Blended Learning in an Advanced Course on Greek Tragedy

Nikos Manousakis
University of Athens

Abstract
In recent years, computer supported learning has gained ground in a whole range of courses. The study of classical literature (ancient Greek and Latin), a course that has been taught for centuries around the world, is not an exception. This paper reports on a theoretical and practical approach to the computer-assisted study of Classics in higher education. We make reference to the main theoretical guidelines and some influential digital media and resources used in this direction, and we also present the conditions and results of a study that took place in order to test the approach under analysis in the field.

Keywords
blended learning, Greek tragedy, educational technology, LMS, classics, higher education

Introduction
From the slate of the ancient world to the modern laptop, from real-world practice to virtual world role-play, from classroom lecture to recorded recitation, from solitary study to a community of learners, technology continues to develop; and with it the techniques to learn languages [spoken and non spoken] (Reinhard). Traditional media are being transformed into digital ones and the texts and tools of classical studies are no exception. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, repositories of articles and books of philological interest, and corpora of ancient Greek and Latin texts are some of the resources that are being digitized to replace traditional forms and to allow a more direct, better, and safer approach to texts by ‘trapping’ the ancient knowledge in a network of digital information (Bolter). The great challenge for the rising generation of scholars is to build a digital infrastructure with which to expand our intellectual range (Crane, et al.). In this paper we report on a pilot project and present how classics and digital media can be combined in a functional way to enrich the process of teaching and learning ancient Greek in higher education. We focused on the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) technologies (Moodle platform), and how students can be motivated through blended learning to embrace classics, a so called “tough” area of studies.

As far as the educational planning is concerned, our choice for this study was blended learning. Blended learning as described here is “a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home” (Staker and Horn 3). It is characterized by its student-centered-humanistic approach (Derntl and Motsching-Pitrik; Ginns and Ellis), which was developed by the...
American psychologist Carl Rogers (Derntl & Motsching-Pitrik). Learners participate actively in the learning process by undertaking various roles. Another feature is its multi-dimensional communication. Specifically, the increased interaction between the learner and the teacher, among learners themselves and between students and external sources, is very noticeable. Moreover, according to Gray, blended learning by combining tested traditional methods with technology creates a collaborative and dynamic environment for learning.

For the design of the learning material, our focus has been to mitigate the static way that students perceive and approach Greek Tragedy. This means that we have tried to escape the logic of teaching Greek Tragedy in universities by only aiming at the grammatical-syntactical-metrical etc analysis of the text. According to Alessi and Trollip, in order to make effective use of educational technology, the first rule is that you must choose when and where is it more likely to be used beneficially. A good example is the usual lack of motivation, “mobilization” of students for courses concerning the study of the ancient world. Therefore, since our program falls into this category, we chose to enrich our material with hypermedia, such as video and audio recordings. The fact that the text we want to teach is a stage play gave us many options of this kind. The video as a medium is attractive, fun and motivating. The information provided through recorded videos is easier to be remembered, due to the visual experience and the emotional impact (Swan).

**Methods**

**Goals**

The main research target for this study was to present how blended learning can affect the teaching of classics in higher education, depicted both in student achievement and satisfaction.

The overall objective of teaching ancient Greek literature is for students to understand the structures and norms of the ancient Greek language, and to gain insight into the work of the major representatives of each historical period of ancient Greece and of the foreign areas that have been affected by this language. Our goal in this project was the modernization of the field, especially concerning teaching. To do so, we organized the abovementioned course design using blended learning. It is an educational approach that balances multiple face-to-face educational techniques with coherent technologies, and is perhaps the fastest growing form of the kind (Bliuc, Goodyear, and Ellis; Köse; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison).

The experimental use of digital media in teaching classics in higher education in a Greek University is depicted in the case study we describe here (Cf. Donmoyer). The major elements of the study and teaching of ancient Greek language that we tried to improve by incorporating digital means are the:

- grammatical, syntactical and metrical phenomena of the ancient Greek language;
- clear distinction between the several textual types (genres) of ancient Greek literature and introduction to the work of its main representatives;
- ways of linking the textual type with its mythological framework;
- political, historical and literary context of the texts; 
- concept of intertextuality;
• overall influence of classical texts on modern times.

