

# Using Technology to Promote Intercultural Competence: An Exchange between Japanese and U.S. College Students

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## Introduction

As part of the globalization movement during the past few decades, there has been mounting pressure from both state and private sectors alike for educational institutions in many developed nations to produce students who can demonstrate a high degree of intercultural competency. Experiential learning activities that allow students to interact with people from cultures outside their own, such as study abroad programs, have been highlighted by higher education institutions as holding the key to promoting intercultural competence. While study abroad programs have grown significantly, there are still many constraints that make it impossible for a large number of students to participate in these life-changing opportunities. Therefore, a growing number of formalized programs are being created to support technology-enhanced exchanges. Additionally, many professors are forging their own such exchanges. The opportunity to initiate such a ‘home-grown’ exchange arose while I was teaching on a Fulbright in Japan during the 2014–2015 academic year. In this article I will describe a cultural exchange activity between U.S. students studying sociology at a community college and Japanese students studying English and Global Studies at two Japanese universities. While this international exchange was small in scale and perhaps not as transformative as a study abroad experience, it was relatively simple to organize and facilitate and it allowed for rich social interactions between the students who participated.

## **Growing Emphasis on Intercultural Competence in Higher Education**

In a world of fast travel, international media, and economic globalization, intercultural competence is no longer an academic specialization for the inter-

ested few, but has become a requirement for all college graduates who desire a well-rounded education. While there are various definitions of intercultural competence, most emphasize an ability to effectively interact across cultures. For example, Wiseman (2003) states that “intercultural competence involves the knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures”. Other definitions also highlight an ability to interact without imposing one’s own cultural values onto others (e.g. Earley, Ang & Tan, 2006) and respect for cultural differences (e.g. Chen & Starosta, 1996).

In the U.S., educational institutions and employers alike have grown increasingly aware of the importance of producing workers who can successfully interact across cultures if the United States is to compete in the ‘global economy’ (Twombly et al., 2012). A recent survey of employers found that more than 9 out of 10 said that it was important that those they hire demonstrate intercultural skills (It Takes More than a Major, 2013). Institutions of higher learning play a key role in helping to foster intercultural competency. A growing number of colleges and universities in the United States have identified this skill as an important learning outcome and have developed programs to help students achieve it. Since 2001, increasing the number of college graduates with the ability to effectively interact internationally has emerged as a national policy priority in the U.S. (APLU, 2004; Lincoln Commission, 2005).

Promoting this skill also is an important goal at my home institution, a community college in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. At Cascadia College, there are four learning outcomes integrated across the curriculum, including “Interact in Diverse and Complex Environments”. According to the course catalog, this outcome is grounded in the realization that “[s]uccessful negotiation through our interdependent and global society requires knowledge and awareness of self and others, as well as enhanced interaction skills”. In addition to this curricular emphasis on intercultural competency, pluralism and cultural richness, along with global awareness are explicit institutional values that guide us in our mission to transform “lives through integrated education in a learning-centered community”. Furthermore, Cascadia College has developed an Associate in Integrated Studies degree with an emphasis on

Global Studies. In addition, all degrees offered at the college mandate that students take a minimum of 5–10 credits in courses that are designated as meeting the Cultural Knowledge Requirement. This emphasis on global awareness, cultural knowledge, and diversity is not uncommon in colleges and universities across the United States.

Similarly, there has been a growing emphasis on internationalization in Japanese colleges and universities over the past few decades. In the 1980's and 1990's "major corporations began to pressure the Japanese government for what came to be called 'education for global competitiveness'" (Tye, 2003, p. 20). As a result, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), is currently supporting multiple initiatives designed to promote international understanding in the curriculum and increased foreign language proficiency. Accordingly, there has been an explosion of departments, particularly within private universities, focused on international, cross-cultural or global studies (Huang, 2006).

These forces of internationalization could be seen at play in a number of ways at the two women's universities in Tokyo where I taught as a Fulbright scholar during 2014–2015. For instance, at Kyoritsu Women's University an International Studies department was established in 2007. A graduate program in this area was added in 2011. Japan Women's University's website touts the large number of international faculty in the School of Integrated Arts and Sciences at the college. Additionally, the Department of Humanities and Cultures website points out that students in this program "are encouraged to broaden their knowledge and deepen their sensitivity toward different human cultures". Both of these universities send a significant number of students on both short-term and longer study abroad programs each year, many of them to the U.S.

