topic. A set of questions from the teacher helps to structure the discussion and focus the group. The larger the group, the more difficult it is for everyone to participate actively.
Continuum	Everyone cooperates to form a line according to their capabilities/confidence/whatever the topic is. For example, the length of time their families have been in South Africa, their ages, etc.
'Tell your partner'	Pairs. Each learner explains a topic/concept/ answer to someone else. The partner has to listen, then ask questions.
Fishbowl	One group discusses a topic. The second group observes the discussion and each person records: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A partner's contributions (and gives individual feedback afterwards), or • The important parts of the discussion (may be identification of issues, applications, generalisations, etc., depending on the task instructions)

Peer evaluation	<p>The class is divided into pairs. Partners exchange written work or observe each other's oral presentation. They give each other feedback and work together to identify :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was good? • What needed improvement? • How it could be improved? <p>They can focus on delivery and/or content. This activity works best if learners already have knowledge on the topic. Giving them a checklist is also a good idea.</p>
Role play	<p>Groups/ pairs/ individuals 'act out' information on a specific topic, often in front of the class or group. If they lack confidence, they can work in pairs without 'performing' in front of the whole class. Set a time limit for each group. This activity can be used for formative or summative assessment. It is important to allow time for participants to de-role/ debrief.</p>
Presentations	<p>Individuals or small groups find information on a topic, then prepare and deliver a short informative session to the wider group.</p>
Panel	<p>Several 'experts' are invited to the session and answer questions from the class. The experts may be from the community, other educators, and/or learners. They may each speak briefly before the question session.</p>
Question and answer session	<p>This is a useful activity to check learners' understanding. A time is set aside for a discussion/answer session. Questions may be submitted in writing at the previous session (good for shy learners), or they may be oral.</p>
Syndicates	<p>Groups of learners work together on a project(s) which entails researching and presenting (written and/or oral) information. Useful for focusing on group and cooperative skills while covering discipline content.</p>
Brainstorming	<p>Everyone thinks of as many different ideas as possible. All ideas are accepted and recorded without comment. The ideas are evaluated after a set time period or when inspiration ends.</p>
Student - teacher role swap	<p>The educator asks learners to write their ideas/information on the blackboard and then explain them. S/he places several pieces of chalk on the desk and sits with class members. (Sometimes learners will be shy, especially at first, and the educator may need to sit for a while.)</p>
Information transfer	<p>This is a paired activity. Partners ask each other questions and give answers to fill gaps on their worksheets. (Each worksheet has different gaps.)</p>

Matching	This activity is one way to divide a large group into pairs. Members of the group are given cards which contain either a title or a definition. They have to find the person with the complementary card. In finding their partners, they come across a range of definitions and have to think about the topic. Content can be simple or complex depending on learner's abilities. The pairs then work together on an exercise/problem related to their title and definition. Reporting back afterwards widens the learning.
Withdrawal	While the group works together or alone on set work, the teacher spends time with individual students or small groups. The individual assistance can be rostered through the course so that everyone gets a turn, or it can focus on people who need extra help.
Mindmaps	A topic is written on the board (or on butcher's paper). The class/group suggests and organises ideas and information, presenting them visually, often in clusters. Students often enjoy writing on the board; where numbers are large; this activity is better carried out in groups with a display of the results at the end.
Organising information	Information items are provided out of sequence. Learners work (in pairs or small groups) to arrange them in order. The results can then be reported by each group and/or discussed by the wider group. The information can be given to learners on a single worksheet or already cut into pieces for them to arrange in order.
Demonstrations	The educator shows learners how to do something, or uses equipment to explain theory/principles. This activity can also be presented by a learner or group. Seeing something real helps students to remember more clearly.
Experiments	The educator or the learners carry out a practical activity to verify or refute a principle.
1 – 2 – 4 – more (pyramid)	Each learner writes brief notes about the topic and then compares them with a partner. Each pair discusses its combined list with another couple. This provides a good basis for discussion in the wider group. It is a good idea to limit the '1 – 2 – 4' stages, e.g. 2 minutes or so for individual and for paired work, 5 minutes for the '4' stage.
Show of hands	This quick check is useful for gaining a rough idea of how many people are confident about a topic. It is worth remembering that confidence is not always the same as understanding. This activity is a good 'energiser'. It is particularly useful: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at the beginning of a session to focus attention, or • when the group has been sitting still for some time.
'Ignorance'	Before the class begins, learners consider what they would like to know by the end of the session. They write down some questions - five is a good number to aim for. Some learners may like to share their questions, which can be recorded on the board. The learners write more questions at the end of the session. These questions are likely to be different from the earlier ones; they should involve a higher level of thinking; there may well be more of them; and they can be a useful basis for further private study.

