

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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<http://www.ijea.org/>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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Volume 24 Number 13

September 6, 2023

## Project-Based Learning: Toward a World-Centered Music Education

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Citation: Dillon, J. E. (2023). Project-based learning: Toward a world-centered music education. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 24(13).  
<http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea24n13>

### Abstract

In recent decades, the discourse of music education and education more broadly has shifted from curriculum-centered to student-centered approaches. In an effort to address the existential dimensions of education, Gert Biesta poses a rhetorical and theoretical alternative: *world-centered education*, an orientation directed at enabling what Biesta described as student *subject-ness*. Situated within and drawing upon U.S.-based conceptions of music education, I position *project-based learning* as a body of practices through which the possibility of a world-centered orientation—and, thus, student subject-ness—can manifest in music education. To that end, I offer three considerations for music educators of all levels interested in student subject-ness in the practice of project-based learning. To prepare a foundation for these three considerations, the article begins with an explanation of project-based learning, an unfolding of concepts pertinent to Biesta's world-centered education, and a rationale for marrying the two together.

## Introduction

All of our kids work on projects as part of their education... This helps the kids begin to learn how the world works, how all sorts of things interact and influence one another.

—Octavia Butler 1998, *Parable of the Talents*

As demonstrated by a wave of recent practitioner articles, interest in student-centered learning has grown substantially among music educators in the United States (e.g., Ackles, 2022; Fung, 2018; Gilbert, 2016; Hansen & Imse, 2016; Holoboff, 2015; Park, 2022). Student-centered approaches are defined by Jones (2007) as those that “consider the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process” (p. 2). Largely rooted in Green’s (2017) exploration of informal music learning practices among popular musicians, scholars have described a number of student-centered practices related to popular music pedagogies: integration of informal learning (e.g., Derges, 2022; Vasil, 2019), selection of popular music repertoire (e.g., Powell & Burstein, 2017), the role of the teacher as facilitator (e.g., Cremata, 2017), involvement of student voice in music curriculum reform (e.g., Clauhs & Cremata, 2020), and peer mentoring (e.g., Gramm, 2021), to name a few. Regarding private studio instruction, Park (2022) wrote that student-centered approaches “demonstrate the value of the individual student as a member of your studio” and enable “students to take charge of their learning” (p. 23). Tobias et al. (2015) further invoked this turn toward student-centered learning by situating student-centeredness alongside “teacher facilitation,” “collaborative interaction and inquiry,” and “disciplinary expertise” (p. 40) as defining attributes of project-based learning in music settings.

Regarding the field of education more broadly, Biesta (2021a) described the general shift toward student-centered approaches as a response to “authoritarian forms of education in which teaching is enacted as a form of control” (p. 69). Such approaches are variably described as teacher-, content-, or curriculum-centered (Krahenbuhl, 2016). Within music education, many teaching practices associated with the large ensemble paradigm constitute a curriculum-centered orientation (see Allsup, 2012; Allsup & Benedict, 2008), such as the prescriptive ways in which instrument method books are frequently used (Regelski, 2021). Despite this, some recent efforts have been made to reorient ensemble-based teaching toward student-centeredness (e.g., Debrot, 2017). Approaches for teaching general music are also largely curriculum-centered in that they focus on “what to teach, how to teach, and when to teach it” (Abril, 2016, p. 17). Critics of such approaches note that when codified and implemented unthinkingly, teaching approaches become prescriptive methods through which teachers are more likely to center and replicate the method itself, supplanting the students and curriculum as central considerations (Benedict, 2009, 2016; Regelski, 2002).

Responding to the “age-old and rather fruitless opposition” (Biesta, 2021a, p. 90) between curriculum- and student-centered approaches, educationalist Gert Biesta poses a rhetorical and theoretical alternative: *world-centered education*, an orientation directed at enabling what Biesta described as student *subject-ness*. Situated within and drawing upon U.S.-based conceptions of music education, I position *project-based learning* as a body of practices through which the possibility of a world-centered orientation—and, thus, student subject-ness—can be made manifest in music education. My intent here is not to prescribe specific teaching practices as a way of implementing world-centered education (see Biesta, 2021b), but to bring the language of world-centered education to bear on project-based learning in music as a means of enabling pedagogical possibilities and inviting dialogue. I articulate three considerations for practice in this position paper, each of which draw upon literature involving project-based learning in music and are situated using Biesta’s (2021a) domains of educational purpose. But first, I begin with an explanation of project-based learning as used in this paper, an unfolding of concepts pertinent to Biesta’s world-centered education, and a rationale for marrying the two together.

