

The Art and Craft of Teaching Dance from a TA Perspective: Lessons Learned and Issues Explored

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Abstract:

The idea for this presentation came from my experiences and thinking as Director of Graduate Studies in my department and as a teacher of a graduate course titled: Dance Pedagogy in Higher Education. Through discussion in this course and as an observer of classes taught by TAs, I became aware of a number of issues that arose when TAs taught courses in the department. I noticed that while training to perfect their craft of teaching dance, many TAs became unsure of their roles and responsibilities to their students, themselves, and their professors and/or teaching supervisors. They have multiple roles and responsibilities that can be difficult to navigate. Issues surrounding ideas such as power and philosophy emerged from these discussions and experiences as well.

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Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Panel

The Art and Craft of Teaching Dance from a TA Perspective: Lessons Learned and Issues Explored

Panel Moderator and Developer: Jill Green, PhD

Panelists: Michele Trumble, MFA, Caroline Althof, BA, and Elisa Foshay, MFA

INTRODUCTION

Jill Green, PhD

The idea for this presentation came from my experiences and thinking as Director of Graduate Studies in my department and as a teacher of a graduate course titled: Dance Pedagogy in Higher Education. Through discussion in this course and as an observer of classes taught by TAs, I became aware of a number of issues that arose when TAs taught courses in the department. I noticed that while training to perfect their craft of teaching dance, many TAs became unsure of their roles and responsibilities to their students, themselves, and their professors and/or teaching supervisors. They have multiple roles and responsibilities that can be difficult to navigate. Issues surrounding ideas such as power and philosophy emerged from these discussions and experiences as well.

Another thing I noticed is that when discussing pedagogical issues in higher education dance, teachers and scholars rarely address the roles of TAs. It tends to be a marginalized topic in research and at educational conferences. Yet, many graduate dance programs offer TA positions to some graduate students.

So thinking about the legacy of teaching dance and the roles of TAs and the conference theme, “the art and craft of teaching dance,” I gathered this panel of former and current TAs to address one main question: How do TAs negotiate their diverse roles and responsibilities while attempting to locate, develop, and sustain the art and craft of teaching dance? So, the panel is made up of those who could answer these questions best, the TAs themselves.

Each presenter will address a particular aspect of this question. Caroline will address time management issues; Elisa will talk about how to work with pedagogical mentor/model practices, and how to integrate somatic approaches into the technique setting; and Michele will address hierarchies and roles. Each presenter will include a narrative that highlights their questions, struggles, and/or issues that arose while performing their TA duties. These narratives are significant for other TAs struggling with these issues, as well as pedagogy professors and others interested in the work of TAs.

Time Management- Caroline E. Althof, BA

As a third year MFA candidate and teaching assistant at The University of North Carolina Greensboro I have had to deal with the issue of time management. When I entered the MFA program as a teaching assistant I felt completely overwhelmed. I had a difficult time balancing my scholarly work, courses that I was instructing, administrative duties that I was assigned, outside performance opportunities, and my own choreographic endeavors. It seemed there was never enough time for everything and I would arrive home at the end of the day physically and mentally depleted, despite the fact that I typically had an additional three to four hours of work ahead of me in preparation for the following day. I have always been a terrific time manager, but for the first time in my life I felt at a complete loss as to how to manage so many demanding tasks at one time.

For the majority of my life I have run by the mottos “When work is done then you rest” or “After work comes play.” These sayings served me well through my undergraduate education and my years as a dance instructor in the public school system. I considered myself an overachiever, great at multi-tasking. However, in graduate school I quickly came to realize that the work never ends. There is always more time that could go into lesson planning, or grading, writing the next paper, or planning the next rehearsal. As I began my graduate education I felt as if I could never come up to breathe; I felt suffocated by the amount of work that lay ahead. See, I’m a planner. In the past I looked at the semester as a whole, or at least weeks in advance. Rather quickly I became physically and mentally exhausted; I burnt out.

I have a great passion for teaching. I’m a giver and will typically do something for others before taking the time for myself. As a result, my artistic endeavors suffered; choreography was typically the last thing that I got around to, and when I did make the time I was completely worn-out.

