An abstract artwork featuring a textured background of various shades of green and yellow. In the center, there are two dark, silhouetted figures of people, one slightly behind the other, facing each other. The overall composition is layered and has a painterly, textured quality.

# An Integrative Approach to Teaching Visual Arts in Teacher Education

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## Adopting an Integrative approach in Modern School Pedagogy

The latest renewal curriculum process for basic education in Finland highlighted the role of integration in active knowledge construction (FNBE 2014). In a global world, we are facing problems that often pose challenges for multi-disciplinary expertise in co-operation. For this reason, the National Curriculum (2014) considers it important to devise various means to build larger entities and to develop multi-faceted skills in knowledge construction in every subject and multi-disciplinary area. Teachers are encouraged to organize contents

of learning, for example, by arranging intensive time periods or themes in learning, and by actively building bridges between different content areas within the school subjects. Furthermore, similar research topics may be handled at the same time in different school subjects to assist students in linking them and formulating them as even larger meaningful entities. According to the curriculum, at least once a year the whole school is to work co-operatively while focusing on one, multi-disciplinary theme.

This integrative teaching practice had already been the norm at the primary level for many class teachers, as they are generalists in the Finnish school system. They are qualified to teach almost all school subjects at the primary level and they usually achieve this by adopting an integrative approach in its many forms. In class teacher education, during the subject pedagogical studies, the students explore both internal and multi-disciplinary forms of integrative approaches. For pre-primary education, the teacher-training curriculum also adopts multi-disciplinary and phenomenon-based learning as central concepts. These themes are emphasized in the National Curriculum for Pre-Primal Education (2014). Kindergarten teachers likewise need to have an understanding of larger educational entities and an ability to build connections between disciplines.

Research questions and data

This article explores how this integrative teaching approach is applied in teacher education at the University of Helsinki. Two cases are analyzed as different types of examples of the integrative approach that occur in art pedagogy. The data consists of student teachers’ art works and pedagogical portfolios that are related to these artistic learning processes. The former case comes from the class teacher education (The Basic Didactics of the Visual Arts, 3 ETCS), where the first-year students (N=137) reflected on the visual arts as a school subject and the concept of internal integration in its pedagogy by drawing comics in the autumn term of 2015. The latter case comes from kindergarten teacher education (Visual arts didactics 2, 4 ETCS), where second-year students (N=72) researched environment and the concept of place and space through art in the spring of 2016.

CASE 1: Comics as internal integration in the visual arts

At the beginning of the class teacher education programme, the student teachers may harbour rather narrow views of the visual arts as a school subject (Räsänen 2005; Collanus, Kairavuori & Rusanen 2012). Therefore, it is important to update student understanding of the aims, contents and pedagogical principals that are currently valid in school practice. One of the crucial questions for high quality learning and teaching in visual arts is whether teachers are able to integrate the three core contents in curriculum (Picture 1.) into their teaching.

Picture 1. The Core Contents in the Visual Arts.

According to the Finnish National Curriculum (2014), the visual arts consist of the following three core contents in the grades 3-6 (pupils from 9 to 12 years old), which are usually taught by class teachers.		
1. Pupils’ own visual cultures: The pupils’ self-made images and visual cultures familiar to them may serve as starting point for visual exercises. The pupils’ own visual cultures meet and discuss together with other visual cultures. The meaning of active participant in the society is constructed through the membership of these cultures.	2. Visual cultures of the environment: The pupils use artistic means to investigate their everyday surroundings. Both natural and constructed environments are taken into account, as they are types of visual cultures in the media as well are topics of interest in learning and possibilities of acting as an active participant in the society.	3. Art worlds: The pupils study artistic images by creating their own images and discussing them. They learn artistic and knowledge constructive processes that are characteristic to art worlds, which consist of various conceptions of art and acts or products related to them. The key issue in the learning is the construction of the cultural identity by making and interpreting visual art and culture.

Picture 1. The Core Contents in the Visual Arts.

Teachers are expected to support the internal integration in their teaching so that the objectives for expression, skills and knowledge are achieved simultaneously in visual exercises. The purpose is to integrate the different content areas in various combinations in each exercise and not to omit any of them or to disconnect them from the whole. As a result of this pedagogical principle, teachers can create larger thematic wholes in knowledge processing, which allow them time to concentrate and this introduces more rigour to the relaxed atmosphere in art learning.

By analysing the case of comics here, our aim is to argue that this particular task may serve as a highly beneficial learning experience involving the internal integration of the three content areas of the school subject.