### **Project-Based Learning**

While there is no universally adopted definition, model, or theory of project-based learning (Laur, 2021; Thomas, 2000), the approach can be described as “a model that organizes learning around projects” (Thomas, 2000, p. 1). In a U.S.-based practitioner journal, Tobias et al. (2015) offered the following definition for project-based learning in music contexts: “We conceptualize projects as carefully planned sets of interrelated learning experiences built on substantive disciplinary ideas that involve inquiry and musical engagement, often emergent out of student learning needs or interests” (p. 40). The authors drew a clear distinction between projects, which involve a greater degree of student initiation and decision-making, and activities, tasks, and rehearsal strategies, which involve less student initiation and decision-making. While project-based learning is often associated with problem-based learning and other related models—discovery learning, experiential learning, service learning, and cooperative learning, to name a few—project-based learning is often distinct in that it tends to take more time (Sarrazin, 2019) and concludes with the construction of a “concrete artefact” (Helle et al., 2006, p. 295).

Projects ought to be “realistic, not school-like” (Thomas, 2000, p. 4), an idea Tobias et al. (2015) adapted when claiming that projects ought to be “authentic, by posing problems that occur in the real world and that people care about” (p. 40). This aspect, however, is not universal: in some accounts of project-based learning, references to real-life and real-world contexts primarily situate this feature in terms of career exploration and preparation (e.g., Tobias et al., 2015); in other accounts, this feature is absent (e.g., Helle et al., 2006). In the context of media studies in higher education, Hanney (2018) opposed this focus on career

exploration and preparation, arguing instead that educators ought to frame project-based learning beyond the instrumental purpose of preparing students for “the *real world of work*” (p. 770, emphasis in original). Maida (2011), for example, argued in a theoretical paper that educators ought to use project-based learning as a critical pedagogy directed toward social transformation. Writing about project-based soundscape composition with middle school students, Bylica (2021) addressed a similar concern: “I felt something was missing. *We may have been listening differently, but what did that really mean, and to what end? What was the greater purpose beyond creative engagement?*” (p. 83, emphasis in original). I argue that part of the potential of project-based learning toward critical ends lies in this imperative to engage students in realistic projects and to encourage students to “approach the world with curiosity” (Tobias et al., 2015, p. 46).

### **World-Centered Education**

Curriculum- and student-centered approaches each offer incomplete accounts of education (Biesta, 2021a). Purely curriculum-centered approaches, for example, focus on student acquisition of skills and knowledge regardless of who the student is or what the student might do with said skills and knowledge. Purely student-centered approaches, in which education is directed by student development and a focus on the facilitation of learning, fail to address the fact that “not all [developmental trajectories] are helpful for engaging with the challenge of trying to lead one’s life well” (p. 3). World-centered education aims to address an educational aspect missing from or marginalized in such discourse, whether or not this aspect is present in practice. What is missing, according to Biesta, is the existential dimension of education—a recognition of the fact that “educational questions are fundamentally *existential* questions, that is, questions about our existence ‘in’ and ‘with’ the world” (p. 90, emphasis in original).

### ***Domains of Educational Purpose***

Education serves three purposes: *qualification*, *socialization*, and *subjectification* (Biesta, 2021a). Through qualification, students acquire knowledge and develop skills. Through socialization, students are welcomed into social groups and encounter groups with which they are unfamiliar. Through subjectification, students are encouraged to exist as subjects and not as objects of external control. By way of example, consider a project that post-secondary ethnomusicology students engaged with in a course on Music, Culture, and Politics in West Africa (Hunter, 2019). Through this project, students were musically *qualified* in that they acquired knowledge of specific musical and cultural practices. Students were also *socialized* in that they developed their projects collaboratively in groups and, in some cases, encountered social groups with which they were unfamiliar, thus opening the possibility of reflexively reinforcing understandings of their own social groups. While such group collaborations are frequently emphasized in project-based learning (Tobias et al., 2015), the inclusion of

