# On the Definition of Learning

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# Contents

# 'Situated learning' – beyond apprenticeship and social constructionism

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## Introduction

Since its release in 1991, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's book 'Situated Learning' (Lave & Wenger 1991) have had a significant impact on the ways in which 'learning' is conceptualized. This is not least the case in Denmark, where the book was immediately enrolled in some current debates that had stirred through the 1980s: the interest in 'the intuitive expert' (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986), and the focus on the philosophical concept of 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi 1966). Both concepts were applied to research of professional knowledge i.e. the use of knowledge in professions like nursing, where the competent practitioner's skills and knowledge cannot always be made explicit (Benner 1995; Heggen 1997; Rognhaug 1993).

Through the concept of 'tacit knowledge' as a special form of knowledge, the professions could boost their legitimacy: the knowledge that the professional possesses is perhaps different from academic (theoretical, explicable) knowledge, but is not therefore (as practice-based, non-explicable) inferior. Referring to Donald Schön's distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action the practice-based knowledge was understood as the former, which also contributed to the legitimacy of practiced-based knowledge (Schön 1983).

Chronologically, this focus on tacit and practice-based knowledge was largely coinciding with educational policy discussions of a 'rehabilitation of apprenticeship' as an educational strategy in Denmark (Kvale 1993; Kvale & Nielsen 1999; Laursen 1993). In addition, the discussion was associated with the practical-creative professions' demands for legitimacy at all levels of the educational system (Wackerhausen & Wackerhausen 1993; Molander 1996; Nielsen 1995).

Hence, the impact of the concept of 'situated learning' can hardly be understood in isolation from these discussions. This is also manifested

by the way the theory in Denmark was understood as a theory of apprenticeship (Kvale 1993; Kvale & Nielsen (ed.) 1999). However, as it will be shown in this chapter, Lave & Wenger's approach contains some qualities that make it very different from a traditional theory of apprenticeship. As an analytical concept, the theory can contribute to analyses of learning in all settings. As such, it urges the researcher to change perspective from the intentions for learning to what is actually going on in the practice.

But first, I will give a brief introduction to Lave & Wenger's approach.

## Learning as legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice

In their presentation, Lave & Wenger underscores that 'situated learning' is written as a dissociation with: 1) that learning is something, which is only related to schooling and education; and 2) that learning is an individual cognitive exercise (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 49). Based on empirical examples, among other Jean Lave's anthropological studies of apprenticeship (training of tailors and midwives in traditional societies), the authors analyze, how the novice becomes a competent practitioner through non-teaching based learning. According to Lave & Wenger, the process of learning cannot fully be understood as something that only takes place inside the individual participants. Instead, it must be considered as a contextual occurrence, which means as something going on in between the participants. And when it comes to the question of cognition, this must be understood as 'distributed cognition' (see e.g. Ibid. p. 73 ff.).

The theory of learning, that Lave & Wenger develops, is based on three interrelated concepts: *community of practice*, *situated-ness* and *legitimate peripheral participation*. According to the authors, any context is potentially a community of practice. Thus, a community of practice is not an empirical, but an analytical concept. Basically, a community of practice is constituted through of a set of relations between the participants:

> A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity, and world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic

condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. [...] The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., for legitimate peripheral participation). (Ibid. p. 98)

Communities of practice are characterized by the fact that all the actors involved are carrying out activities related to the community and to a mutual product. Thus, a community of practice is characterized by having a common task, which is structuring its activities. The task or product can be explicitly defined; such as it appears in several of the examples in the book *Situated learning* (Ibid.). Or it may be non-explicit, but (tacitly) implied by the participants, who nevertheless are acting on the basis of a (tacit) mutual understanding that they are part of a common and meaningful activity – regardless of how its meaningfulness is evaluated from outside.

The concept of the 'community of practice' as a foundation for learning emphasizes that learning is not restricted to the school, but is something that can – and will – occur everywhere. The only prerequisite is the participants' explicit or implicit agreement on what the community is about, i.e. the mutual product that regulate the practice and the process of learning.