### Hands-on learning of the pedagogical principal

The process began by discussing the students' earlier learning or teaching experiences related to the visual arts at school. The students were asked to express something meaningful in their own learner's history by creating a short story. This story served as a manuscript for the comic strip. The students rehearsed ways to improvise stories and they experimented with suitable tools and technical skills in drawing comics. They also explored various types of comics to understand the means of visual expression and communication in hand (such as image size, angle of view, framing as expression). After this, an excursion to the Finnish National Gallery followed, where the students examined works of art representing the Finnish Golden Era in art history. The students created their own way of recycling some elements from one well-known work of art and used it to tell their personal story in a comic strip. After drawing the story, the students reflected on the process and the products together to understand the principals of evaluation in visual arts. In the end, the comics were put into an album.

When undertaking this activity, the students were positioned as active, responsible learners of the artistic process. Thus, educating competent teachers of the arts at the primary level includes vital personal experiences and shared reflective

observations to facilitate conceptualizing and understanding the core didactics in arts – even though the students themselves do not often feel themselves to be 'gifted' in visual expression and communication.

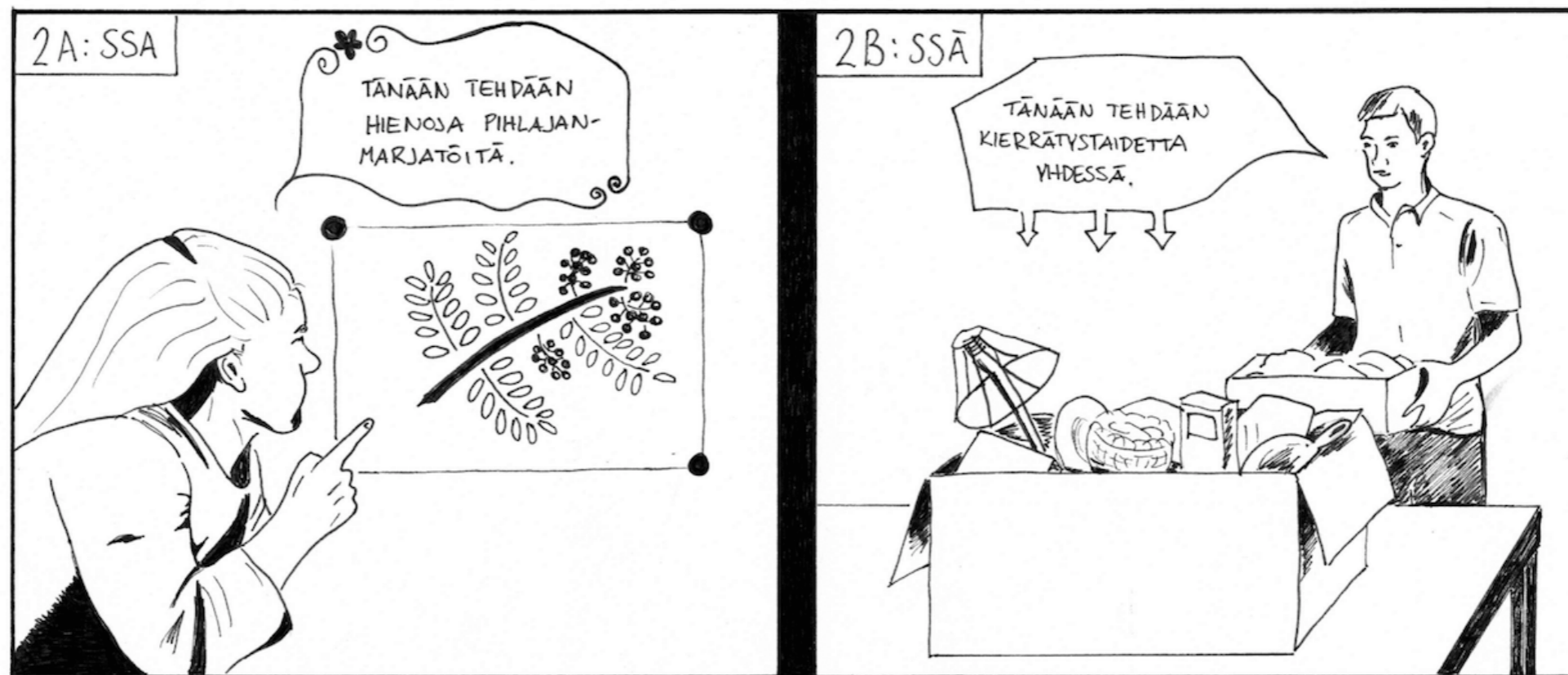
### Reflecting on the dynamics of internal integration in student portfolios

