

Problems and Countermeasures for English Majors' Dissertation Writing in the New Era in China

Shiyong Jiang
School of foreign languages
Leshan Normal University
Leshan, China
jsyenglish@126.com

Abstract—Dissertation writing is not only one of the major sections of practical abilities of English majors, but also one of the important channels to improve their comprehensive abilities. In the new era of internet and multi culture, the quality of English majors' dissertation is in the process of decreasing continuously due to various factors like the society, culture, educational context, etc, causing the malfunctions of dissertation writing. This paper analyzes the practical problems of English dissertation writing in the newly-built colleges in China, including its essence and expectations in college education and, provides some countermeasures for improving the quality of dissertation ecologically.

Keywords—the new era, English majors, dissertation, practical problems, countermeasures

I. INTRODUCTION

Dissertation is metaphorically regarded as the "Period" of undergraduate education in China, and is also the last section of college education. However, this "period" cannot be made easily as someone may expect. In many cases, it may be somewhat difficult due to many explicit and implicit factors in both the college and the society. As a matter of fact, there are many problems of obscurities, including ill logic, plagiarism, or misused genre, etc, which were far from national standard and have been criticized by many people. In 2007, there have once been the controversies whether dissertation should be canceled. According to some research, many students' dissertations are far away from innovation, or roughly scraped together with parts from other resources with no deep analysis based on the existing researches [1]. Besides, entering 21st century, especially in the recent decade, the changing culture and growing technology have been changing people's life and study drastically, which also change most students' value of profession, study and behavior, causing a number of problems in dissertation writing and influencing the quality of college talents cultivation. For example, some graduates of English majors cannot write a qualified academic paper, or even cannot deal with writing some professional or academic paragraphs with appropriate meaning and correct grammatical structures. Especially, with the application of E-learning and the development of multi-culture, students' thinking styles, ways of thinking and resource getting have changed drastically. Therefore, to ensure and improve the quality of undergraduate students and the development of the discipline of English language in college, this paper attempts to analyze the present challenges and problems of undergraduate's dissertation and provide some suggestions of reforms so as to highlight the cultivation of talents of English major in China.

II. THE SERIOUS PROBLEMS OF ENGLISH MAJORS' DISSERTATION WRITING IN THE NEW ERA

A The Negative Impact of Social Development and Technology

In the 21st century, following the development of China's society and economy, many colleges and universities expand their enrollment of students which, on the one hand, ensures more students opportunities of higher education, and forms a large group of job-hunters, causing the well-known problems of employment of the society on the other. It is just because of such a serious problem that the recognition of college students and higher education by people lowered gradually. Currently, following the slow down of the economy in China, the pressure of employment is increasing, which leads to students' neglect of study and dissertation writing, some even fledging the classes frequently showing their dissatisfaction. Many students in our face to face communication expressed their concept of English major as "Passing the exam of TEM4 and TEM 8 and having rich working experience are everything". Regarding dissertation writing, they believe that "It's the task set by the college, so if I can pass it, it's OK, I don't have to spent too much time on it". Some students think that Dissertation is important to practice writing, but they do not have sufficient experience to do it. There are also students think that "dissertation can help little in their comprehensive abilities". These are how students think about dissertation and its writing in our daily communication after class. In the meantime, the highly developed internet and mobile technology and changing society have provided students a virtual word which provides rich life styles and multi culture in forms of novels in E-books, on-line or off-line games live video, etc. It enriches students' life on the one hand and causes some baffles in their study on the other hand, causing student make wrong or inappropriate justification of academic knowledge and courses in colleges.

The impact of the unique multi culture and technique leads to a lower recognition of academic learning and writing, which then makes students' learning motivation weakened in learning. As a result, it's natural to see their indulgence in mobile phones, carelessness in assignment or no respect for academic learning in the class like linguistics or literature as the unavoidable phenomena. In the new sociocultural background, what students care is no longer limited in course learning as

scheduled by the college; what they concern is how they can pass some exams easily and quickly, how they get a part-time job, how to gain social experiences, which seem to be of more direct benefit for them. This ideology will certainly affect their investment of time and energy in their learning in college. Additionally, these changes would directly influence students' justification of dissertation, making graduation paper writing lack of precedent preparation and motivation. Therefore, although innovations and reforms in the society and technology has made writing of dissertation have wider accesses to information and resources, there could also be negative impact on students' habit of learning and changes in the orientation of their values toward learning and dissertation writing. As stated by some students in the newly-built college in Sichuan, "they would feel bored and worried when the course is academic oriented", many students in our survey express their worry and reluctance toward courses like linguistics, lexicology, teaching methodology and so on which in fact can form the basis of students' research in dissertation writing. To improve the quality of dissertation, both the administrators and teachers in English language department must consider it carefully.