Hence, a community of practice is a community that only exists when the participants have access to complete certain functions, which the community consider as a relevant part of the mutual practice. Learning is thus attached to the community of practice, which means that it is situated. While the community of practice set the context for what can be learned, Lave & Wenger differentiates between two different forms of participation: *legitimate peripheral participation*, which is characterized by learning, and *full participation*, which is characterized by competence and 'mastering'. The position as *novice* is characterized by legitimate peripheral participation and the position as *experienced* is characterized by full participation.

While the term 'peripheral' and 'periphery' in other cases bear quite negative connotations, Lave & Wenger stresses, that the way in which they use the term, is positive: as antonym they mention *un-relatedness* (Ibid. p. 37). Thus, being 'peripheral participant' does not mean being marginalized, but rather being relevant to the community of practice.

'Legitimate' and 'peripheral' are therefore concepts to be understood as a coherent complex: legitimate-peripheral. This is underlined by the fact that the legitimate peripheral position is described as powerful ('*empowered*') unlike the position where someone is denied participation; a position that is power-less or '*dis-empowering*' (Ibid. p. 76).

The key to legitimate peripheral participation and thereby to learning, seem to be that the newcomers gets access to the community of practice and to everything that the membership entails (Ibid. p. 100). Thus, 'belonging' has a vital bearing on what you learn and whether what you learn is related to the practice of the community (Hasse 2002). However, being denied participation does not mean that you do not learn: you will learn how to acquire and maintain the position as marginalized.

## Learning as socialization?

As it may be realized, Lave & Wenger conceptualizes learning as the property of the community of practice. This is an alternative to the traditional understanding of learning as cognitive activity in the human individual (e.g. Piaget and Vygotsky). In those cases, learning must be understood as the person's property. Lave & Wenger's comprehension of cognition as something, which is distributed in the community of practice, means that learning is inscribed in the social practices of the context (Hasse 2002).

This means that learning is understood as a rather open concept compared to what we traditionally consider as learning. Traditionally, learning is understood as a change in the individual, which is partly individual (cognitive, emotional), partly social (see e.g. Illeris 2015). Lave & Wenger's 'situated learning' is less defined as a specific activity that differs from all other activities. Learning seems to be considered as a byproduct of human activity-in-context.

Hence, Lave & Wenger's concept of learning can be criticized for being too extensive and all-encompassing: that their theory makes it impossible to differ between practice and learning (Hansen 1998). This critique is also aimed at critical psychology: that everything is hence comprehended as learning, which makes it impossible to comprehend 'learning' as a specific activity (Ibid.). Learning dissolves or becomes equal to socialization. This is of cause quite problematic and as far as I see it, one of the weakest points of the theory.

Furthermore, it is important to notice that Lave & Wenger perceive learning not as transference of a curriculum, but as appropriation of the standards for how things should be done: 'A learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice. It is not specified as a set of dictates for proper practice.' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 93). Hence, 'situated learning' can by no means be handled as a didactic theory that sets out requirements for 'good teaching'. In this case the boundary between a theory of learning and a theory of teaching must be maintained.

Thus, the concept of 'situated learning' is analytical rather than prescriptive (Lave 2011). This has a significant consequence for the application of the theory as an analytical tool, which I will demonstrate later in the chapter.

## Learning and apprenticeship

Although, Lave & Wenger presents 'situated learning' as a general perspective on learning, the examples in the book are all derived from traditional and practical settings such as a seamstress' workshop, midwifes practices or a butcher's shop (Lave & Wenger 1991). Due to the fact that the opportunities for learning in those examples are defined by the community of practice, there will be a significant rigidity in what can be learned: 'In this view, learning only partly – and often incidentally – implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to mater new understandings.' (Ibid. p. 53).

The quotation show that the authors consider learning as both intentional – which means occurring through activities aimed explicitly at learning – and as non-intentional, i.e. randomly occurring in communities of practice. As Kvale & Nielsen points out, this is also the case in apprenticeship (Kvale & Nielsen (ed.) 1999). The processes of learning in apprenticeship are defined by the norms of the context and must – at least to some extend – involve imitation, which is both intentional and non-intentional.

