

Developing Teachers' Ability to Make Claims about Historical Significance: A Promising Practice from a Teaching American History Grant Program

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IT IS GENERALLY UNDERSTOOD that the most historically significant people, places, events, and themes merit attention within the history curriculum while phenomena of lesser significance do not.¹ However, ideas about historical significance are neither static nor dispassionate; they evolve and are often contested, as evidenced in the recent debate regarding the proposed changes to the Texas Social Studies Essential Concepts and Skills.² The list of debated items included whether labor activist César Chavez and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall deserve space in history textbooks alongside founding fathers like Benjamin Franklin. Assertions of historical significance were clearly part of this ideological policy debate, although common criteria for determining significance were not.

Certainly, every single event that happened in the past cannot be studied equally—if at all—so scholars as well as educational policy-makers must use determinations of historical significance to effectively focus their efforts. History is inherently interpretive, and there is no list of criteria to determine whether or not an event is significant. Seixas defines historical significance as “the valuing criterion through which the historian assesses which pieces of the entire possible corpus of the past can fit together into

a meaningful and coherent story that is worthwhile.”³

For historians, historical significance is an essential tool in the disciplinary toolkit. This toolkit (sometimes referred to as historical habits of mind or historical thinking skills) allows historians to assess continuity and change over time, probe the complexities of historical causation, contextualize historical accounts and the events they describe, evaluate claims made about the past, and craft evidence-based arguments.⁴ For professional historians, assessing historical significance is a habit of mind that they cultivate through guided research seminars in which they learn to select good topics for future research or collaborations among other historians and professionals.⁵ Building a broad and deep content knowledge base is inherently linked to developing the reasoning involved in discerning and asserting historical significance. Determining historical significance is, thus, a process (requiring a disciplinary skill set) and a product (contributing to current scholarship) of historical inquiry.

When teachers and students use the historians’ toolkit, they build new content knowledge through inquiry, investigation, and analysis and become involved in the active process of “doing history.” This dynamic approach is in contrast to merely “covering history,” which relies on students to passively absorb content knowledge transmitted via the teacher, the textbook, or other curricular materials. The emphasis on historical thinking skills aligns well with current reform efforts in history education, supporting classroom practices in which teachers move away from the memorization and recitation of facts toward the active use of critical thinking skills. To successfully implement these reform initiatives, teachers need facility with the tools of history so they can lead students in authentic and rigorous historical inquiry. Unfortunately, the pressure to “cover” vast quantities of content as delineated in state frameworks, content standards, and adopted textbooks is real and quite prevalent among teachers.⁶ The research on three beginning history teachers indicate that with such pressure, teachers tended to rely on lectures and design units based on textbook chapters with the goal to “finish the textbook.”⁷ They were not able to engage students in “doing history,” which was stressed in all three teachers’ preparation program. There are many hoops to jump through to overcome this coverage challenge, including structural issues such as the lack of long-term mentoring for beginning teachers. Enhancing teachers’ ability to assess and articulate claims of historical significance will provide a valuable compass that thoughtful teachers use to navigate large amounts of material in meaningful ways.

This study explores how and to what extent—if any—teachers develop their ability to apply historical reasoning to determine the significance of historical people, places, events, or ideas after working closely with

historians during a professional development seminar designed to increase their knowledge and skills as American History teachers. Participating teachers attended a ten-day summer institute, during which historians presented current historical scholarship about nineteenth-century America with a particular focus on the complexities of racial relationships before and after the Civil War. In this study, we investigate changes in teachers' abilities to use historical thinking skills to make and support claims of historical significance by analyzing a document-based assessment given before and after the professional development course.

Theoretical Framework

Contentious debates that have taken place in the academy, in school board meetings, and in the popular press over the past three decades highlight the role that identity and ideology play in assertions about the historical significance of particular people, places, and events.⁸ New historical scholarship has brought forward the perspectives and experiences of workers, women, and non-Anglo people.⁹ At the same time, the "back-to-basics" reform initiatives in kindergarten through twelfth grade education rejected much of this new scholarship in favor of traditional history.¹⁰ The rancor brought to these arguments reflected political and cultural tensions as well as a robust interest in how national and individual identities shape interpretations of what is important in the past and why it is important.