However, I learned much from having to face the issue of time management. Dr. Sue Stinson, the former dance education professor and recent interim dean at UNCG, once told me “There is no way that you can give 100% to everything; you must learn to pick your battles.” This wise piece of advice has proven priceless over the past two years; it is advice of which must continually remind myself.

In heeding this advice, I’ve learned to balance my focus. There are times when I spend more time as a teacher than a student. There are other periods of time that I allow myself to become lost in my choreographic projects, even if it is only for a day or two. I am careful about the amount of outside performance work that I take on, accepting work that intrigues and challenges me. Simply stated, I learned to change my hat more frequently and truly be present in what I am doing, allowing my mind to stay with a given task for a certain amount of time. Instead of looking ahead a month in advance, I look only a week in advance and more importantly, what the next day holds. In addition, I have come to realize that resting is just as important as working. By taking a few hours to rest, when I feel that it is needed, I can approach the next day refreshed and ready to take on the challenges and inspirations that it holds.

The active integration of my teaching, scholarly, and artistic interests has proven a valuable time management asset. For example, I am intrigued by work outside the proscenium stage and have been able to investigate this interest through a variety of avenues. I began choreographing site-specific works in the Greensboro community. In my courses I began giving lectures and assignments on site dance, which led me to other site-artist’s work and writings on the subject matter. All of these influences continue to enrich and inform my studies of site-specific dance work. Another example of this crossover began my first year in the program when my scholarly interests turned to creative cognition and lateral teaching approaches. I researched the implications of criterion based assignments and evaluation on the minds/creativity of the students. During my second year I continued this research and designed my courses accordingly, emphasizing creative problem solving and collaboration. And here I am in my third year, presenting a paper on one of the lessons that I designed for my 101 Intro to Dance course based on the same research that I’ve had the opportunity to explore theoretically as a student and practically as an instructor, thus leading me to new scholarly insights. Simply stated, I learned to focus on crossover interests and work around themes and ideas.

In conclusion, time management is an issue that most teaching assistants experience in graduate school; it is a balancing act and there is no exact formula to manage so many demanding tasks during such a short period of time. My solution has been to take one day at a time, rest when I need to, and allow my interests to crossover in the many roles that I experience as a teaching assistant. This may not work for everyone, but it is important to figure out what works best for you as an individual so that each day you’re putting your best foot forward.

When I entered graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the fall of 2010 I brought with me several years of experience teaching dance, but comparatively little practice in cultivating my voice as a teacher of postmodern dance technique to pre-professional dancers. The opportunity to teach potentially several semesters of technique classes within the UNCG dance department appealed to me, and was one of the many reasons I happily accepted a graduate teaching assistantship. During my three years as a TA both the former and current Dance department chairs took care to inquire about my teaching interests and accommodate them to the best of their abilities. Thus, I taught courses including Introduction to Ballet, Dance Appreciation, Introduction to Dance and Social/Ballroom Dance. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus on my experience teaching postmodern, or *contemporary* dance technique as it was labeled in the department, to dance majors and pre-majors. Looking back on my time as a TA from the perspective of a recent graduate transitioning to new adventures in the field, I find myself continuing to reflect on questions that arose during my time teaching technique at UNCG.

I was challenged to find my own voice as a contemporary dance teacher, influenced by yet distinct from the voices of my instructors and mentors up to that point. My training in modern and postmodern dance was a collage of movement voices and perspectives. Many of these styles fell under what might be considered “release-based” techniques, but my dance education also included healthy doses of more classical modern, including Horton and Cunningham.

As a professional performer, my experiences took me into realms of movement including and inspired by improvisation, contemplative movement practices, performance art, martial arts and punk music. When faced with teaching a contemporary dance class I asked myself, What of these experiences was important for me to pass on? I certainly had my own preferences and ideas about my values as a mover, but I did not necessarily believe that my values ought to be unquestioningly passed down to students who were still in the early stages of their professional dance training.

Perhaps this challenge to distinguish one’s teaching identity may be perceived differently by someone who enters a graduate Teaching Assistantship with extensive experience instructing a chosen form, or for a dancer who has a singular technical approach upon which to hang his or her hat. But I, a “modern dance mutt” who had taught mostly non-professional dancers, was in grad school in part to further cultivate my voice and refine my values as a contemporary dance educator.

