

Gearing practitioners up for research: evaluation of a pilot online research training course for social workers

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Abstract

There is a vicious circle of resistance to developing research capacity in social work. Practitioners receive minimal research methods teaching on qualifying programmes which contributes to a low value being placed upon research skills within social work agencies. There are few opportunities to acquire these skills on post-qualifying social work programmes which means that practitioners who go on to become educators possess limited research expertise, thus perpetuating the problem. Increasing the research competence of practitioners may be one way to transform this circle into a virtuous one. We developed two e-learning courses to increase the research literacy of social work practitioners and this paper evaluates a pilot of the second of these, a research protocol writing short course. We compared an e-learning group (n=6) with a classroom group (n=12) using mixed methods. In this pilot, e-learning appeared to be just as effective as providing this training within an advanced-level PQ programme. This suggests that e-learning may have some potential to enhance research capacity amongst social work practitioners.

Keywords: Practitioner research, research capacity, social work education, research protocol writing

Introduction

There is a well-documented lack of research capacity in social work in the UK (Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, 2006). Factors contributing to this problem include a lack of resources (Marsh & Fisher, 2005), a lack of research skills in the profession (Orme & Powell, 2008), difficulties in defining itself as a separate academic research discipline (Shaw & Norton, 2008) and a low public profile (Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, 2006).

Orme and Powell (2008) have identified a 'circle of resistance' to developing research capacity in social work. Practitioners receive minimal research methods teaching on social work qualifying programmes due to the demands of learning practice skills. This contributes to a low value being placed upon research skills within social work agencies. As employers play a leading role in shaping

post-qualifying (PQ) curricula (General Social Care Council, 2005), this negatively impacts on the opportunity to include research methods teaching within PQ programmes. Social work practitioners who go on to become social work educators possess limited research expertise, particularly in quantitative methods (Economic and Social Research Council, 2006), thus perpetuating the problem.

A potential way of transforming this vicious circle into a virtuous one is to support the development of practitioner researchers who can promote research mindedness within their agencies and provide a pool of social work educators of the future. Practitioner research is typically employer-led, applied to social work practice and ideally produces results that are directly relevant for practice (Shaw, 2005). Practice-based research can provide data not only on the social problems that practitioners are attempting to address, but also on the actions they take in the course of

their work, helping to make it an efficient means of generating new knowledge (Marsh & Fisher, 2008). Additionally, good practitioner research reveals ‘tacit knowledge’ that is held by practitioners but not otherwise revealed in formal statements or discovered by academic research (Shaw, 2005).

Shaw (2005) has estimated that there are more social work practitioner researchers than academic researchers, but their work is mostly small-scale and their findings are less likely to be published in peer-reviewed journals. The quality of practitioner research has also come under scrutiny. This is particularly apparent in the parallel field of education research where case studies conducted by teachers have been criticised by ethnographers for their lack of methodological rigour (cited in Shaw, 2005). However, whilst ‘inner-science’ considerations such as methodological quality are important in assessing the utility of practitioner research, ‘outer-science’ considerations such as its usefulness for practice should not be underestimated (Shaw & Norton, 2008).

The development of a research literate social work workforce has been frustrated by a lack of coherence and continuity in policy (Marsh & Fisher, 2008). There have been many examples of local initiatives to promote practitioner research (Hess & Mullin, 1995) and a variety of practitioner research training programmes (e.g. Fuller & Petch, 1995; Fook, 1996; McCrystal, 2000). However, in spite of the research priorities for practitioners being quite clear (e.g. Gould *et al.*, 2007; Stevens *et al.*, 2007), funding for practitioner research remains scant.

Practitioner research can be supported by the transformation of social work agencies into ‘learning organisations’ (Maynard, 2010). As Orme and Powell (2008) assert: “reframing organizations as communities and networks of learning opens up the potential for different practices within organizations and across practice and academic settings”

(p.1002). The Department of Health approval of Academic Health Sciences Centres in the UK (Darzi, 2008) suggests that the National Health Service is taking steps towards becoming an effective learning organisation with an increased integration of research and practice. Local authorities, who continue to employ the majority of statutory social workers, however, have largely been unable to develop a similar culture of learning.

