

# ***The Epistemic Practice of Networked Learning***

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## **Abstract**

This paper has two aims; first to understand how networked learning has developed as a field and educational approach in the last 20 years; and second to consider the contribution the Networked Learning Conference has had to the development of the field. To achieve this we conducted a survey of people who have regularly presented or published papers from the Networked Learning Conference (NLC) since its inception in 1998. The purpose of the survey was to understand the role the conference has played for them in the development of their thinking and ideas over time, and what this means for the theory, pedagogy and practice of networked learning.

In order to provide a context in which to examine respondents' experiences of networked learning, we situate the paper in the current definition of the term. Since the first conference in 1998, the definition of networked learning has come to be defined as involving the key characteristics of learning community; connections; reflexivity; criticality; collaboration; and relational dialogue.

Our survey involved sending an email to 30 NLC participants in which we asked them to respond to five questions about their experience of the conference. 21 responses were returned. In general, many people felt that networked learning gives a frame of reference where the conference enacts the values of networked learning as a research community. We thus argue in the paper that a closer examination of the NLC offers an interesting opportunity to re-evaluate key characteristics and values associated with networked learning, which informs us of networked learning as a social practice.

To achieve this, we focus in depth on four areas that figured particularly strongly in the analysis and which we believe are worthy of further discussion. They are *critical space*, *community*, *scholarship*, and *developing practice*. We found there was a degree of overlap and interaction between these areas, and that together these four areas constitute key aspects to the way the networked learning conference 'institutionalises' networked learning as a practical accomplishment.

## **Keywords**

Networked Learning, learning community, criticality, critical spaces, epistemic practice

## ***Introduction***

It is 20 years since the first networked learning conference took place in Sheffield in 1998 and much has changed in that time. Not least, as many commentators have stated, digitalisation and the accompanying, globalisation has dramatically impacted on the nature of work, society and education. As Stiegler (2017) comments 'Thinking is thoroughly conditioned by a technical milieu'. And Fenwick (2018) points out there has been huge change as a result of social media and the emerging digital transformations of professional relations and knowledge - Fenwick goes on to comment;

Finally, for me, a particularly compelling issue is the consequences of new digital technologies for professional practice and therefore for education (Fenwick, 2018)

The purpose of the study reported here is to understand how networked learning has a) developed as a field and educational approach in the last 20 years, and b) to consider the contribution the networked learning conference has had to the development of the field. The study is based on a survey of contributors to the networked learning conference (NLC) and in our analysis we draw on the key concepts of 'epistemic practice' and the related concept of 'knowledge communities'.

We have already discussed elsewhere (Hodgson et al 2012, 2014) the idea of networked learning as epistemic practice. Drawing on the work of Gherardi and Strati (2012) on practice based studies (PBS), we explained that it was important to recognise that practice is always epistemic. From a practice as epistemology perspective, the designs we implement and the way we go about and do network learning is a performative accomplishment of situated, social work and organisation. As Gherardi and Strati (2012) state, “knowledge (therefore) does not reside in people’s minds nor is it a commodity; rather it is an activity situated in social, working and organisational practice”

Within practice based studies (PBS) and a practice as epistemology perspective there is a shift from seeing knowledge as an object to seeing knowing and indeed learning as a situated activity and something people ‘do’ together, collectively and socially. Consequently, in this paper, we argue that the responses to our survey suggest the way participants interact and engage in dialogue about the theory and the practice of networked learning at the conference is in effect ‘doing’ networked learning in practice. As one regular attendee to the conference explained;

*I would probably try to get to the conference each time, almost irrespective of what participants ended up talking about. In a sense, networked learning is constructed and reproduced through their decisions about what to talk about, so it’s also a way of moving along with a (loose) community. (r21)*

While another more recent participant to the networked learning conference commented:

*I guess what is different about the NLC is that it is not only an event that happens for three days biannually, but instead it is part of the way this community engages in conversations. As a relative novice to this field, I believe that these conferences enact the values of NL – bringing together people that are genuinely interested in connecting, participating, collaborating, and engaging in knowledge building processes – as such, the conference setting and the event itself becomes an opportunity to realise networked learning practices. (r11)*

In both of the above responses, there is also the idea of a (NL) knowledge community being created at the conferences. In a not dissimilar way to what Tight (2015) explains with regard to different disciplines, quoting Becher’s work on disciplinary difference and cultures where, he claimed ‘there are identifiable patterns to be found within the relationship between knowledge forms and their associated knowledge communities’ (1989, 150).

