

Abstract

This paper illuminates some of the journey taken by me, the researcher, whilst completing my doctoral research into the lived experience of epiphanies. The research journey is conceptualised as one of discovery; into the task of qualitative research to 'carry forward' the meaning of human experience that is considered 'more than words can say'. Six participants took part in an unstructured interview aimed at exploring how they made sense of their epiphanic experiences. Following the application of an interpretative phenomenological analysis an arts-based representation of the research findings, in the form of found poetry, was chosen to supplement the emerging interpretation. Six found poems are dispersed throughout the paper. The aim is to offer the reader the crucial opportunity to simultaneously engage responsively and rationally with an exploration of the value of found poetry. Moreover, this style of presentation may offer the reader more space and time to notice, observe, and reflect on the impact of research poetry as they move through the paper. An evaluation of the utility of found poetry is also offered. By providing an insight into the process of constructing found poetry it is intended that the merits of its integration within qualitative inquiry are highlighted as successfully being able to bring the meaning of exceptional human experience alive to the reader. Furthermore, the experiential knowledge offered here is considered particularly relevant to professionals working in caring or therapeutic roles.

Key words: Qualitative, arts-based representation; interpretative phenomenological analysis; found poetry; epiphany

'Elisabeth'¹

My mind flashed back

This is what they talk about when they talk about epiphanies

Guided to something you never knew

Wake up call to our greater purpose

Huge and always for the good

My mind flashed back

I had an epiphany

It was as if time stood still

My whole body shifted

A weight snapped free

My mind flashed back

I had an epiphany

What a gift it was

My fear revealed and released

Me in a whole new direction

A bigger blessing that I ever knew

¹ Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

My mind flashed back
I had an epiphany
What a gift it was
Finally able to take action

Introduction

Braud and Anderson (1998) stated that ‘many of the most significant and exciting life events and extraordinary experiences - moments of clarity, illumination and healing - have been systematically excluded from conventional research’ (p. 3). My aim, in completing my doctoral research was to investigate the lived experience of epiphanies. Defined as a ‘sudden discontinuous change’ (Jarvis, 1997, p. 5), an epiphanic experience is known to transform an individual in a profoundly positive and enduring manner through a reconfiguration of their most deeply held beliefs about themselves and the world. A deeply emotional experience, an epiphany is not experienced as the product of will or control and commonly felt as intensely positive and joyful (Chilton, 2015).

The autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi (1949), and Viktor Frankl (1959) offer real-life accounts of sudden transformation associated with positive and lasting effects. Conversation within psychological sciences literature regarding sudden positive and profound change also exists. Positive transformational experiences following trauma in the form of adversarial or post-traumatic growth (PTG, Linley & Joseph, 2004) have received substantial attention in recent decades and PTG could be said to have become the flagship theme of positive psychology (Joseph, 2014). Other terms have also been adopted in an attempt to capture the capacity of the human organism for profound and enduring positive change including transformative

change experiences (White, 2004) unencumbered moments (Murray, 2006), turning points (Berglund, 2014), transformational growth (Ivtzan, 2015) and pivotal experiences (Bhattacharya et al., 2018). Common characteristics among these experiences have been demonstrated. Individuals identifying as having experienced quantum change (Miller & C' de Baca, 2001) knew something extraordinary was happening to them and recalled the details of their experience vividly. They were not seeking such an experience, and many referred to the feeling of having not contributed to it themselves. The experience was felt to be exhilarating and liberating, accompanied by a profound sense of safety, love, and acceptance. The change was enduring: 'They knew instantly they had passed through a one-way door through which there was no return' (Miller, 2004, p. 456).