Kvale & Nielsen's conceptualization of 'situated learning' as apprenticeship may be considered as an attempt to ground the rather open and unclear learning concept. But there are some fundamental differences between 'situated learning' and 'apprenticeship' that Kvale

& Nielsen neglect when they appoint Lave & Wenger's approach as 'decentered apprenticeship' and thereby positions the approach as a theory of apprenticeship (Ibid.). Apprenticeship has as its core premise that 'mastering' is located in a person, a 'master', who is a particularly competent practitioner, and who therefor must be imitated by the lesser-experienced practitioners. This is not the case in Lave & Wenger's approach. When learning is considered as a product of the community of practice, something that exists in the space between the individuals, the 'master' cannot continuously be 'master', but will be 'master' concerning some activities and 'newcomer' or 'apprentice' concerning others.

In apprenticeship learning is considered as imitation of the competent practitioner's behavior. Hereby the learner will become a competent practitioner. But while apprenticeship is focused on the master *as a person*, Lave & Wenger's approach is focused on the community of practice. Thus, in the process of learning, the learner undergoes from legitimate peripheral to full participation in interaction with the community of practice. While traditional theories of apprenticeship have the master as the center, there is no center in Lave & Wenger's community of practice. Or rather: given that cognition is considered as distributed and the community of practice as dynamic, the center of learning will continuously be flowing and retained only momentarily by the norms of the community of practice.

The consistent rejection of an individual focus on learning in Lave & Wenger's approach thus means that 'situated learning' is not a theory of apprenticeship – not even in the form of 'decentered apprenticeship', as Kvale & Nielsen suggests. Although the concept is interesting, there is a danger that even this approach concentrates skills in a 'master', who will distribute mastery in the context.

## The inherence from dialectical materialism

The conceptualization of cognition – and thus of learning – as distributed in the community of practice, raises another question in relation to Lave & Wenger's approach: which role does the individual play for what is learned? And what are the mechanisms of learning? Does 'learning' lead to individual progression or is it so closely linked to the community of practice, that transfer is considered impossible? In

other words: how does Lave & Wenger understand the relation between the human subject (person, individual) and the context?

According to Kirsten Grønbæk Hansen (1998), Lave & Wenger's emphasis on the community of practice has as its consequence that the authors in fact operate with a 'blank' or 'empty' human subject who carries nothing either into or out of the community of practice. The subject, in other words, only exists in and through the community of practice. Therefor, Grønbæk Hansen accuse Lave & Wenger to operate with a concept of the human subject that is identical with the subject in social constructionism: 'Though Jean Lave's theory is based on activity theory and critical psychology, the approach distance itself from these inspirations; a distance that allows her to approach the social constructionist project, or more broadly, the poststructuralist' (Grønbæk Hansen 1998: 6; my translation).

Grønbæk Hansen find that Lave & Wenger actually dissociate their approach to the human subject from the one you find in the theory of Vygotsky, that is in fact their source of inspiration (Ibid.). Whether you consider this accusation as valid is, however, a question of weighting respectively cognitivism and contextualism in Vygotsky's theory. According to Vygotsky learning and personal (cognitive) development will occur through the individual's encounter with the outside world, particularly through the encounter with 'a more competent other' (Vygotsky 2004). Although this is actually cognitivism, the contextualism in Vygotsky's approach implies that the-subject-in-the-world is the smallest unit of analysis. The dialectical approach in the learning theory of Vygotsky is defining this concept of the human being.

Thus, in this approach one cannot understand the human subject without understanding it embedded in an external world. The American interpretation of Vygotsky's approach, which among others is continued by Michael Cole and Ray McDermott, is highlighting contextualism above cognitivism. It seems obvious that it is this approach to activity theory, which has inspired Lave & Wenger (Lave & Wenger 1991). This is marked by the theory's emphasis on the situated-ness of the community of practice. According to this conceptualization, learning is closely linked to the context in which the learning has occurred.