While we are not claiming networked learning to be a discipline we are suggesting there are identifiable patterns in the knowledge form associated with it as a knowledge community. NL is if anything probably interdisciplinary. Tight (op cit) however also comments on the ideas of interdisciplinarity, saying;

Interdisciplinarity, however, when examined in detail and over time, usually turns out to be about the development of new disciplines, sub-disciplines or specialisms, rather than some more fundamental and comprehensive change, and its proponents and their practices are similarly capable of characterisation.

The idea of networked learning being capable of characterisation as a knowledge community through its epistemic practice(s) at the networked learning conference did have a certain resonance with the responses we received from our survey. Consequently, we believe they offer us a view of networked learning in 2018.

## Methodology

We sent a questionnaire made up of five questions to 30 people who had participated in NL conferences and had attended and presented papers at a minimum of three conferences. We also included two more recent participants to the conferences who had contributed a chapter based on their NLC paper in the Research in Networked Learning Springer book series. The lead institutional organisers from all the NLC conferences between 1998 and 2018 were also included. Thus, all survey respondents had a close, often-longstanding association with the networked learning conference and its’ ‘knowledge’ community. As well as the survey questions, respondents were given a reminder list of conferences and the papers they had presented. The five questions were;

- 1 What attracts you to NLC as a forum/community in which to present your work?"
- 2 Have you developed your thinking and ideas as a direct result of your attendance at NLC? If so, please describe how your thinking has developed.
- 3 In what ways - if any - have you seen a change in focus and key ideas/theories presented in the time you have been attending the Networked Learning Conference?
- 4 In what ways - if any - is Networked Learning contributing to the context of higher education learning and teaching practice in which you work and research?
- 5 Finally - and if you can remember - can you indicate when you first attended the NLC and how many conferences you have attended?

21 responses were received, and we included our own responses to the questions making the total 23. Countries respondents were from or were currently working in included the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, The Netherlands, Croatia, South Africa, and Canada. 14 respondents were female and 9 were males.

17 have either edited a Research in Networked Learning series book and/or written a chapter in the RNL book series

2 considered themselves as relative outsiders to the NL community/network but had attended 3 conferences over a period of years between 2004 and 2014/16

The remaining 4 had attended between 3 - 7 conferences and indicated through their responses that they felt part of the NL community/network.

We carried out a thematic analysis of respondents' returns looking for patterns and themes in order to identify some areas to examine closer, in accord with qualitative data analysis approaches suggested by, for example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Miles and Huberman, (1994). We identified four main themes that are discussed below. All quotes from respondents have a numerical code to maintain respondent's anonymity and each respondent is referred to as r1 through to r23 throughout the paper.

## Themes in the responses

Every respondent had her or his own experience and story to tell about their participation in the NL conferences and each experience varied. Nonetheless, we identified the following four recurring themes;

- Critical space in networked learning
- Community in networked learning
- Scholarship in networked learning
- Developing practice in networked learning

These four themes appeared to be consistent in respondent's understanding and experience of core and/or foundational ideas of networked learning. To put it in another way, many people felt that networked learning itself gives a frame of reference for how the conference enacts the values of networked learning as a knowledge community. Consequently, we believe that a closer examination of the experience and practice of the networked learning conference offers an interesting opportunity to re-evaluate key characteristics and values associated with networked learning. It offers an example of the 'doing' of networked learning as a social epistemic practice. Further, it allows us to consider what practices are produced and re-produced in the responses to our survey which assist us to see how the characteristics of NL are institutionalised in the NL conference as taken for granted assumptions and beliefs.