When the comics album was completed, the students constructed a pedagogical portfolio, which consisted of digital documentation (images, texts) of their artistic process. They were asked to reflect on this entire learning experience as a possible example of internal integration. The majority of the students reported that the comics had worked as an example of internal integration in an eye-opening way. The students could recognise which content areas were included and how they were integrated. On the one hand, *the art worlds* were taught by connecting and recycling various conceptions of art and different types of images in the artistic process. Both the comics and the paintings of the Finnish Golden Era were also introduced as examples of art that can make a difference in society and that can serve as a political standpoint. For example, the nationalist movement to establish Finnish national identity at the beginning of the 1900s was discussed in a visit to the Finnish National Gallery and this was linked to the theme of the cultural identity that is expressed in art and visual culture in general. In the comics, the students expressed their identities as learners and teachers in art.

**Picture 2. Comics by Annika Savela.** She recycles the art work called "Women of Ruokolahti on the Church Hill" (1887) by Albert Edelfelt in her story. This painting is one of the most famous examples of true representation of rural life of the Finns. The student represents "Women of Ruokolahti" as teachers gossiping about the 'new' way of teaching visual arts at school. Some of the teachers are prejudiced against the latest ideas in the curriculum, which refers to the paradigm shift in the teaching practice.

Link to the original art work

<http://kokoelmat.fng.fi/app?imagesize=0&si=A+l+217&lang=en>



On the other hand, comics as art referred to the *visual cultures of the environment*, which children face or ‘consume’ on a daily basis in the media.

Connecting these two types of art was sometimes experienced by students as confusing and as a rather new approach in the school context, where popular art is perhaps still not considered as worthy of study as the established art of the ‘master pieces’. In addition, the comics made it possible to experience the power of students’ own *visual cultures* as a learning environment in didactics within this school subject. Through this shared self-made album, they actually constructed active participation using artistic means in their learning environment through the membership of these visual cultures as future teachers. In a sense the album

had turned into a book of pedagogy for visual art, which encouraged students to eclectically combine different

approaches in art teaching (see Räsänen 2008). The album process served as an example of internal integration, creating a larger learning process, which simultaneously combined objectives for expression, skills and knowledge in one visual exercise. Furthermore, the process also

combined the aims of different curriculum content areas.



Case 2, example 1. A film where environment was studied in the context of a child's fears and loneliness.

Case 2, example 2 (pages 183, 190-193). Graphic prints and sculptures produced in an artistic research project.

## CASE 2: Visual arts as research in multi-disciplinary integration

At the **Art Education Didactics 2**, students of kindergarten teacher education researched the concept of space and place in the context of environment, geography and architecture through printmaking, sculpting and film. While all the exercises focused on researching the environment, other principles were also taught simultaneously, such as those of multisensory perception, artistic meaning-making and image building as well as techniques in artmaking. Through these processes, the students were introduced to the knowledge of artistic knowing. Today multimodality and the different ways of knowing are recognized and emphasized even at the national core curriculum level. The visual arts with its unique knowledge-building, offers one more channel to research the reality around us. Arts-based research is based on the idea of artistic process as a primary tool for inquiry and as a way of data collection (see Leavy 2009) and to art as knowledge (see Eisner 2008). Cognition is understood to cover all means of receiving information and processing it. At the core of thinking across subject borders is the transfer of acquired knowledge into new situations. From a