B The Difficult Situations of Managing Dissertation Writing

Currently, seeing from the policies of many colleges, the management of dissertation writing is still problematic in many aspects. In the first place, there exists the situation that teachers of English department may let students pass the oral defense "softly", that is, although some students' graduation paper cannot meet the requirement of the department or college, teachers would finally let them pass it by considering that students have to go to the job market with the diploma certificate issued by the college. Facing more and more pressure, no matter the supervisors or the management department of colleges, they have to choose compromise in order that students could have the opportunities to find their jobs. For some of the supervisors, if the dissertation can be "basically qualified", they can let students pass the oral defense on the basis of some revisions, of which, the process is quite hasty, usually for one day or so. All these lead to the decrease of quality. Second, there are more conflicts in the timing schedules of dissertation writing and job recruiting in the phase of Grade four. As a matter of fact, many students began their interview and employment, causing conflict between job hunting, course learning, dissertation writing; this conflict gets more and more serious in the next term. To finish their dissertation to meet the need of the department and college, plagiarism, or malpractice in writing become "normal" state for some students, which in turn affect the quality of dissertation and students' professional attitude. Our random survey in the daily communication with students shows that 98.3% of those students interviewed (in this case, there are 65 seniors) would choose to find jobs in the job market or spent their time for postgraduate exams first because students thought that "they could finally pass the oral defense of dissertation according to the tradition of the college" and so "they would not seriously worry about their dissertation. What's more, the system of dissertation management is still problematic in many places from details. For instance, the supervisor's research field does not accord students' topic of dissertation, for example, the teacher whose research is about linguistics guide students who choose to write around literature. This may cause many problems like supervisor's weak supervision or monitor of students' mistakes or astray in their writing directions. Additionally, although there are special system of management and prescription and schedules, yet they are not standard; for example, the writing style or citation formats are not unified even within the same department; besides, there are grammatical or structural errors or mistakes in many places of some students. A serious issue is that even after the oral defense procedure, nothing seems improved as required by the board of defense. It's difficult to find where the supervisor or students' responsibilities.

C Students' and Teachers' Cognition of Dissertation Writing

In the process of dissertation writing, both the teacher's and students' cognition influence writing in the sense that cognition determines values and values determine motivation of writing. After all, whether students will treat their dissertation seriously is mainly determined by their own motivation, values and cognition of it. Currently, with more and more graduates flooded in the job market, English majors are facing heavy pressures which then reduce their attention of dissertation writing directly. This is especially true for the graduates of the newly-built or non-prestigious colleges. Under such situations, many students are worried and could not focus their attention on the writing, let alone innovation in academic study. In our study, 73.8% students feel worried toward employment, postgraduate entrance examinations, and 44.6% students have not realized how dissertation writing can help their self-evaluation, and comprehensive English abilities. Consequently, students can not sit down quietly to go further into the world of academic innovation and dissertation has become a dull task which has to be finished reluctantly. In this study, 35.3% students believe that "they have little experience of academic writing", or "feel reluctant of dissertation writing". Therefore, it's natural to see that some of the papers are just patched together with weak logic and cannot satisfy the need for an undergraduate. Besides, there are also problems that some supervisors still have incomplete cognition as what been discussed. For example, some teachers are not so responsible for students' dissertation writing, which, in turn, would directly lead to students' attitude, motivation, and action toward writing. As can be found in some colleges, some teachers failed to understand dissertation writing as an important step to further model students' writing ability. For those teachers, the only task of supervision is to organize and help students' finish the task of a bachelor's dissertation and so not much of reflection is mentioned in research methods, innovative thinking, logic thinking and the comprehensive development of English ability. Therefore, dissertation writing can only exist as a simple "period" as named by someone metaphorically.