### **Promoting Intercultural Competency in Higher Education**

While there is certainly some debate within the multiple disciplines across which the discourse on intercultural competency extends, scholars seem to agree that contact with different cultures is essential for promoting this skill. Gordon Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which suggests that interaction between groups is an effective way of reducing prejudice, stereotyping and

discrimination, provides the theoretical framework for many scholars studying intercultural competency. Grounded in this perspective, educational institutions often view experiential learning opportunities that allow students to engage in cross-cultural interaction as the key to developing intercultural competency (Salisbury & Goodman, 2009). One of the primary ways in which U.S. and Japanese educational institutions have attempted to provide students with such experiential learning opportunities has been through study abroad programs.

### **Study Abroad**

Both Japan and the United States send a significant number of students to study overseas each year. According to the Institute of International Education, both countries sent record numbers of students abroad in 2013. The United States sent 273,996 students to foreign countries that year (Institute of International Education 2015c) while Japan sent 69,869 students (Institute of International Education, 2015b). The top destination for U.S. students was Europe. Only about 2% went to Japan. In contrast, the United States received 24% of Japanese students who studied abroad that year. Although the number was somewhat lower than in previous years, it was still the largest percentage of Japanese students to travel to any one country. Thus, among students who have the opportunity to study abroad, Japanese students have a relatively strong likelihood of coming to the U.S. and interacting with U.S. students, but the reverse is not true.

What do we know about the effectiveness of study abroad for promoting intercultural competency? Numerous, single-institution, small sample studies have investigated the effect of studying abroad. Such studies have repeatedly found that students who participate in longer study abroad programs demonstrate positive change on several aspects of intercultural competence upon return to their home campuses. Studies also have demonstrated that these study abroad experiences may have additional influences on identity, intellectual and cognitive development, grades, graduation rates, and language proficiency. Although the literature on short-term study abroad experiences is far less extensive, some studies do claim that even short-term programs have positive effects on intercultural competence. In their monograph *Study Abroad in a*

*Global Century*, Twombly and colleagues (2012) have critiqued the literature on the impact of participating in study abroad on intercultural competency on methodological grounds, suggesting that more thorough investigation of the impact of study abroad on intercultural competency is needed. Moreover, Salisbury (2011), using rigorous methodological analyses, found that while study abroad participation increases one's inclination toward diverse contact, it has no statistically significant effect on one's comfort with diverse interactions or one's relativistic appreciation of cultural differences, two outcomes that are widely touted benefits of study abroad programs. This suggests that we must re-think the value of study abroad programs as mechanisms for enhancing the intercultural competency of our students.

In addition to the questions regarding the efficacy of study abroad, there are other reasons why institutions of higher education should reconsider their emphasis on this teaching modality as the quintessential experiential learning opportunity for promoting intercultural competency. In general, study abroad is accessible to only a small percent of the college population as a whole. Fewer than 5% of enrolled U.S. or Japan college students study abroad each year (OECD, 2015). In the U.S., community college students constitute an even smaller minority of those who study abroad (Institute of International Exchange, 2015a). The prohibitive cost and difficulty obtaining student visas may contribute to the limited number of students who are able to study abroad each year. In addition to the cost and logistical challenges for students, study abroad programs pose challenges for institutions as they are expensive and time-consuming to manage (Online program connects students, 2010). The lack of access coupled with the significant resources needed to maintain study abroad programs has led many educators to search for other ways to provide their students with meaningful learning opportunities to develop their intercultural competence.

### **Virtual Exchanges**

Nurtured by the rapid evolution of technology available in higher education, an alternative to study abroad programs has emerged that addresses some of the aforementioned limitations. The Internet and other new communication technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for promoting cross-cul-

tural exchanges and collaborations (Cowan and Arsenault, 2008). With foreign language educators leading the way (see for example Kinginger et al. 1999, O'Dowd 2003, Thorne 2003, and Liaw 2006), virtual intercultural exchanges are now being fostered across disciplines and across the spectrum of educational settings.

