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Eyes on Skin: Positioning Dance in Business Education

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Abstract

This article examines dance as a pedagogical resource in a non-dancing context and is founded on the author's long-term experience of employing dance-based methods in business education. The value of dance can be regarded as both instrumental and existential in preparing students for professional life. In order to explore this further, an experimental dance and movement improvisation workshop, *Eyes on Skin: dance, dialogue and unexpected encounters*, was implemented during Encounters15 conference, with the purpose of exploring wordless communication and authenticity through ensemble work outside a traditional conference setting. Subsequently, three interviews were conducted to support the author's reflections on how to go beyond the instrumental purpose of dance towards recognizing the unique value of dance-based methods as means of developing perception and self-understanding. .

Keywords

arts, dance, business education, movement, pedagogy

Introduction

Upon entering the dance studio, the students are asked to perceive the space through their skin, as if the skin had eyes in all directions. Thus the body is understood as a three-dimensional entity embedded in space. Furthermore, the body is exposed to the immediate gaze of the other members of the group, resulting in heightened awareness of the self in relation to the other. There is no furniture for taking refuge behind, just open space to be explored and embraced. The moment when the group of random conference delegates becomes an ensemble moving together could be called sublime, as in Longinus' conception of the sublime being something of local rather than of global effect: "it comes at a single stroke, like

lightning, and is not achieved by content or structure on a larger scale" (Heath, 2012, 12).

The opening passage glimpses into a scene from the *Eyes on Skin: dance, dialogue and unexpected encounters in space* workshop, designed as an artistic intervention in an academic conference setting at Encounters15, Porvoo, Finland. Since the general theme for the fourth Encounters Conference was titled *Unexpected Encounters: Senses and Touching is Services and Care*, I set out to explore alternative ways of experiencing touch and senses, moving beyond the spoken word in a lecture room. What would happen if conference delegates were given the alternative of attending a dance and movement improvisation session organized in a dance studio and supervised by a professional dance teacher? Naturally, when it comes to the

notion of touching and sensing, dance improvisation provides the most immediate means of gaining access to the physical space of the other, thus maintaining a justified position among traditional conference paper presentations on the topic of touch. The *Eyes on Skin* workshop was based on my long-term learning experiments of employing dance as a pedagogical resource in business programs at Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences. Furthermore, the workshop also opened new perspectives to reflections on my own role as language and dance teacher within a tertiary level business university: why should we make people dance in a business school?

Traditionally, as a result of marginalization of the arts in European education, dance has been positioned at the very bottom of the hierarchy in an educational system that seems to favor subjects of immediate instrumental value: mathematics, science and languages (Robinson, 2011). Furthermore, there exists an internal hierarchy between the arts, where dance is placed at the bottom of the scale, far below music and visual arts. This is particularly apparent in the Finnish primary and secondary education, where music and visual arts are curricular subjects, whereas dance is excluded from the official curriculum altogether. On the other hand, my experiments with dance workshops in a business school environment have proven to be easily justified due to their immediate instrumental value as an effective tool for team-building in multi-cultural and multi-lingual groups, dance being acknowledged as a universal and non-verbal language (Kiviaho-Kallio and Berazhny, 2015). Robinson refers to dance as “a kinesthetic form of intelligence” and points out how speech in a foreign language is “usually accompanied by a dazzling variety of physical movements, facial expressions and gestures” (2011, 121). Accordingly, in a dance-based language class gestures and movements will help the students to embody a foreign language beyond the level of grammar and vocabulary, thus preparing speakers for more fluent and natural interaction in a multi-lingual business environment. On a whole, dance is regarded as valuable when teaching meta-competences such as interpersonal skills, stage presence and responsible self-management to future business professionals. Taylor and Ladkin have defined this approach as *Skills transfer*: “Arts-based methods can facilitate the development of artistic skill that can be usefully applied in organizational settings” (2009, 56).

Notably, in an educational culture with a preference for measurable results, the notion of *Skills transfer* may also be easily comprehended from a managerial perspective.

