

'Becoming a Reflective Educator?': An Analysis of the Individual Career Trajectory and the Importance of Reflection for Islamic Educators

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ABSTRACT

This article covers scaffolding efforts done by the writer to be a reflective educator in the middle of educational condition which is often stopped, routine and less innovative. By depending on the stages of carrier of being educator, some important inventions can be showed that between the first stage of carrier and the stage toward maturity in educating, it can be found a time of carrier transmission making ones be wary and alien to the carrier chosen. This stage must be passed by some actions not only having self reflection but also learn and adopt critically toward the best innovation and model done by other colleges. Moreover, some creativities and innovations also need to be developed, so the carrier of being an educator becomes the important choice in one's life. This article also explains that a skill of reflection and improving the quality of work is an Islamic action for every Moslem which is having educational profession.

Keyword, Reflective Education, Professi Development, Educational Carrier, Moslem Educator.

ABSTRAK

Tulisan ini mengungkap upaya bertahap yang dilakukan penulis untuk menjadi pendidik yang reflektif di tengah kondisi pendidikan yang kerap kali mandeg, rutin dan kurang inovatif. Dengan menyandarkan pada teori tahap-tahap karir pendidik, beberapa temuan penting dapat dikemukakan bahwa antara tahap awal karir sebagai pendidik dan tahap menuju kedewasaan dalam mendidik dapat ditemukan sebuah masa transisi karir yang sering menjadikan seseorang merasa ragu dan terasing atas pilihan karirnya. Tahap ini sesungguhnya perlu dilewati dengan tidak hanya melakukan kritik diri dan upaya perbaikan atas kinerjanya, namun juga perlu menyimak dan mengadopsi secara kritis atas inovasi dan kinerja terbaik atau keteladanan yang dilakukan kolega lainnya. Lebih dari itu, sejumlah kreativitas dan inovasi juga perlu dikembangkan sehingga karir sebagai pendidik merupakan pilihan penting dalam kehidupan seseorang. Tulisan ini juga menegaskan bahwa kemampuan merefleksi dan meningkatkan kinerja secara umum merupakan tindakan Islami bagi setiap Muslim yang memiliki profesi kependidikan.

Kata Kunci: Pendidik Reflektif; Pengembangan Profesi; Karir Mendidik; Pendidik Muslim.

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the dynamics of teaching and learning as central parts of educational processes. Perhaps, this particular portrayal will be empirically clarified by examining teaching-learning activities conducted by teachers along with their

students either in or outside their classrooms. This mode of interaction between teacher and students is actually one of the criteria of judging whether or not an educational process runs well. Such a mode of relationship is able to be linked to the term 'teaching styles' which mean 'a wide range of approaches' in teaching activities fitting with 'the needs of learners' and 'the nature of subjects' (Wallace, 2009). Yet, this concept might be difficult to implement if teachers as classrooms' leaders lack of knowledge and practical experiences of how to select teaching approaches possibly appropriate with either their students' needs or the characteristics of each subject. This sort of difficulty is likely to be a common problem for teachers, in particular, who are in 'a betwixt transition' (Horrison and McKeon, 2009). At this period of transition, teachers tend to have hesitance between to change their old-fashioned teaching styles and to try more innovative methods.

By taking account of that transitional period of teaching, I have personally faced more or less the same circumstances. The first deals with the influence of the past educational impacts. It seems that I was a 'product' of the schools and pre-service trainings generally traditional in terms of teaching styles merely promoting teacher-centered rather than teacher and student-centered learning. What I was encountering is probably relevant to Blume's (1971) notion that 'teachers teach as they are taught and not as they are taught to teach' (cited in Cheng, Cheng and Tang, 2010, p.102). It is not to mention that I never had previous innovative teachers, rather I would say that generally they are likely to perceive their profession as 'business as usual', referring to

the lack of self and external criticism. It fits with what Dewey (1933) said that teaching has been a 'routinized' rather than 'reflective' activity (cited in Pollard, 2002). Quite clearly, I have hardly ever encountered the best models of reflective teaching whereby a teacher continuously analyzes, criticizes and improves his or her teaching quality.