Reflecting such trends, research on the influence of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and family history on students' notions of historical significance focuses on the underlying beliefs and attitudes students bring to their assessments about which aspects of history matter most.¹¹ Fertig and collaborating teachers report that fourth graders considered events historically significant when they deemed the events to have made an impact on people living in the present, and when they could identify personally with the historical actors involved (e.g., school children like themselves).¹² Seixas noted different stances that high school students employed when making determinations about the historical significance of past events.¹³ Some students relied on external authorities (basic objectivist); others looked at events from their personal interest and concerns (basic subjectivist); and a few demonstrated a more developed understanding, uniting "personal interests and concerns with broad historical trends and developments, constructing significance in history through the conscious selection of events which would tell a story."¹⁴

Drawing on literature about students' ways of constructing historical significance, Coughlin's research suggests that teachers construct under-

standings of United States history that echo dominant narratives of progress, duty, and meritocracy because that is how they understand their own family histories.¹⁵ While it is clear that history teachers' knowledge, experiences, and beliefs influence their curricular and instructional decisions,¹⁶ additional research is needed to understand how teachers construct notions of historical significance and reason about significance. Compared to literature documenting students' conceptions of historical significance, teachers' criteria are less explored, as are changes and growth in the underlying content knowledge or reasoning skills associated with the criteria. This study seeks to add to the literature by focusing on the influence of professional development on teachers' abilities to reason about historical significance.

Methods

Participants

The data were collected from a Teaching American History grant in which teachers first attended a ten-day summer institute to increase their content knowledge and improve their use of historical thinking skills. The summer institute focused on investigating slavery and freedom in nineteenth-century North America. Teachers participated in lectures and discussions around four themes: (1) multiple perspectives on slavery, (2) the role of gender, (3) the broader historical context, and (4) conflicting narratives of freedom articulated within a slave-holding culture. Throughout the summer institute, teachers also participated in the close reading and discussion of primary sources and explored teaching strategies that encourage students' use of historical habits of mind. Definitions and methods of identifying historical significance were never directly addressed during the summer institute, but were implicitly a part of the assertions that the historians made about the sources and interpretations that they chose to highlight as central to understanding America in the nineteenth century.

The Civil War is a core topic in the eighth grade U.S. History curriculum in California and in middle school history courses across the country; the content of the summer institute was intended to deepen and broaden the participants' knowledge of the historical context surrounding the events proceeding and following the Civil War. These teachers applied what they had learned in the subsequent fall semester as they participated in a professional developmental model known as Lesson Study, which required teachers to work collaboratively to design, field test, and revise a lesson based on content from the summer institute. Teachers developed lessons based on the content of the summer institute and used primary sources of their own choosing to engage their own eighth grade students in historical inquiry.

The main data sources for this study were pre- and posttests given to participating teachers at the beginning and end of the ten-day summer institute. The program staff designed this assessment as abbreviated Document Based Questions (DBQ) to enable participants to demonstrate relevant historical habits of mind as they used primary source documents.¹⁷ In the assessment, which took fifty to sixty minutes to complete, teachers considered an abolitionist's speech in 1852 and discussed the ways in which his speech is historically significant. Although teachers discussed various primary sources during the institute, the speech was not among the materials introduced. While crafting their responses, teachers were encouraged to draw from their background knowledge and to use relevant heuristics, such as historical empathy, to place the speech in historical context. There were a total of twenty-six sets of pre- and posttests.

Analysis Methods

Based on studies about historical significance, and drawing from definitions of historical significance asserted by professionals in the discipline,¹⁸ we developed a rubric (available in the Appendix) to differentiate the levels of quality in teacher assertions about the historical significance of an excerpted 1852 speech by abolitionist Frederick Douglass.¹⁹ There are two definitions of historical significance widely used among historians. The first, which is more traditional, defines a significant phenomenon as one that affects a large number of people in an important way and for a long period of time.²⁰ The second definition, used to develop the rubric for this study, reflects more recent scholarship in the field of history. This definition of historical significance indicates that the significance of events in the past is determined by their impact on the present. According to this definition, a historical phenomenon becomes significant if members of a contemporary community can draw relationships between it and other historical phenomena and, ultimately, to themselves.²¹ Approaching historical significance with this understanding would be useful to teachers as the research indicates that students understand historical significance to be about the current relevance of a past event, idea, or person.²²

We based teachers' scores on the degree to which they did the following in their responses: considered historical significance from multiple perspectives; drew relevant and clear connections to other historical phenomena and/or to themselves; and, as a result, made an intellectually solid and rigorous argument. Teachers at the most advanced level of historical significance, which is the highest score in the rubric, consider the objective impact of the phenomena under investigation as well as the more subjective impact on self or others.