What these 26 constructivists and learner-centred strategies offer in the very least is that it will allow for a rigorous process of historical enquiry which:

- encourages and assists constructive debate through careful evaluation of a broad range of evidence and diverse points of view
- provides a critical understanding of socio-economic systems in their historical perspective and their impact on people
- supports the view that historical truth consists of a multiplicity of voices expressing varying and often contradictory versions of the same history.¹⁹

This in turn will satisfy the needs as expressed in the National Curriculum Statement for Grades 10-12 (schools) – Guidelines for learning programmes – History. Furthermore, very few if any of the strategies in Table 1 require scarce resources or a first-class infrastructure. It relies on the ability of the History teacher to utilise the most abundant resource available – the large class of learners in the disadvantaged school. By applying the range of strategies as outlined above History educators will propel their learners beyond the behavioural model of learning which relies on direct programmed instruction and notes.²⁰ Instead, History learners in a large class in a disadvantaged school would be exposed to social models of learning which emphasizes knowledge construction and deconstruction and cooperation, as well as information processing models which rely on reasoning and problem solving by mastering “complex bodies of concepts by generating, analysing, applying and evaluating information.”²¹

The key question to ask is: “Are the techniques as outlined in Table 1 attainable in the real world of large classes in disadvantaged schools. The following four case studies will hopefully provide the answer.

“Indigenous Knowledge Suggestions” on how to teach History to large classes in a disadvantaged school

Since the creation of the Department of History Education in 2002²² students taking the History Education 220 course have annually had to complete the following assignment: “How to teach History and specifically the Industrial Revolution to a large class in a disadvantaged school.” To

complete the assignment the students had to tap into, not only the available literature, but also their personal experiences as learners/students and educators, as well as that of experienced educators confronted by such educational scenarios. The rationale behind this is very simple - to empower prospective educators with the necessary skills and competencies to teach History effectively in the majority of the 28 000 public schools in South Africa. As part of the assignment the students had to come up with activities on how to teach History within the mentioned context. Invariably the quality of these activities varied as many of the prospective History educators wrestled with a context that many a time was foreign to their personal middle-class schooling. Similarly, students who came from a background where they had been taught in large classes at school struggled to move beyond devising tasks that involved “chalk and talk” methods. Over the years, however, a substantial number of ideas/activities were presented which I consider worth sharing with History Educators. These activities, which I call “Indigenous Knowledge Suggestions” invariably, took cognisance of the educational context of large classes and disadvantaged schools and adhered to the “National Curriculum Statement for Grades 10-12 (schools) – Guidelines for learning programmes – History” which states:

Educators carry the responsibility of developing learning programmes for the learners in their care, as they know what the situation requires. They alone can design a learning programme that is ideal for their learners and which meets the conditions for Provincial approval...In the process of developing the learning programme, the strengths, interests, as well as the barriers to learning of the learners should be taken into account.²³

What made these ideas stand out was the fact that they proved that even inexperienced teachers can think innovatively and imaginatively when faced with the problem of having to teach History to large classes in a disadvantaged school while only using the resources available to them.