D Practical Problems in the Process of Writing

From the procedure of supervision, there are also some practical problems in reality. At present, writing courses, as the base of dissertation writing, are set in all the colleges and universities, yet how to choose a topic, how to make an outline and how to organize the text academically is somewhat blank for many students in those non-prestigious universities as students do not

have such experiences. From their training of writing a general passage to academic paper, there is a long distance. If students do not have the necessary experiences of writing academic paper or how to carry out academic research in their daily training, it would be very reluctant for them to begin dissertation which is per se academic. Therefore, it is natural to foresee what result of writing can be. Research which was carried out to investigate 52 foreign language schools and departments of colleges and universities shows that there were only 9 of them have academic writing course, and less than one sixth of the students investigated have taken academic course, which cause the difficult situations [2]. For many of the colleges and universities in China, it is a general situation that students are assigned supervisors according to their choice of the topics or just assign students to teachers with certain titles. Then students would finish their first draft, second draft, and so on and so forth. For some colleges and universities, students have more freedom to choose the topic of the paper, even it is quite different from what the supervisor have more expertise. Therefore, there exists the phenomenon that the teacher whose research interest and expertise is English literature supervises students who write about linguistics or the teacher who is skillful in linguistics directed students writing about English literature or culture. The result is simple—there could be only weak guidance or supervision in the whole process. Due to the lack of in-depth guidance, some students cannot go deeply in their writing and even cannot expound clearly about the basic principles or theories. What's worse, the teacher even cannot find out if students disobey the basic academic morality due to the limitation of their academic horizon and expertise. This would further “strengthen” students’ attitude of how to deal with dissertation writing. For example, they would not treat writing seriously and could not improve their writing skills as there would be no reflection or deep exploration of academic knowledge and innovation in the relation profession.

III. THE ESSENCE AND REQUIREMENT OF DISSERTATION WRITING

Dissertation writing is not just a process of constructing the text simply, rather, it is a process of socialization and cognitive development [3]. The newly established Syllabus for English department requires that the aim of talents cultivation is “with solid basic abilities, broad knowledge, certain professional knowledge, strong comprehensive abilities and high qualities, and abilities in acquiring knowledge, thinking independently and innovation”. In the document of “MOE Notice of Strengthening Graduation Design (Dissertation Writing) of Colleges and Universities”, it is stated clearly that “dissertation writing or design is an important section which plays an indispensable role in realizing cultivation objective, including making students explore the truth, strengthening students’ social awareness, having basic training of scientific research and improving their overall practical abilities and qualities. These official documents indicate that graduates of English major must form the comprehensive and innovative abilities based on rich linguistic, literature and cultural qualities. As a direct manifestation, in dissertation writing, they must be able to deal with the basic issues in the disciplines like linguistics, translation, literature and culture and be able to have some further exploration in some certain field both theoretically and practically with their won opinions and thinking. Under the supervision, they are supposed to go further in details in one familiar topic, knowing well how to write an academic research paper with the format of appropriate citation and the regulations of paper writing of the college. As a matter of fact, through the process of writing a long passage like dissertation, students of English major can have further understanding of how to organize paragraphs with their own vocabularies, sentences, rhetoric, citations, etc and how to improve their abilities of using logic, analysis, inference, and so forth in their specified disciplines, so as to suit their future profession more easily.

In the practical section of dissertation writing, the whole process incorporates choosing the topic, making an outline, opening of writing, writing and repeated revision. And, each time of writing and revising the sentence, text, etc. would be the process and opportunity to strengthen students’ English thinking and logic organization holistically. Therefore, it is safe to say that dissertation writing not only has the role of evaluation of graduates, but also implication of teaching and leaning which can not be underestimated at any time[4]. In fact, dissertation writing is an innovative process with English language as the medium and must reflect its characteristics of academics, knowledge and instruction. Unfortunately, many of the English department only emphasize the evaluation function and ignore that dissertation writing is a crucial process to cultivate students’ comprehensive abilities of using English for innovative and creative work after four years [5]. The essence and significance of a complete writing process can be illustrated through the following figure:

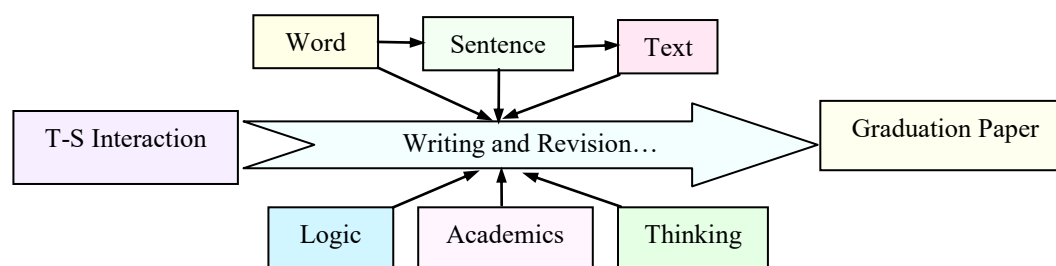


Fig. 1. The essence of writing process

As shown in Fig. 1, T means the teacher or supervisor and S refers to students under supervision. Dissertation writing is an a comprehensive and interactive process which is significantly important for students. Since it involves the integrity of the

knowledge of word, sentence, text as well as logic, academics and thinking, both the teacher and students should notice the functions of evaluation and also instruction of dissertation and consolidate or strengthen students' ability of thinking as well as academic logic. Dissertation is not simply a "period" as some people stated; it is in fact a continuous process of fostering students' overall abilities of the target language. Through such a process of writing and revision, students can not only write a qualified graduation paper, they could also have improvement in the integration of paragraphs, sentences, phrases and grammar into an acceptable passage so as to realize overall improvement in their logic, thinking and written discourse. Currently, many universities, especially those prestigious universities begin to emphasize the cultivation of students' academic English ability. This tendency has important implication for the reform of English dissertation writing in many aspects, such as in course development and reform, in the teaching of writing course and the management of graduation thesis writing. Therefore, it is of practical importance and significance for to prompt students' academic English ability and help them to suit the requirement of academic writing if colleges or universities are to be more competitive and promising in the future.

IV. COUNTERMEASURES TO DEAL WITH ENGLISH MAJORS' DISSERTATION WRITING

Writing a dissertation is a systematic project which involves the management of the department, the supervisor's guidance and supervision in the choice and revision of words, phrases, sentences, and texts as well as academic research. Besides, it is also under the influence of other external factors of the colleges, the society, personal time allotment, etc. In the new era, to suit the practical needs of improving the quality of English graduation thesis, there must be new horizons, new perspectives and new models to carry out effective reform in the spheres of management, administration, implementation and evaluation, etc. All is considered, there are at least the following measures:

A. *Reform the Management Mechanism of Graduation Paper Writing*

From the administrative perspective, there must be new concept which will reform the current situations through the solution to the problems and innovation of the management at both micro and macro levels based on the current mechanism. First of all, the time schedule is a big problem for some colleges, which has strong relation with the feasibility and possibility. It's essential that the time schedule of dissertation writing is feasible and reasonable. Currently, many universities and colleges scheduled dissertation writing at the second term of Grade four, while this is also the time when graduates are busy hunting for jobs or are preparing for entrance examination of postgraduates, hen there is the unavoidable conflict or contradiction. Therefore, the authority of colleges should consider choosing appropriate time of writing dissertation in which there would be less conflict. For example, the stages of choosing topics, making outlines and writing can be set in the whole period of Grade three or Grade four. If the writing task can be finished as scheduled, it is acceptable. Specifically, for students of various levels or with different orientations of learning, such as for those who would like to further their studies as postgraduates or field work, the schedule could be different. Secondly, in the new era of new technology and culture, there must be a set of effective management mechanism and platform to control paper writing according to students' learning, living and employment based on the coordination between the college, foreign languages school, the supervisor and students. For example, we can improve the quality of dissertation by combing topic choice, guidance, supervision, oral defense and procedural evaluation together. In so doing, the school or the department should manage the regulations of thesis writing accordingly, carry out random cross-exam of different stages and evaluate the advancement of writing to improve the quality of writing. In addition, there must also be necessary mechanism or system of evaluation of supervisors and regulate both teacher and students' behavior in the process. For example, the final version of dissertation can be evaluated between colleges or universities or rated blindly within the department in the real sense, have exhibition of papers, choose and publish excellent papers, choose excellent supervisors, etc. to strengthen students' and supervisors' responsibilities and motivation in the project. Based on the scientific management, there must also be more reasonable and suitable forms of graduation design instead of only thesis writing, such as teaching design, translation, case study, action research and report, etc. By doing so, such multiple forms of graduation design or thesis writing will not only benefit students in choosing the suitable forms of graduation evolution, which is also beneficial for the development of the discipline.