collaboration does not necessarily mean that socialization took place within the context of project-based learning. That said, collaborations within project-based learning can serve as meaningful opportunities for the development of conflict resolution and other social skills (see Lee et al., 2015), thus equipping students with skills they may need as they are welcomed into various social groups. But were the students encouraged to claim their *subject-ness*? We will return to this example shortly—but to make sense of this question, we must first consider the relative prominence of qualification, socialization, and subjectification in education as a means of further understanding subjectification itself.

Biesta (2021a) claimed that qualification and, to a lesser extent, socialization are emphasized in curricula and in discourse on contemporary education. Consider, for example, McCarthy's (2009) music education essay on the imperative to teach performance skills while also "connecting students to multiple musical worlds" (p. 33). While McCarthy does not use the terms qualification and socialization, teaching music performance skills can be viewed as a form of musical qualification—that is, as a means of helping students to acquire musical knowledge and to develop musical skills. Similarly, helping students to connect with musical worlds beyond their own can be viewed as a form of socialization—that is, as a means of welcoming students into social groups and enabling them to encounter social groups with which they are unfamiliar.

This overemphasis on socialization and especially on qualification is evident, too, in the literature on project-based learning in music. Regarding a non-major Introduction to Music course, Horsington (2019) described a project blending qualification in music notation and, more prominently, nonverbal communication among musicians. Through participation in exploratory in-class instrumental performances and observations of concert performances, this same project served a socializing function, too, in that students were drawn into the culture of musicianship and the sociality of performance practice. Till (2017) noted in a review of literature on higher popular music education that the author's own teaching included project-based learning geared toward qualification in popular music mixing, recording, and production. Similar to Hunter (2019), Nicely (2019) also employed project-based learning as a means of engaging deeply with the music of various regions and culture groups in an ethnomusicology course—that is to say, as a form of musical qualification. Nicely's project also featured a socializing, collaborative structure, and even named collaboration explicitly as one of the goals of the project. In describing the project-based planning of an orchestral concert season within a non-major Music Appreciation course, Leenhouts (2019) emphasized a number of aims relating broadly to music qualification, such as: students will "deepen their knowledge of particular composers, pieces, and/or styles" (p. 43). The author noted that "[n]one of [the students] knew the normal format of a musical program" and that "even the idea of creating a logical space for an intermission seemed alien to them" (p. 50), which

suggests that one aim of this project was to induct students into the culture of orchestral concert music—that is to say, the project also included socializing features.

Biesta (2021a) described both qualification and socialization as essential “domains of educational purpose” (p. 44), and yet claimed that subjectification—through which students are encouraged to exist as subjects—accounts for the existential dimension of education. Subjectification is, essentially, the opposite of socialization: “it is precisely *not* about the insertion of ‘newcomers’ into existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders” (Biesta, 2010, p. 21, emphasis in original). Although qualification and, to a lesser extent, socialization are typically emphasized in school curricula, Biesta (2021a) argued that subjectification ought to be fundamental and that qualification and socialization ought to be directed by a focus on how students “can encounter the world, can encounter themselves in relation to the world, and can explore what it means to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way” (p. 51). Biesta was not referring to age or development when he described subject-ness as “grown-up,” but was instead illustrating a mature orientation toward subject-ness—an orientation which accepts “the challenge of reconciling ourselves to reality” (p. 49).

Even though “down-to-earth, and tangible description[s] of what subjectification may be about in music education” (Dyndahl, 2021, p. 173) are scant, I argue that rich examples can be found in the literature on critical project-based learning in music—though for the most part, they do not employ Biesta’s particular terminology. I will explore some of those examples in greater depth in tandem with the considerations for practice posed later in this article. But for now, I will return to our example: did Hunter’s (2019) ethnomusicology students in Music, Culture, and Politics in West Africa experience subjectification? Consider that one of the groups, in conducting their research, encountered what they perceived as representation issues while exploring Ewe music. This observation was not meant by the teacher to become the focus of the project, nor was it the students’ initial intention to explore issues relating to gender. And yet, in response to their encounters with representation issues, one group of students decided to focus their project explicitly on the music of Ewe women. Through project-based learning, these students encountered the world and were interrupted by what they experienced. This sort of world-centered episode does not wholly or even necessarily constitute subjectification, but as I will explore in the following section, such interruptions are pivotal steppingstones toward that end.