The second is commensurate with my recent capacity of managing teaching processes. By taking Brown, Lake and Matters' (2009) opinion that teacher-centered and student-centered teaching styles are a continuum, it is probably right that I am still struggling to overcome my difficulties of dealing with my classrooms by choosing particular methods of teaching more appropriately. Furthermore, my ability to practice a reflection of my own teaching whether it is improved or not, has not been carried out yet. In that sense, however, some of my interactions in education such as trainings and research, however, are quite important to build on my horizons of teaching in order for me—probably others—to be more reflective. But, it is undoubted that I have not made full use of these practices as internal data or resources to criticize and reflect on my own teaching. In this respect, thus, I have an interest to trace and analyze some activities within my teaching career trajectory.

To analyze the path to be a teacher, it is quite imperative to take Goodson's (1995) idea that 'a story is never just a story—it is a statement of belief and morality' (cited in Smith (ed.), 1995, p.56). Such a notion implies that teaching is not only a profession but also an ethical standpoint or value (Lampert, 2009). Here I would try to uncover not only what happens on the surface of, but also the dynamics under the surface relating

to ideas, values and beliefs of my teaching profession. More systematically, this paper has been divided into three parts. The first part deals with the concept of the teaching profession and reflective teaching. The second correlates with an analysis of my individual career in teaching and the possibility of becoming a reflective educator. The third tries to signify my teaching experience to other Islamic practitioners, especially teachers, in terms of practicing reflections of their career.

TEACHING CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND THE NEED FOR A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER:

A brief theoretical framework

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on teaching profession development. Most of the literature generally investigate its basic concepts, stages and possible barriers. In detail, other studies have even focused on a particular dimension of teaching styles necessarily practiced by teachers as reflective practitioners. Such pivotal viewpoints, henceforth, will be briefly highlighted below.

The most important aspect of the teaching profession might be capacity building since it will determine the teaching quality performed by teachers. Murray, Jones, McNamara and Stanley's (2009) research reveals that capacity building is a multiplication of 'motivation', 'opportunity' and 'expertise'. It is obvious that motivation or interests could no longer exist without both opportunities provided by institutions and particular expertise, skills or competences which will be produced. In regard to teachers' expertise, Eraut (1998) cited in Day (1999) asserts that professionals' skills should be

based on 'current competence(s)' of each teacher and then gradually developed by internalizing and transforming 'additional capability' and possible practices. Yet, teachers' development and transformation are unlikely to be merely the sort of skills or competences listed since, as Fessler and Christensen (1992) argued, teacher development should pay more attention to 'personal' and 'organizational environment(s)' as well (cited in Day, 1999). The former refers to individual dispositions, incidents and life; and the latter deals with regulations, union and management—to mention some. It is clear that capacity building of every teacher is unique due to various personal conditions and even complex because of lots of influencing factors.

Generally speaking, personal and organizational conditions interact with stages of teachers' career. Huberman (1995) develops five stages of 'teacher career cycle' consisting of 'launching a career' (1-3 years), 'stabilization' or 'integration into a peer group' (4-6 years), 'new challenges' (7-18 years), 'reaching a professional plateau' (19-30 years), and 'the phase of greatest expertise in teaching' (31-40 years) (cited in Day, 1999). For those who choose teaching as their career, it is important to note that the first stage seems to be a quite new career environment where teachers might feel either convenient or awkward. Such initial challenges can possibly be controlled if they have positive perceptions, knowledge and experience of teaching, for instance, as previously taken from their pre-service trainings. This induction process will be likely to be a foundation of the second stage, 'stabilization'. Here, teachers are personally tested whether or not they are committed to their profession. Interpersonal

skills such as working in a team will be one of important indicators. As a profession which is academically linked to the dynamics of science, teaching itself really has a number of challenges such as experimentation. At the third stage, self-reliance and collaborative work generally determine the quality of academic involvement. Besides having scientific responsibility, teachers are also responsible for their students and institutional progression. The following years are the possibility of getting professionalism. At the fourth stage, teachers are probably in a situation whether or not they tend to be professional and such a condition also depends upon, for example, promotion sustainability of their career. Finally, the greatest career is when teachers can manage and reflect on the possibility of change both to themselves and others. It is clear therefore that teaching career development necessarily correlates with personal and organizational environments which support the personal dynamics of each teacher.