The introduction of dance and movement into a business school curriculum can also be examined in the context of an increased interest in the usage of art-based methods in management education, as presented by Springborg (2012). He chooses to focus on art-based methods as means of facilitating *meta-level learning*, where the unique contribution of art-based methods is that of facilitating “the meta-level learning processes of *making and expressing more refined perceptual distinctions*” (117). Springborg also discusses the role of language when employing art-based methods in learning, where language holds a less primary role when exploring experiences. Furthermore, the arts should not be restricted for instrumental purposes only, as it can contribute to the perception of experiences in a unique manner, as argued by Springborg: “If we keep sensing, we keep having the possibility to develop a more fine-grained and richer perception of the context we are part of. The moment we define a purpose, there is a risk that we stop sensing and lose this possibility of further perceptual refinement” (128). Accordingly, the *Eyes on Skin* workshop was based on non-verbal communication and perceptual refinement was enhanced by omitting verbal explanations of the purpose of the session in favour of creating a wordless movement experience together as ensemble.

This article is a reflection on the role of dance in business education and the discussion is based on my long-term practical experience of employing dance and movement-based methods in business programs at Haaga-Helia UAS (Kiviaho-Kallio and Berazhny, 2015). Previously, in my curricular work, dance has been allowed space mainly due to its instrumental value in team building activities and in teaching performance skills to future business professionals. However, the *Eyes on Skin* workshop brought a new perspective to my role as language and dance teacher in a business school, since the point of departure for this artistic intervention was to experience art for art’s sake, without defining any instrumental purpose. With the *Eyes on Skin* workshop I strived to return to the essence of experiencing dance in the moment, without any explanatory notes, perceiving dance as valuable

when actively experiencing it, as stated by Krantz (2015). The workshop design was mainly based on the modern educational dance model employed by Rudolf Laban (1988), where movement is perceived as universal to humans and where “spontaneity of movement” is preserved to adulthood (12).

Summing up the purpose of dancing in choreographer Mark Morris’ words when referring to the L’Allegro Movement Project, a community dance project bringing together Canadian 5th-6th graders with elderly people diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease: “Everyone who is dancing is a dancer”. Morris then continues as follows: “skipping is more fun than walking”, something that is intuitively understood in childhood, yet often forgotten in the immobile and static existence of adulthood. Would this statement be justification enough for including dance in tertiary level business education?

Perspectives on practising dance in a non-dancing context

Initially, we need to take a glance at the position of dance in a non-artistic context. Undoubtedly, when taking dance out of its usual dance studio or stage performance setting, the dancing activity is often initially perceived as *odd*. Incidentally, oddness cannot be pinned down to a definition, thus giving room for discovery (Heimonen, 2009). This happened at Lund University, Sweden, where first-year students of industrial design were exposed to a one-week dance workshop, eight hours/ day during their induction weeks. This workshop was part of Heimonen’s field work for her doctoral dissertation. One student described the feeling of oddness vis-à-vis dancing and movement improvisation as follows: “It’s hard to draw any conclusions out of this week, it has been really strange. I don’t know the meaning of these sessions but I think we all had a good time getting to know each other which is good of course [...] However, to come up with something feels great! Creativity in an odd way I guess...” (Heimonen, 2009, 136-37). In Heimonen’s approach, the purpose of dancing in a department of industrial design was not defined to students, thus employing an art-based method in accordance with Springborg’s argument for art used for the purpose of perceptual refinement rather than for a clearly defined instrumental reason. In

other words, the very oddness of the dancing activity results in heightened awareness.

Upon looking at practical questions in reference to art-based methods, scheduling seems to be one challenge in a non-artistic environment. Usually it takes time for oddness to turn from something ambiguous and maybe even uncomfortable into something enjoyable despite being odd, as noticeable in the student journals presented in Heimonen’s study. Since arts practice is time-consuming, it is easier for an educational organization to dismiss arts into what Taylor and Ladkin calls “flavor of the month”, something that spices up managerial development activities, yet not clearly defining these (2009, 55). Upon introducing dance and movement as a pedagogical resource in my own teaching at a tertiary level business school, I have come across this tendency of dance being regarded as a mere intervention occurring between serious study, or at its worst, as pause gymnastics for exhausted business students. Yet, my long-term experience of using dance as a pedagogical resource has revealed that dance has a profound and long-lasting impact on for instance team-building when introduced to new students during the induction weeks, however it should be allowed enough time in order to turn meaningful to the students. Despite direct student feedback supporting this assumption (Konttinen and Moilanen, 2015), it seems to be difficult to communicate these findings across the entire business school community, often leaving the dance teacher to work in isolation.