### ***Pointing: The Gesture of Education***

A common thread in Biesta’s work is the integrity of education as a field independent of philosophy, psychology, sociology, and other fields frequently paired with education (see Biesta, 2014; Saeverot & Biesta, 2013). In Biesta’s (2021a) articulation of world-centered

education, the term *educational* is used to describe those qualities which belong uniquely to the field of education (see also Biesta, 2011). Discourses that reframe teaching and education as the facilitation of learning, for example, are not educational but economic in nature (Biesta, 2006). This shift toward a language of learning, Biesta argued, reduces education to a transaction in which teachers deliver a commodity to be consumed by the student-*cum*-customer. The educational work of education, rather, is teaching.

Building upon the work of educationalist Klaus Prange, Biesta (2021a) argued that the essential gesture of teaching is that of *pointing*, through which the attention of the student is (re)directed. Put another way: teaching is “fundamentally a triadic act in which there is *someone* showing *something* to *someone* else” (Biesta, 2020, p. 95, emphasis in original). Through this act of pointing, teachers can (re)direct a student to the world, both natural and social, so that the student might encounter that which the world is asking of the student and, reflexively, the student’s own freedom to act in response to that call. This encounter constitutes a subjectifying event in which the student becomes aware that “there is a question for *me*—not for someone else, not for anyone or everyone” (Biesta, 2021a, p. 92, emphasis in original) and of the appeal that this question makes to the student’s freedom.

Biesta’s (2021a) existential use of the term freedom is unique and has been a target of scholarly criticism (e.g., Christodoulou, 2020; Miller, 2022). More specifically, the freedom entailed in this account is not an absolute freedom, but the bounded freedom of a subject “*in* the world and *with* the world, and not just with themselves” (Biesta, 2020, p. 37, emphasis in original). In this context, then, subject has two meanings: the student as subject, not object; but also, the student as subjected to the limitations of the world (see Arendt, 1994).

Practically, teachers can help bring students into dialogue with the world through *interruption*, *suspension*, and *sustenance* (Biesta, 2021a). By definition, to (re)direct the attention of a student from their own desires is to interrupt that student. This interruption is often experienced by the student as *resistance*, as something “‘in the way’ of the student’s trajectory” (Biesta, 2020, p. 87) through which the student becomes aware of the relationship between their own desires and the limits of the natural and social world (Biesta, 2018). For the student, then, this resistance makes their desires into something tangible, something they can consider critically. Once the student is interrupted, the teacher ought to “offer time, space and forms that allow children and students to *practice* grown-up ways of being in and with the world” (Biesta, 2020, p. 89, emphasis in original)—that is to say, suspension. Additionally, students require ongoing support and sustenance from the teacher to remain engaged in this slow and difficult work.

### ***Why Project-Based Learning for World-Centered Music Education?***

Music and the arts, according to Biesta (2020), are “different ways of being in dialogue with the world” (p. 112) and, as such, enable different sorts of interactions between student and educational content. Typically, such interactions are guided by questions of what the student might learn from the subject content. Encountering art, however, is guided by questions of what the art is trying to say to or ask of the viewer. Furthermore, arts education can provide “concrete opportunities for experiencing what it means to encounter resistance and go *through* it, rather than shy away from it” (p. 91, emphasis in original), indicating that arts education might be conducive to the interruptive quality of world-centered education (see also Biesta, 2018). Lastly, Benedict (2021) noted that music teachers often have continuity with students relative to other teachers, a feature of music education that, I argue, further enables long-term engagements with and suspension in world-centered education.

