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Darasawang, P., Chamot, A. U. and Cooker, L.
Andy Barfield and Natanael Delgado (eds.). Autonomy in Language Learning: Stories of Practices (Chapter 8). United Kingdom: IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG. 2013. pp. 87 - 96.

The definitive version of this article was published as Darasawang, P., Chamot, A. U. and Cooker, L. (2013) The Story of a Self-Access Centre: Reflections on Challenges and Success (Chapter 8). In Andy Barfield and Natanael Delgado (eds.), Autonomy in Language Learning: Stories of Practices. United Kingdom: IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG. pp. 87 - 96.

Chapter 9

The story of a self-access centre: Reflections on challenges and success

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Part One

Pornapit's story

From 20 years of running the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC), there are many good and bad memories and experiences. But when I look back at what we have done in order to keep it working and be recognized as a model self-access centre by various institutions in Thailand whereas other self-access centres in Thailand have faded, I think it is because we set it up and run it on a theory basis. With this knowledge and experience, we have helped many schools set up their own self-access centres and have run many workshops for many educational institutions at all levels nationwide so they can understand the concept and set self-access centres up and operate them to suit their needs and users.

Many people are sceptical if the setting up of the SALC is a 'fad' or not. I admit that the decision to set it up at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) partly came from practical reasons, i.e., we were about to offer a course on individualization, which was an optional course in our MA programme in 1990. Leslie Dickinson was invited by the British Council to help us develop the course, and he introduced the concept of learner autonomy to us. He showed us how learner autonomy can be fostered through different contexts, one of them the self-access centre, although its main function is not directly related to the development of learner autonomy. At first, the decision to set up the SALC was to demonstrate how we might implement the concept in a real context. We wanted to demonstrate how choices could be given to learners through the materials, learning strategies, and learning objectives which the students set up to improve their English. In some educational contexts that are more open, choices can be given in class as a part of the learning process. However, with the constraints of the existing curriculum and exams at KMUTT, we had to provide choices through activities as a supplement to classroom learning.

The self-access centre perfectly served the immediate needs of our context in that the students only study English compulsory courses with us in the first three semesters of their university studies. But by the time they graduate, they are expected to be fluent in English, especially in their speaking and writing. English language teachers are well aware that if the students have no chance to expose themselves to the target language continuously, it is very difficult for them to become fluent. In our case, the students had no English exposure for two and a half years before graduation; they might read English texts but did not have to speak or write in English. The year after the SALC was set up, we changed our curriculum to integrate into the compulsory courses learner-training components such as self-assessment or explicit teaching of learning strategies. The SALC then became used as a place for the students to choose the materials to practise further the strategies learned in class.

We have tried various ways to encourage the students to use the SALC with the hope that they would be familiar with, and confident to continue, learning English by themselves using the facilities provided or choosing appropriate resources they know. The use of the SALC was encouraged in a restricted manner such as teachers assigning the students to use specific materials in the SALC, teachers giving 5% of the total scores for the students to work on the language skills/points they identified as their weakness by choosing materials in the SALC to practise for that skill, and students choosing to use the resources in the SALC to complete a particular task.

The establishment of the SALC had a twofold purpose, a resource for undergraduate students to practise English and a lab for postgraduate students to analyse the system of a self-access centre, how it is used, and a place for both postgraduate students and teachers to conduct research on self-access learning. After we offered 'Individualisation' as an optional course in the MA programme, we decided to offer a postgraduate diploma in Resource-Based Language Learning in 1991 because we thought that one course is

not enough for the teachers to understand how to develop learner autonomy. The postgraduate diploma was a one-year programme which provided knowledge about training the learners to 'learn how to learn'; learner autonomy and examples of how it has been fostered in various educational institutions; how to integrate the learner training with classroom teaching, setting up a self-access centre/corner; and how to develop self-access materials as a resource for learner training. The students had to do a project to demonstrate how they could put theory into practice such as integrating learner autonomy through learner training in class or setting up a small self-access corner in class.