There are many formalized programs that facilitate such opportunities. Some of these formalized programs, such as eTandem and Cultura (out of MIT), focus on providing individual language students with opportunities to practice linguistic skills with native speakers through the use of email, telephone, or social media. Other organizations, such as Etwinning, Soliya Connect, Exchange 2.0, and COIL offer educators the opportunity to integrate virtual exchanges into their classrooms with the goal of enhancing language skills specifically or engaging in cultural exchange more generally.

Though the idea of virtual exchange is gaining popularity in North America and Europe, there appear to be few such exchanges conducted in Japan. There is no scholarly literature (published in English) describing such exchanges in Japan. However, there does seem to be some interest in developing such exchanges. In 2015, a newly formed association, Asian-Pacific Virtual Exchange Association (APVEA), held their inaugural conference at the Muroran Institute of Technology in Hokkaido. The conference theme was Borderless Communication Now and keynote speakers included Dr. Melinda Dooly, who according to the APVEA website, "has written extensively on virtual exchange and is a leader in the field of education through virtual exchange". Despite this promising indication that there may be a nascent movement towards developing virtual exchange in Japan, it is unclear whether the APVEA has gained much traction following their inaugural conference as the website no longer seems to be active.

Due to its more recent emergence as an intercultural exchange modality, there is less research on the effectiveness of virtual exchange as a tool for enhancing students' intercultural competency. However, some studies do suggest that virtual exchanges may promote this skill. For instance, in a study of Korean and U.S. students, O'Neill (2007) found that International Virtual Elementary Classroom Activities enhanced students' intercultural competence. Another small scale study found that virtual exchange produced an impact on

students' attitudes towards international peers (Cavalli, 2013). Additionally, a large scale study indicated that students participating in Global Virtual Teams to collaborate on projects experienced improved cultural intelligence, shift in attitudes towards other cultures as well as towards cultural differences in general (Taras et al, 2013).

As with study abroad, there also are obstacles to implementing virtual exchanges. Access to technology and locating suitable partners seem to be two of the most formidable hurdles, although the growing number of programs offering support in these two areas (as described above) are helping to reduce these barriers. Another potential pitfall of virtual exchange is a failure of technology during the exchange. This is particularly problematic during synchronous exchanges (Cavalli, 2013). Time differences can also present challenges when attempting to set up synchronous exchanges. Lastly, as with any new teaching modality, especially one requiring the use of unfamiliar technology, there is often a learning curve that may discourage many faculty from being willing to give it a try.

### **A Case Study: A Virtual Exchange between U.S. and Japan students**

I was inspired to develop a virtual intercultural exchange while teaching English and Global Studies courses at Japan Women's University and Kyoritsu Women's University as a Visiting Fulbright Scholar. Prior to this, I had participated in only one virtual exchange. The prior exchange was between U.S., Japanese, and Saudi college women and was a synchronous teleconference. While it was incredibly rewarding to faculty and students alike, there were some serious limitations. First, due to the fact that the exchange was synchronous, it was very difficult to find a time when students from all three countries were able to meet. In the end, the U.S. students had to come to campus in the evening, outside of the regular class time, in order to participate. Second, the technology was unfamiliar to faculty, who required significant support from IT staff. Moreover, the technology was unfamiliar to IT staff, who needed additional training to use the technology. This required significant time and resources. Lastly, the Japanese students that participated in the previous exchange were quite reluctant to appear on camera and speak in English, resulting in very limited participation from them. This was disappointing and

frustrating for the U.S. and Saudi students. Despite the struggles with the previous exchange, I was compelled to try another virtual exchange when it was suggested by an enthusiastic and highly motivated colleague (Dr. Anne Tuonimen) who was based at my home institution in the United States. She suggested that since I was teaching in Japan and she was teaching an online class in the U.S., we might have a perfect opportunity to create a virtual exchange for our students. Although we encountered a few minor challenges along the way, we ended up creating two very successful virtual exchanges over the course of the academic year, which I will describe below.