Participants

Our research took place at the University of Athens (UOA) and investigated the teaching of ancient Greek Drama from the actual Greek text to undergraduate students (3rd semester in a total of 8). The participation in the program, which ran in parallel with the teaching process, was voluntary. One hundred and five students, approximately one eighth of the class, registered for the program. Their motive for participation was their desire to see if and how the subject of their study can co-exist with the use of technology and what results this combination can bring.

Approximately 85 students were informed about the opportunity during the first lecture by the researchers. 105 students were registered in the virtual course created in Moodle platform for the needs of the course (male and female students with an age range from 20-34 and moderate technology skills). Comparing our class attendance record with our Moodle one we noted that 83% of the students who were registered in our study were also attending the lectures. The gap between the number of the students who were originally informed of the study at the first lecture and the number who finally participated shows that the program gained its own momentum.

Blended Learning Program Design

The experimental program consisted of web-enhanced learning activities in addition to regularly scheduled face-to-face classes. Class sessions occurred once a week and were all given by the same professor. Each class lasted three hours. The theme of the course was ancient Greek Drama and especially the Sophocles’ tragedy Philoctetes. The course was taught in the winter semester (3rd) of 2009-2010, in the School of Philosophy, department of Greek Philology, domain of Classical Philology of National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UOA). The primary objective of this department is to provide students with many different literary interests and to encompass the whole spectrum of knowledge about the Hellenic literary production across the centuries and its ongoing dynamic discourse with the western civilization. The course ran from September 29, 2009, until December 15, 2009. Class structure consisted of one and a half hour lecture analysis (grammatical, syntactical, lexical, metrical and factual) of specific verses of the text (see Appendix A) and one hour and a half discussing the issues arising from that analysis. This discussion was always left open to the students. The students were given hints through the Moodle program to research more on their own. The results of their research were always discussed in the next lecture.

The digital media that we had at our disposal and that we used in order to teach ancient Greek literature were:

• digital text corpora of ancient Greek literature in form of critical editions,

• electronic Dictionaries of ancient Greek language,

• online grammar and syntax of ancient Greek language,
• repositories of articles and books concerning ancient Greek literature,

• additional digital material concerning ancient Greek literature, such as videos of ancient drama performances, animated movies of Philoctetes’ cave in Lemnos and 3D presentations of the island.  

For the implementation of our study, the Moodle platform was divided into twelve units, one per week (see Appendix A for week-to-week syllabus). These units divide the subject of the course by the creation of an equal number of specific Moodle assignments, allowing students to be better engaged. The first two units were introductory (without textual analysis), concerning the ancient Greek Tragedy in general, its particular features and its main representatives, with an emphasis on the works of Sophocles (see Appendix B for an indicative lesson plan). Afterwards, the text of *Philoctetes* was presented in its mythological context and textual dimensions. The remaining lectures were devoted to the text analysis (grammar, syntax, meter, factual) that largely follows the existing common structure of the Tragedy division: prologue, episodes, stasima and exodus. The learning material we created for each unit followed the auditorium lectures and consisted of: explanatory texts concerning the specific issues of the course subject; articles from academic journals; learning objects presenting specific aspects of Greek Drama; videos of educational content; and videotaped performances and rehearsals of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*.

The students had to follow some very specific steps that were presented in the Moodle assignments in order to approach in the most constructive way the subject of each section of the program. Those steps were:

Textual analysis of a certain passage:

• Use of the hypertext and scholia of *Philoctetes* provided through the Perseus Digital Library, in order to study the grammatical, syntactical, lexical and factual analysis of the certain passage.

Analysis concerning the concepts and ideas given in the certain passage:

• Use of the Modern Greek translations of *Philoctetes* (provided by www.mikros-apoploous.gr and other sites), in order to conceive more clearly the meaning of the certain passage and the form that it gets when translated.