It seems that once the practitioner manages to get a foothold in the curriculum, he often finds himself defending the artistic approach as useful for some other competence outside the artistic spectrum, in accordance with the notion of *Skills transfer* presented by Taylor and Ladkin (2009). However, as argued by Springborg, this kind of instrumental approach misses the most unique value of art-based methods, that of perceptual refinement beyond words (2012). Thus there is a need to turn back to the essence of dancing and rather embrace dance as a means for self-understanding and for finding authenticity and the uniqueness in yourself. (Krantz, 2015). In Taylor’s and Ladkin’s presentation of arts-based methods this approach is defined as *Making*: “The very making of art can foster a deeper experience of personal presence and connection, which can serve as a healing process...”

(2009, 56). By designing the *Eyes of the Skin* workshop, my purpose was to move away from instrumental skills transfer by giving room for the creation of a movement experience without any initial explanations for why we were moving in a dance studio instead of listening to a paper presentation on touch.

The design of the *Eyes on Skin* workshop followed the principles of modern educational dance, with an emphasis on the “*process of dancing and its affective/ experiential contribution to the participant’s overall development as a moving/ feeling being*” as defined by Smith-Autard in reference to the Laban model of dance education (2002, 4). The workshop structure was based on a practical implementation presented by Heimonen (2009) in her movement improvisation workshops at Lund University. In the workshops Heimonen invited students to describe their holistic and subjective experience of dancing instead of the dance instructor providing rational explanations on why it would be beneficial for students of industrial design to practice dance during their induction week. Similarly, upon taking the decision of organizing the *Eyes on Skin* workshop in a dance studio instead of a traditional conference setting, there was a step away from an explanatory slide show towards knowledge acquisition by embodying non-verbal experience. In accordance with Heimonen’s approach, even music was left out from the workshop in order to give room for the participants to explore their personal rhythm and quality of movement, thus paving way for authenticity and heightened awareness of mind and body. Furthermore, the implementation was also influenced by contemporary dance choreographer Joonas Halonen’s course on perception and bodily expression (*Havainnon harjoitus ja kehollinen ilmaisu*) at the Finnish Theatre Academy summer school in 2014, where dance and movement was practiced as a conscious series of movements occurring “now” and progressing in time and space, described in my *Dancing English Teacher* blog (Kiviahho-Kallio, 2014).

The chosen approach for the *Eyes on Skin* workshop was in accordance with the title of the conference: *Unexpected Encounters: Senses and Touching in Services and Care*. The unfamiliarity of the dance studio space together with a non-determined group of conference delegates stood for the unexpected, and naturally, dance and movement improvisation involved all the senses and enabled the participants

to involve touch in a tangible way. As one of the conveners of the theme “*Movement and Arts in Services and Care*”, I wanted to ensure that there would be a natural setting for actual physical touch in a conference stating *Touching* in its title. As claimed by Elo, touch appears to be a very concrete, even mundane concept in the familiarity of physical touch (2014, 12). Yet, touch also carries a complex metaphorical dimension, Elo mentions Mark Paterson’s division into *immediate touch*, standing for concrete physical touch, and *deep touch* representing a metaphorical mental experience (13). However, in this paper I am not going to cover the dimensions of touch in any further detail, instead the focus is on the immediate and tangible experience of “*having eyes on skin*” in a dance studio. Of being able to communicate with a stranger, the other, through physical touch. Ultimately, touch has often been associated with skin as the border-line between the self and the other (Elo, 2014, 7).

Workshop design and methodology

Upon planning a dance and movement workshop for an academic conference, there were several open questions to be considered due to the parallel theme session structure. How many delegates would participate? What would be the preconception of dance among the participants? And, finally, even such practical matter as whether the participants would be dressed for a dance workshop or for a traditional conference needed to be taken into account in the planning process. On the morning of the *Eyes on Skin* workshop I arrived early at Porvoo Art Factory Dance School, where the conference organization had rented the smaller dance studio. When the representative for the school asked me about the number of participants, my spontaneous reply was “*about eight*”, since the room dimensions seemed to ideally host 8-10 dancers moving simultaneously. Eventually, eight delegates showed up for the workshop, which turned out to be the perfect number to ensure focus and intensity upon performing the activities. However, this isolated example also illuminates the challenge of introducing an alternative way of knowledge acquisition in a traditionally structured setting such as an academic conference. If 20 people had showed up for the parallel session, the

experience would naturally have been very different and the workshop would have needed to be redesigned.