B. *Improve Students and Their Supervisor'S Understanding of the Value of Dissertation Writing*

As is known to all, cognition or beliefs are the decisive factors of human action, and the understanding or beliefs of dissertation is an important section of reforming dissertation writing of English majors in reality. Especially, with more external influential factors, there must be improvement of the teacher and students' awareness of the importance of dissertation and establishment of the awareness of quality or responsibility of writing in their learning and future development [6]. It's necessary to understand that students must be motivated to see the value themselves of the significance of writing to their overall ability and competitiveness in future professional or academic career. In its nature, dissertation writing is a long one which covers the process of knowledge integration, innovation, and logic development. In such a process, besides writing ability, other abilities like language, literature, culture and translation, etc can be used in an organic way. By finishing such a task, students' abilities of logic, language and inquiry can thus be enhanced greatly which cannot be obtained simply from the traditional course. From our observation, it's a common fact that many students have increased their ability of writing and become more aware of the apriority of their use of language. From the first draft to the final form, students can experience how their "achievements" come into being word by word and sentence by sentence, and establish higher self motivation consequently. With such concepts, the teacher is not to do everything but guide, supervise and lead students with certain scaffolding. Therefore, the teacher needs to supervise students from a wholesome perspective, help them to write according to the right direction, help them to have self-revision and perfection of the thesis. This means as the supervisor, the teacher is

supposed to be responsible in the process of supervision, not only control the whole process of writing in a macro way, but also focus on its role of modeling students and improve their comprehensive abilities from a micro way.

C. Adopt flexible Ways of Guiding Students

In the process of writing, the teacher is both the “beacon light” to guide the direction and the “doctor” to help students check their structure and logic of the dissertation. Therefore, it’s essential that the supervisor can fully exert its multi-roles at the very beginning, guiding students to write in line with the academic research regulations, directing students revise each section of the thesis and requiring students to be strict with their thesis from even the first word. What’s more, in the new era, since students’ concept, cognition and knowledge framework has changed drastically; the way to guide students’ writing must also be in line with these changes. For instance, from the determining of the topic of the thesis to drafting and revision, the teacher can adopt collective guiding, individual guiding, on line guiding, etc by making use of the internet and mobile technology. In our practice, we have organized the several members of the same group into a thesis writing community which has a clear purpose—write a good thesis, and complete structure and roles. In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing In the community of writing, students can share their understanding and talk with each other, provided the teacher play his central role of guiding and directing the group. Within the community, students will share their resource and understanding of the document, etc. and help each other in reading and finding out grammatical or structural mistakes and errors first before submitting to the supervisor. Based on their first revision, the teacher will carry out individual guidance in the content and structure as well as logic and academic research. Through such a community work under the supervision of the same teacher, students can not only accomplish a successful dissertation, they could also improve their overall writing skills and awareness, logic thinking and criticizing ability as well. This can be some what different from the traditional way which only focuses on how the writing task can be finished. According to our experience of teaching, a writing community can be made by at least 3 students who agree to share ideas and help each other. In the community of writing, the teacher can communicate with students by e-mail, QQ group, Wechat group, etc. in the form of audio, video and text dynamically. Currently, many colleges have their college-based platform of discussion or social communication, it’s convenient for students to establish their space in which they can communicate, reflect and revise their thesis. In the new era, as student may have many other things to do and there could be the conflict of time schedule, the teacher can flexibly adjust the guidance through effective ways like self-revision, in-community revision, teacher revision, etc which is beneficial not only to the one who write the thesis, but also to other members through different types of revision and communication academically.