Indigenous Knowledge Suggestion: Case Study 1 – Workstations²⁴

The class of 50 learners would be divided into five groups of ten with representative age-group and gender ratios. The desks would be moved to create space for five workstations and if necessary workstations could also be formed outside of the classroom. Each of the groups would then be placed at a workstation where they would find a laminated source. At workstation one, for example, learners would find a depiction of children working in mines during the Industrial Revolution. The visual

source is accompanied by source-based questions “that the group would have to critically answer in written format after discussion between members of the group had taken place.” At workstation two there would be an outline of factory rules and pay during the Industrial Revolution with only one question posed: “Do you think this is fair? Why/Why not?” Learners in this group would have to write a petition asking for better working hours and pay if they felt the rules and pay was unfair or, a petition in support of the conditions as they exist, if they regarded them to be fair. Workstation three would be supplied with a picture of houses during the Industrial Revolution. The group would have to study the image, making a list of what they noticed. At workstation four there would be a cartoon of the era under discussion which the group would have to analyse before answering the questions posed. At the final workstation there would be pictures of pre-industrial Britain and of Britain during the Industrial Revolution. The learners would have to identify the change that took place and depict their conceptual understanding of this in a spider diagram/mind map. Each group would be allowed 10 minutes per workstation and would rotate on the instruction of the teacher. At the end of the lesson, or during the next lesson, the teacher would ask for feedback from the groups and knowledge on the Industrial Revolution would be constructed and deconstructed and notes compared in the process. Learners can take notes during this process while the educator will be able to determine whether the outcomes were achieved by employing the “student/teacher swap” method outlined in Figure 1.

Indigenous Knowledge Suggestion: Case Study 2 - Sound²⁵

The teacher would have to make an audio-recording of ten different sounds that occur daily in our modern environment. Examples are the sound of a car, a train, inside a factory, household appliances and so forth. At the lesson these would be played to the large class where all learners would be asked to try and identify the sounds they have heard. Learners would then offer “their partners” ideas/answers as to what they thought the sounds represent. “Buzz groups” of five would then be created and each of the groups would receive one of the sounds they had heard and appropriate handouts. Each group would then be required to report back orally to the class on the following key-questions:

- how was their sound invented?
- how did it changed over time?
- how did these products impacted on their lives and the lives of the people at the time?

The class would in turn, in their “Buzz groups” assess each report back by means of a negotiated rubric.

Indigenous Knowledge Suggestion: Case Study 3 – Invent your own machine²⁶

The class of 50 would be divided into “brainstorming groups” of 4 to 6 learners. The learners would then be given the key question: “Invent/design a machine that would make life easier.” Learners must firstly draw a plan for their invention, give it a name, and then build it using waste material that they have collected. The group will then have to write a report (which the teacher will assess) in which they answer the following questions:

- What material will you need to build your invention?
- Are these materials available or will other inventions need to be created to provide you with your materials?
- How will your invention be powered?
- How much money will your invention cost to run?
- How many people will be employed because of your invention and what will they do?
- What will your invention replace?
- What will the impact of your invention be on the environment?
- How will it make life easier?
- Where would be the best place for your invention to be situated? (think of materials, transport, labour)
- What effect will your invention have on your community and region?

Each group will need to prepare a talk to explain/demonstrate their invention to the class and try to convince them that their invention will revolutionize the world. The other members of the class will then employ the “Round Technique” to comment on the talks and inventions. Once this is completed the teacher would use this as the baseline information to teach about the Industrial Revolution.

Indigenous Knowledge Suggestion: Case Study 4 – Oral History²⁷

Roughly half-way through the unit on the Industrial Revolution “I would use third party representation from the community around the school to come in and help teach the Industrial Revolution. An example would be a factory foreman, business manager, printer, baker, mechanic, etc. to come in and give a talk to the big class on how their work and business has evolved.” This was decided upon because of the difficulties in organizing field work for large classes in disadvantaged schools. The members of the community would do their presentations as part of a panel. Learners would be expected to direct questions towards either the panel or to individual members so as to be able to write a newspaper article in which they would

compare and contrast working conditions at the present to that during the Industrial Revolution. Their articles must be augmented by “syndicates finding their own information” by conducting further interviews in the community around their school. The newspaper article will eventually be assessed by the teacher using a negotiated rubric.