The structure of the workshop was that of a contemporary dance lesson: warm-ups in space followed by group and pair activities. The end of the session was dedicated to pair activities, where part of the group functioned as audience, giving room for reflection and analysis of the emotional and artistic impact of dancing together. The activities were illuminated by employing Preston-Dunlop's choreological presentation of choreographic work, concretely described as *choreutic unit and manner of materialisation* (2014, 133-136). Manner of Materialisation comprises the following elements: spatial progression, body design, spatial projection and spatial tension. When these are combined into clusters, a piece of dance emerges. Manner of materialization represents basic aspects of choreographic work, therefore these concepts were introduced at the workshop to provide a concrete and easily grasped framework for non-dancers. However, as stated by Preston-Dunlop: "To understand them you have to do them not just read about them. Performing is the only way to make the words meaningful" (133). Thus, these are only briefly introduced in the following passage.

The workshop was introduced by a spatial progression and projection exercise, basically walking in space, followed by stopping and going. Progression is the continuous movement, the line progressing in space, whereas projection is "the energy line beyond the body" (134), in other words, the invisible direction of the movement. With eight people crossing an empty space, a rhythm and choreography soon emerged, just like in the opening scene in Jeromy Robbin's urban ballet *Glass Pieces* to music by Philip Glass, originally choreographed for New York City Ballet (1983). The transformation from mundane walking into the illusion of choreography never stops fascinating and always feels novel to the on-looker. This basic warm-up was then followed by pair work based on paying attention to the rhythm of a partner and simultaneously moving in space. In order to feel different rhythms, partners were exchanged during the exercise. The final and most intense part of the workshop explored body design and spatial tension. "Body Designs appear when the shape is in the flesh and bone of the body" (Preston-Dunlop, 2014, 134), in other words, it is an articulate shape in

space. Spatial tension again, is "an imagined line between two parts of the body or two dancers..." (135). Here the pairs were asked to do a movement improvisation duet involving clearly articulated body shapes performed in interaction with the partner. This exercise was performed under the gaze of half of the group serving as audience, thus enhancing the feeling of being present in the moment and taking possession of the stage as performer. This final more advanced exercise brought an additional nuance into the workshop, that of artistic and aesthetic experience, defined by Smith-Autard as "the art of dance model" with the conceptual basis of "appreciation through creating, performing, viewing" (2002, 28). As viewer, there was a fascination in seeing manner of materialization turning into choreography that could be appreciated as an individual work of art.

As a final note to the workshop and how to document such an experience, it should be pointed out that there were no cameras involved during most of the process, except for the very beginning when a few still pictures were taken. Video recording was left out altogether to ensure the full focus and concentration of the group. The workshop ended in a short introduction of the participants and brief exchange of thoughts. Two weeks after the implementation of *Eyes on Skin*, three participants of three different generations and nationalities were interviewed for the purpose of deriving some verbal reflections on the subjective workshop experience and its implications. At this point, with some time having passed by, the experience of the dance and movement improvisation workshop had become embodied in the muscle memory of the participants. The age of the interviewees was 20, 43 and 65. Two were interviewed face to face in an open interview and one submitted her reflections by email. The youngest interviewee was an Asian male student specializing in international tourism, whereas the two older participants were female university lecturers from Finland and Russia. The following questions were reflected upon:

1. How did it feel to step into the Dance School studio? What did you think about the space?
2. How did you feel about the group dynamics? What did you notice about the group?

3. What did you notice about communication through movement?
4. What did you notice when working in pairs?
5. Does dance and movement have a place in a Business School? Why?
6. What is your strongest memory from the workshop?

The outcome of the interviews mirrored my own reflections on my position as language and dance teacher in a business university. Having for several years used dance and movement mainly for their instrumental value as a skills transferring tool, I am open for considering a different perspective, where dance as method comes without the label of “we are doing this because...” In other words, we dance first, only afterwards do we discuss what actually happened to our perception of ourselves and others while dancing. Or, alternatively, we leave out the verbal discussion altogether and let the experience stay in our kinesthetic memory.