To find a planning process that worked for me I considered the various approaches to teaching a class that I had learned and experienced over the years. Backward by Design was one, which when applied to planning a technique class I interpreted to mean creating an ending combination and then building the rest of the class back toward helping the students be prepared to perform it successfully. Another was a more systematic warming of the body for dancing, meaning that a complete class included exercises that explored the full range of motion of the back and pelvis, shoulders and arms, joints of the hips, legs and feet as well as work on balance, directional agility, locomotion and elevation, usually culminating in a combination that “put it all together.” I also considered an approach, perhaps similar to a ballet structure, of class consisting of a repeating series of discreet skills to be mastered: Plies, swings of the upper and lower body, contractions and high releases, locomotor foot patterns, turns and the like.

But I also thought about the many other classes I had been a participant in that took none of these approaches. Classes where we sang through our warm up. Classes where we did Pilates or yoga for the first half and then delved directly into dance sequences. Classes that took considerable time for improvised movement, only eventually gathering the group into more structured exercises. As a student I found value and learning in many of these alternate formats. Of all of these myriad pedagogic approaches to the practice, which were the most essential for me to bring into my technique classroom, full of students whose backgrounds and interests may not be consistent with my own?

To offer general guidance to its instructors, the department at UNCG had created a Dance Technique Feedback Sheet years prior to my arrival. This list of twenty-or-so items was specific, yet general enough to be applied to just about any approach to movement. The Dance Technique Feedback Sheet asked the instructor to evaluate students on elements of technique such as “appropriate use of the legs and feet” or the

ability to “maintain dynamic alignment while standing.” While this offered a framework and broad-brushstroke guide on what the department valued, it left open space to interpret words such as “appropriate” and also neglected some dance concepts that I found to be equally important aspects of technique, such as the ability to find the full range of motion of a body part or joint or the ability to activate both sequential and simultaneous initiation.

As Caroline focused on in her paper, time management was also a challenge when planning and teaching technique classes. Developing new material and experimenting with different approaches to the planning process took time, and I found myself in the studio for several hours a week honing my movement sequences, timing and cues. I had yet to develop an arsenal of exercises to draw upon, and I often was left feeling like I reinvented the wheel for each class and each semester. Granted, this may be the reality of the new teacher still honing her craft, but when coupled with the numerous other responsibilities of graduate school I wondered if my students, as well as my own work, were being shortchanged because I was unable to focus on any of them as much as I would have preferred.

Another question I considered was how my class fit into the overall educational paths of my students. As may be the case with many graduate teaching assistants, the classes I taught were mostly beginning and intermediate-level technique classes. Knowing that my students would have my class for only a semester or two before moving on to other instructors, how could I best prepare them to be successful as they progressed through the program? I questioned what my primary responsibility was: To prepare them for what was next, or to offer them a unique movement experience that promoted my voice and values? The latter, to me, felt egotistical and appeared to lack consideration for my student’s needs, but the former left me negotiating my own values and beliefs about teaching contemporary dance in comparison to the other contemporary technique instructors in the department. I perceived these differences in approach amongst instructors to be part of a spectrum of beliefs about contemporary dance, none more correct or incorrect than the other. But my students, just as I did myself as an undergrad, may have struggled with shifting movement paradigms without comparing teachers and falling into a right/wrong binary. These concerns further complicated my choices about what to prioritize in teaching contemporary dance technique. Ultimately, I taught what I saw to be the essential needs for my student’s training, what I thought they could develop a deeper understanding or mastery of. Doing so combined both my beliefs as well as those held up by the department.

Lingering through all of these considerations was the precarious nature of being both teacher and student. As an emerging teacher it was important for me to honor my training and values about contemporary dance technique, which had been shaped by many years as a student, teacher, performer and choreographer. But as a graduate student, departmental faculty would regularly evaluate my performance. What if they disagreed with what I was teaching? What if I taught a concept that contradicted the way in which they presented it? Disagreement and personal preference may be a challenge in evaluating teachers generally, but I felt especially vulnerable because of my location in the faculty/student hierarchy. I concluded that I had to teach to my core values and trust that my evaluator would be an objective one, that his or her feedback on my teaching would acknowledge the range of choice about teaching contemporary dance technique and be rooted in a desire to help me improve and succeed. To think anything else could prove paralyzing.