## The current definition and values associated with Networked Learning

It is useful to first remind ourselves how networked learning has come to be defined, both through a Keynote at the first 1998 NL conference (McConnell 1998), and through the definition that originated from a 1999 Networked Learning in Higher Education project at Lancaster University. This definition became the standard definition used by the conference, as it appeared in the first book of papers based on the 2004 NLC (Goodyear et al 2004). They are respectively:

Networked collaborative learning (NCL) is therefore the bringing together of learners via personal computers linked to the Internet, with a focus on them working as a "learning community", sharing resources, knowledge, experience and responsibility through reciprocal collaborative learning (McConnell, 1998)

And

We define 'networked learning' as learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources. (Goodyear et al 2004)

Arguably, two other key projects helped to establish the characteristics of networked learning in the early years of the conference. One a UK project that led to the presentation of the 'E-quality in e-learning Manifesto' at NLC 2002, available at <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/esrc/>. The other a large European follow-up project, EQUEL, which had 14 partners from six different European countries that presented several symposia and papers from the project at NLC 2004 conference. As with the Manifesto, the project title stood for 'e-quality in e-learning'. What was emphasised or stressed in the early work and definitions of networked learning were the ideas:

- Learning community
- Connections
- Reflexivity
- Criticality
- Collaboration
- Relational dialogue

Through the following descriptions of the four themes identified in our survey, we will consider the extent to which these ideas are reflected and developed in respondents' comments and experiences of the NL conference.

## Critical space in networked learning

The editors in the final chapter of the most recent Research in Networked Learning book (Dohn et al 2018) while reflecting on the NLC2016 papers, point out that there is a growing interest in the examination of learning spaces, particularly with respect to the way they are configured and produced within digital networks. They explain however that space often plays an important, if sometimes implicit role for the issues discussed in the NLC book chapters. They comment:

The focus on learning spaces further reflects at least two trends in the Networked Learning community and the field of learning and education in general. The first of these trends is the growing awareness of the significance of the socio-material place of learning in determining activities, interactions, and learning outcomes (Carvalho, Goodyear, & de Laat, 2017). The second trend concerns what might be viewed as the dialectical opposite of this focus, i.e. the significance of boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Wenger, 1998) for initiating and inspiring new cognitions and practices. These trends combine also in the first theme which we see emerging from the chapters of this book as an area of focus deserving further investigation in the future: mobility, new forms of openness and learning in the public arena. (Dohn et al 2018)

In raising this growing interest in the ideas of space at the NLC and for networked learning more widely, they do not however discuss the idea of 'critical spaces' that emerged from our analysis of responses to our survey

Reference to the strength of papers presented at the conference itself, supporting criticality and critical reflection was a recurring theme in many of the responses. However, closer examination of responses revealed it was not just about, as one respondent commented; '*Networked learning stands out for the critical and theoretical stance it takes to the field*' or as another wrote; '*I think it has supported a more critical take on claims that might be made about technology*'.

It was as much about how this had been possible as a result of creating or making a space, from the very early conferences, where criticality and critical reflection could happen and was acceptable, and was as one person commented 'even required'.

While the idea of critical examination has always been clearly stated in the NLC calls for papers what is not stated is what this means, or how criticality is reflected in practice in the NL conference. However, some of the survey respondents revealed how and in what ways the conference provided a 'critical space' stating for example that from the beginning;

*'Networked Learning seemed in those early days to open up the possibility of a more interesting, critical space where it was possible to take some risks in thinking' (r1)*

A space that allowed the development of discussions and a 'critical' examination where;

*Much more importantly, with each new conference the NL community critiques the political/ethical implications of reliance on said tools to theorise relationships among tutors, learners, resources, and mediating technologies (r9) --- The NLC's critical, social justice-oriented approach to networked learning brought me 'home' (r9)*  
*I have always felt that NLC was interesting in that it invited more critical, theoretical, politically and social aware (r7)*

In these comments, we start to see that the NLC as a 'critical space' allows participants to;

- Take risks
- Examine social justice, ethical and political concerns
- Consider and examines power relations from a critical perspective

What is more, according to comments under other themes, the work done in this critical space is (mostly) to a high academic and scholarly level and represents a range of different theoretical perspectives and interdisciplinary thinking. Importantly from a networked learning perspective, it is nourished by a supportive and interesting ongoing community/network of NL researchers. As one respondent aptly commented, the conference:

*Practices what it preaches – provides a supportive and critical on-going international learning network (r6)*