Reflections on the dance and movement improvisation workshop

When little, I was used to dreaming while listening to music, played at concerts or rehearsals, or just at home. Wherever it took place, I perceived impulses given to me by that music. This listening often resulted for me in absolutely new life ideas. So, when I felt it necessary to find a decision or do something new for me, I went to the concert to help my head bear the wanted ideas.

This experience has lately seemed to me as something gone away long ago. But attending your workshop I found out that the above mentioned feeling or attitude returned to me again. This time it happened due to watching and participating in movement activities and not through listening to music. (email, 6.4.2015)

The above quotation is from the email interview, expressed by the oldest participant of the *Eyes on Skin* workshop, Russian woman aged 65. These thoughts are in accordance with the views expressed by Krantz on dance as something existential and valuable in itself for bringing joy and a feeling of resting within yourself (2015). Similar thoughts were echoed in the reflections expressed by the Finnish female interviewee aged 43 in answer to the question “What did you notice about

communication through movement?”: “I went into what I was doing. The experience was deep” (face to face interview 2 April 2015) The experience of entering the dance studio was summarized as follows: “There was a feeling of closing the door behind you and being here and now: this again lead to the feeling of intensity, time stopping, being here and now. Leaving the phone behind...” Apparently, both interviewees felt the intensity in the moment of dancing, without the need to justify the activity in terms of acquiring some outer competence. Thus the value of the experience lay in perceptual refinement, as defined by Springborg (2012).

Notably, on a whole the youngest interviewee, Asian male aged 20, seemed to represent the most instrumental view by stating the following: “People need to be relaxed, people need artistic activity to stimulate their creativity. Arts help people to come up with something creative. It makes the school more interesting and people will be happy to come.” He also saw a need of business students being given some explanation on the benefits of integrating arts into business studies, moreover the activities should be fun and dynamic in order to engage the younger generation. Additionally, there was a concrete suggestion of organizing extra-curricular activities such as a music and performance ensemble that would meet outside class hours and strengthen the student community.

In reply to the question whether there is room for dance in a business school, the second interviewee (Finnish female aged 43) pointed out that students learn to encounter each other and to trust themselves in a dance workshop. Moreover, the benefit lies in the moment itself in such existential terms as “now we are doing this and experiencing how it feels like doing this.” Additionally, the interviewee thought that question on the benefits of such a workshop should be left to afterwards, when students would reflect on what kind of skills they could retain from dancing together. Thus, questions such as “is this how things are done in business life” should be left to later reflection rather than introduced before the initiation of the artistic activity. The first interviewee (Russian female aged 65) acknowledged the current status of dance and movement as being undervalued in the educational system, yet it should be regarded as an effective tool for contact-building and for widening perspectives on how to develop human interaction:

Every true professional seeks to widen his or her professional horizon. You cannot know everything, still other people engaged professionally in the same sphere can show you other directions you can choose. Normally, people directed at their personal development look for and want to acquire what they believe they are in lack of. Body language and non-verbal communication play an important role in business as well as in other human contact. (email, 6.4.2015)

Finally, in response to the Eyes on Skin workshop all three interviewees, regardless of age and gender, recognized the immediate joy of connecting to others through dance and movement improvisation. The two older interviewees, the Finnish and Russian university lecturers, mentioned life experience as source for courage and inspiration and how easy it was to get involved in the activities, to “dare to do something new and to find a medium for expression” (aged 43). The 65-year old participant stated the following in the email interview: “The richer the person’s inner world is, the more experience he will get from your class.” The youngest interviewee and the only representative for the Y- generation marveled at the ease of the group for dance and move together. He also felt that it seemed to be easier to engage middle aged people into the activities and he noticed a state of introspection and “looking into the soul” in his fellow dancers. Even if he was the only student among professionals from the field of tertiary-level education, business and health-care, he perceived the group as comfortable and easy-going and used the word “youthful” to describe it.