Some experienced practitioners interested in undertaking research enrol for advanced-level PQ programmes to acquire research training and supervision, despite the absence of a research pathway in the PQ framework (General Social Care Council, 2005). These practitioners are beginning to make a modest contribution to the evidence-base for social work (see, for example, Dunn, 2001; Slack & Webber, 2008; Furminger & Webber, 2009; Dutt & Webber, 2010; Kingsford & Webber, 2010). However, there are few opportunities for practitioners to engage in this type or level of training.

To widen access to research training we transformed two research modules of our advanced-level PQ programme into stand-alone e-learning short courses. The first provides training in quantitative and qualitative research methods, and critical appraisal skills. An evaluation of a pilot of this course found that social work practitioners can successfully engage with e-learning and develop their understanding of research methods (Webber *et al.*, 2010). Building on this success, we developed a second e-learning short course in research protocol writing to assist practitioner researchers to develop proposals that are sufficiently robust to withstand peer review and the scrutiny of an ethics committee.

e-Learning is becoming increasingly prevalent in higher education and there is good evidence of its effectiveness (Sitzmann *et al.*, 2006). e-Learning approaches in social work education have developed rapidly since the 1990s (Waldman & Rafferty, 2008) and students on qualifying programmes have

found e-learning a positive and enabling experience (Madoc-Jones & Parrott, 2005). e-Learning also has the potential to widen access to advanced-level PQ modules, though progress towards developing courses at this level has been slow. Social care employers would like to see an expansion in the use of e-learning and the majority of employees feel that they had the necessary skills to engage with it (Ipsos MORI, 2006). However, delivering social work education using virtual learning environments is not without its limitations. For example, in their evaluation of a technology-enhanced module of a social work programme, Zeman and Swanke (2008) found that the lack of group interaction in e-learning diminished its capabilities for transmitting professional values. This paper reports an evaluation of a pilot of an e-learning short course in research protocol writing.

Method

Volunteers were recruited in autumn 2007 to pilot an e-learning course in research protocol writing from January to April 2008. This course taught social workers the principles and practice of writing a research protocol which provided 30 credits at the PQ advanced level (General Social Care Council, 2005) and at Masters level in the Common Credit Framework. It was designed to be equivalent to the classroom based module on the programme from which it was derived.

In the research protocol writing e-learning course students were encouraged to undertake their own independent study and focus on developing their own research protocol. The course was tightly structured with instructions provided to students each week on which learning materials to study within WebCT (a virtual learning environment) and which aspects of their protocol to consider. The learning materials included audio presentations of lectures supplemented by bullet-point slides; learning modules containing the lecture text and hyperlinks to relevant resources; asynchronous discussion fora; and online submission of a summative

assignment. The topics covered included structuring a protocol, conducting a literature review, writing questionnaires and interview schedules and research ethics. The learning materials from the research methods and critical appraisal e-learning course (Webber *et al.*, 2010) and accompanying book (Webber, 2008) were also available for learners to gain a critical appreciation of a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. The lectures and learning modules were studied during the first eight weeks of the course and the practitioners wrote their protocols in the final four weeks.

An e-tutor maintained weekly contact with each volunteer to monitor and support their progress throughout the course. She provided at least four individual tutorials, either face-to-face or on the telephone, to each e-learner. An online discussion forum was also available for the practitioners to share their ideas, pose questions and discuss their protocols with colleagues and tutor. The e-learning group had two face-to-face meetings, one at the beginning for induction and one in week twelve when the e-learners presented their protocols to the group as part of their assignment.

The 2007-9 cohort of social workers studying the MSc in Mental Health Social Work with Children and Adults at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London, were the comparison classroom group. They were taught the same course across the spring and summer terms alongside other modules of the MSc programme. The teaching methods were lectures, small group seminars and individual tutorials in the same structure as the e-learning course. The classroom group was also provided with handouts of the same course materials available to the e-learning group and equivalent access to WebCT.

We conducted a pre-post evaluation of the e-learning course and classroom equivalent using mixed methods. To objectively assess change in practitioners' knowledge from the beginning to the end of the course, we asked them to complete a research protocol exercise

at the start and repeat it at the end. We provided them with the following scenario and asked them to write an outline research protocol for a hypothetical study which would investigate it:

You are a social worker based in a Community Mental Health Team in London. Your team leader has asked you to conduct a piece of research investigating job 'burn out' and stress associated with employment in a mental health setting. You are asked to develop a proposal using the following headings as a guideline. If your project received approval from the local ethics committee you will have a half day per week for six months in which to complete your project.