The SALC was, as I mentioned earlier, established in 1991. We first looked for a place that was as accessible as possible. Unfortunately, we were only allowed to use a room that could accommodate up to 50 students. That meant we had to work harder in order to introduce the SALC to the fourth-year students who needed English for their future careers. With a limited budget and a conventional approach to procuring furniture, our first SALC could operate with existing books and magazines; many were donated by the US Embassy, together with a TV and videos. We had motivated students who wanted to master English before graduation, and lecturers who wanted to practise English to pass various exams also came to use the SALC frequently. Some complained that we did not have enough materials, while others used more open resources such as newspapers and books.

In 1993, two years after the SALC was set up, the Department moved to a new building where we could house SALC on a whole floor and accommodate up to 250 students at a time. The use of the SALC was then integrated closely with classes because three classes could come in and have their students use various corners in the SALC all at the same time. More choices could be provided to the students through materials, skills, and how to use the materials.

For the MA in Resource-Based Language Learning, the SALC was used for students to analyse the concept of individualization, how to set up and manage the self-access centre, and how to act as a helper/counsellor in the SALC. With more input from the analysis of the SALC by the MA students based on theory and the results from their research on different aspects of the SALC (such as learner training, material development, skills for consultation, aspects that contribute to accessibility of the SALC), we could develop the SALC continuously with clear objectives and direction. Every five years, we invited an expert from outside to evaluate the SALC such as Susan Sheerin and Hayo Reinders. They helped us reflect on our objectives, users and our direction. At present, we have expanded the SALC to be electronically accessed in order to cope with the expansion of the university and changes in students' learning styles.

For 20 years, we have continuously offered training on self-access learning and setting up of self-access centres; we have also shared with staff from other self-access centres our experiences of (a) producing in-house materials which incorporate learner training aspects such as reflection, suggested learning strategies, and self-assessment, (b) giving consultations, which can be done face to face, on the phone and online, and (c) how to manage a self-access centre over time.

Anna's response

Pornapit tells the story of 20 years of setting up and running the Self-Access Learning Centre (SALC) at her university. Providing language learners with choices in how and what they learned was not possible in the regular language

courses at that time because of the demands of the set curriculum and examinations. Therefore, the creation of the SALC gave students their first opportunity to choose their own learning goals, materials, and learning strategies. Since the inception of the SALC, however, the university curriculum has been modified, so that now students learn about topics such as self-assessment and learning strategies, then go to the SALC to practice them. This seems like a very productive way of linking courses with practice opportunities.

The record of progress over the last 20 years is impressive. Even though the SALC had to start in a small space which could hold only 50 students at a time, it has now grown to accommodate 250 students! A materials collection that started out as mostly print, TV, and video resources has kept up with new advances in technology and the materials can now be accessed electronically. The types of services offered by the SALC have also expanded to meet the growing needs of its users.

Reading Pornapit's story really makes me want to visit her SALC and see it in action for myself! I would be interested to know more about some of the different people who have helped to create and maintain the SALC, some of the incidents that stand out as critical in the SALC's development, and, most of all, I'd like to hear Pornapit's own voice, her point(s) of view, and her feelings as she persisted in what must have been an uphill struggle at times (or most of the time!).

As for my own engagement with learner autonomy, it has come about through my research on language learner strategies and the effects of language learning strategy instruction. My earliest research was on the identification of the learning strategies of high school ESL students. The experience of interviewing real students and discovering the many ways in which they endeavored to learn English for both social and academic purposes was fundamental to my subsequent thinking. It made me change from a focus on the best way to teach language to the best way to help students become better language learners. Later, I branched out into investigating the learning strategies of primary, secondary, and tertiary level students learning a variety of foreign languages (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish). Finally, I have been exploring how teachers teach learning strategies to their language learners and how the students respond to this instruction.

As with Pornapit's SALC, there have been ups and downs along the way. I was devastated to read one high school student's comment on the learning strategy instruction in his French class during the year: 'This was stupid, a waste of time. I resent the fact that taxpayers' money was used for a study like this—everybody already knows how to use these strategies—we didn't learn anything new.' Fortunately, the next student's comment was: 'This was great! The strategies my teacher taught really helped me learn French. And I could use the same strategies in other classes—why didn't any of my other teachers ever talk about learning strategies for different subjects?' Comments like these made me realize that students who are already autonomous need a different kind of instruction from those who have not yet learned how to learn. So these early studies led me to explore how learning strategies instruction needs to be differentiated to meet the needs of both successful language learners and those struggling to make sense of a new language. It seems to me that autonomous language learners are individuals who can set their own goals, reflect on their own approach to language learning, and select learning strategies that they know will help them to learn successfully.