Perhaps the greatest impediment to world-centeredness in music education is the contradiction between the need for teachers “to refrain from the desire for control” (Biesta, 2020, p. 48) in encouraging student subject-ness and the frequently authoritarian nature of ensemble-based teaching, methods-oriented teaching, and other common approaches in music education. Project-based learning in music, I argue, is one means of releasing this desire for control. While such approaches are typically rooted in student-centered, constructivist notions of education (Tobias et al., 2015), I suggest that the value of such engagements lies further in the potential of project-based learning to enable students to encounter the world directly and, reflexively, themselves. Furthermore, I argue that project-based learning in music is more readily compatible with the interruption, suspension, and sustenance needed for world-centered education than, for example, ensemble-based teaching.

### **Considerations for Practice**

Biesta (2021b) cautioned teachers against reducing world-centered education to an agenda for implementation and argued instead that world-centered education ought to “give words” (54:22) to teachers and scholars so they can engage in meaningful dialogue while also providing them with “resources that may inform their educational artistry” (Biesta, 2021a, p. vii). And yet, if we are to engage in meaningful dialogue about what these ideas might mean for the students in our care, it is important to envision the ways in which these theoretical resources might manifest in practice. In the following sections, I offer three considerations for music educators of all levels interested in student subject-ness in the context of project-based learning. I offer these considerations in that same spirit—as possibility-oriented resources that may inform our artistry as educators, and not as prescriptive action steps. Based initially on Biesta’s (2021a) recommendations, these considerations for practice have been revised to address the world-centered potential of project-based learning in music education.



***Interruption and Resistance: (Re)directing Students to the World***

Project-based learning is frequently described as student-centered (e.g., Tobias et al., 2015) and such student-centered approaches often reflect constructivist beliefs about the ways in which students construct knowledge (Krahenbuhl, 2016). With regard to project-based learning, this typically means that projects are “student-driven, in that students are responsible for making choices and for designing and managing their work” (Tobias et al., 2015, p. 40). This does not mean, however, that project-based learning should be an opportunity for

students to just focus on anything they fancy, anything they desire to focus their attention on, but to turn them in a particular direction, that is, towards the world, and to call them to come into dialogue with the world, so that they can exist as subject. (Biesta, 2020, p. 87)

To that end, I argue that while the frequently “student-driven” nature of project-based learning is of value, teachers ought to thoughtfully deliberate over which aspects of a project will be led by the students themselves and which aspects will be defined by the teacher.

Bylica (2020b), in an action research study, engaged students in soundscape composition, dialogue, and reflection through which students critically considered the ways in which they viewed themselves, their peers, and their world. The teacher defined the outset of the project by offering the following prompt: “How do I hear my world?” The outcome, too, was defined—a soundscape composition project—but in ways that were open-ended, enabling students to produce personally meaningful and richly divergent compositions. In a subsequent article, Bylica (2022) wrote of project-based learning and wider social change: “If we seek to reimagine the possibilities of how the music class setting might serve as a catalyst for these changes, a project such as this might serve as a starting point” (pp. 21–22). I suggest that one way to think of this project as such a starting point toward critical ends is to consider the ways in which the teacher (re)directed the students with a defined project outset—an interruption by which resistance was introduced and had to be worked through by students. Essentially, the teacher used a defined outset in project-based learning to put “something ‘in the way’ of the student’s trajectory” (Biesta, 2020, p. 87), and thereby (re)directing their attention to the world.

***Suspension and Sustainance: Offering Time and Support***

Slowness, as opposed to the neoliberal imperative toward efficiency, is a value with critical potential in music education settings (Varkøy & Rinholm, 2020). To remain engaged in the difficult work of world-centered education, students require suspension (Biesta, 2021a). Teachers can offer time to their students through project-based learning, an approach which

often takes place over several weeks or months (Tobias et al., 2015). Odena (2014), for example, conducted an action research study in which clarinet performance majors engaged in a project-based dramatization of *The Magic Flute* in an effort to develop creative skills and reduce performance anxiety, which can be interpreted as forms of artistic qualification. Based on this study, Odena offered several suggestions to those interested in developing similar projects, including: teachers ought to “allow for an *extended time* period,” especially in the early, exploratory stages of a project, and then “flexibly adapt expectations as the project progresses” (p. 134, emphasis in original).