They were given 30 minutes to draft a protocol under the following headings: title; research question; research aims and objectives; methodology; sample selection and size; data collection procedures, instruments used and methods for data quality control; ethical considerations; plan for analysis of results; and timetable. These research protocols were analysed using a qualitative content analysis methodology, with the primary focus being change between the start and end of the course.

We asked both the e-learners and classroom group to rate their confidence in the course learning outcomes on a scale of 1-10, where 1 represents no confidence and 10 represents full confidence, pre- and post-course to help us to appraise subjective knowledge gain. We used t-tests to explore differences between the classroom group and e-learners and paired t-tests to examine change over time within the groups. To explore differences in objective knowledge gain between the e-learners and classroom group we compared their mean grades achieved in the assignment using t-tests.

The research protocol writing course required a moderate level of computer literacy. We evaluated whether there were differences in confidence with computer literacy between

the classroom group and e-learners, and whether this changed after completing the research protocol writing course by asking them to rate their confidence against five items on the same confidence scale (1-10). This was analysed in the same way as the learning outcomes.

Finally, we conducted semi-structured group interviews with the e-learners following their protocol presentations. These interviews focused on the course materials, strengths and weaknesses of the e-learning approach to writing research protocols, technical aspects of using WebCT and satisfaction with the course. Detailed notes of these interviews were made and analysed thematically. The group interviews were supplemented with post-course evaluation self-complete questionnaires to gain additional feedback about their learning experiences.

Ethical approval was provided by the King's College London Joint Schools Research Ethics Sub-Committee for Humanities, Law and Social Science and Public Policy (RESC 07/08-02).

Results

Fifteen social workers expressed an interest in undertaking the e-learning pilot and we accepted eleven of these onto the course. Seven out of the eleven who were invited to the pre-course induction were able to attend. The remaining four received telephone inductions by the e-learning tutor. There were twelve students in the classroom comparison evaluation group.

Six (55%) of the e-learners completed the course and submitted all the assignments. Of the remaining five, two dropped out for personal or workload reasons and three lost contact with the course providers in spite of numerous attempts to re-engage them.

Qualitative analysis of the evaluation exercise revealed several important differences when comparing the pre- and post-course writing samples. However, it is important to note that

there were no systematic differences between the e-learners and the classroom group in the pre-course protocols suggesting that the pre-existing level of knowledge about research protocol writing was similar.

In the pre-course exercise, practitioners' proposals used vague language and a main weakness was the lack of clearly defined terms. Specifically, in the section addressing the research question many practitioners simply repeated the task as set out in the instructions without narrowing the question or clearly linking concepts. In many cases this meant that the proposed question was un-researchable in its current form.

The most obvious difficulty of the pre-course exercise was linking the study aims with an appropriate methodology. Most of the sample (71%) suggested a qualitative methodology although there was never a clear justification for this choice. Data analysis was an area that caused specific difficulty, with nearly half (47%) of the practitioners leaving this section of the exercise blank. Some of the practitioners incorporated research vocabulary; however the understanding of these concepts often appeared superficial, suggesting a lack of research literacy. For example, 'association' was often discussed as evidence of a causal relationship.

When looking at the three e-learning participants who completed the pre- and post-course evaluation exercises there was important evidence of learning. For example, student 'E1' had a much more clearly defined research question and had employed a significantly stronger methodology. She was able to provide details about a proposed sample size and source, and the analytic strategy selected was appropriate for the proposed design. In all, the post-course exercise was a much more viable piece of research. It is interesting that this student also received the highest marks on the course assignment.

As a comparison, student 'E2' struggled with the course assignment. Mirroring this, his

post-course evaluation retained significant weaknesses, specifically with regard to methodology and the structure of the proposal. However the student demonstrated some improvement and the post-course exercise was full of creative approaches to the problem and the sample selection was appropriate.