## Dialectical materialism or social constructionism?

According to Grønbæk Hansen, the contextualism of Vygotsky's theory must be reflected in the light of dialectical materialism (Ibid.). This means, that the relationship between the individual and the society is basically considered as contradictory. The conflict between the individual and the society in dialectical materialism can be found in the tradition's distinction between the social (objective) significance on the one hand and the personal (subjective) experience on the other (Ibid.). This distinction is not present in Lave & Wenger's approach, where the human subject is considered as formed in and through the community of practice.

Consequently, the social criticism of dialectical materialism dissolves in Lave & Wenger's approach, and the process of learning (and thus becoming an individual) seems to be conceptualized as a seamless and unproblematic process. In *Situated Learning* there is almost no focus on the individual's struggle, controversies or relations of power in the context of learning (except for the butchers' example; Lave & Wenger 1991). This is of cause a weak point in Lave & Wenger's approach, and a problem, which Jean Lave retrospectively has addressed (Lave 2011). Never the less, the missing point in the theory will evidently lead to analyses that has difficulties in capturing the struggles of learning and the implications of the relations of power in the context (Christensen 2013).

Apart from this, Lave & Wenger's concept of the human subject differs in other important aspects from Vygotsky's concept of the human subject, which among others is reflected in his theory of development. Although Vygotsky considered development as a relationship between the individual and the context (mediated by 'a more competent other'), his concept of 'the zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 2004) indicate that the individual must be in possession of a form of personal 'core' or 'essence', even though this is only in the form of individual cognition.

In contrast, Lave & Wenger subscribe for a fundamentally anti-essentialist concept of the human subject. This can be found in the way they rejects cognitivism and shifts the focus on learning from being a matter of acquiring a specific content or subject matter to becoming a person: 'Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the

construction of identities.' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 53). Thus, the world, the human subject and practice are considered as at one time existing and socially constructed:

> Briefly, a theory of social practice emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing. It emphasizes the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and action of persons-in-activity. This view also claims that learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world. This world is socially constructed; objective forms and systems of activity, on the one hand, and agents' subjective and inter subjective understanding of them on the other, mutually constitute both the world and its experienced forms. Knowledge of the social constructed world is socially mediated and open ended. (Ibid. p. 50-51)

Although Lave & Wenger uses the term 'identity', which is alien to social constructionism, their approach must be considered as such a strong contextualistic variant of activity theory that it approaches social constructionism. Whether Lave & Wenger's perspective is actually social constructionism, can only be identified by examining the ontological assumptions on which the respective approaches are based.

## A question of ontological foundation

As mentioned, there are considerable similarities between social constructionism and Lave & Wenger's approach to the human subject. However, Lave & Wenger denotes their theory as a *practice theory*. Practice theories are characterized by the basic assumption that the individual must be comprehended in the context and in the activity-in-the-world (practice) in which it participates. Analytically, it may not be possible to separate the individual, the activity and the context and thus not to analyze these phenomena separately. The group of practice theories also contains the historical-dialectical materialism of Vygotsky and Leontjev, Bourdieu's 'praxeology' and critical psychology. Lave & Wenger's affiliation to critical psychology is emphasized by the fact that Jean Lave has had a significant

collaboration with the Danish critical psychologist Ole Dreier (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Analogous to Lave & Wenger's approach, all practice theories are characterized by their foundation in dialectical materialism, which is the philosophical basis of Marxism. Dialectical materialism is grounded in a materialistic, i.e. a realistic, ontology. A realistic ontology implies the basic assumption that the world exists and that it is possible for human beings, through their cognition (perception and experience), to comprehend the phenomena in the world. The human subject is considered as situated in the (material) world, and is, as such at one time separate from its surroundings and interacting with these surroundings.