Looking back, I wonder if perhaps these questions bubbled up merely as part of the process of questioning and self-reflection that often takes place during graduate study. In a professional setting I may not have questioned my teaching theories or practices so deeply, but while in graduate school I did so in an effort to better understand who I was as a dance artist and educator. The faculty I learned from during my time at UNCG encouraged critical self-reflection, and while at times this felt debilitating it ultimately created in me a sense of empowerment. I knew that I *had* considered other options, that I had not blindly followed the traditions of my history and training.

The choices that I made regarding teaching contemporary dance technique reflected careful consideration of what I knew at that time. Though I will certainly continue to refine my voice as a technique teacher, I do so with the knowledge that it is ok to question and reflect upon my beliefs and my approach

and to make changes as needed, always acknowledging that there are many healthy ways to teach contemporary dance technique. Thank you.

Chutes and Ladders: Graduate Teaching Assistant Edition- Michele Trumble, MFA

Being a Teaching Assistant can feel like a game of chutes and ladders - it is hard to know where exactly you lie on the hierarchy of academia at any given time. Depending on how a department is set up, a teaching assistant can take on many levels of responsibility – all the way from behind the scenes administrative work to teacher of record for multiple classes. As teaching assistants we are responsible for the teaching and evaluation of students in the department, but are not full time professors with the knowledge of how everything in the department is run. This results in subtle power shifts amongst faculty, staff, other graduates and undergraduates that we must tune into. The question of “who has the power in what situation?” occurs in other places of work and areas within academia, but is particularly relevant to teaching assistants as they bounce between, through and among many roles.

I entered into the University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s MFA Choreography program with the bulk of my studies and teaching experience in the sciences. Despite this, I auditioned for a Graduate Teaching Assistant position when I auditioned for admission into the program. I was accepted into the program and wait listed for the assistantship. Looking back I feel this was for the best, as I did not have the same depth of experience as most of my fellow graduates coming in. I was able to spend the time concentrating on rediscovering, exploring and building my own artistic voice as a performer, choreographer, and researcher.

I auditioned for a Teaching Assistant position each year and received one my third and final year in the MFA program. I became the teacher of record for three classes right away. Although this is not a unique situation, it is more common for Teaching Assistants to begin by gaining experience as an assistant to another professor in their first year and begin to take on their own classes their second year. Now, I had taken pedagogy classes and completed pedagogy practicum my first two years in the MFA program as an effort to gain experience. So in reality I was prepared, but there are always doubts in the beginning and as I took on the role of graduate assistant I began to feel a shift in how I identified myself within and related to that same community. I had entered a new community as a graduate student and spent two years developing my ideas and work within the academic community as only a graduate student. I now had another hat to add to my rotating collection. How was I going to negotiate my diverse roles and responsibilities while attempting to locate and develop my skills as a teacher, choreographer and student?

Both types of classes, introductory general education classes, and classes for majors produce their own set of questions and challenges to the Teaching Assistant. Often Teaching Assistants are asked to teach the lower level or non-major classes. It can be more difficult to be taken seriously in a class of non-majors. In a field that is often seen as "less than" or secondary, there is a pressure to set a foundation of respect right away, which is hard when you are teaching a dance appreciation class smashed between contemporary class and rehearsal wearing stretch pants, sweat stains and hair like a troll. For these classes I often struggled with how do I present my physical body and my philosophy in a way that invites dance to be seen as both a serious yet fun and creative endeavor? Especially when we are doing the same type of work as a professor, but lack the title and same level of experience?

When it comes to classes where we are teaching majors or minors, we are not only teaching these students, but are also dancing alongside them in technique classes and in other professors' work and choreographing our own work on and/or with them. This can create multidimensional relationships that can be productive and enlightening, but also tricky to navigate when it comes to grading their work and earning respect as the teacher in a classroom.

While this happens with both major and non-major sections, my challenges were largely in negotiating my role amongst the majors. I feel the best way to examine this is to take a look at two examples with two different students.