Relating to the personal and organizational environment, some findings show that teachers' development very often faces barriers because it correlates with more than what the teachers want to do but what ideas and practices they believe. Cheng, *et.al.* (2010) find that teachers' perceptions possibly influenced by their 'pre-training strategies' might have positive or negative impacts. For example, due to the image of the possible difficulties of putting innovative ideas into practices, they tend to decide to take the old-fashioned teaching styles emphasizing one-way communication. Moreover, some even feel 'frustrated' and give up when trying to implement active-reflective teaching methods (Hursh (1995) cited in Smith, 1995). Ironi-

cally, Brown, *et.al.* (2009) finding reveals that by using Teaching Perspectives Inventory (TPI), even if teachers agree with innovative teaching styles but, as if they could not reject 'the transmission perspectives' or teacher-centred learning, for instance, due to the political demand such as national assessment which should be completely covered in their teaching materials. In this context, 'the conservative culture' could be a particular challenge when 'innovative practices' try to be implemented (Cheng, *et.al.*, 2010). Again, the work of Horrison and McKeon (2009:19) indicates that a 'turning point' or 'betwixt transition' can be either a support or a barrier. This concept refers to a situation where, for instance, a relatively new practitioner in higher education institutions (HEIs) should initially conduct research and 'scholarly activities'. This transitional state seems to be critical and strategic in determining self-esteem of the teacher. Thus, it may be clear that both unexpected internal (personal) and external (organizational) atmospheres are quite important to anticipate.

By taking account of these barriers, teachers actually require a tool of analysis and practice for anticipating and resolving possible problems. In his writing, Lampert (2009) argues that teachers should have an ability of developing 'praxis' or 'theory-in-action' as 'an ethical, social and political action'. This concept is different from a Cartesian doctrine which separates a theory from a practice, solely focusing on technical work ('poiesis'). However, according to Hillier (2005), while 'praxis' only develops a critical awareness, what is really needed is 'acting rightly and appropriately' ('phronesis'). In this respect, Lampert (2009) also makes clear that, in order to be reflective, teachers should con-

centrate on 'a common problem of practice' or 'high-leverage practices' rather than ordinary teaching practices. Based on the above notes, it may be argued that under simple or complex circumstances, teachers need to be critical of and reflective on their teaching processes and interactions so as to improve their teaching competences.

When promoting the idea of a reflective educator, Perkin (1995) identifies three types of teachers (cited in Snowball, 2007, p. 254). The first are those who 'resist scrutiny' and 'show little tendency to reflect on their own practice' and the next are the group who 'rethink their own practice according to their own experience' but ignore 'outsiders'. Finally, the last are those who conduct 'self-examination' and open interactions and criticism from others. In practice, the third group is the reflective practitioner. More completely, Snowball (2007) lists four criteria of reflective teachers. Firstly, they make use of 'classroom experience' as a basis to assess and reflect on their teaching processes. Secondly, they look for 'professional literature, colleagues and other resources' to develop their profession. Thirdly, they actively make use of various resources to improve their teaching-learning skills, solve their problems, and get 'feedback'. Lastly, they involve in 'professional development activities' such as classroom action research. Pollard, *et. al.* (2008, p. 14) clearly add that 'reflective teaching is applied in a cyclical or spiralling process, in which teachers monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continuously'. In this regard, it is obvious that reflective educators would always evaluate and improve their teaching and profession from self-criticism and other various resources such as colleagues, communities and refer-

ences.

If paid more attention, reflective practices can possibly be one of the ways to deal with the problems facing the teachers' roles. Since, in this context, they tend to get involved individually or collaboratively to anticipate the barriers which might emerge. Moreover, Pollard, *et. al.* (2008) point out that 'teacher judgment' and 'competence' could be more responsible if the teachers make use of 'evidence-based enquiry' in their teaching. Therefore, by taking account of such an inquiry, the possible problems and difficulties emerging during the teachers' career cycle and trajectory could be anticipated so that the smooth practice will possibly enhance their teaching performance.