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2 Our study presents the use of various educational “tools” in an effort to design the optimal blended learning model for teaching classics in higher education: The first and foremost of the digital media we used to approach the themes of our program is the Perseus Digital Library, a significant effort for a computer-supported holistic and interactive view of classical literature. The Perseus Digital Library is an evolving digital library of the Tufts University in the USA, used by researchers, academics, teachers and students in many schools, and hosted as a link to many humanitarian nodes on the Internet. The Perseus Digital Library includes a large interactive text corpus of the ancient Greek literature. From Homer to the Hellenistic age, it presents a vast amount of important sources concerning the ancient Greek literature. That is why we used it as the main tool in our program. The digital texts included in the library, which can be accessed freely, allow scholars to gain time in their study by being able to look up the definition or the grammatical type of words just by clicking on them. The vast commentary of texts included in the Perseus Digital Library is also an important factor in the approach of their meaning. By searching the analysis of the texts made by the philologists, students and scholars get the chance to acquire insight into the subject that they study.

In our program, we also used tools such as the Portal for the Greek language, retrieving mostly translations of *Philoctetes* in Modern Greek, Google Books, retrieving books about classics, National Theatre of Greece online Archives, retrieving videos about the play under analysis, and many more. The applications mentioned here have been used partially or combined at times, depending on the features that made them useful in the study of classical literature that we designed.
• Following links to other educational sites (scientific papers, videos of the play etc.), in order to perceive important aspects of the text under analysis.

A weekly structured Web Quest covering a full spectrum approach for each section (see Appendix B) was provided via Moodle, leading participants to these digital learning resources, which allowed them to engage more deeply with the texts and themes of each week’s face-to-face class session. Web Quests are defined as research activities, where all or most of the information used by students is derived from the Internet. Web Quests are designed and developed to creatively use the training time and put the emphasis on using information rather than searching for them (Dodge, 2001). Each Web Quest was implemented through the use of detailed web assignments. These included a brief factual analysis of the text being studied that week and a series of specially selected digital educational resources covering the full spectrum approach of each section.

Research Design

The evaluation study of the program was multifaceted and it was performed by analyzing students’ performance in the final course exams, by studying the records of the course that were kept by the researchers, primarily of in-class questions and statements of the participants about the program; and also by analyzing the students’ opinion about the learning effectiveness of the program. The latter was identified through a post-test questionnaire (see Appendix C) that was filled out by the students on the last day of the course. It consisted of 19 questions and was largely based on the post-test questionnaire CADMOS-E (Retalis et al.; Psaromiligkos and Retalis), which is a mixed method approach using questionnaires to elicit quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire consisted primarily of Yes/No, multiple choice, and 3- or 4-point rating scale questions that were used to evaluate the contribution of various factors to the programs’ effectiveness, such as the type and quality of the various learning resources, the usability of the utilized tools, etc. It was given at the final lecture of the course and was completed by 81 students who were present. The data analysis was performed through the SPSS program for statistical analysis.

We also looked at student success measured via the course examination grade. The questionnaire also included a section with a number of open-ended questions in order to supplement the quantitative data. The open-ended section was about students’ likes and dislikes regarding the learning material. In addition, we also decided to compare the results of the students who participated in our program with the results of those who did not. Thus, we examined a corpus of 177 tests, corresponding to the total number of the students who took the exams of the course at the end of the semester, with grades ranging from 1 to 9.

Results

Student Questionnaire

The attitude of the students towards the auxiliary role of the program provided through the Moodle platform was generally positive. Students declared through the questionnaire that they were supported in the study of Greek Drama. The strongly positive opinions represented 85% of the respondents (Appendix C, Question 9; see Figure 1).
Moreover, 51.3% of students gave the Moodle platform the highest rating for usability and another 40% rated it “[e]asy to use with minor difficulties” (Appendix C, Question 2).