It is equally important to put a critical lens on the NLC as a critical space. As one respondent alluded, it does present potential social and economic barriers through being in a fixed physical location and the relative high cost of attending. In addition, as in any social situation (and as we will discuss shortly, in any community) hierarchies of authority and power have to be acknowledged. To this extent control over what is deemed to be networked learning is maintained through mechanisms that operate both consciously and unconsciously through the conference organisers, the paper reviewers, the hot seat presenters, the Keynotes, the participants themselves and the book series editors and publishers. While striving to operate in a flexible and open manner, all involved have a certain investment and contribution in retaining while still seeking to develop and extend the theory pedagogy and practice of networked learning. As Bayne and Ross (2013) point out referencing Peters and Hulme (2003), openness does not mean freedom.

There was a sense in the comments made by some of the respondents that this control is shared with and amongst the conference participants. Respondents' experience of the networked learning conference community and its significance to our understanding of networked learning is discussed in more detail in the next section.

## Community in networked learning

In their analysis, which forms the introductory chapter of the research in networked learning book from NLC 2016, de Laat and Ryberg (2018) identify community/community of practice as one of the dominant perspectives discussed at NL conferences as they comment:

*The interest in community oriented and collaborative forms of learning has always been strong within networked learning; in fact it is probably because the notion of Communities of Practice resonates well with the foundational ideas of Networked Learning that it has become so pervasive (de Laat and Ryberg 2018)*

If then, as we have stated, we see the NL Conference itself enacting the values of networked learning, what do we learn about the idea of community in networked learning from the responses to our questions. Many respondents talked positively about their sense of being part of a community and indicated this was a major attraction to them in attending the conferences over the years. Our analysis of the respondents' comments suggests several different but mutually supporting views of the NLC community.

An example of this is the way in which respondents' talk of the community as a place where members can develop attachments, friendships and ties. The concept of weak and strong/close ties is a familiar one from the

literature on social networking and networked learning (Jones et al, 2008). All but two of the respondents to our survey indicated that they felt part of the NLC community of researchers. They talked almost exclusively about the strong ties that they have made or experienced within the NLC community. Some talked of the importance to them of being part of an ongoing and continuing series of conferences where a core of the community was relatively stable, thus allowing them to build relationships, stating for example that the community “...is consistent from conference to conference so one can build relationships over time.” (r13)

The conference community roots are however Anglo-Saxon in culture and thinking. And the language, in common with many other international conferences, is English. All of which can potentially present barriers to being part of the NLC community for those from other cultures, and other ways of thinking and speaking, as one respondent says:

*I found that language but also culture is still a barrier for my colleagues to take part in the debates of the NLC. However, I appreciated the fact that many researchers within the NLC adopted French and German critical and post-modern theories to develop their own reflections. While the NLC's language was English, the community's culture was open and well beyond the Anglo-Saxon perspective of research and practice (r12)*

What this respondent says however indicates that for them value is placed on the openness of the networked learning community.

Another theme in some respondent's replies was the way in which the conference community provides participants with affirmation of their professional practice, and helps them consider their practice in the light of collegial discussion:

*There are new ideas. There are works in progress. There are some 'old' ideas which are still bearing fruit in terms of practical implications for my work in higher education. I find this mix quite supportive of some aspects of my practice, but also quite stimulating in terms of framing and reframing my ideas and my practices...and so refining them. This is important, particularly for researchers and practitioners like me who may not have ready access to a group of peers that is co-located. (r 17)*

And for some, the opportunity for sharing and critiquing ideas in the community was a key feature:

*with each new conference the NL community critiques the political/ethical implications of reliance on [technology] tools to theorise relationships among tutors, learners, resources, and mediating technologies (including inscribed designs for learning). (r9)*

The way in which the NLC community puts into practice the values of connection, collaboration and knowledge building associated with networked learning, and the way in which the community provides a space in which members can grasp, understand and enact networked learning practices was all seen as important: As one respondent aptly commented;

*NLC sure lives up to that side of its label (ie networking). (r19)*

To summarise, the analysis of respondents' comments on community indicates that the conference provides a community space for enacting the following values and practice of networked learning:

- A communal spirit of encouragement and support
- Informally sharing and critiquing ideas in a supportive way
- Affirming professional practice in networked learning
- Openness to other ways of thinking and speaking
- Connection, collaboration and knowledge building

It appears to be the case that the networked learning conference community has developed a culture where participants place high value in supporting each other and in working towards a collective and shared process of participation and understanding. In noting this, we should not be complacent about the conference being a space that supports everyone. As one respondent also commented that there might be a 'canon' in the networked learning community. To this extent, the idea of community in networked learning may itself be problematic.