'From routine to reflective teaching': An individual career trajectory

In the mid-1990s, I started taking a pre-service training in a university where I could learn knowledge of why and how to be a teacher. In regard to the materials offered, the course generally taught philosophical, theoretical and practical dimensions of education. In detail, for instance, I could learn an inspirational lesson of a Cartesian doctrine which underpins idealism and of a Newtonian experience which implies empiricism. Such philosophical ideas were to be debated and, in some cases, to be linked to educational theories. Other subjects such as educational management, curriculum, teaching methodology and evaluation were studied as well. In addition, a number of subjects referring to the National curriculum were taught in order for students to be more or less knowledgeable of the subjects. Almost all these subjects were then projected to support students to understand and implement them

in teaching practices. As long as it is concerned, the logic of learning from philosophy to practice of education was generally conducted. Yet, it is argued that because of merely referring to the content mastery, students tended to feel overwhelming and less reflective. There was hardly ever critical thought during the teaching practice. In daily meetings, learning any subject tended to be 'routinized' without reflections (Dewey (1993) cited in Pollard, 2002). Therefore, such a problematic circumstance was likely to make students, including me, less aware of possible disadvantages of, for instance, any particular teaching strategies practiced.

The less impact of the educational theories towards the subject of the teaching practice was empirically verified. As I was taking this subject, even though I have theoretically learnt various teaching styles in previous classes, I tended to concentrate on subject transmissions to peers (in a shadow class) or students (in a school where I took a real teaching practice) instead of applying teacher-centered and student-centered teaching interchangeably. This choice seemed not because of a particular demand such as national curriculum as indicated by Brown, *et al.* (2009), but it was quite influenced by the lack of practice. As noted earlier, there were a few reflections and practices conducted correlating with philosophical and theoretical dimensions of education so that as if the concepts that I have learnt might be separated from practices. It is obvious that, in this subject I took at the final term, I tended to take materials for granted without having criticism sufficiently. In short, my competence of 'acting rightly and appropriately' ('phronesis') as proposed by Hillier (2005) in the context of teaching practice at that time

seemed to have been quite far-reaching.

Even if I previously had a plan to be a teacher at any school, but after graduation, in the early-2000s, I was in fact promoted to be a teaching assistant in a university. At the stage of 'launching a career' (1-3 years) as shown by Huberman (1995) cited in Day (1999), I could note some particular experiences. At this phase, I received an induction programme managed by the university in a couple of months, providing activities such as self-introduction to new colleagues and the explanation of the existing units with their programmes and other chronologically ceremonial activities. In addition, I followed both training of instructional techniques and workshop of research methodology for newly qualified lecturers. In this respect, what did these activities then influence my perception of becoming a university educator? It might be clear that my perception has since been built whilst taking a pre-service training (see Cheng, *et al.*, 2010). The problem was that the pre-service training was part of my preparation of becoming an educator at school, not at university. Whilst I was still having some problems in line with the concept and the methods of teaching students at school, I was being taught several key points of how to teach university's students. I have read somewhere that school's teachers should understand the concept of 'pedagogy' (child's education) and, on the other hand, university's ones should develop their knowledge of the concept of 'andragogy' (adult education). Here, I would argue that although both concepts might be different in terms of practical techniques of approaching between children's and adult' needs, the ideal concept of education is basically an interaction instead of only using a one-way communication.

Through the training and workshop conducted during the induction, it seemed that I could refresh my knowledge or practices, and, in some cases, learn more about why and how to teach in higher education.

Even though the 2003 Education Act, which issues that the academic requirement for lecturers must be at least a master (post-graduate), had not been enacted, many academics said that it was reasonable if a university educator has reached the minimum standard such as the Masters level. Because of this reason and other factors, in 2001 I took a post-graduate programme in home country as part of in-service training. Reference to Murray, *et. al.* (2009) reveals that motivation to study, an opportunity given by the university and certain competences that should be reached, have led me to run this transitional period of time. Under this circumstance, receptively called 'a betwixt transition' by Horrison and McKeon (2009), I also started taking the chance to specify my skills, for instance, writing an article in media and an academic journal. By asking for one of my senior colleagues to criticize my article, I could then publish it in a local newspaper. Moreover, I also begun to get an annually competitive research grant provided by the University and to involve in being a participant in training for trainers. The latter activity held in 2004 was quite pivotal since I could interact with other colleagues from different universities in line with the skills needed to be a learning facilitator. Such an interesting moment has made me aware of my role as a newly qualified educator and other teaching challenges in higher education. It might be argued that the opportunity for teachers to develop their career is not only limited by the chance given

by certain institution where the teachers work as generally stated by Murray, *et. al.* (2009) but also by the wide range of their interactions. It can be the so-called 'a cyclic process' since such interactions will strengthen network and improve teaching skills. The latter would then improve professional competences and broaden network for the teachers.