Because of my interest in language learning strategies, I am particularly interested in the details of how Pornapit's university and SALC have helped language learners

understand and use learning strategies that help them not only to learn English more successfully, but also to help them to become autonomous learners.

Lucy's response

When I read Pornapit's story about establishing the self-access learning centre (SALC) in KMUTT, I identified closely with several aspects of her story. One of the first things that Pornapit tells us is that the KMUTT SALC was set up and run on a theory basis. I believe that this is very important to the success of a SALC. When we established the SALC at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Japan in 2001, we had a strong underpinning philosophy that the purpose of the centre would be to develop our students' learner autonomy for language learning. The layout of the centre, the resources we provided and the courses we established, centred around this guiding principle. I would be interested to learn more from Pornapit about the theory which formed the basis of the KMUTT SALC.

In her story, Pornapit explains how the KMUTT SALC expanded after two years and moved to a new building, and my experience at KUIS mirrored this too. We started with a pilot centre which ran for two years, before we moved in to a purpose-built building which allowed us to expand the services we offered. I would also like to hear from Pornapit about the involvement of her and her team in the design of the new building and whether pedagogical principles were influential in the architectural design of the new space.

In her account, Pornapit also discusses the twofold purpose of setting up the KMUTT SALC: to support language students with their English learning, and as a 'lab' in which postgraduate students could conduct research. This is appealing, and underscores the importance of research-informed pedagogy. It would be interesting to understand more about this symbiotic relationship, and how the experiences of the language learners were affected by the ongoing research agenda in the SALC.

Linked to the above point, the connection between the SALC and the offering of postgraduate courses in Resource-Based Language Learning was one of the focal points in Pornapit's story and an unusual aspect of establishing a SALC. Now that I am working in postgraduate education, I would like to know more about these courses: do they still exist (and if not, why not)? How many students graduated from these courses? What career trajectories did these graduate students have?

Reflecting on my own experience in establishing a SALC, I felt there were aspects of running a SALC which Pornapit did not discuss and which would be interesting to explore in more detail. At KUIS, the use of the SALC was voluntary and the integration of self-access language learning into the curriculum was always a challenge: Pornapit touches on the ways that students were encouraged to use the SALC, but I would be interested in knowing how the work students did in the KMUTT SALC was integrated into the curriculum or how the SALC was otherwise integrated into course provision. Perhaps Pornapit could also explain how the students and other stakeholders have responded to the existence of the centre over the years.

At KUIS, as part of our overall guiding philosophy of developing learners' autonomy, we set up a learning advisory service in which a team of dedicated learning advisors supported students individually with both their language learning and the development of their autonomous learning skills. I wonder how KMUTT students' were supported in

the development of their learner autonomy, and whether they considered setting up a system of learning advising or something similar.

Part Two

Pornapit's story continued

It was stimulating to read the responses from Anna and Lucy. Their questions helped me think more critically about how the SALC has helped students at KMUTT to develop learner autonomy and how we have used the SALC to reach the goals we set. I did mention in the first part of my story that theory or philosophy is a strong basis for making the SALC remain successful. However, we could not follow everything said in the theory as Lucy did in setting up the SALC at Kanda. For example, the physical setting of the SALC at KMUTT is not accessible enough due to some constraints such as the priority of activities happening in the building and the security system of the university; therefore, we could not choose the most accessible area of the building (i.e., the first floor) to be the SALC. To establish an ideal self-access centre, accessibility is a fundamental aspect, but the support system provided for the learners is also important. Thus, what we have specifically focused on is how to provide an appropriate support system and manage the SALC to support learner autonomy, especially to provide learner training for learners who come to use the SALC on their own.

Choices are offered through a variety of materials classified according to skills/corners, e.g., the 'reading for pleasure' corner, the 'learn English from songs' corner, etc. The learner training corner was also set up to help users to be aware of themselves as learners, understand how language is learned, and be aware of various learning strategies they can use with different kinds of tasks. So the support system we provide includes needs analysis questionnaires, record keeping systems, generic worksheets for open materials such as movies, magazines, novels to help students report their understanding of the materials they work with, and induction programmes to familiarize students with the SALC system. These are all provided to scaffold users if they come to use the SALC on their own. But if the students are taking an English class in any semester, their teacher will take them to the SALC, in which case they may not need to make use of the support systems that we provide.