While suspended in project-based learning, students also need support to stay engaged with world-centered education. One means of offering sustenance to students is by providing some degree of structure in project-based engagements. Nicely (2019), for example, balanced “open-ended and impossible to ‘solve’” (p. 87) questions with a specific structured outcome: the creation of a tourism website. In Odena’s (2014) action research study involving a dramatization of *The Magic Flute*, clarinet students relied on a “safety net” of “critical friends” (p. 133) who provided advice and instrumental accompaniment as sustenance. As in Bylica’s (2020a) aforementioned critical action research study, teachers can also offer sustenance by “designing multiple, varied, purposeful opportunities for reflection” (p. 308) throughout a project. Furthermore, project reflection ought to “help students draw connections between their projects... and larger socio-political and cultural-historic issues” (p. 309) rather than simply asking students what they learned or what they might do differently.

### ***The “Concrete Artefact”: Setting the Stage for Action in and with the World***

Key to the critical potential of project-based learning in music is the project itself—the “concrete artefact” (Helle et al., 2006, p. 295) created by the student or students. To embrace that potential, teachers ought to design project-based experiences in ways that, as previously discussed, (re)direct students to the world—what Biesta (2020) described as “interruptions”—while simultaneously remaining open-ended enough for students to explore the questions and challenges they personally encounter along the way. I argue that in creating opportunities for project-based learning, music teachers can “point” or “(re)direct” students’ attention to the world (Biesta 2021a), but it is through the process of engaging with and creating the project itself that students have the potential to *act* in and with the world. If, through this process, a student finds “a question for *me*—not for someone else, not for anyone or everyone” (Biesta, 2021a, p. 92, emphasis in original), the project structure and outcome ought to enable that student to engage further in that subjectifying event in generative, personally meaningful ways. That is to say, projects ought to be designed in ways that keep “the door to the question of the student’s subject-ness open” (Biesta, 2021a, p. 101), rather than closing that same door by defining prescriptive, convergent project outcomes.

Consider, again, the example of Hunter’s (2019) project in a course on Music, Culture, and Politics in West Africa. One particular group of students were interrupted by representation issues they encountered while exploring Ewe music, and so decided to focus their project explicitly on the music of Ewe women—a focus made possible by the ways in which the project was structured. In a critical action research project aimed at exploring student subject-ness through collective, project-based songwriting with Kindergarten students, Dillon (2023) offered some structure for the project—the creation of personalized lullabies for infants connected to the class community—while offering space and flexibility for other aspects of the project to emerge along the way, especially the means of sharing the final lullabies with the students’ intended audiences. This project is an example of the “world-centeredness [of] everyday practice” (Biesta, 2021b, 56:30) in that, much like caring for a plant or an animal, soothing a baby is “precisely an encounter with something that asks something from you” (55:27)—an example enriched by divergent, open-ended aspects of the project’s design.

### **Lingering Thoughts: Project-Based Teaching**

As the name suggests, project-based learning emphasizes learning rather than teaching. And yet, while some of the projects examined in this position paper outlined specific learning goals (e.g., Leenhouts, 2019; Nicely, 2019), the implementation of such projects focused on teaching. Consider, for example, the way in which Hunter (2019) intentionally revised the guiding question for a given project between the semester a project was first taught and a subsequent semester in which the author taught the same course. As Biesta (2021a) claimed, “the basic educational ‘gesture’ is that of *teaching*,” (p. 75, emphasis in original) not learning. This claim is rooted in Biesta’s (2021a) understanding of teaching as, essentially, an act of pointing, and it is through this act of pointing that teachers have the potential to (re)direct students to the world. Education is risky in that teachers cannot guarantee learning (Biesta, 2013). Teachers can define their teaching, but what students learn and, more importantly, what students do with that learning cannot be defined by the teacher. To that end, teachers ought to lean into this risk by reframing project-based learning as *project-based teaching*.

Though Biesta (2020) suggested that education for subjectification can and does take place in arts education contexts, the author also said, “I leave it to the readers to make their own ‘translations’ of the ideas presented in this book for the theory and practice of art education” (p. 39). In this paper, I sought to offer one such translation: that the theory of world-centered education offers insights of practical import for music educators engaged in project-based teaching and, more importantly, language for music educators to further explore their role in supporting students as they claim their subject-ness.

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<http://IJEa.org>

ISSN: 1529-8094

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