The distinction between the individual and the outside world leads dialectical materialism to the aforementioned distinction between the objective (societal) structures and the subjective (individual) experiences. This distinction constitutes the foundation of the dialectic. The individual and the society are considered as connected in a dialectical relationship. This means that the individual on the one hand is considered as subject to the conditions of the society, and on the other hand is regarded as an active co-creator of the very same conditions (the process thesis-antithesis-synthesis). Although the society forms the basic conditions for the individual, the individual is, thus, not determined by the societal structures. Though the societal structures may be considered as a 'frame' for the individual, the individual is considered as an autonomous and rational agent whose subjectivity is the outset for thinking and action.

In contrast, the basic assumptions in social constructionism and post-structuralism are grounded on an anti-realistic ontology. This implies that the world is considered as produced in and through our social interaction and communication (Gergen 1991; 1994; 2001). According to this approach there are no objective (material) societal structures, which sets the frame and thus the limits for the individual. The human subject is considered as formed through discourse, i.e. the individual's historical, cultural, social and societal framework. The individual is thus not considered as in possession of a specific individuality (personality, psyche or essence), which is determining the person's schemata for actions. Alternatively, human subjects are regarded as constructed through discourse, i.e. through their relations to others and to the opportunities in the context.

The difference between a realistic and an anti-realistic ontology can best be illustrated by an example of how an analysis will be radically different depending on which paradigm, the researcher choses. A realistic based analysis will build on the assumption that certain categories such as gender, class and ethnicity exists and sets specific conditions for individuals by virtue of the societal structures (e.g. politics, institutions and economy). Assuming that these categories objectively exist, it will give rise to studies of e.g. the correlations between gender and education, and ethnicity and class as genuine groupings. A realistic ontology is thus a prerequisite for the meaningfulness in analyses of social heritage (or habitus like Bourdieu). Such an investigation is based on the assumption that the societal structures set the framework for individual life and possibilities.

In contrast, an anti-realistic grounded researcher will consider 'gender', 'class' and 'ethnicity' as social constructions. Hence, the researcher will examine how these categories are articulated and how the articulations create and exclude certain possibilities for specific groups e.g. 'men' and 'women'. What does it for instance mean that certain characteristics, capabilities and competencies on the one hand are attached to being 'a man'? And what does it on the other hand mean that this is contrasted with being 'a woman'? And how does these mechanisms function in a specific context?

Additionally, there will be a difference in what the researcher will consider as a relevant research subject. A realistic based research will deal with 'reality' in the form of materiality, as the concept of *the community of practice* in Lave & Wenger's approach. The community of practice is, thus, considered as an existing occurrence in the world. In contrast, an anti-realistic grounded researcher will take as his outset that 'reality' is created or constructed. Therefore it makes more sense to investigate the medium through which this takes place: language. There is substantially more rigidity in practice than there is in language. And there is significantly more developmental potential in language, considered as the medium through which human subjects are constructed, than there is in practice. In Lave & Wenger's conceptualization, the human subject (individual, identity) is generated in and through the community of practice. This means that the subject is considered as formed in and through the structures of the practice and is, thus, not just a social (linguistic) construction.

## Bridging the gap between anti-realism and realism

In order to assess whether Lave & Wenger's approach places itself in a realistic or an anti-realistic ontology one also has to analyze what their concept of 'practice' embraces. In this case, it appears that Lave & Wenger refer to a *situated* practice, which means a practice-the-world. Although Lave & Wenger's concept of practice is sufficiently spacious to include linguistic practice, the authors maintain a fundamental division between not only language and practice, but also between different forms of linguistic practice (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 108; Lave 2011, p. 49). An anti-realistic based approach would not establish this kind of distinction, but would (in theory) analyze both practice and language through the analysis of the discourse. Lave & Wenger's conceptualization of the community of practice is in other words founded on a realistic ontology.

However, Lave & Wenger's approach can be considered as a perspective that, so to say, 'bridges' between realism and anti-realism. This is also the case with the philosopher Karen Barad, whose theory of *agential realism* (Barad 2007) specifically is intended to convey this distinction, but in a clearer theoretical form than Lave & Wenger.