In addition, a helper/language advisor was hired to have consultations with students who want to set up their own learning programme. We found that it is quite difficult to offer language advice or consultations in the SALC because users tend to regard the advisor as a private tutor. They might expect her to teach grammar, which is generally the weakest area for SALC users. This partly comes from the educational context in Thailand where cram schools and private tutoring are popular. In the SALC, the main responsibility of the advisor is helping students to be confident enough to learn on their own and to set their learning plan, by suggesting learning materials and helping students become aware of their learning processes. The concept of learner training here includes both psychological and methodological preparation. In the psychological preparation process, the language advisor has to share with students her experience as a language learner and encourage students to learn on their own. For methodological preparation, the advisor has to discuss with the students the strategies they use and whether they are effective or not. She also has to suggest new strategies to expand the students' strategy repertoire.

I personally think that the support system, especially consultations, is an extremely important aspect of the SALC. This is because it makes the SALC different from an English library, which is the initial impression that people form when they visit the self-access centre for the first time. In the course 'Establishing and Managing the Self-Access Centre,' which is one of the compulsory courses in the MA in Resource-based Language Learning Programmes, we discussed how support systems can underpin independent learning and encourage learner autonomy. The students in this course had to do a 6-week practicum by acting as a counselor to two students for that period. At the end they were required to report on what they had done and reflect on the whole consultative process by focusing on why they made the decisions they did at each step, and whether what they had done had encouraged the students to become more self-directed in their learning or not. The consultation process in the SALC has also been researched from many different aspects such as the use of macro- and micro-strategies during consultations, and how to help students set learning goals. I also conducted a study on types of counselors after working with those MA students for many years in the course I mentioned earlier. The data revealed that there are two main types of counselors, teaching-oriented counselors and independent learning-oriented counselors. The position that counselors take depends on the beliefs they have derived from their experiences as language learners and language teachers, and it directly affects how they guide learners during consultations to become self-directed learners.

After 20 years of running the SALC, when asked how successful we have been in helping students to develop learner autonomy, I'm afraid that we don't have much concrete evidence about that, unfortunately. There has been an attempt to do research with students who come to use the SALC to improve their listening by using a quantitative methodology focusing on pre-/post-tests, but the results did not really show why the students performed better in the post-test; there were also other variables contributing to their improvement which were not related solely to the use of the SALC. Other research was conducted in various areas linked to the development of learner autonomy such as how reflections help learners develop their autonomy, but the results were scattered across different areas of SALC activity, and we only gained insights into some parts of the SALC.

Because the SALC has been closely integrated with classroom learning, the use of the SALC can be seen as forced rather than voluntary. In response to the question whether the use of the SALC in this respect helped develop learner autonomy or not, it is my belief that what we have achieved is to encourage students to make more choices in their learning, which is different from traditional classrooms. The other aspects of developing autonomous learning such as the ability to set learning objectives, to plan what to learn, to monitor their learning progress, to identify problems and try to solve them, and to evaluate their learning process have been encouraged in class and through the e-SALC programme ('My English'), which we created for students at other campuses to access. These students don't have to physically come to the SALC. From feedback and informal talk with the students, not everyone could develop their learner autonomy by going through the process we set up (starting from asking them to fill out a needs analysis questionnaire, making a learning plan to set up learning objectives, choosing the materials they want to study before later completing a reflection sheet to report on what they did and to show their awareness of their learning processes after finishing each exercise). Some were motivated and did the tasks in a meaningful way, while others treated them as mechanical tasks—they reflected on their learning with repeated information and were not aware of what they had learned even though they had gone through an explicit learning process.