## **Designing the Exchanges**

### **Choosing a platform.**

There are a variety of platforms that one can choose from in order to develop a virtual exchange. In addition to the formal programs mentioned above (e.g. COIL), other options include teleconferencing and social media. It is also possible to develop a virtual exchange using a learning management system (LMS) supported by one's own institution. At Cascadia College (and across all institutions of higher learning in Washington State) a LMS called Canvas is used to support both face-to-face and on-line classrooms. Since both instructors were already familiar with this system and because the e-learning director at our institution was enthusiastic about supporting our proposed virtual exchange, we elected to use Canvas as a platform.

The use of Canvas was relatively straight-forward. In order to add the Japanese students to the Canvas system, the e-learning director at my home institution required only a name and an email address for each student. She then manually added them to the system. In our first exchange we chose to add the students directly to the on-line class taught by Dr. Tuonimen. However, the addition of a large number of Japanese students to her class proved rather unwieldy for the instructor and confusing for the Japanese students. For these reasons, we decided to create a separate course specifically for purpose of the virtual exchange in our second iteration. The e-learning director was able to easily add both Japanese and U.S. students to this course using the same process as she had with the first exchange. Thus, both exchanges were hosted by the online learning management system regularly used at my home institution.



In both cases, the exchange took place within a discussion forum that was specifically created for that purpose. Discussion forums are widely used as a teaching tool in the United States, especially in on-line classes. Thus, the U.S. students were quite familiar with how to participate in on-line discussions and required little coaching in this area. However, my Japanese students were not familiar with this learning format. In general, Japanese students do not have much experience with discussion-based learning due to the traditional lecture format that is still used at most Japanese universities. Although I used small group discussion as a regular pedagogical tool in my Japanese classes, it was a format with which my students remained relatively uncomfortable. In addition, my Japanese students appeared to have little experience with instructors integrating the use of a learning management system into their courses. Even though both Kyoritsu and Japan Women's Universities did have LMS's available, few faculty used them regularly. As a result, I decided to spend a significant portion of a class period explaining the purpose and practice of discussion as a learning strategy and also to introduce my Japanese students to the format of on-line discussions before proceeding with the exchanges.

### **Choosing topics.**

After committing to doing a virtual exchange and selecting a platform, Dr. Tuonimen and I began to brainstorm to identify which of our classes might be most appropriate to bring together. We also shared the topics we were covering in our various classes and tried to pinpoint meaningful intersections. For our first exchange, during the fall of 2014, I was teaching two sections of American Cultural Diversity and we had a reading about the trend of Americans getting tattoos of Chinese characters. My students were very intrigued with the idea of Americans borrowing Japanese culture. At the same time, in her Social Inequalities in the U.S., Dr. Tuonimen was getting ready to embark on a discussion of racialized Halloween costumes. We hit upon the idea of cultural borrowing as an interesting topic that our students could approach from multiple angles. For our second exchange, during the spring of 2015, I was teaching two courses on gender in Japan while Dr. Tuonimen was teaching a Sociology of Families class in the United States. We realized that we both discussed gender socialization into work and family roles in our classes and so

we decided to focus on that particular topic for the Spring Exchange. It seemed to be a topic that would be especially interesting to our largely female student participants.

For both exchanges, Dr. Tuonimen drafted discussion questions for the forum and then sent them to me for revisions, which was essential given the linguistic gap between our two groups of students and Dr. Tuonimen's lack of familiarity with my Japanese students' language abilities. During the revision process I was mindful of my Japanese students' English language skills and tried to eliminate any complex or unnecessary terminology. In addition to revising the questions to make them more easily understood by the Japanese students, we decided to require all students to include some type of visual image in their posts. This requirement also improved the accessibility of the forum for the Japanese students.

At the outset of each exchange the instructors modeled the desired types of interactions for students. For instance, in the Fall Exchange on cultural borrowing, I initiated the discussion by describing the secular celebration of Christmas in Japan, particularly among young people making sure to include the required visual image (shown below). Dr. Tuonimen then replied to my post.



### **Student participation.**

We were cautiously optimistic that our students would be interested in participating in a virtual exchange with peers from another culture. However,

since it was our first time conducting this type of exchange, we were reluctant to embed the exchange into our courses as an assignment that students would complete for credit. Alternatively, we decided to make participation voluntary and offer the incentive of extra credit points for our first exchange. In the initial exchange 111 of my 175 Japanese students volunteered to participate for extra credit. These students were added to Dr. Tuonimen's on-line course, which already contained her 33 U.S. students. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm expressed by the Japanese students in signing up for the exchange did not carry over to their actual participation on the forum. Only 4 of the 111 Japanese students ended up posting on the forum, in contrast to 24 of the 33 U.S. students. There were a total of 68 student posts on the first forum, only 15 of them coming from Japanese students (and 12 of those were from one particularly enthusiastic Japanese participant).