In line with the stage of 'stabilization' (4-6 years), it has drawn attention to the fact that the induction and other activities have become a foundation of my teaching establishment and integration with other colleagues. My difficulties in the first three years in regard to the abilities to build teaching interactions tended to be gradually resolved. Even if I very often deliver the subjects by applying one-way teaching methods such as lectures, but, in another time I also tried to practice some active learning methods such as 'teaching starts with brainstorming and questions', 'small group discussions' and 'classroom debates'. It seems that my interactions with colleagues who have been quite advanced in practicing such active learning, have given me much more benefits, not only enhancing the possible quality of learning for students (Ng and Tan, 2009) but also 'collaborative dispositions' (Parkison, 2009) with my colleagues. Initially, I tended to imitate what they have practiced and gradually, I started making a little bit variation for my own teaching style. This 'self-directed professional development' as Minott (2010) perceptively states, might happen because of this intensive interaction and experimentation. Although I sometimes encountered some barriers such as the lack of knowledge of choosing appropriate teaching methods fitting with learning objectives, contents and time limitation, I did

not get 'frustrated' as indicated by Hursh (1995) cited in Smith (1995). Through these efforts, I would say that I could even have much 'deeper learning' (Hedberg, 2009) from either my possible mistakes or a little bit of my progressions.

My effort to be more familiar with some innovative teaching methods seemed to have flourished gradually. In 2006, I conducted Classroom Action Research (CAR) on one of the subjects I taught in a class. Again, I worked collaboratively with my colleague who monitored a couple of meetings of my teaching. Because of the essence of such research is monitoring, evaluating and revising the teaching practice (Pollard, *et. al.*, 2008, p. 14), I received plenty of considerations and corrections. One of them was that I needed to have certain teaching instruments which guide students and me in observing and analyzing both my teaching development and students' learning progress. It was quite clear as I read Chiptin, Simon and Galipeau (2008)'s practice when they used 'the objective knowledge growth framework' (OKGF) to monitor students' learning achievement. In this respect, the main dimension of teaching was not only learning targets, but also the stage-by-stage learning achievement. As promoted by Pelliccione and Raison (2009) about 'a structured reflective tool' by which students can analyze and reflect on their arguments, in the CAR I practiced, I had just conducted the process of teaching and learning without sufficient instruments. However, by working collaboratively, I could learn to recognize, as Malm (2009) called, 'uncertainties' in my teaching career. By practicing the reflection collaboratively or individually, I have more positive feelings such as empathy to my students about certain difficulties they

possibly encountered to improve their learning quality. Such reflective practices substantially help grow 'human flourishing' such as 'positive emotions' and 'positive engagement' (Ghaye, 2010; Shoffner, 2009). Thus, what I have conducted with my colleague seemed to have been part of my effort towards more qualified teaching and learning. Yet, I would say that I have not yet practiced such a type of important collaborative research continuously. Therefore, unfortunately, not all important criticism and suggestions from my colleague could be followed up.

By taking account of the stage of 'new challenge' of my teaching career (7-18 years), I would little bit argue that teaching skill improvement is a dynamic practice. As I have tried to conduct innovations, to be or not to be, I also encounter new challenges in my profession. In 2009, I got scholarship and have started studying abroad to pursue my second Masters degree. During my study in Europe, I have begun to interact with various learning resources in terms of tutors, students and references from different countries. Under these globally diverse circumstances, I have entered a new phase of how to bring some of the advanced notions and practices with me to my home country. On the one hand, I can possibly borrow them critically and reflectively to be implemented in the institution where I have worked and I would possibly have difficulties to adapt some European educational advancement to my home institution on the other. Regardless of having opportunities to access 'professional literature', 'colleagues' and 'global resources' as Snowball (2007, p. 257) said, by studying overseas, however, I have been in a new 'betwixt transition' (Horrison and McKeon, 2009) of my career trajectories in line with

the issue of adaptation, borrowing and possible implementation of these diverse resources into my educational institution.