Teachers, in my view, play an important role in helping students to develop learner autonomy. The same activity can be treated differently and can yield different results as seen from how we try to encourage students to set their learning objectives by thinking about their problems and setting their own learning plans, choosing the materials to go along with the plan and monitoring their performance. Teachers can use a reflection sheet as a guideline for students to write down their reflections. Some teachers spend time working with students individually and responding to their problems, plans and learning development. In this way students learn from each step and are able, with their teachers, to exchange opinions, focus on problems and decide how to learn. However, other teachers only want students to fill in the reflection sheet and give marks at the end of the semester; the students neither get any feedback nor know why they had to perform those tasks. The reflections thus become even more mechanical because the students fill in the same information at the end of each task. The problems that they identify are vague, and they write down the same strategies for every task.

So, to answer the question about whether the SALC is important in helping students develop learner autonomy or not, I can say that I don't think the SALC is a must, but it does provide facilities which can help learners perform autonomous learning tasks, especially when there is a constraint of trying to cover particular content that will be evaluated in a class. There is however not much space available to integrate choices in class. Although there have been attempts to offer learner training in class, the students should have the chance to practise in the SALC what they learn in class, and the SALC is also set up for that purpose.

In closing, as I look at my story again, some of the unresolved but critically important issues seem to me to be:

- Can we use the SALC to help students foster learner autonomy without forcing them to use it first?
- How can the support system provided in the SALC effectively help students to become more autonomous?
- How can we encourage deeper reflections using the forms provided because reflections help learners to become aware of their learning?

And the most important issue that I'm working on is to see the whole picture of how the SALC helps students to develop learner autonomy.

Anna's second response

Pornapit has expanded her account of the KMUTT SALC and provided important and rich details that can be particularly useful for planning and improving other self-access centers. In addition, Pornapit provided such positive responses to the comments of both reader responders! Both Lucy and I expressed an interest in knowing which particular theory or theories of language learning and/or learner autonomy informed Pornapit's original plan for the KMUTT SALC. This would help us understand why the physical setting (and other aspects) placed constraints on the operational implementation of the theoretical model. This is important because identification of the theoretical framework on which the SALC was founded could provide insights into the practicality of the theory/theories in real-life situations. From my perspective as a practical teacher educator, when a theory does not work perfectly in a real-life situation, then the theory itself needs to be modified. Given the experience of 20 years, I would be interested in knowing whether Pornapit believes that the theory with which the KMUTT SALC was founded needs some modification.

The description of the corners in the SALC addressing different learner needs is a creative way to provide differentiated instructional services so that students can work on the area(s) that they particularly need. This seems to be similar to an approach advocated for younger language learners that is often called 'learning stations' or areas in the classroom dedicated to different types of learning activities. Since Pornapit has found that this approach also works very well with adult university students, I am inspired to try it out in my own university classes.

I can understand how difficult the role of the helper/language advisor must be, when students have expectations that are different from the main responsibility assigned to the helper/language advisor. I wonder if there is any kind of orientation for students about the role of the helper/language advisor that is provided before they actually go to the SALC. The description of the support system offered by the SALC really shows the complexity and challenge of providing appropriate and effective learner training to adult students. The research conducted by Pornapit on both the helpers/language advisors and on the graduate students during the 6-week practicum revealed important aspects of learner training which can be informative and extremely useful to other self-access centers. For instance, the relationship between the type of counselor (teacher-oriented or learner-oriented) and their approach to guiding learners to become self-directed is particularly important knowledge for other self-access centers.

The unresolved critical questions that Pornapit poses at the end of her story are not only important for the KMUTT SALC, but should also be addressed by all language educators concerned about developing learner autonomy.

First, the question about whether the SALC can foster learner autonomy without forcing students to engage in autonomous activities is a key issue. The same issue exists in the field of learning strategy applications: Should teachers allow students to use the learning strategies of their choice, even if they are ineffective or counterproductive? Or should teachers insist that students try out new and potentially more effective strategies, even if they initially resist them? Without trying out new learning strategies until they become comfortable, how can learners become more independent and autonomous? Only research can answer these questions—and even then, it may depend more on the ability of the teacher to convince students to try new strategies or to experiment with more autonomous learning than on the implementation of either a free or guided choice of students' language learning strategies.

Second, Pornapit asked how the SALC support system could help students become more autonomous. Her description of the current SALC support services shows thoughtful and creative activities that are already in place to encourage learner autonomy. Many would be satisfied with the range of support services provided—but Pornapit shows that she is questioning and searching for ever better ways to help students learn how to learn independently. This attitude, I believe, has been a driving force in developing the SALC over the last 20 years and continues to be an engine for change and improvement.