The final student 'E3' also demonstrated improvement when comparing pre- and post-course samples. The second exercise was much more organised and the research aims and objectives were more specifically tied to the methodology. The proposed analytic strategy was also more robust. In addition this student added a section entitled 'dissemination', demonstrating awareness of the project output even from the proposal stage. This student received near the median for the course assignment.

Given that the three students from the e-learning group reflected the spread in marks from the course assignment, purposive sampling was used to select comparisons from the classroom group who achieved the highest, lowest and median scores. The highest score was achieved by student number 'C4'. Her pre-course exercise stood out from the others in the classroom group as it was the only one in which the methodology was clearly linked with the objectives stated. It suggested that her assignment mark was influenced by higher baseline levels of knowledge about the important concepts in developing a research protocol. Despite the pre-course exercise demonstrating this relatively high level of competence, the post-course exercise illustrated evidence of considerable learning.

In contrast, student 'C5' scored near the median for the classroom cohort. A comparison of her pre- and post-course exercises demonstrated more modest gains. Overall the main improvement was more specificity about the proposed design, but imprecision in outlining the research questions, aims and objectives remained. Given that this was a common weakness of

both the classroom and e-learning group, it suggested that the course should re-emphasise the importance of these concepts.

Finally, student 'C6' received the lowest assignment mark in the classroom group. The pre-course exercise was one of the weakest and lacked details and justification for the choices made. The post-course exercise was much improved. Specifically the student made mention of standardised measures in the methodology and linear regression analysis to account for confounding variables. Given the learning demonstrated when comparing the pre- and post-course exercises it was surprising that this student did not score more highly in the summative assessment.

The content analysis of the pre- and post-course exercises demonstrated an important shift in the practitioners' understanding of the key elements of a research proposal. Post-course exercises were more specific, made greater use of specific definitions, were more likely to consider standardised measures and had a more robust design. However, there were still significant weaknesses in the research questions, aims and objectives. For the most part these areas of the proposal remained vague and lacked definitions even after the course.

Across all the learning outcomes, the e-learners had less confidence in their skills and abilities in research protocol writing prior to the start of the course than the classroom group (Table 1). This difference reached statistical significance for the practitioners' understanding of social work research methods possibly because the classroom group had just completed a research methods and critical appraisal course, whereas only one of the e-learners had done so. No other e-learners had completed any other comparable research methods training in the previous five years.

Practitioners in both the classroom and e-learning groups increased in confidence with all of the learning outcomes by the end of the

course. The change in confidence ratings reached statistical significance for almost all of the learning outcomes (Table 1). In contrast to pre-course, the e-learners were more confident than the classroom group across all the learning outcomes at completion, but this was only statistically significant for 'writing a research protocol for a modest research project' and 'applying to a research ethics committee for approval'. Although the e-learners appeared more confident than the classroom learners upon completion of the course, there was no difference in their assignment marks. The mean grade for the e-learners was 60.8 in comparison with 60.4 for the classroom learners.

The increase in their confidence, and difference between the groups, was also apparent in the qualitative data we collected. For example:

When I started this course I found the idea of developing a research protocol a daunting task. I had had an interview for a DPhil years ago to which I was successful but could not take up due to funding problems. I wish this course had been available then because it is a complex matter to work with and I feel this course has now given me the confidence to try again but perhaps on a part time basis. It has helped me to present a research proposal to a university for a PhD but am awaiting the result. (e-learner, post-course)

Table 1 Ratings of confidence with learning outcomes

Learning outcome	Classroom group	e-Learning group
	(n=12)	(n=6)
	Pre/post confidence ratings	Pre/post confidence ratings
	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)
Developing hypotheses and researchable questions in response to practice-based issues	4.00 (1.13)	3.33 (1.87)
	5.64 (1.50)**	7.20 (1.92)*
Understanding the structure of a research protocol	3.75 (1.96)	2.78 (1.72)
	6.09 (2.02)**	8.40 (2.07)**
Conducting a literature review on a social work practice issue	4.83 (1.70)	4.67 (2.12)
	6.00 (1.41)*	7.40 (1.82)*
Understanding different methods used in social work research	5.00 (1.13)	3.44 (1.59) ⁺
	5.73 (1.49)	6.40 (2.30)**
Identifying ethical issues in social work research	4.50 (1.45)	4.00 (2.24)
	6.18 (1.89)*	7.80 (2.17)**
Writing a research protocol for a modest research project	3.33 (1.97)	2.56 (2.07)
	5.64 (1.43)**	7.80 (1.80) ⁺ *
Applying to a research ethics committee for approval	3.17 (2.59)	2.44 (1.88)
	4.00 (2.28)	7.20 (2.17) ⁺
Implementing an original research project	3.00 (2.34)	2.44 (1.88)
	5.09 (1.97)**	6.80 (2.05)**