In the context of psychotherapy and psychological therapy, endeavours that are designed to facilitate important life changes, and non-linear change experiences have also been documented. Labelled as significant events (Elliott & Shapiro, 1988), sudden gains (Tang & DeRubeis, 1999), helpful events (Grafanki & McLeod, 1999), and moments of meeting (Stern, 2004), identifying particularly meaningful moments in psychotherapy can assist the identification and cultivation of distinct opportunities for client change. Ann Jauregui (2003) conveys something of the mystery and familiarity of the phenomenon of epiphanies in a description of sudden change in the context of psychotherapy:

Something big is occasioned by something little, something easily missed. And it unfolds from there - sometimes as a flash, sometimes in exquisite slow motion - out of conventional time and space and language [at such times it can strike you] ... The universe is bigger than it was a minute ago and so are you.' (p. 3)

This growing body of work within the field of psychotherapy challenges the assumption of linear symptom improvement over time in treatment (Resnicow & Page, 2008). Therapy is increasingly understood to have the capacity to facilitate discontinuous change (Gumz et., 2010), as well as produce gradual, linear adjustment. Accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy (Lipton & Fosha, 2011) is one example of an approach that has been developed based on the notion that naturally occurring discontinuous change can be harnessed within therapy and can be designed to support clients to increase their ability to act adaptively.

To date, the qualitative literature, which has examined sudden and profound transformation, has mostly sought to elucidate the antecedent and facilitative factors associated with this form of change (Hayes, Laurenceau, Feldman, Strauss, & Cardaciotto, 2007, McDonald, 2008). It is now well established that stressful and traumatic events may serve as a trigger for personal growth and positive change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Having experienced an epiphanic experience myself some years earlier (Amos, 2016), I was interested in how those who had experienced such a transformation made sense of it and what the impact was.

Ethical approval was given by the author's institution, and recruitment of participants was initiated following a referral from a colleague, who knew someone they believed to fit the study's inclusion criteria. Following an interview with the first participant, a snowball effect ensued in which participants referred other potential participants who were contacted directly to invite to take part. None of the participants were previously known to me. Six people, all of whom identified as having experienced a brief, sudden, personal and positive transformation, consented to take part in a research interview in which they were invited to tell me what their experience meant to them.

Initially I was exclusive in my intention to contribute technical knowledge to the academic discourse related to the current psychological understanding of epiphanic experiences. Taylor (2018) states that such experiences have been overlooked in the field of psychology. If sudden transformation is considered the most dramatic, yet the least understood mechanism of human change (White, 2004), then it might be safe to assume that therapeutic practitioners may not be prepared to identify, appreciate, comprehend, or respond appropriately to incidences in which this type of change occurs. Furthermore, the extraordinary potential for healing, which has come to be associated with the type of sudden, and profound transformation experiences suggest that this type of change is of particular clinical interest (Taylor & Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Fletcher, 2008). However, very early in the research process I discovered that for the participants to find the words to do justice to the extent of the meaning of their personal change was a challenge. My interaction with the research participants served to confirm to me the indescribable feeling associated with such a profound experience as an epiphany. Whilst their experience looked for the words, they seemed to experience difficulty articulating their felt sense; consistently referring to the existence of an ineffable quality, which they strived to capture.

Experiences of sudden, personal, profound, positive, and permanent change, which can fundamentally alter the lives of those who experience it exist (Taylor, 2018). Yet, how can qualitative research engage with phenomena that is experienced to be 'more than words can say'? Investigation into a magical and miraculous experience such as this required me to find the words that *work*. Soon, the potential contribution of the research study expanded to include not only the development of technical knowledge, but experiential knowledge too. An attempt to capture and share with the reader the ineffable quality that seemed so inherent to

the lived experience of epiphanies became a central concern. How might the data generated from the study be presented to the reader in a way that might facilitate 'knowing what something feels like' (Tracy, 2012, p. 110); knowing what an epiphany feels like. This had implications for the aesthetic merit of qualitative description, and it was here that the journey to discover ways of expressing qualitative research findings to evoke an empathic understanding began.

'Bill'

Discontent

Beyond Caring

Take, take, take, take

Live life hard and fast

Self-destructive rebellion

A downward slippery slope

An unsustainable chaotic existence

Taken out of the experience and put in a concrete box

After counting the tiles twenty times, what else can you do but think?