The combination of the face-to-face lectures with the use of the digital platform in teaching Greek Drama also received positive feedback. 80% of the respondents stated that this combination was sufficiently or very helpful for the study of the specific course. (Question 11; see Figure 2).
The learning resources that emerged as most interesting were the audio-visual material and the videos particularly. The use of audio-visual material as a learning resource seemed to encourage the involvement of the participants in the program and to motivate them in the process of study: 64.5% of students ranked this as one of the three most stimulating resources (Question 17). Surprisingly, featured articles and reviews from scientific repositories ranked second on the preferences of the students, with almost one-third of students naming this as a most stimulating resource. Thus, students seem to have discovered through the program the great value of featured articles and reviews from scientific repositories about classics.

**Exam performance**

Of the 105 students enrolled in the study, 85 (81%) participated in the final exam of the course. An additional 92 students who had not enrolled in the blended learning study also took the exam. The grading scale covered a range from 1 (total failure) to 10 (excellent), but no test was graded with 10.

Among students who did not participate in the study—about 52% of the total of 177 tests that were examined—approximately 50% managed to get a passing grade (5 or above), but only 10% of them managed to get an excellent (9 or 8) or a very good one (7).

Students participating in the blended learning study were significantly more successful, with 87% receiving a passing grade. Even more striking is the fact that 37% managed to obtain an excellent score (9 or 8; there were no 10s scored) and 40% obtained from good to very good rating (6 or 7). Only 13% did not pass the exams (1–4). The blended learning program was apparently quite beneficial for its participants concerning the final exams. Furthermore, the opinion of the course professor about our program (especially the process of teaching classics through an LMS), summarized in a report that he prepared for us, clearly reflected his positive opinion and the positive opinions of the students about our effort.

**Discussion**

As we hoped, students had the opportunity to communicate with each other and discuss the course of the project, using the discussion forum provided by the Moodle platform. They posted questions mainly concerning the use of the projects’ tools and learning material, and also some more specific queries addressed to the tutors concerning metrical, grammatical and other related issues. The participation of the students in the discussion forum was average (not adequate for statistical processing) but satisfactory, bearing in mind that the educational use of the medium was totally new to them. There was also a News Forum in use, mostly to motivate students to get involved more, by informing them through email each time something new was added to the platform.

This research has as its main objective the fullest possible enhancement of the combination of classics and educational technology (Cf. Lister & Smith). Our effort, judging by the data mentioned above, seems to be effective. Both the professor of the course and the students who participated in the program declared that our program was beneficial for them in several ways and also stated that they believe it can be generalized to other courses too. Nevertheless, existing deficiencies and problems concerning “mixing” classics with informatics have to be taken under serious consideration for further research in the field. For example, the digital tools available are continuing to evolve. Furthermore, the way digital tools and practices are combined with the actual subject of the course in the educational practice can evoke much discussion and debate.
The use of educational technology in teaching classics offers new perspectives in the field. Traditional pedagogies will not be abandoned: the examination of Greek Tragedy using the analytical method of Aristotle will continue. What will eventually happen is that with the support of technology and informatics, the dramatic texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, not to mention Aristophanes and Menander, will come alive. By the use of hypermedia, written information gets visual and audio format, giving students a strong motivation to deal with their subject of study under a new light.

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WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

WEEK BY WEEK BY SYLLABUS

Week 1 (Introduction 1):
A. Introduction to the dramatic genre:
   • Birth of Tragedy
   • Typical structure
   • The main representatives (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides)
B. The Poetics of Aristotle:
   • Tragedy and structure

Week 2 (Introduction 2):
A. The myth of Philoctetes:
   • The elements of the myth
   • The different perspective given by Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles
   • Subsequent use of Philoctetes’ myth: from Heiner Müller to Yiannis Ritsos.

Week 3 (Verses 1-53):
A. The ethos of the tragic hero in Sophocles’ Philoctetes
   • The “deceitful” Odysseus
   • The “naïve” Neoptolemus
B. Iambic trimeter. The meter of Greek tragedy
C. The stagecraft of Greek Tragedy
D. References to the hero Philoctetes by ancient writers

Week 4 (Verses 54-218):
A. The arms of Achilles. The myth of Tragedy.
B. Deceit, violence and persuasion in ancient Greek tragedy. The example of Philoctetes.
G. Lessons of Sophists in Tragedy.
D. The style and language of Sophocles’ plays.