In conclusion, in reply to the question “What is your strongest memory from the workshop?” the pair work and mirroring improvisations seemed to have made the deepest impact on the participants. The 20-year old male interviewee mentioned the overall fun and feeling of immediate connection when mirroring your partner in duet work. The 43-year old female interviewee was strongly impacted by the rhythm and energy level by different people: how some people are calmer and slower and how to adjust your own faster tempo to this. In other words, “how to melt in?” Accordingly, the 65-year old female participant perceived “echoing the movement of the partner” as a way for building pair work in class and she emphasized that more time should be given for students to realize the necessity of these kinds of activities. “Words cannot express

everything while your exercises make students feel the partner” (email, 6.4.2015). She also reflected on this exercise in terms of her role as university lecturer in relation to her students:

The second investigation of mine was the inner understanding of how to organize my personal space. I also came to the conclusion that this feeling is of great importance for university instructors whose exuberance can ruin students’ desire to study. (email, 6.4.2015)

The reflections above summarizes the purpose of the Eyes on Skin workshop, that of exploring wordless communication, authenticity and the perception of space within a non-typical context for an academic conference. Notably, the participants were asked to tell their names and affiliations only at the end of the workshop, yet, the instructor provided no verbal summary on the purpose of the workshop and why the group had been dancing together for 1.5 hours in Porvoo Art Factory Dance School. Supposedly, the answer to this question had been recorded in the muscle memory of the participants and needed no verbal specifications, at worst only trivializing the experience itself. In the immediate words of one of the participants, an accomplished academic, upon finishing the workshop: “let’s stay dancing in this studio for the rest of the conference.” Maybe this illuminates how the participant was *touched by touch* in its most immediate form.

Conclusion

“Dance is the hidden language of the soul.”
(Martha Graham)

The Eyes on Skin workshop was implemented in an ideal setting, as part of Theme 4, “Movement and Arts in Services and Care”, at Encounters15 conference. The experimental approach of the conference supported the argument for securing a proper dance studio as venue, thus attracting a group of delegates genuinely interested in exploring non-verbal communication and authenticity outside a typical conference context. The “closed door” was a necessity to ensure a space void of outside distraction and enabling a workshop conducted in silence. As seen in the presentation of the workshop design and outcome, it turned out to be easy for the participants to enter a dancing mode, since they had a genuine wish to focus on

discovering their three-dimensional and mobile selves in relation to others. This again paved room for the art for art's sake approach, or what Taylor and Ladkin calls Making, thus perceiving dance as a form of existential self-expression valuable as such; that "hidden language of the soul" as expressed by American modern dancer Martha Graham. Finally, as also indicated by the interviews, the outcome of the workshop was an intensive experience of meaning-making through non-verbal means, with no immediate need for connecting the experience to outside competencies. Simultaneously, the workshop paved way for further reflections of my own role as dance teacher in a business school setting, moving the focus from skills transfer towards that of using dance for perceptual refinement.

Yet, as a first encounter with art integration in a business school context, the skills transfer-based method has turned out to be the safest and most convenient method, as it is rather easy for students to understand the importance of for instance good posture, open body focus and articulate body design when doing business. This is in accordance with the future demands of the working body in post-industrial economy, where embodied presence is part of professional competence (Parviainen, 2011-14). However, there should also be a possibility for a follow-up in smaller groups where art for art's sake is practiced for the purpose of

gaining a more embodied and kinesthetic experience of human interaction, without distracting the experience of heightened awareness with verbal labels. For instance authenticity is an important quality in leadership and communication and can be explored in a workshop like Eyes on Skin. Accordingly, arts-based methods should be regarded as a valuable resource in business education and could be used more systematically in preparing students for a career in business. Ultimately, in reply to the question, why dance should be included in a business school, I choose to end this article by quoting a passage from a learning blog written by a student who recently took part in one of my Dancing English Teacher dance and movement workshops, where perceptual refinement was in primary focus rather than skills transfer. At the end, is there a need for any other justification than the one expressed below? Indeed, "skipping is more fun than walking" (Mark Morris, L'Allegro Movement Project).

Awesome because... what should one to do when feeling a bit beat, bushed and bled dry? Dance of course? Yep... I danced! I boogie down, I cut that rug, I shimmied and shook [...] She [Dancing English Teacher] rumbaed me into rejuvenation, foxed trotted into me feeling fine and waltzed my way into well-being. Who knew that dance could have such an influence on one's moods. (learning blog, 15.11.2015)

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