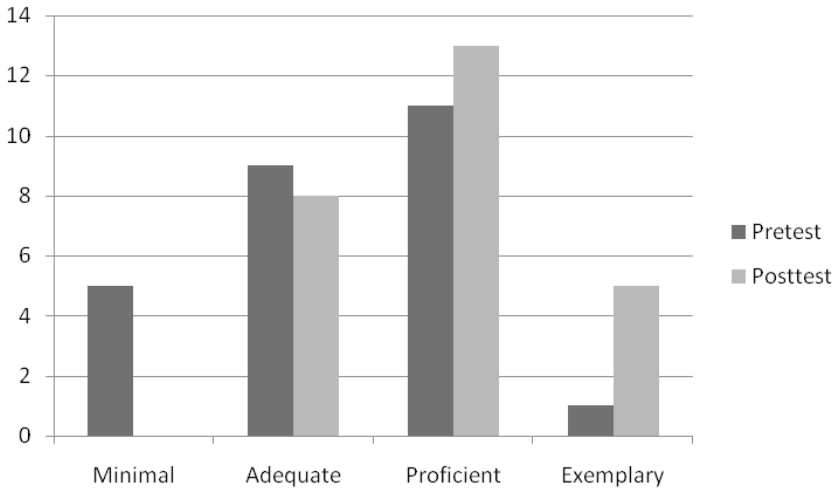


Figure 1: *Changes in Scores between Teachers' Pre- and Posttests.*

Using random ID numbers for teacher participants and the four-point rubric described above, Lee and an independent rater coded the DBQ responses to produce a quantitative score (1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest) for each. We first coded 10% of the data (six sets out of twenty-six) using the rubric independently. Once the target of 90% agreement for interrater reliability was met, the independent rater coded the remaining data. With the small number of samples in mind, we then conducted paired samples *t*-tests of these scores, examining pre- and posttest changes among teachers.

Once we derived the quantitative scores, we used them as categories and compared and contrasted responses within and across categories to examine the extent to which teacher responses changed and/or developed.²³ Upon comparison, Lee wrote analytical memos for pre- and posttests. She then circulated the memos to Coughlin and two independent reviewers for the purpose of triangulation.

Findings

Overall, the mean score for posttests ($\bar{2.88}$, $s = 0.80$) improved over the mean score for pretests ($\bar{2.38}$, $s = 0.71$). Out of twenty-six teachers, twelve earned improved scores. Two moved from the minimal level, one to adequate and one to proficient; five teachers moved from adequate to proficient; and four moved from proficient to exemplary. Eleven teachers'

scores stayed the same and two participants' scores lowered. Figure 1 shows the changes between teachers' pre- and posttest scores.

The paired samples *t*-test results demonstrated meaningful significant changes in pre- and posttests ($t=3.348, p = .003$). With the small number of samples (twenty-six teachers), we used the paired samples *t*-test here to present findings from multiple perspectives rather than to make definitive claims. The significant changes in pre- and posttests mean that, on average, teacher participants moved from identifying historical significance without considering historical context or drawing from solid historical evidence (the adequate level) to explaining the significance of the speech considering multiple historical contexts, including who gave the speech, when it was given, and why it was given (the proficient level). In the posttest, teachers tended to determine the significance of the speech in relation to historical phenomena such as the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Civil War (proficient level). Teachers also wrote more in the posttests than they did in the pretests. On average, teachers wrote 212 words in posttests compared to 142 in pretests, which is a 49% increase. With the exception of one teacher, those who improved scores all added words in the posttest, although there was a wide range (a gain of 29-165 words, which equals a 13%-635% increase). However, it should also be noted that the two teachers who moved down levels on the rubric also added words in posttests: 152 and 217 words respectively, which was more than a 100% increase compared to their pretests. The increased word count, although an obvious difference between pre- and posttests, seemed to have no significant correlations with the improvement in the quality of arguments. In other words, the number of words did not seem to affect the quality of the argument. Even if they had more time and more space, it might not have affected the levels of quality that teachers generated.