Disappointed with their lack of participation in the Fall Exchange, I asked my Japanese students why they were not posting on the forum, despite having signed up to participate. I learned that although few had posted, many were fascinated lurkers. They indicated that they had visited the forum and were very interested in the ideas being discussed there, but they lacked confidence in their language abilities to make posts of their own. They also revealed that the discussion format was unfamiliar and a bit uncomfortable for them. Bali (2013) notes that power dynamics can be a challenge in virtual exchanges (particularly live video exchanges) since one group is usually at a linguistic disadvantage. Moreover, dialogue and exchange of ideas is a particularly Western pedagogy that is uncomfortable and unfamiliar for students in many non-Western cultures.

In order to improve participation, particularly of the Japanese students, we decided to build the virtual exchange into the course as a graded assignment for the Spring Exchange. I also spent some additional time coaching Japanese students on the use of discussion as a learning modality. With these small changes we were able to dramatically improve participation. In the second exchange, 34 of my 45 Japanese students ended up making at least one post to the forum. On the U.S. side, 40 of the 44 students in the class made at least one post. A total of 200 posts were made by students in the Gender Socialization forum, nearly half of them (92) by Japanese students.

There are additional factors that might explain the improved participation of Japanese students. First, in contrast to the Fall Exchange, I was teaching upper level courses for the Spring Exchange. Many of the students in these classes had studied abroad and were fairly proficient in English. Second, several of the students who participated in the Spring Exchange had been students of mine in the fall and already had some exposure to the format of the exchange during the previous semester. Thus, Japanese students in the Spring Exchange may have been better prepared and more confident about participating in the exchange. It is worth taking these factors into consideration when designing future exchanges.

## **Student Interactions**

### **Fall exchange.**

In this discussion forum, students were asked to introduce themselves and then “[p]ost an example of cultural appropriation (attaching an appropriate image or short YouTube video of a cultural symbol that you find) and describe which culture is being appropriated and by whom”. Topics raised in this discussion included: The use of Hitler’s image and the swastika in Thailand, Canadian singer Avril Lavingne’s Hello Kitty music video, the celebration of Christmas in Japan, cultural borrowing of many types of foods in the United States and Japan, clothing borrowed from Native American culture in the U.S., Christian wedding ceremonies performed in Japan, and the borrowing of languages. Below is an example of the types of exchanges that occurred in this discussion forum.

U.S. student’s post:

“I used this image to illustrate the appropriation that many Americans use towards Native Americans. Every day many of us preach of illegal immigrants have no right here, yet our entire society was founded by immigrants. We celebrate Columbus Day every year, yet Christopher Columbus didn’t discover America, he just accidentally happened upon it, and then proceeded to bring more immigrants to America, who would then brutally murder all of the Native Americans. Now, we dress as Native Americans for Halloween, a lot of our fashion is made to look ‘Native American’ or what some may call ‘Bohe-



mian'. Yet how often is the brutality whites showed Native Americans hundreds of years ago discussed?"

Japanese student's response:

"I did not know the existence of Columbus Day and American celebrate the day! Japan have few races except Japanese, so racial problem is difficult to feel in daily life and I did not pay special attention on fashion like Native Americans. Bohemian had fashioned two or three years ago in Japan".

The above exchange illustrates that as a result of her interaction with a U.S.



student, the Japanese student gained new knowledge about American culture and was able to identify the loss of original meaning that can occur with cultural borrowing.

### **Spring exchange on gender socialization**

In this exchange students were instructed to “[w]rite a 5+ line paragraph, present an example of how your society promotes particular gender roles in family and / or work, and explain how. Attach a visual cultural image that supports, promotes, and encourages the message you are presenting. Explain whether or not you feel the message promotes gender equality or inequality, and how.” One Japanese student sparked several responses, and challenged American students’ perceptions of Japanese men, when she posted about Japanese ‘ikumen’, or men involved in childrearing.