Indigenous Knowledge Suggestion: Case Study 5 – Games, simulations, role-play²⁸

Each learner will be expected to draw a picture of a man on paper donated by a company. The class would then select the best two drawings to be mass-produced on an assembly line. The learners will then be seated in four rows of roughly 12 each and asked to mass-produce the drawings repetitiously, re-creating one part – such as the man’s eyes, shirt, hair, etc. and passing the picture down the line. During the activity the educator (acting as factory manager) pushes the four lines to compete to create high quality drawings at speed. As the learners work the educator can push them to speed up, concentrate and to work harder by saying: “Keep production moving! Don’t slow down! Our competitors will catch up!” The educator can also perform quality control by removing completed pictures that do not measure up. Learners can be strictly monitored and those that misbehave can be reprimanded with phrases such as “No talking! Do not waste time laughing!” Some learners might become frustrated by the pace and repetitiveness of the work and some may even refuse to work and try to organize a strike. The educator may want to “fire” unproductive workers or alternatively may want to “pay” learners for their work on the assembly line by telling them that their grade for the activity is based on their productivity. By assuming the roles they did, learners would be better able to conceptualize a range of concepts related to the Industrial Revolution such as mass production; quality; working conditions; assembly line. Afterwards the educator will debrief the experience and along with the class, using either the “think-pair-share” or “pyramid” method to make connections between the students’ experience and that of workers during the height of the Industrial Revolution. The above-outlined case-studies were all piloted during the annual teaching practice session and found to generally work. More importantly large classes of learners managed to take steps towards discovering “What is the purpose of History?” and “History in the South African context” as outlined in the National Curriculum Statement for Grades 10-12 (schools) – Guidelines for learning programmes – History, 2004, namely: **A study of history builds the capacity of people to make informed choices in order to contribute constructively to society and to advance democracy. History as a vehicle of personal empowerment engenders in learners an**

understanding of human agency, which brings with it the knowledge that, as human beings, they have choices, and that they can make the choice to change the world for the better... We need to build the capacity of learners who study History to use the insights and skills of historians. In that process, they must be given the opportunity to analyse sources and evidence, study different interpretations and divergent opinions and voices, and build historical imagination. This is a central means of imparting the ability to think in a rigorous and critical manner about society.” Learners need to be taught how to use concepts as a means of not only analysing, but interpreting and constructing historical knowledge and understanding and be encouraged to communicate their knowledge in a variety of ways...²⁹

At the same time Historical knowledge would have been constructed and deconstructed while the necessary outcomes have been met. All along the student-teachers got their learners to “do History” in an active and learner-centred manner by using resources that is readily available to all and by treating the less than ideal environment with great flexibility and by being committed to teaching.

Concluding comments

While executing the outlined strategies within a large History class in a disadvantaged school is very possible and certain realism needs to prevail. For a teacher to succeed under such conditions s/he needs to be enthusiastic, innovative, well prepared, possess a good subject knowledge, an excellent grasp of both the official documentation related to the teaching of History in this country and the strategies outlined in Figure 1, be able to work with little support, provide interpersonal interaction, active learning and much much more. Are we not seeking for “super person” like teachers of History which does not exist? Are we not expecting more from disadvantaged History teachersthanfromtheircolleaguesinwell-resourced schools? Are there not other ways and means (excluding lecturing and the use of ICT) to teach History to large classes in disadvantaged schools?

Comments, answers and suggestions on this article are welcomed.

(Endnotes)

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²² The Department first formed part of the Faculty of Education at the University of Natal – Durban, but since 2004, after amalgamation with the University of Durban-Westville, it forms part of the School of Social Sciences Education, Faculty of Education, UKZN.

²³ National Curriculum Statement for Grades 10-12 (schools) – Guidelines for learning programmes – History, 2004, pp. 5-6.

²⁴ My gratitude to Lara Hill for allowing me to share her idea with the members of SASHT.

²⁵ My gratitude to Jaime Harris for allowing me to share her idea with the members of SASHT.

²⁶ My gratitude to Megan Loubser for allowing me to share her idea with the members of SASHT.

²⁷ My gratitude to Meghan Claxton for allowing me to share her idea with the members of SASHT.

²⁸ My gratitude to Michelle Hughes for allowing me to share her idea with the members of SASHT.

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