Week 5 (Verses 219-358):
A. The bow of Hercules. Myth and symbol.
B. The friendship between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus.
C. The Limnos of Philoctetes (video presentation).

Week 6 (Verses 359-541):
A. The chorus as a functional feature in ancient Tragedy in general and in Sophocles’ Philoctetes
   in particular.
B. Tragic irony.
C. Neoptolemus and the path to self-knowledge.

3 All appendices originally in modern Greek.
Week 7 (Verses 542-645):
A. The concept of deception in Sophocles. The conclusive example of *Philoctetes*.
B. The scene of the trader. Theater within theater.
C. The seer Helemus and the oracle in *Philoctetes*.

Week 8 (Verses 646-864):
A. The path of Neoptolemus to self-knowledge in the second episode.
B. Mythical Persons:
   1. The myth of Ixion and exploitation by Sophocles at *Philoctetes*’ first stasimon.
   2. The Sleep as a mythological figure (verses 827-838)
C. The concept of pity and envy in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*.

Week 9 (Verses 865-909):
B. Dilemma as an element of Tragedy in general and as the focal point of the third episode of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*.
C. The nature of Neoptolemus. Shame as a hero’s virtue.

Week 10 (Verses 910-1046):
A. The monologues in tragedy.
B. Silence as a dramatic feature in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*
C. Supplication in Greek Tragedy

Week 11 (Verses 1047-1408):
A. Kommos as a structural element of Tragedy in general and its role in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* in particular
B. The exodus as part of the tragedy and pseudo-exodus in *Philoctetes*

Week 12 (Verses 1409-1470):
A. Virtue in Greek Tragedy.
B. The Deus ex Machina as a functional part of Greek Tragedy and its use in *Philoctetes*.
C. Divine and human level in Greek Tragedy
APPENDIX B

SAMPLE WEB QUEST ASSIGNMENT

Lecture 3: Text analysis. Verses 1-53 (Prologue)

Now that you have read the whole text once, let’s study it…

Presentation

A. The ethos of the tragic hero in Sophocles’ Philoctetes
   • The “deceitful” Odysseus
   • The “naïve” Neoptolemus

B. Iambic trimeter. The meter of Greek tragedy

C. The stagecraft of Greek Tragedy

D. References to the hero Philoctetes by ancient writers

You have one week to… follow the steps

1. Study the text (verses 1-53) using the grammatical and lexical tools. Try to make your own translation

   http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0193%3Acard%3D54
   (the hyper-text of Sophocles Philoctetes by Francis Storr)

   (introduction to the text)

   http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0026%3Atext%3Dcomm%3Acommline%3D1
   (text commentary)

2. Consult the given translations (verses 1-53). Go back to the main text and try to understand the choices the translators have made

   http://www.mikrosapoplous.gr/sophocles/phil00.html (G. Blanas)

3. Odysseus and Neoptolemus

Study the texts below and make a list of similarities and differences in the ethos of the two heroes. Who would you choose to be and why?

“Neoptolemos,” Wikipedia


Blundell

4. Iambic trimeter: Study the texts below and then go back to the hyper-text of Sophocles’ Philoctetes given above (verses 1-53) and track down 3 examples of the specific meter


Holtsmark

5. Stagecraft: Take a look on the links below and try to navigate through them to at least 3 other web pages with additional information about the stagecraft of the Ancient Greek Theatre. Write down what you have discovered.