Japanese student post:

“In japan, men who takes care of their children is called IKUMEN. Usually, these type of men are positive towards raising their kids. There are many community to support IKUMEN these days. This picture is one of them. These man are sharing each trouble about their child raising”.



U.S. student response:

“Wow, I think the idea of IKUMEN is great and wish we had something like

this for men in the United States! I think if men here saw these groups they would think it is more acceptable to be like this and care for their children. It is awesome that communities supports this and not only mothers with children and I believe we would benefit from learning some things from you in Japan!”

The U.S. student’s response is a particularly powerful example of how the exchange may shift ideas about the other culture and may even make students more open to ideas from that culture.

### **Impact of the Exchange**

At the end of the second exchange, students were asked whether or not participating in the discussion had expanded their cultural knowledge and whether they would like more opportunities to interact with students around the world. Over 95% of the Japanese students and 90% of the U.S. students said the exchange had expanded their cultural knowledge and that they would like more opportunities to interact online with students around the world. Students were also asked to describe what they had learned from participating in an international discussion forum. Several themes emerged from their responses to this open-ended question. While there were some themes that were common across both groups of students, distinct themes also emerged for each group. As the following quotes illustrate, Japanese students indicated that they gained confidence in their self-expression through interactions with U.S. students.

“I get confidence of writing English through talking with foreign students. I can talk with other country students”. (Japanese Student)

“I realized that having my own opinion is really important . . . through this discussion forum I learned that having my opinion leads to connect with other people and make a lot of chances to interact with them. And I also learned that thinking critically makes me grow up”. (Japanese student)

It is not surprising that Japanese students, who are known to excel with writ-

ten English over spoken English, appreciated an opportunity to have discussions with foreign peers in a written format. This allowed them time to craft their ideas in a relatively comfortable environment, while still challenging them to engage in an unfamiliar form of learning. Comments from U.S. students, on the other hand, indicated that they gained a more sophisticated sense of cultural relativism through their interactions with Japanese students. As the following quotes illustrate, U.S. students developed an increased appreciation for Japanese culture.

“I learned that even though America has a lot of influence around the world, there are other cultures, like Japan, that are much further ahead than us in equality, especially with the trend in gender fluidity”.

“I learned that even the things we consider fundamental to society, and as such don’t question, may be entirely different in a different society”

Developing a culturally relativistic perspective is a key learning outcome for students at my home institution and these quotes illustrate that the virtual intercultural exchanges did seem to promote this learning outcome for our students. This learning format holds a great deal of promise for helping students become competent in this area.

In addition to the distinct themes that emerged from student comments regarding what they learned from the exchange, there were two themes that emerged among both Japanese and U.S. students. First, both groups of students expressed their surprise at being able to establish common ground with peers from the other side of the world. The fact that this theme emerged from student comments is particularly exciting because establishing common ground is often viewed as a necessary step in developing intercultural competence.

“The good thing is I could learn that we have the same point of view even though our cultural background is different. Some gender-based inequalities and gender roles are in common no matter where we live”.  
(Japanese Student)



“I learned how much different cultures have in common and how they can come together and have a discussion on a topic even though they live entirely different lives on other sides of the world”. (U.S. Student)

Second, both groups of students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interact with peers from a foreign country and were enthusiastic about engaging in these types of discussions again.

“This interactive discussion was really amazing to share our opinion/ thoughts with foreign people and I am so glad that I could be a part of it! Thank you for giving us this opportunity”. (Japanese Student)

“It was a great discussion. I really, really enjoyed it and wish there could be more opportunities like this!” (U.S. Student)

Although short-term, these online exchanges provided Japanese and U.S. students an opportunity to engage in rich, authentic conversations about contemporary societal issues. Unlike a study abroad program, virtual exchanges are low cost (in our case free) and relatively easy to conduct. Although they may not have the power to make the same life-changing impact as a study abroad experience, they are more accessible and therefore offer the potential for multiple exchanges. In this exchange, we had several students on both ends of the exchange who were able to participate in both the fall and the spring exchanges. One could imagine how carrying out multiple exchanges with the same group of students over time would further deepen their experiences. If repeated over time, these exchanges also have the potential to strengthen ties between institutions across different nations.

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