We all have the answers, it's whether you choose to listen

I start reflecting, A space to change

No choice but to listen

Feet out of lead boots

The more I give

Fulfilment

Reward

Arts-based representation: Discovering found poetry

The question of representation has been fiercely debated; commentators have argued against the over reliance on predictive research as the exclusive basis for knowledge, which results in less attention being bestowed on the suitability of rich description (Fox, 2017). The 'crisis of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 16), as it came to be known, led to the acceptance and adoption of literary and artistic styles of representing lived experiences, which appeared more suitable to the goals of qualitative inquiry. Since then, there has been an upsurge in research related to the implicit dimension of experience; that which is in some sense known, but not yet available to reflective thought or articulation (Orange, 2011). This is particularly relevant to the counselling professions (White, 2014). There exists a knowledge that captures those essential components to which counsellors accord priority, namely, the relational aspects of therapeutic work. Qualitative research studies that promote the opportunity to empathically understand the rich lived experience of humans and promote the welfare of clients across diverse social contexts has led to innovation within qualitative research. Increasingly, artistically shaped representations of research findings (Ellingson, 2006; Anderson & Braud, 2011) are aimed at generating different kinds of knowledge believed to be particularly meaningful and relevant for those working in the caring practices (Latimer & Schillmeier, 2009).

Raingruber and Kent (2003) demonstrated how therapeutic practitioners tune into their own bodily senses to detect the meaning of their clients' experiences. They

concluded that 'when clinicians listen to the piercing wisdom of and the immediate knowledge of their body...they are more likely to make time to reflect and to develop an understanding...in personal, professional and human terms' (p. 466). Within the therapeutic endeavour, bodily forms of understanding are seen as essential in guiding sensitive practice. In any act of empathy, bodily and relational resonance is required for the imagination to connect to, and thus participate within, the joint encounter. With that in mind, efforts have been made towards the translation of 'technical and jargon-driven language' (Galvin & Todres, 2011) evident in many qualitative research methodologies into language more relevant to everyday caring practice. The rationale is to evoke 'intellectual, aesthetic and affective responses' (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 4) and to create 'living texts' (Willis, 2004, p. 8), which portray the immediacy and impact of human experience, and have the potential to support the development of the personal resources of the practitioner, which are deemed so essential.

Within grounded theory research, Rennie and Fergus (2006) developed the technique of 'embodied categorisation', with an aim to facilitate the analyst's bodily receptivity to the nuance of meaning contained in participant accounts. Other research studies have supplemented their data analysis with further interpretative phases designed to highlight the aesthetic dimensions of qualitative description. In another example, a phenomenological study exploring the experience of caring for a partner with Alzheimer's disease, (Todres & Galvin, 2006) the authors offered an 'embodied interpretation' of the research findings, supplementary to the presentation of the general structures generated by their phenomenological analysis. In seeking to enhance the 'emotional intelligence' of their readers, the authors attempted to find the 'I in the thou' (Buber, 1970).

In this research study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed as an appropriate methodology. Largely influenced by the philosophical movement of phenomenology (Husserl, 1901), IPA justifies the use of descriptions of individual experience as a starting point for enquiry (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Experience is considered our earliest access to understanding anything at all. The phenomenological approach to qualitative enquiry therefore grounds itself in concrete human experience, seeking to explore meaning rather than obtain measurement. IPA is committed to favouring participant voices via the presentation of a contextual understanding of idiographic experience. A central spirit of an epistemology for phenomenology is the assumption that understanding can never be simply cognitive. Instead, it is embodied; always interwoven with senses, mood, and intersubjective contexts. IPA research assumes that the data collected is able to 'tell us something about people's involvement in and orientation towards the world' (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47). However, it does not make any claims about what may be 'true' or 'false' about the participant's experience or its connection to an external reality; what matters to an IPA researcher is how the experience is experienced. In this sense, it subscribes to a more relativist ontology, and that reality is constructed intersubjectively. It is recognised that the production of knowledge occurs through meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). More often than not within IPA, theme structures are established which seek to organise meanings with a shared value. This was certainly the case in this research study. An IPA was applied, and core themes emerging from the data were drawn together and presented as a narrative account. Correspondingly, it was identified that creation of research poetry offered a unique mode of reporting the research findings that may further extend the aims of the research.

Poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2004) has become one form of representation utilised by qualitative researchers across the social sciences. Regarded as an umbrella term, it is an approach in which the tenets of qualitative research are merged with the craft of traditional poetry writing (Leavy, 2009). Methods include poetic transcription (Richardson, 2001), research poetry (Langer & Furman, 2004), transcript poetry (Luce-Kapler, 2004), poetic representation (Prendergast, 2009), and found poetry (Glesne, 1997). Some consider the use of poetry as a representational practice contrasting with more distanced and authoritative qualitative representations of lived experience (Collins, 2016). It is viewed as capturing the holistic nature of the themes conveyed by research participants, while having the capacity to surpass discrete categories (Sjollema, Hordyk, Walsh, Hanley, & Ives, 2012). Poetry can paint a feeling-picture for the reader (Leavy, 2015).

'Louise'

I kind of have a real vision

I've had it ever since it happened

I see myself from the side and I am in and out of it

Like I'm here but I'm there

And I have long grey wiry hair

And it's in a ponytail

And I am wearing a blue old jumper

And all I'm looking out to is fields

And I'm holding a warm mug of something

And I'm drinking it

Sipping it

And the wind is blowing through my hair

And I feel absolute knowing that I have had a life well spent

I've had that since the moment it happened

And it never changes

The vision never changes

I know that it's ok

It feels so safe

Nothing is there apart from me and the land

The old jumper

And the drink

Creating found poetry

Unlike generated or interpretive poetry, which is used as a means of data analysis and involves the researcher creating original poetry as part of the investigation, found poems are concerned with the representation of participant data. In essence, a reconstruction of existing text (for example, interview transcripts), the justification for found poetry is similar to McLeod and Balamoustou's (2004), when examining key moments in therapy using qualitative narrative analysis. Counselling session transcripts are represented in stanza form; considered 'particularly effective as a means of representing the rhythm, meaning and structure of oral narrative' (McLeod & Balamoustou, 2004, p. 291). Similarly, found poetry has emerged as a method to 'crystallize' and present findings in both aesthetic and accessible forms (Ellingson, 2009). Considered the most popular form of poetic inquiry, found poetry has been incorporated into research methodologies aimed at informing practitioners, policy-makers, and the public about various topics, including homelessness (Hordyk, Soltane, & Hanley, 2014) and disaster resilience (Miller & Brockie, 2015).

Found poems are created by taking the words of others and transforming them in to poetic forms (Prendergast, 2009). In seeking to create found poetry, I took each interview transcript in turn, and began by revisiting the annotations made during the phases of the IPA. Within the second stage of IPA, known as initial noting, ‘The analyst notes anything of interest within the transcript’ (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 83). In revisiting the already highlighted transcripts, I selected previously ‘nuggeted’ words and phrases from the chained prose, in particular picking out any manners of expression that appeared repetitious. I then created line breaks in the narrative, breaking it up into the form of a poem. Figure 1 illustrates how the found poem corresponds with the verbatim transcript of the interview with Louise.

Poem ‘Louise’	Excerpt from interview transcript with Louise
<p>I kind of have a real vision I’ve had it ever since it happened I see myself from the side and I am in and out of it Like I’m here but I’m there And I have long grey wiry hair And it’s in a ponytail And I am wearing a blue old jumper And all I’m looking out to is fields</p>	<p><u>I kind of have real vision; I've had it ever since it happened.</u> The vision may not happen, I may get knocked down on the way home, but I kind of had a vision since that moment, and it’s ridiculous, but at the same time, it feels very solid. I have a vision: I am there and it’s me, and when I see the vision, <u>I see myself from the side, and I am in and I’m out of it, like I’m here, but I’m there, and I have</u></p>

And I'm holding a warm mug of something	<u>long grey wiry hair, and it's in a ponytail,</u>
And I'm drinking it	<u>and I am wearing a blue old jumper, and</u>
Sipping it	<u>all I'm looking out to is fields, and I'm</u>
And the wind is blowing through my hair	<u>holding a warm mug of something, and</u>
And I feel absolute knowing that I have had a life well spent	<u>I'm drinking it, sipping it</u> whilst holding it
I've had that since the moment it happened	up toward my mouth, you know how you hold it here, <u>and the wind is blowing</u>
And it never changes	<u>through my hair, and I feel absolute</u>
The vision never changes	<u>knowing that I have had a life well</u>
I know that it's ok	<u>spent, and I have had that since the</u>
It feels so safe	<u>moment it happened, and it never</u>
Nothing is there apart from me and the land	<u>changes, the vision never changes,</u> and
The old jumper	it's not that I'm with anyone, but it's that
And the drink	<u>I know that it's ok.</u> I don't know whether
	it's a vision of being old and knowing
	that my time is up, or that it is just
	knowing I have left generations behind
	me of people that are all ok, and that is
	why <u>it feels so safe.</u> But it's something
	about in that vision; <u>nothing is there</u>
	<u>apart from me and the land, and the old</u>
	<u>jumper and the drink</u>