Phillips

Aggelikopoulou

6. The hero Philoctetes in the Ancient Greek sources:

First of all, try to find the 3 missing web links… it’ not that hard. Then study the passages and try to find out what antiquity was thinking about Philoctetes. Locate the controversies…

Homer:
- Iliad: B. 718, 725 (…)
- Odyssey: γ. 190, θ. 215 (…)

Ilias Parva:
Fragments 1 & 12 (link)

Cypria:
Fragments 1 (link)

Pindar:
1st Pythionikos, στ. 50 (…)
Dio Chrysostom:
(Very important source: Orations 52 and 59 by Dio are about the myth of Philoctetes and the texts written concerning his story)
-Oration nr. 52: Philoctetes by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides (link)
-Oration nr. 59: The prologue of Euripides’ Philoctetes (Greek text), (English translation)

Quintus Smyrnaeus:
-Book 9: fr. [353], [438] (link)
-Book 10*: fr. [50], [219] (link)
-Book 11: fr. [54], [494] (link)
-Book 12: fr. [86], [337] (link)
-Book 14: fr. [126] (link)

All your findings will be discussed in the classroom, so don’t forget them at home!
APPENDIX C

University of Piraeus – Digital Systems Department

University of Athens – Greek Philology Department

Ancient Greek Philology Course – 3rd semester

Supplemental program for teaching Ancient Greek literature with the use of digital resources

-The data obtained from the questionnaires will be used exclusively for research purposes-

PROGRAM QUESTIONNAIRE - QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

1. I am a …… semester student
   (3rd sem.: 81%/ 5th sem.: 5.1%/ 6th sem.: 1.3%/ 7th sem.: 3.8%)

2. The course platform (Moodle) was:
   A) Totally easy to use (51.3%)
   B) Easy to use with minor difficulties (40%)
   C) Manageable but with important difficulties (6.3%)
   D) Unmanageable (2.4%)

3. I have used Moodle L.M.S. before in an other class:
   A) Yes (56.8%)
   B) No (43.2%)

4. I have studied for this class:
   A) Through the whole semester (36.45%)
   B) Only in the exam period (63.55%)
5. I follow the supplemental program through Moodle from the beginning:

A) Yes (66.7%)

B) No (33.3%)

C) I do not know about the program

6. I visit Moodle to study for the course:

A) Every day (7.7%)

B) 3 times a week (21.8%)

C) Once a week (46.2%)

D) Once in two weeks (24.3%)

7. I am familiar with Perseus Digital Library and the hyper-text corpus of Ancient Greek literature:

A) Yes (75.3%)

B) No (24.7%)

8. I am familiar with the course forum in the Moodle platform:

A) Yes and I have used it (17.3%)

B) Yes but I haven’t used it (61.7%)

C) No (21%)

9. Moodle platform helped me to follow the course and gain insight into its content:

A) A lot (35%)

B) Sufficiently (50%)

C) A little (11.3%)

D) Not at all (3.7%)
10. Was it difficult for me to deal with the Moodle resources given in English:

A) Not at all (82.5%)
B) A little (16.9%)
C) Very difficult (0.6%)

11. The combination of classroom teaching with the use of Moodle for the course helped me study in a more holistic way:

A) A lot (33.8%)
B) Sufficiently (46.3%)
C) A little (16.2%)
D) Not at all (3.7%)

12. The Moodle platform gave me motivation to study for the course throughout the whole semester:

A) Yes (71.3%)
B) No (28.7%)

13. My expectations for the supplemental program were confirmed:

A) Very much (68.8%)
B) Moderately (26.2%)
C) Not at all (5%)

14. The Moodle platform resources helped me study for the final exams of the course:

A) A lot (76.6%)
B) A little (18.5%)
C) Not at all (4.9%)
15. Moodle platform is more manageable than other learning management systems I have used before:

A) Yes (86.4%)
B) No (13.6%)

16. The use of audio and video resources as learning material in the Moodle platform motivated me to get involved into the supplemental program:

A) A lot (73.1%)
B) A little (19.2%)
C) Not at all (7.7%)

17. Which were for me the three (3) most stimulating resources given in the Moodle platform throughout the whole course:

A) …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
B) …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………
C) …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

(videos of performances (64.5%), multiple modern translations (31.6%))

18. I believe that Ancient Greek literature course becomes more interesting when taught with the use of digital resources:

A) Totally (88.7%)
B) At some point (7.6%)
C) Not at all (3.7%)
19. Improvements I would like to see in the supplemental program:

A) ..............................................................................................................................
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B) ..............................................................................................................................
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C) ..............................................................................................................................
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