Comparisons between classroom and e-learning groups: ⁺p<0.05

Comparisons within groups pre-post training: *p<0.05, **p<0.01

At the start of the course there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in confidence with computer literacy (Table 2). Both groups improved in confidence in undertaking online learning and, as one might expect, the e-learners were significantly more confident than the classroom group with this at the end of the course.

Again, this was reflected in the qualitative feedback:

Though I have used the internet in the past when I trained as a lawyer I had got a bit rusty having worked in social services!! So the course helped me greatly to stretch my knowledge in this domain. (e-learner, post-course)

Table 2 Ratings of confidence with computer literacy

Computer literacy item	Classroom group	e-Learning group
	(n=12)	(n=6)
	Pre/post confidence ratings	Pre/post confidence ratings
	Mean (sd)	Mean (sd)
Using the internet in general	7.33 (1.88)	6.44 (2.13)
	7.20 (1.75)	8.40 (1.52)
Using the internet for work purposes	7.17 (2.13)	6.44 (2.19)
	7.50 (1.65)	8.20 (1.30)
Undertaking literature searches using bibliographic databases	4.33 (2.43)	5.00 (2.40)
	5.60 (2.27)	7.20 (1.92)
Undertaking web-based learning	3.67 (2.31)	4.67 (3.12)
	5.30 (2.06)*	7.60 (1.52) ^{+ *}
Giving presentations using PowerPoint	4.08 (2.88)	4.56 (3.71)
	6.20 (1.81)***	6.60 (3.21)

Comparisons between classroom and e-learning groups: ⁺p<0.05

Comparisons within groups pre-post training: *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Only two of the e-learners had studied online previously, but the volunteers quickly saw the advantages of e-learning. For example:

[It provided a] better capacity to learn the material at my own speed and to pursue information that would fill gaps in my knowledge. It felt that the flexibility allowed me to tailor the learning to my needs. (e-learner, post-course)

The flexibility of e-learning to fit into busy lives was also a limitation of the modality as it was often the first thing to be dropped when other pressures became insurmountable. Work pressures were most frequently cited as constraining study time, but other problems some e-learners faced during the course included getting divorced and losing a job. However, the flexibility of e-learning meant that most of the volunteers were able to study the course which they would probably not

have been able to if they needed to attend lectures, seminars and tutorials in a classroom each week.

The flexibility of e-learning also meant that it was easier for the practitioners' managers to suggest that they could study in their own time. Only one of the e-learners was given any study time (two days for the entire 16-week course), but it was not clear that this was taken as time owed or was genuine study leave. The lack of a research culture in social work also explained the absence of managerial support for this kind of training. None of the e-learners reported that their managers were able to identify the wider benefits to their agency of having skilled practitioner researchers in their teams. Most saw it as solely for the personal or professional development of the practitioner.

The e-learners perceived their personal contact with the e-tutor as being the most helpful aspect of the course, whereas the asynchronous discussion forum proved the least popular (Table 3). In the group interviews following the course, the e-learners emphasised the importance of the support provided by the tutor and highlighted the value of personal contact on e-learning courses which helped to minimise isolation. For example:

I think that I have much less of an understanding of this course material than if I had been in a classroom setting. ... You miss that link with a teacher and other students that helps you to understand the material better. (e-learner, post-course)

In contrast, the classroom group found the learning materials presented in the classroom to be the most beneficial aspect of the group (Table 3), possibly because the interpersonal

contact with the tutor was taken for granted as this was an integral component of the course.

Discussion

This was a small pilot study comparing an e-learning group with a classroom equivalent. The small number of practitioners involved in this study means that our results can only be taken as indicative of how an e-learning group may perform. Further, as there was no random assignment to e-learning or classroom tuition, selection bias cannot be ruled out. It is possible that the e-learners were more motivated as they had the opportunity to learn via a novel method and they were not distracted by coursework from other modules unlike the classroom group. However, it is equally possible that the classroom group had a greater investment in succeeding as they were enrolled on a Masters programme costing them a significant amount of time and money.