Figure 1. Example of creation of found poem

Through the creation of line breaks, I was careful that significant attention was paid towards keeping discrete units of meaning together, so as not to distort the essential

features of the narrative. Although no words were altered during the course of constructing the found poems, I did use some 'poetic license' (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 87). Words were sometimes rearranged to punctuate specific themes. Where deemed appropriate, I used the poetic device of repetition to create emphasis.

'Firelight'

I can just go to those places

A place within that is constant

Just be there

Everything earthed, everything grounded

It's always still there

I still have my ups and downs, but

Always still there

I have moved on, but

Always still there

Evaluating the value of found poetry

Clearly, different qualitative researchers seek to produce different kinds of knowledge, driven by different purposes. Ellingson (2006) conceptualises the enterprise of qualitative research along a continuum. Rather than notions of art and science existing dichotomously, they are instead located at two ends of the spectrum within which a vast and diverse middle ground exists. I consider qualitative research to be most effective when it is both art and science.

In undertaking research into the experience of epiphanies, I discovered that whilst part of the participants' sense-making and consolidation process following their transformation was defined by the integration of the experience via language, metaphor, and new patterns of thought and action, a sense of wonder and disbelief in relation to the experience always remained. Acceptance and appreciation of the experience as one which can never be fully explained was vital in the sense making process. The epiphany itself was considered miraculous or magical, and participants repeatedly showed signs of struggling to find the words to do justice to the extent of the meaning of their transformation.

Gadamer (1989) claimed 'When we understand a text, what is meaningful in it captivates just as the beautiful captivates us' (p. 484). Whilst outside of the arts, poetry continues to occupy a marginal space and is still considered an unusual output (Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2014). Cautions against incorporating poetry into research are plentiful. Faulkner (2007) and Neilsen (2004) questioned the capabilities of the research poet and the often-inferior poetry which, if considered within the literary arena, would not make the standard. Sandelowski (2004) warned that artistic experiments in representation may run the risk of intensifying this so called 'crisis' rather than resolving it, as artistic modes of research reporting are considered least proficient in demonstrating the instrumental use of qualitative findings. Nevertheless, it is important to consider how meaningful and/or useful the creation and presentation of found poetry has been in presenting qualitative research findings that facilitate entry into knowing and feeling what an epiphany is like.

Consistent with a hermeneutic of faith (Josselson, 2004), the exploration into poetry and its ability to convey the richness enabled me to think *with* as opposed to *about* participants. It is possible that I have been able to speak *with* them through the

inclusion of found poems; listening in greater depth to participants' stories via the process of constructing the poems, and sharing the richness of experience with the reader. However, writing in a different genre does not automatically assume a more effective result, simply because of its novelty. Research findings are 'expected to be accessible, relevant, significant and credible, and to hold the prospect of change to those who have a stake in them' (Sandelowski, 2004, p. 1368). Furthermore, there is a requirement to present findings in such a way that permits their practical use. 'Usable' and 'useful' are terms with diverse definitions, dependent on the research orientation. It could be said that symbolic or conceptual utilisation is one of the most important objectives of qualitative research: 'Understanding is not merely a prelude to or basis for action but, rather, is itself action' (Sandelowski, 2004, p. 1373). If symbolic utility relates to development and change in how stakeholders may think about the topic under investigation, then perhaps the role of the qualitative researcher is in making the value of symbolic utilisation increasingly apparent. What is sought is description alive to the reader (Gendlin, 1992), intended to meaningfully affect the person and their practice (Galvin & Todres, 2011).