The first was with a student I will call Hannah. Hannah was a dance major whom I worked with in several capacities. For the Fall semester our interactions remained one-dimensional: choreographer and

dancer as I had cast her in my culminating production, which was a year long project. But it was still an intimate one due to the many hours of rehearsal, small cast, subject matter and of course the experimental and exploratory nature of creating a work. When spring semester came around I was a little apprehensive to find that we were taking the same technique class and she was a student in my majors section of Dance Appreciation. We now had three different ways of relating to each other and the one that made me most nervous was the student/teacher relationship. I worried that she might not respect my authority as a teacher, not necessarily on purpose, but out of familiarity and more relaxed nature of our choreographer/dancer relationship. I was (and still am) building my values and pedagogical practice and with that came a constant questioning of confidence. I was worried in moments of panic during lecture that I might call upon her too much as a familiar face in a sea of strangers or create a snafu in our other relationships over a grading disagreement. I was thinking and worrying about scenarios so far ahead of the game that I was well on my way to damaging the new parts of a relationship that hadn't even started yet. I had to tell myself to relax and trust myself to deal with whatever might come up during the upcoming spring semester.

My experience with Hannah turned out to be the exact opposite of all my fears. Hannah was eager to make connections between class work and our work in rehearsal. She demonstrated respect at all times, but allowed herself to let loose more in rehearsal. I cannot say that there were not times when I felt awkward during lecture or while grading her work, but I also think this is something all teachers face at various times with students for whatever reason. We can only try to be as fair as we can and open to communication. In the end, the multiple roles brought a depth to our relationship that ended up assisting us in the rehearsal process. The more layers of Hannah I got to understand the easier it was for me to choreograph with her and on the flip side, as she got to see and relate to me in different roles - I believe it was easier for her to find her voice within my work.

I had a completely different experience with another student I'll call Katie. Katie was also a student in my Dance Appreciation for majors class and taking one of the same technique classes I was enrolled in. For her production practicum she was assigned to my culminating production. I perceived (perhaps unfairly) Katie to be disinterested when she was in my class and never initiated a hello when we would enter the studio, but would respond back if I greeted her. So while I considered her qualified and competent, I was nervous about what our interactions would be like during technical rehearsal.

Things went smoothly the first day, but the second night there was a problem with one of the other crew members that Katie had to address since the Stage Manager had stepped out of the theater. I was impressed with how she handled the situation appropriately and fairly, but never got a chance to tell her at the end of the night as I got wrapped up in talking to my dancers. So the next day as our Dance Appreciation team was wrapping up and students were leaving I mentioned my appreciation for last night and to try to keep conversation going, asked her what she thought about a cue change. She responded with something along the lines of: "Thank you. I don't mean to be rude but I would rather wait and talk about the production when we are in tech and not here (meaning the classroom)". Now I am sure that many others share the same ability I have to blow a simple comment WAY out of proportion. I spent the next couple hours between class and tech wondering if I should apologize, if I had somehow damaged my teacher - student relationship with her by bringing up our production relationship in a different setting, etc. Come tech time, she was all business and it seemed as though nothing from the earlier conversation had bothered her.

Processing my thoughts and talking to trusted professors and fellow Teaching Assistants led me to several realizations. The first and most obvious was how personally we can take things our students do or say that in reality was not meant that way, especially for new teachers. It is only human to have these reactions, but it is a practice and skill to not give these thoughts too much weight and allow them to affect your interactions with the student. The second was the realization that since a relationship is between two or more people, I was not the only one negotiating what my role or relationship to Katie was in any given situation. She was doing the same and while at times I saw us as peers, just two students in a technique class (as I was used to for the first two years of my graduate study), I realized that may or may not be the same way she saw it. I might still be her "teacher" at all times or perhaps even seen as a "peer" in my classroom.