Ideas on community can be nostalgic and seen as some kind of utopian ideal. They can be used to try to foster commonality and consensus that can have a normative effect that may lead to the setting of norms that exclude certain kinds of behaviour and ways of being. (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005; McConnell, 2006; Roberts, 2006; Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008). NLC participants seldom talked of community in this way, we should, however be alert to the possibility that for others, who do not clearly identify or see themselves as part of the NLC community their experience of community, may be very different.

## Scholarship in networked learning

Another characteristic of the conference that respondents identify is the way in which scholarship is developed through the conference. Our analysis indicates that scholarship is evident in two broad areas: the conference processes, i.e. the quality of participants' relations and the sharing of ideas; and in the way in which networked learning is defined and re-shaped during the conferences.

The patterns and processes of the conference community can lead to new forms of knowledge and scholarship concerning the theory, pedagogy and practice of networked learning. From our analysis of the responses, it is evident that the conference is a place where participants share a common sense of identity as scholars of networked learning and where participants "exchange information, build alliances, dispute ideas and work together" (Tight, 2015).

*NLC is also a place where one can hear/talk about ideas. That's important. Other conferences in the 'Ed Tech' area tend to be dominated by show-and-tell accounts of recent educational innovations or (more rarely) by empirical studies that value method over substance. I don't mean that the perfect conference is a philosophical talk-fest – far from it – but NLC seems to welcome people who have interesting ideas to share, without requiring the supporting props of shiny new gadgets or tight data. (r21)*

Hodgson et al (2012) consider the ontology of networked learning and the assumptions it makes about the nature of being and existence. Making sense from one's own personal experiences and view of the world is a key feature of networked learning. Our analysis of the survey responses indicates that many conference participants experience the NLC as a scholarly setting in which they can make sense of their own personal and professional experiences, and where they can engage in scholarly discussion – all instrumental in driving their scholarly activities:

*I found myself in an ideal mix of exposure to new ideas, active discussion of both theory and practice, and a truly welcoming group of strong thinkers. This experience has repeated itself at each of the NLC's I have attended. (r17)*

*My research-theory-practice 'home' will always include a complex combination of my Canadian and UK experiences. I have nowhere outside the NLC to sort this complexity and highly value the opportunity to continue working toward that goal. (r9)*

The quest to discover is striking in many of the responses, which capture an enduring characteristic and spirit of scholarship, which is a wish to solve problems, discover alternative viewpoints and transform practice. Scholarship is also evident in the way in which the conference shapes and defines understandings of networked learning, and in the way it offers other and new theoretical perspectives, as these responses indicate:

*The conference has always engaged with the idea of how we define networked learning: the definition of this that emerged from the work of X, Y and other colleagues who established it has continued to shape it, but has also adapted and moved on as other theoretical frameworks have emerged. (r1)*

*I go to NLC because speakers are not continuing to figure out how to put courses online or how to develop 'best practices' for instructors. Presenters and attendees tend to be in the forefront of new thinking about how networked learning can be used, where it applies, and how to take the best advantage of it, whether for exploring new theories or new practices. (r10)*

*NLC has helped to engage with an audience of researchers and practitioners to explore and design for social learning relationships, appreciate human agency in networked learning and develop my work over the years to include non-technological social (f2f) networked structures for learning and professional development. (r6)*

*.. the field of networked learning has moved from a focus on 'online learning' towards including how networked technologies are affecting on-campus, full-time students ...new modes and mixes of online/offline and digital/analogue are emerging and call for reconceptualization of distinctions such as online/offline. (r7)*

These comments help us understand the place of scholarship in the networked learning conference and the central role it plays in its development of networked learning ideas. Participants are seeking a place in which they can engage in high-level discussion, debate current ideas and theories, and explore the way in which networked learning is developing, as well as being challenged in their thinking. For some, the conference provides an important space for them to clarify their thinking in ways that are not possible elsewhere.