Table 3 Perceived helpfulness of teaching methods to e-learners and classroom group

e-Learning group (n=6)		Classroom group (n=12)	
Position	Teaching method(s)	Position	Teaching method(s)
1	Individual tutorials	1	Reading materials
2	Other tutor contact	2	Lectures / seminars
3	Induction session	3	Other tutor contact
=4	Learning modules	4	Protocol presentation session
	Reading materials / online links	5	Individual tutorials
	Protocol presentation session	6	e-Learning materials
7	Online lectures		
8	Asynchronous discussion forum		

Bearing in mind these limitations, this evaluation suggests that e-learning appears to be as effective as classroom based teaching as a pedagogical method for training experienced social workers in research protocol writing. The practitioners' confidence and ability in writing a research protocol increased significantly as a result of studying the course. e-Learning appears to be an acceptable method of learning, the volunteers appeared highly satisfied with the quality of education they received and the e-learners met the learning outcomes to the same extent as those studying the course in the classroom. Additionally, the e-learners found the flexibility and autonomy of this method beneficial.

An interesting finding of this pilot study was that e-learners valued personal contact more highly than the online learning materials. Online discussion fora were used to facilitate contact online, but these were not highly used or valued by the e-learners. Communicating with a tutor face-to-face or by telephone was important to the e-learners, suggesting that a blend of online and 'traditional' methods best facilitates learning. This is supported by an emerging evidence-base for blended learning in social work education (e.g. McPherson & Barnett, 2006; Cooner & Hickman, 2008; Cooner, 2010). Further investigation of blended learning in post-qualifying social work education in general, and research training in particular, is required.

Our non-completion rate of 45% for the e-learners was, although higher than we would have hoped for, consistent with other e-learning courses which varies from 20-50% at the lower end to 70-80% at the upper end (Tyler-Smith, 2006). Whilst e-learning is flexible and fits around other commitments, it still requires a considerable investment of time.

The e-learners had very little confidence in their understanding of research methods prior to the course, most having previously had little or no formal research training. This lack of confidence is indicative of the wider

problem of poor research literacy amongst social work practitioners (Orme & Powell, 2008). The research protocol writing e-learning course appeared to provide a steep learning curve for the volunteers. In a short space of time they had to become familiar with academic study (a challenge for most who hadn't studied for many years), using online learning, searching bibliographic databases and understanding research methods and basic statistics before they could start to write their own research protocols.

The e-learners achieved the same grades as the classroom group in the course assignment. However, none of the e-learners were able to undertake their research projects on completion of the course because of a lack of support from their agencies and employers. In contrast, the entire classroom group (except one who deferred entering the second year for personal reasons) went on to undertake their research projects in the context of the advanced-level PQ programme. This suggests that the 'circle of resistance' (Orme & Powell, 2008) to developing research capacity can only be broken in the context of advanced-level PQ programmes. Anecdotal evidence from a local authority which sponsors two practitioners on the MSc programme each year suggests that this may be the case: community mental health teams with graduates of the programme in leadership positions appear significantly more willing to engage in research projects than those with none.

The Social Work Task Force (2009) has initiated a series of reforms to introduce a more coherent and effective national framework for the continuing professional development (CPD) of social workers. Ongoing learning and development of professional practice will become the norm, rather than the exception: currently only a very small proportion of social workers enrol on advanced-level PQ programmes (General Social Care Council, 2009), and few receive financial or other support from their employer to do so. The Task Force (2009) argued that organisations must develop strong learning

cultures to free up staff for courses, including e-learning, and support them to access and conduct research to inform their practice. The introduction of a research pathway into the new CPD framework may help to develop practitioner research capacity, possibly by e-learning, but it will only contribute to breaking the 'circle of resistance' if it receives full employer support.

The Coalition Government has confirmed its commitment to implementing the recommendations of the Social Work Reform Board (Loughton, 2010). However, significant reductions in public spending to reduce the budget deficit will make the transformation of social work agencies into effective learning organisations a challenging prospect.

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