The importance of reflective teaching for Islamic educators

What I have encountered as stated in the previous paragraphs is probably different from those also involved in educational fields. It is because of the possible differences of having experiences of why and how to teach. However, it is important to note that reflection in teaching possibly looks like the term 'transcendentalism' in a religious meaning which is pivotal for many educators of certain religion. Regarding this concept, Immanuel Kant, a prominent German philosopher, said that "all knowledge transcendental ... is concerned not with objects but with our mode of knowing objects." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism>, 4/4/2012). Put simply, the main problem in this life is not merely how to change or manipulate certain objects or circumstances, rather, is how to understand and rethink about what we think and why we think about those objects. Related to the reflective teaching, therefore, teachers should be more critical of their own choices of teaching approaches for instance.

There are lots of findings which state that teaching approaches in Religious—including Islamic—Education have accentuated on a one-way communication (see Barnes & Wright, 2006; Kassem & Murphy, 2009) such as lectures. These practices seem to be recognized as the only way of transmitting the religious knowledge to students. Furthermore, the teachers of this subject also implement such mode of teaching without any criticism. If their students do not understand

what the teachers have delivered, the teachers would mostly say that it is because of students' lacks of understanding of the subject taught. In short, the culprit is students as a conclusion. In this case, the so-called 'religious transcendentalism' seems important to propose that Islamic teachers need to try to fairly scrutinize their teaching and learning achievement. By transcending their routine activities of teaching, the Islamic teachers might be able to take account of what they have facilitated in their classrooms. The activity which encourages them to be more aware of their weaknesses in their teaching tasks is quite similar to the so-called 'reflection'. In this respect, being reflective or transcendent is likely to be more Islamic or pious.

The process of reflective teaching for Islamic teachers might be able to be conducted either personally or collectively. The personal reflection of teaching leads them to try to individually understand what they have taught. However, such reflection tends to close the possibility of others' suggestions. I would argue that the collective reflection of teaching will highly possibly directs them to correct and improve their teaching quality. Their colleagues' suggestions for instance, would become the so-called 'second opinions' since their own thoughts and feelings might be limited in trying to deal with their possible teaching difficulties. The best practices of some Chinese teachers for instance, show that cooperative learning will accelerate their teaching improvement (Chen and Maanen, 1999). As fitted with the soul of 'change' and 'improvement' in teaching and learning, Islamic teachers should be open-minded in the context of improving Islamic education teaching. Finally, I also argue that to

strengthen the Islamic teachers' reflection on their teaching, the practice of Classroom Action Research (CAR), as I have noted earlier, might be valuable for them. It is not only to lead the reflection of their teaching to be more systematic but also to optimize collaborative work between an Islamic teacher and his or her colleagues.

CONCLUSION

A teaching career seems to face many challenges. In this essay, by analyzing my teaching career trajectory and development, I have often encountered difficulties regarding the effort to implement innovative teaching styles. Such problems seem to be affected by my teaching notions and practices which have no longer been matured. Even if the more I tried certain innovative teaching method, the more I encountered new barriers, but, by practicing more reflective teaching, I could gradually overcome such teaching barriers. In this regard, the practice of reflective teaching has generally flourished my positive affection to students' learning processes and my positive relationship with the people involved. The reflective teaching which bases on evidence-based inquiry, feedback from outsiders and continuous improvement, appears to be a challenge for my own teaching profession. Based on my experience of practicing collaborative Classroom Action Research (CAR) which underpins reflective teaching, I would say that teaching activities need to be reflected and improved. Nowadays, my new interactions with globally diverse learning resources seem to be the new challenge of the possibility of borrowing and implementing them in my home institution. On this basis it may be inferred that becoming a reflective educator is a gradual process instead of being

given. The possible way of practicing teaching reflection is try to optimizing learning resources available, monitoring the implementation of teaching plans and evaluating the output of learning more reflectively used as a feedback to the following teaching and learning activities. Finally, based on such an experience, the reflective activity may be pivotal to implement by Islamic educators. By practicing reflection on their teaching collaboratively, the Islamic teachers will have the chance to optimize their teaching improvement and their students' achievement simultaneously.

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