## Developing practice in networked learning

The final significantly recurring theme in participant's responses relates to the development of practice from a networked learning perspective. This is a theme that epitomises the idea of epistemic practice where the theory of networked learning is captured in the practical accomplishment of not only one's learning designs but in our situated performative actions/work and social practices.

There was the recognition of how the conference had for many of the respondents a direct impact on informing their approach to their own professional and academic practices. Not only in terms of developing their theoretical ideas but also for sharing and getting feedback on their practice. Finding the community as a place to share and provide feedback in a supportive but still challenging manner

*There is still room for a joyful sharing of things that have been tried out and might provide some inspiration for teaching – I love the mix of challenge and simulation. (r5)*

*I have been inspired by studies of specific NL designs for planning my own teaching, and I often use texts from the NL community in my syllabuses (r2)*

It was not however only a case of taking on ideas to both implement in one's own teaching and learning practice but also to be able to share these with others either when designing new programmes or advising other institutions etc.

*Networked learning has challenged my thinking about groups and communities as the locus or main pedagogical constellation and this has also meant a lot for how I have tried to work with networked learning locally. I.e. working with networked technologies to increase transparency between student groups; thinking in ways of how students can develop and utilise their personal learning networks as a way to strengthen and challenge collaborative knowledge building. (r7)*

*Ideas from NL fed into the last major program I helped design (the Masters in Learning Sciences & Technology at (name of) Uni) and they also inform some of the work I do as a consultant to other universities wrt design approaches, professional development programs, network/community-oriented learning, etc. (r21)*

In addition, as one respondent commented, in the examination of practice there has been an ongoing extension or focus of the domains of practice considered;

*... first towards informal education and then towards activist perspectives. There has perhaps been a shift from technologies for teaching to technologies for coding – and what happens to the data from these. These are probably natural responses to some of the perceived threats to our institutions and values that have also featured strongly in recent years (r5).*

The perceived threats to our institutions, the difficulty of engaging others in the ideas and practice of networked learning together with a perceived increasing potential relevance of networked learning in relation to these threats were also commented on:

*Highly relevant to my own practice, though I feel that the conference itself is an opportunity to stand back and review this practice. There is still a nebulous aspect to Networked Learning – its reach is extending but it is some way off being meaningful to those outside it (r5)*

Another respondent explains:

*In many ways, I see the position in the UK the position of NL is even more precarious than previously due to a) the integration of new technologies into the mainstream of HE b) the marketization and consumer focus of HE c) the limited room to experiment. To some degree this seems to affect many other HE systems but the UK and US seem to be the most affected. (r3)*

Further, as already touched on the difficulties of bringing in others from none Anglo Saxon or English speaking traditions are complex but, it would appear, certainly not impossible:

*I proposed a debate within a project in Latin America on the terms “Distance Education”, frequently used and emphasizing the logistic dimension of technology enhanced learning and “Networked Learning”, emphasizing the pedagogical and socio-cultural dimension of TEL. Happily, it was possible to translate and discuss these two terms in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese (r12)*

All of the above lends support to the notion of that the NL conference is a situated doing of networked learning.

## Conclusions

In our analysis of the responses to our five survey questions, we have attempted to tease out and look afresh at ideas of networked learning as they are enacted in and through the Networked Learning Conference. The four themes that we have focused on – critical space, community, scholarship and developing practice - are all aspects of the epistemic practice of the networked learning knowledge community. Further, in our analysis of these themes, we found there were degrees of overlap and interaction, and that together they constituted key aspects to the way the NL Conference 'institutionalises' networked learning as a practical accomplishment.

What do the above ideas and comments reveal about the position of networked learning in the current highly politicised, globalised and increasingly digitalised higher education sector? If nothing else, they show that the conference provides a community to examine and discuss the practical difficulties faced within HE. Arguably, they also demonstrate that the networked learning community of researchers not only reveal their epistemic beliefs in what they write but also in what they attempt to do in their practice – both as participants at the conference and in their own situated teaching and learning practices. It is a reiterative process of developing one's own networked learning practice through the affordance of the NL conference and the conference's own practical accomplishment of networked learning.

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