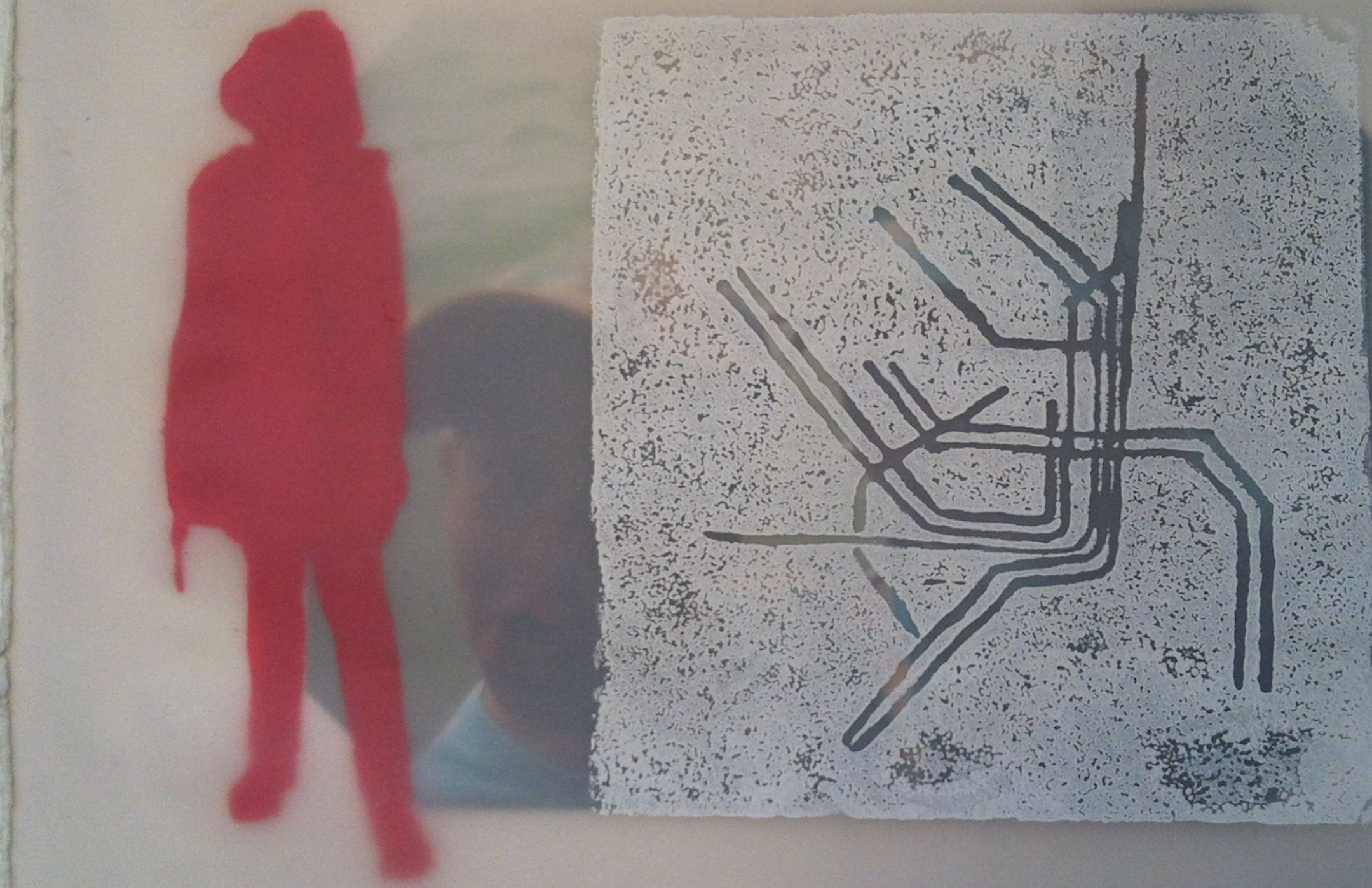
cognitive orientation to learning, important factors for information building are the culturally anchored subjective experiences, perceptions and feelings. The aim of learning is therefore to acknowledge, study and interpret the culturally diverse reality and its phenomena (Räsänen 2009, 30-31). Therefore teachers need to acquire an understanding of the

learning process and knowledge building in art to be able to adopt it in their own teaching and also to be critical in choosing relevant content instead of only thinking in terms of the “product first”. Class teachers and early education teachers have a great opportunity and a responsibility to construct an understanding of arts education and its meanings. They are also in a good position to use phenomenon-based learning and multi-disciplinary integration. A well-balanced education requires integration so as to build connections between the different components of life and its knowledges. The aim is to provide the students with the tools to build a multi-disciplinary learning environment at

primary schools and kindergartens and to use arts as a means of researching and building multimodal knowledge of a culturally diverse world with multiple values.



Katrina Karttunen: “Barbie/ loneliness”



Hanna Sellgren: "In between"



Sohvi Peltoniemi: "In grandmothers closet"



Veronica Saari: "The fence"

## Conclusions

According to the students, the arts constituted an essential part in the integrated entity. Researching both the concepts of pedagogy and the contents of the subject matter through art created experiential knowledge that constructed a deeper understanding of and more affective relationship to the studied issue. Through art, the students were also able to express their research outcome more effectively. They also reported that their "gaze" was somehow sharper, for example, while looking through a camera lens. We argue that visual arts and its role in

integrating active knowledge construction is justifiable. Generalist teachers have an exceptional opportunity to create an effective learning environment with its core in the arts.

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