In the process of creating the found poems, they were read aloud many times, to ensure their accuracy and emotional integrity, and shared with the research participants. This was with the intention of empowering participants to share in the meaning-making process. Poems were received positively, and their resonant validity was confirmed. One participant observed how it moved her to read back her own words, whilst another remarked on the power of the words and the poem's ability to elicit a feeling of lightness and warmth. I felt pleased with these responses because they reinforced my intention not just to settle with the communication of propositional knowing but to consider how this can be turned into the possibility of

experiential knowing as well (Baillergeau, & Duyvendak, 2016; De Vos, Netten, & Noordenbos, 2016). One often cited indicator of the trustworthiness of a qualitative description is the capacity of the interpretation to *impact on or resonate with* the reader (Yardley, 2000). If the aim of the researcher is to continue the conversation regarding a research interest, then the researcher might be encouraged to use words which are both structurally coherent and experientially resonant in order to carry the meaning forward into future exploration.

Research which chooses to make use of poetic representation often takes the position that it should be able to speak for itself. However, some researchers who have incorporated found poetry within their work have offered a corresponding commentary to draw attention to the intention underlying the final construction of the poem. O'Connor (1997) made a convincing case for not talking too much about the found poems when she said, 'If the poem does not succeed without these words, these words cannot succeed even with the poem. If I were you, I wouldn't read them' (p. 20). I decided to let the found poetry speak for itself. Within the principle of hermeneutics of the whole-the-parts-the whole, the found poems in this study represent the final understanding of the whole, the goal being to present the interpreted whole complete with the appropriated meaning of the narrated phenomena. The decision not to offer a commentary on the meaning that was meant to be captured by each poetic narrative was also informed by the relationship between the poem and the experience of the reader. Bakhtin (1982) introduced the concept of 'multivoicedness', in which meaning resides in neither the speaker nor the receiver, but instead is created through the interaction between the two. In seeking

to facilitate a sympathetic resonance, the voices of the participants have sought to be honoured and subsequently united with the reader.

'James'

It's difficult to explain

Nine years old, sneaking into Joe's bedroom

Picking up the album

From the opening bar...bam bam bam

Wow, what was that?

I put it back on again

Nothing like the first time

I am wrapped in pink silk

Caressed, loved, I feel safe

Special

Still trying to make sense of it now you see

I had to know, I had no choice

Started to understand, absorbed into everything

Art, and science, and love and sex and death and rebirth and music and God.

It's difficult to explain

I never forget it

Forty-five years...I listen to it through headphones

Goosebumps

Cemented

This experience was real

This is not just sounds, not just music

It still feels very deep

Still trying to make sense of it now you see

Conclusion

I had initially intended to shed light on the meaning making process relevant to the lived experience of sudden and profound change manifested through epiphanic moments. While completing this research an additional question emerged, asking what methods of data analysis and representation might serve to communicate exceptional human experience that is described as being beyond words. I came to realise that any experience of struggling to find the words is a genuine demonstration of how words are not a simple reflection. A special kind of language may be required to remedy this communication concern.

Despite the growing trend for research poetry (Hanauer, 2014), researchers have not yet utilised found poetry as an insight into the lived experience of epiphanies. As counselling and psychotherapy advocates for the validity of first-person accounts of psychological distress, so the construction and inclusion of the found poems acted to advocate for the privileging of the self-ness of things (Prendergast, 2009).

However, as Prendergast (2009) concisely captures: ‘In an empirical evidence-driven research world, to rely on openness, intuition, and an approach that privileges the itself-ness of things feels radical’ (p. 683). My journey into the realm of research poetry was unplanned and unexpected (something akin to an epiphany-like experience), and it was most welcome. What we understand is intimately involved in how we learn it, while how we learn is intimately involved in what we come to understand. It could be argued that our embodied sense of experience is greater than any conceptualisation (Todres, 2008). In this research study found poetry was constructed, and presented alongside the IPA, to enable the reader the optimum opportunity to relate both emotionally and personally to the phenomena of epiphanic experiences. To access as many different ways of knowing what it is like to experience enduringly positive, wondrous, inspiring and magical transformation is important. In seeking to offer an embodied account, I believe a fuller understanding of epiphanic experiences can be offered.

A found poem by ‘Patrick’

30 July 2012

I felt it come off me

I felt it leaving

I don’t know how

Today’s the day

Today it’s all over

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