Pornapit's third question is a specific and practical one: how to use the forms provided to encourage students' deeper reflections. I agree that engaging in the habit of reflection does promote metacognition, or awareness of one's self as a learner and thinker. I wonder if the students themselves could be enlisted to think of ways that could support deeper reflections. Would they suggest that the forms be modified? Would they suggest that recording their oral reflections might work better for some? Would they prefer using social media (such as Facebook or Twitter) to deepen their reflections by sharing them with others? By engaging in such an analysis and coming up with their own

suggestions, students would find themselves engaging in reflection about their own learning and how to document it.

What I have gained from reading Pornapit's story is a deep appreciation for the influence that one inspired leader can have on a learning community at a university and how this leader can bring about change and improvement over time. In both parts of her narrative, Pornapit uses 'we' more than 'I' and this indicates ~~that~~ how closely she is working with colleagues and staff on this collaborative endeavor. Bravo, Pornapit! We look forward to knowing more about the continuing saga of the KMUTT SALC!

Lucy's response

In the second part of her story, Pornapit kindly says "… we could not follow everything said in the theory as Lucy did in setting up the SALC at Kanda", but of course, at Kanda too, we did not achieve total success in this area. In fact, some of the challenges and dilemmas we encountered during my time there were similar to those reported by Pornapit. For example, we continually grappled with the issue of whether we could use the SALC to help students foster learner autonomy, without having to initially force them to use it. In order to explore the issue of whether mandatory attendance in the SALC would be beneficial, we carried out a small research project, in conjunction with a classroom teacher, in which we investigated what we called 'coerced autonomy'. In other words, we looked at whether incorporating use of the SALC as a regular part of class time served to foster the development of autonomy in these students. The results of the project suggested that 'coerced autonomy' was a helpful pedagogical approach for encouraging learners into the centre and enabling them to understand what they could do there. The viewpoint we had subsequently was, therefore, that if it 'got students in and got them using', a little coercion was permissible.

Both parts of Pornapit's story resonated with me because, as I have discussed above, I felt that many of the 'big issues' which she and her team had been trying to address over the years had also been challenges for our team at Kanda. It is strange to think now that Pornapit and her colleagues may have been having the same discussions in Thailand that we were having in Japan. Perhaps those working in self-access language learning would benefit from greater collaboration at local, national and international levels. While collaborations do currently exist, a more systematic approach to sharing methodologies and data sets could provide insights into the critically important issues listed by Pornapit, such as voluntary use of SALCs, effective use of support systems, and fostering deeper reflections.

I enjoyed Pornapit's point that it is the support systems in SALCs which make a SALC different from a library because I have always stressed the importance of the human capital in contributing to the success of a SALC. I would also suggest that it is the dedicated use of space, described by Pornapit in her centre as the different 'corners', such as the 'reading for pleasure corner', which differentiate a SALC from a library too. Like Anna, I was also intrigued, but not surprised, by Pornapit's team's research finding that there are two different types of counselors—those who are 'teaching oriented' and those who are 'independent learning-oriented'. These findings mirror my own research findings that there are different types of autonomous learner, and these types might include those who are more teacher-focused and those who are more independent in their language learning (Cooker, forthcoming). Pornapit's finding has the potential to be of great use when determining the pedagogical approach of a SALC, and raises some interesting questions: Is a 'teaching-oriented' counselor appropriate in a SALC underpinned by learner autonomy theory? Are these differences in outlook mirrored by similar differences amongst students? Can language teachers and applied linguistics

researchers move towards an understanding of self-access language learning and learner autonomy in which there are multiple ways of being autonomous (Cooker, forthcoming)? If so, then the real advantage of a self-access learning centre is that it has the potential to provide a pedagogy which is truly personal (and, as such, address the varying needs of students highlighted by Anna in her first response) and yet remain the social environment so crucial for language development.

I would like to finish by reiterating Anna's 'Bravo' to Pornapit for her dedication to this field which now spans three decades. I would also like to thank both Pornapit and Anna for engaging in this stimulating discussion. I hope to learn more from you both in the years to come.

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