Rather than feel the need to initiate some sort of interaction or define and redefine our relationship throughout the day, I practiced taking cues from Katie. I recalled my own frustration as a student in the

beginning of the fall semester at having three out of my four classes with the same professor. Having that much face time with one professor during just one semester made me feel exposed. What made me begin to feel comfortable was the professor's allowance of space. Without ignoring me, she gave me room to make connections across the classes and find my own way of relating to her and the material. She was of course guiding along the way, but never forcing. Though the situation didn't involve a shift in power (she was always the teacher and I the student) I realized this was a model that I thought would be useful to implement within my teaching practice. This reflection and my experiences with Hannah and Katie, taught me that rather than feeling like I had to set a rigid trajectory and worry what might happen if we went off course, I could project a path and leave space for both of us navigate it together.

I have taken these experiences with me in my current work as an adjunct at another college in North Carolina. My work is very similar to that of the Teaching Assistant I held at UNCG. As an Adjunct Lecturer I am in sole charge of class planning and grading yet I am still not involved in departmental policy making or advising students. And while it is beyond the scope of this particular paper it will become crucial to look at the role of the Teaching Assistant and Adjunct in relation to a tenure professor as more and more departments are depending on them to carry and support a heavy teaching load as financial cut backs occur. Despite the lack of difference in job duties, I find that I struggle less with my confidence and role as an Adjunct. This is no doubt the fact that I have been practicing teaching and with practice comes confidence. But I also wonder if part of it has to do with the fact that the students at my new college only know me as an Adjunct Lecturer. I did not feel the need to establish myself in a forceful way like I did before, perhaps in an attempt to overcome the peer relationship that was first established with many of my students at UNCG. Working at another college allowed me to see even more clearly how multiple roles can have an affect on one's teaching and relationship to their students.

One thing is clear from my short time teaching – communication is valuable and asking for support is NOT a weakness. My experience at both UNCG and at my new college has been that the department heads and other professors value my and other Adjuncts work and show their support, making it easy to go to them with questions or concerns. It took me some time to come to the realization that I do not lose any power or slip down the hierarchy if I go to other Adjuncts, Teaching assistants or professors for help with an issue. It does not diminish my own knowledge or work to ask others for their thoughts or experiences. Rather it empowers me as I become better informed and connected.

BIOGRAPHIES

Jill Green, PhD is a professor of dance at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is Director of Graduate Studies, conducts research and teaches somatics, body studies, and pedagogy. In addition, she is a certified Kinetic Awareness® Master Teacher and directs a teaching program at her studio. Her work is published in a number of journals and books. Dr Green is a Fulbright Scholar (Finland) and former co-editor of Dance Research Journal.

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Caroline Althof is an MFA candidate and graduate teaching assistant in Choreography at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her primary areas of teaching are contemporary, ballet, jazz, creative movement, improvisation, dance history, and choreography. Caroline's current pedagogical research is focused on facilitation of students' creativity and the individual's artistic voice. Caroline holds a BA in Dance Education with K-12 licensure from Winthrop University. She developed the dance program at Alston Middle School in Summerville, SC, leading the effort to transform the school from a neighborhood school into an arts school and to study the effects of art curricula on standardized test scores, attendance, and participation in extracurricular activities. While in South Carolina, she was the children's rehearsal director for Charleston Ballet Theater. She also developed The Media Arts and Dance Curriculum Guide for the South Carolina State Department of Education.

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Elisa Foshay is a Chicago-based dance artist and educator. She holds a BA in Dance from Columbia College Chicago and a MFA in Dance with K-12 teaching licensure from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she was also a graduate teaching assistant. Beginning her dance career as a competitive ballroom dancer, Elisa has also performed with several companies and independent artists in the realms of modern and contemporary dance, performance art, dance theatre and improvisation. An avid collaborator, she has partnered with sites, movers, musicians, composers, culinary artists and costume designers, among others. Her choreographies and improvisations have been presented in Chicago, Philadelphia and across North Carolina. Lately, Elisa has been writing, thinking and moving a lot around the ideas of improvisation and contemplative inquiry as well as creative potential in undefined space. She also serves as a teaching artist for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Urban Gateways.

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Michele Trumble is a performer, teacher, choreographer and writer originally from Maine. She holds an MFA in Choreography from UNC-Greensboro. Her choreography has been shown in many states throughout the United States and recent written work appears in *World Dance Reviews* and *Dance Chronicle*. Michele is currently adjunct faculty at Elon University.

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