Further qualitative analysis on the changes between the pre- and posttests helps explain the trend toward more informed and assertive claims of historical significance. Overall, the references to the general pre-Civil War historical context increased from pre- to posttests. Teachers who moved up levels also demonstrated stronger reasoning in terms of situating the speech itself within the specific context of its 1852 delivery. Teacher participant 297, who moved from the minimal level to the proficient level, presents a telling example of this shift toward solid reasoning about historical significance. The pretest response was merely a two-sentence summary of the speech; the participant fell short of explaining the significance of the speech, making general and broad statements:

This speech exposed the truth of how America was founded. It also revealed that Douglass was not afraid to publicly acknowledge the elephant in the kitchen.²⁴

In the posttest response, the teacher considered the historical significance of the speech by including references to the context of the event at which Douglass spoke—specifically the audience, the time of delivery, and Douglass’ motives in shaping the speech the way he did. Situating the speech in an accurate temporal context and considering the event from the pre-Civil War perspective, the teacher was able to present more solid evidence of historical significance:

Douglass’ speech is significant in that while he is given the “honor” of speaking to a large group of people on this important day, he blasts the very people who invited him to do so...It is historically significant too in that he delivers this speech prior to the Civil War which would have been especially risky to do. In Douglass’ case, he was respected in that he was recognized as being an intelligent man, thereby making his voice that much louder than most.²⁵

The difference between the pre- and posttest results cited above is quite noteworthy. However, as we move through the differences between pre- and posttest responses of other participants, it should be noted that it was easier to move up levels from the minimal levels, especially if teachers did not make any argument about historical significance in pretests. It is possible that teachers were not comfortable with making arguments about the historical significance of a document with which they did not have much experience. In other words, it is possible that the teachers were capable of making higher scoring arguments in pretests, but their lack of experience in engaging with such an activity undermined their ability to be more explicit in the pretests. Intensive work with historians and exposure to the slavery/Civil War content may have provided models of and practice with historical argumentation that boosted teachers’ confidence. We can gain more insight into what triggered the changes in teachers’ reasoning when we look at those who moved up from adequate or proficient levels.

Teacher participant 874 showed a typical move that teachers made over the course of the summer institute—the leap from adequate to proficient:

In this speech, Frederick Douglass spells out in detail the achievements of his race which clearly show that they have “equal manhood.” At the same time, he puts you in the shoes of an American slave. How can they celebrate independence when they have never known it? On a day when most Americans would be celebrating and taking pride in themselves and past generations’ achievements, Frederick Douglass decided it was better to put them in their proper place. Instead of celebration, Americans should feel shame. Instead of pride, they should feel regret and remorse...This news must have infuriated Southern slave owners and been a real wake-up call to the current leaders of the country.²⁶

In this pretest, the teacher inferred the significance strictly based on the text of the speech, summarizing the key points made by Douglass. As a result, the historical significance was not drawn from the connections between the speech (event) and its historical context, but rather was contained in the speech. Furthermore, the teacher considered the significance from one aspect only, the role as a wakeup call. However, in the posttest, this teacher's careful consideration of historical contexts stood out. The teacher first situated the orator in a historical context, then explained the temporal and societal contexts in an effort to derive the significance of the speech:

In order to understand the historical significance of this speech, it helps to understand who Frederick Douglass was and what he stood for. Frederick Douglass was an ex-slave, I think, well-educated free black in the North. He had ties to the abolitionist movement, and he was often asked his opinion by important political officials, even Lincoln himself. In 1852, slavery is booming in the South and is the most valuable industry in the South. Frederick Douglass cannot sit idly by and watch the people of his race get abused and taken advantage of. Thus, he uses this speech to open the eyes of those who are in denial about their mistreatment of African Americans. I find it ironic, as Douglass himself did, that they asked him, a black man, to speak on the 4th of July.²⁷

The teacher then analyzed the body of the speech:

Douglass explains how the liberty, justice, and independence is shared by white males; not by him, a black man. Instead, "the sunlight that brought light and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me." Douglass explains that throughout the history of this nation blacks have done all the same work and acts to build up this nation, but then receive none of the benefits. Instead, they "are called upon to prove that we are men!" They were not treated as equals. Thus, the 4th of July to an American slave is a slap in the face. Douglass ends his speech by accusing the United States of being guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than any other nation on Earth.²⁸

Lastly, the teacher argued for the historical significance of the speech by considering multiple impacts of the speech, including a personal connection employing historical empathy:

Hopefully, this speech opened the eyes of many in the North and South to the atrocities that blacks at this time were facing. Hopefully many joined with him, feeling empathy for the injustices that African Americans were subjected to on a daily basis. I'm sure that for many, however, this speech infuriated them and drove them to action against people like Frederick Douglass. For me, this speech gives me a personal connection with what it must have felt like to be an African American during the antebellum period.²⁹

As evidenced in this example, teacher participant 874 indeed developed his or her reasoning and made a more sophisticated argument on historical significance. Noteworthy are the clearer references to historical contexts, including who Douglass was and the consideration of multiple—and plausible—impacts this speech might have had.