In the concept of *agential realism,* Barad points out, that one has to understand the world as existing in an ontological (material) sense and that the prerequisite for existence is activity-in-the-world. However, materiality and discourse are considered as separate but co-existing domains, which are created through the same single event. Materiality clearly cannot be comprehended separate from or prior to linguistic practice, as well as linguistic practice cannot be comprehended separate from materiality. Practice (also linguistic practice) is always practice-in-a-material-world:

> Discourse does not refer to linguistic or signifying systems, grammars, speech acts, or conversations. To think of discourse as mere spoken or written words forming descriptive statements is to enact the mistake of representationalist thinking. Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constraints and enables what can be said. Discursive practices define what counts as meaningful statements. Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities. This field of possibilities is not static or singular but rather it is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity. (Ibid. p. 146-147)

As it appears, Barad consider the human subject and materiality as at the same time created through discursive and material practices. As Lave & Wenger, Barad stresses that language, practice and materiality stands in an internal rather than an external relation to each other: 'Rather, the point is that these *entangled practices* are productive, and who and what are excluded through these entangled practices matter: different intra-actions produce different phenomena.' (Ibid: 58).

As such, Barad's perspective can be considered as supporting Lave & Wenger's emphasis on the importance of grasping the individual-in-the-context as an active agent in both a discursive and a material sense. Through this practice, the individual becomes a subject. This demands a simultaneous connectedness and separateness between the subject and the context, which stresses that it makes no sense to discuss what comes first: whether the individual initiates discourse, or is determined by discourse.

In other words, Barad seems to deliver a substantial analytical perspective, which can support conceptions of how individuals are adapted to and included in a learning community in which they are assigned different positions with different implications for their learning (Hasse 2002). As such, both Lave & Wenger and Barad can be considered as offering interesting perspectives to the endeavor to conceptualize and define learning.

## Concluding remarks: the analytical possibilities of Lave & Wenger's perspective

Until this, the chapter has been focusing on a science-philosophical analysis of Lave & Wenger's concept of 'situated learning'. This discussion has been quite theoretical and with less focus on the practical application of the theory. Thus, the aim of the concluding remarks is to sketch the possibilities and limitations of 'situated learning' as an analytical tool.

As mentioned, 'situated learning' is an analytical perspective and not a prescription for practice. This means that the perspective by no means can be considered and applied as a didactical theory i.e. as recommendations for teaching. Thus, it is by no means the intentions of the perspective to animate the teacher to organize 'communities of practice' in class (Lave 2011). Alternatively, Lave & Wenger's approach

is an analytical perspective. This means that the theory can be applied for analyses of learning in different contexts. Though Lave & Wenger are focusing on learning in apprenticeship-like settings, the perspective is not limited to analyses of such settings. In principle, it can be used for analyses of any setting – at school and outside school. Hence, the subject of research does not limit the applicability of the perspective.

Foremost, Lave & Wenger's theory changes the perspective of the researcher. This means that the researcher will have to focus otherwise than if the theoretical perspective was more like a traditional theory of learning and teaching (e.g. a didactical theory). Of cause, the consequence of this change in perspective also has significant effects for what the researcher will be able to capture through her research.

Applying 'situated learning' means that the researcher will have to focus on what is *actually* going on in the context in order to identify the activities and interests of 'the community of practice'. An example could be research of what is going on in a class at school i.e. a traditional teaching- and learning setting. In this case, Lave & Wenger's approach would urge the researcher to focus on the central activities in class instead of the intentions of the teacher. Thus, the activities in class may very well be quite different from the intentions of the teacher, and the learning outcome may very well be another than what the teacher anticipated and planned.

In this case, 'situated learning' can serve as a device to change the researcher's perspective. Hence, 'situated learning' would urge the researcher to identify the center of activity in the group (the (imagined) 'product' of the community of practice), the different positions that the members of the group were allowed to enter and to possess (as marginalized, as legitimate peripheral (learning) or as full participant) and how language and practice were intertwined in these activities (Christensen 2013).

As such, Lave & Wenger's perspective is not limited to certain research subjects but can be considered as an analytical tool that provides the researcher with a different and fruitful perspective. Although the science-philosophical ambiguities in the theory, the perspective can serve as a means for very interesting analyses of learning-in-practice.

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