D. Reform Course Schedule and Teaching Methods

Writing is not in a vacuum as some people may wrongly assume; rather, it is limited by a number of factors, including the society, institutions, professions and culture [7]. In fact, lack of experience of academic research and writing are the major difficulties in graduation thesis writing currently. From the general situations, it's easy to find out that many colleges and universities are concerned more with students' linguistic abilities while emphasize less toward academic research and its writing. Therefore, it would be too abrupt to let students to carry out academic research and writing in such a way suddenly. Many students would feel at a loss at the very beginning [8]. Generally, skill courses should be set in the first and second year of learning which focus more on the improvement of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. In Grade three and four, more attention must be focused on the courses of knowledge and academics which can guide students in academic practice which may be related to their future career. This is also the requirement of national syllabus for English majors, that is, college courses should cultivate students with broad horizon of knowledge. In the long run, especially following the tendency of carrying out teaching English for Academic Purpose (EAP) teaching or English for Special Purpose (ESP), the courses of academic research and writing or publishing should be set, which would ensure that dissertation writing is not abrupt for students. In the daily teaching of those courses, the spirit of innovation, criticism and some useful writing technology must be taught to the students, especially those novice learners[9][10][11]. For instance, we must lay more attention on how to build some key groups of courses such as linguistics, culture, literature, translation, business, technology and so on and so forth based on the requirement and features of the college.

Take the normal universities or colleges for example, courses like “foreign language teaching theories and practice”, “psychology of foreign language teaching”, “second language acquisition”, “research methods in foreign language teaching”, “academic writing”, “research in teaching English in middle schools”, etc. are supposed to set according to the specific feature and requirement of the college. In addition, teaching methods must also be changed and improved; methods like blended teaching, flipped teaching, etc can be employed to enable students extend their horizons of knowledge and to apply their knowledge in practice. With such understanding, students have the freedom and interest to choose courses and improve their knowledge and abilities accordingly. In our practice, by implementing flipped teaching of the course Linguistics, we organize students to go further into the field of language study according to their own objectives and interests of learning, such as phonology, semantics, pragmatics and other cross-disciplinary fields like sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, and corpus

linguistics. In the course, the teacher mainly focused on the basic ideas, and those specific studies will be discussed and dealt with mostly by students themselves. The result is satisfied after one term as many students feel the teaching mode is a success and they felt more interested in linguistics which has always been a boring and difficult subject for many students of English major. An obvious effect is that more students in this class choose to write their dissertation paper with the topic of linguistics like “metaphorical use of English in news report”, “Learning strategies of English vocabulary in Junior High”, “Chinese Students’ failures in Polite Language”, etc. What needs to be mentioned is that in the group, one student’s paper has been chosen as “the excellent dissertation of undergraduates” of this college, showing the success of the way we use to guide students’ thesis writing.

V. CONCLUSION

As the important manifestation of undergraduate education, dissertation is not a simple “period” as the signal of the end of college education. It is in fact a new starting point for students, which plays the roles of evaluation, education and development as well as an unavoidable process of “modeling for perfection”. From the practical perspective, dissertation writing is not just writing a paper or something that exists if students can write paragraphs; it is a complex process in which students should know not only how to write an academic thesis as required, but also knows certain disciplines. This is especially true for those newly-built colleges as students are not of high proficiency while entering the college. In the new era, many students may be affected by the internet and multi-culture society; they may experience many conflicts among their own concepts of study, life, and the actual environment of study. Facing such a situation, many problems in the arrangement of dissertation writing arouse, causing challenges of adaptation and innovation in the course design, teaching and the practice of dissertation writing. Therefore, in the new era, both the administrators, supervisors and students should cooperate to deal with all the problems. On the one hand, the administrators of foreign language department or school should combine the reform of dissertation writing and the improvement of the quality of undergraduates’ education together in line with the essence of English major students; on the other, supervisors and their students must work together for the purpose of writing a qualified dissertation and improving students’ overall English abilities. All is discussed, only when the appropriate conceptualization of dissertation in the new era is ensured and all the parties involved are in line with the right direction can the quality of dissertation be ensured in the new era.

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