Increased references to historical content in posttests, which stood out in the responses of those whose scores improved, were also noticeable in the responses of eleven teachers whose scores stayed the same. For example, teacher participant 1132 referred to just one historical event, the Civil War, to analyze the significance of the speech in the pretest; however, in the posttest, the teacher also listed the abolitionist movement, slavery's connection with economy in South, the roles of racists and sexists of the time, and the social status of slaves. Despite the increased number of historical context references, both responses scored the same; the teacher fell short of using the references to draw on the historical significance, failing to make clear connections between the speech and the contexts to make an argument for historical significance. It is possible that the connections were made in the teacher's mind, but did not get communicated on paper.

Two participants scored lower on posttests because they focused on analyzing the speech and paid less attention to developing arguments about its historical significance. In the pretests, although at the rudimentary level, the two teachers tried to identify the significance of the speech in its historical context. For example, teacher participant 266 wrote:

Considering the time table, Douglass' speech comes before the national struggle of opposing ideas and values. At this time to look the other way is much easier than to take action. His words are a jarring call to action amidst a people presumably willing to look the other way. The hope that some eyes are forced to see, some ears to hear, lives and works to produce action. His oration is an instigation to what is to come.³⁰

In the posttest, this teacher carefully analyzed the speech in length; however, the response remained an analysis, falling short of qualifying as an argument for historical significance:

...Frederick Douglass' oration in 1852 blatantly delineates the gross blindness of the "American" celebrators of freedom at Rochester, NY. He describes the reality of the black slave who is not an American and of the free black who is not an American...Rather than repeating the expected outline of the American experience that is white experience, he challenged white America with the reality of another American experience, that is black experience....After giving voice to a personal narrative, outlining the absurdity of the question of manhood, and challenging the social and political norm, Douglass states that the nation founded under freedom, liberty, and justice is guilty of betraying these very ideals.³¹

Discussion

After participating in the historian-led, ten-day professional development summer institute, teachers demonstrated more sophisticated reasoning when asked to discuss the historical significance of Frederick Douglass' pre-Civil War speech. During the summer institute, there was no dedicated session on determining historical significance; in other words, historical significance was not treated as an isolated skill. The approach that the professional development designers took was more comprehensive, meaning that teachers were immersed in historical inquiry under the guidance of professional historians. There was a strong emphasis on learning and discussing current historical scholarship on freedom and slavery in the Civil War Era. Historians presented the most recent interpretations of the field, read key historical documents with teachers, and shared historical arguments in the making. Our analysis of teachers' responses sheds light on how the summer institute discussion and interaction might have triggered teachers' thinking on and use of historical significance.

Considering the impact of the professional development, it is also interesting to look at teachers' responses that were not related to historical significance arguments. There were three instances in pre- and posttests, respectively. In pretests, two teachers asked who invited Douglass to the event and why. Teacher participant 1275 wondered, "This speech...really makes you stop and think of why he was asked to speak at an Independence Day celebration." Teacher participant 812 wrote, "I would like to know who invited Frederick Douglass to speak on this day! I would also like to know the reaction of the crowd to his speech." The teachers seemed to be genuinely interested in finding answers to the questions. We did not see this type of question raised in the posttests. Another teacher noted the "effective use of repetition and contrast to bring home the point of the speaker" and said this speech could be used as an instructional resource even apart from the slavery issue.

The three instances where teachers' posttest responses were not directed to historical significance were slightly different from those in the pretests. Teacher participant 342 considered the instructional use of the speech; however, unlike the teacher who saw the strength in its rhetoric, this teacher suggested questions for students, including, "Who are the people in the crowd? Why was he asked to speak? Did they expect this kind of a speech? What was the outcome of this? How did people respond?" Although the teacher did not make an argument about historical significance, it is not hard to see how the answers to these questions would help students see the historical significance of the speech. Teacher participant 1042 engaged in a similar activity and sketched out a lesson plan using the speech. The

teacher planned to cover racial relations in the 1850s and then move to Frederick Douglass' identity. The next step involved vocabularies or definitions, and the last step was a focused discussion on Douglass' audience. Teacher participant 550 noted at the end of the response, "still not certain what the answers to these questions are. But [s/he has] also learned that that's OK. [S/he] knows that [s/he needs] to always continue to question." The comparison of pre- and post-comments not related to historical significance reveals that the post-comments were more in line with the instructional use of the document or content covered in the documents. The post-comments were also more closely related to "doing history," displaying teachers' willingness to accept uncertainties rather than their need to find *the* answer.

The findings suggest that teachers can develop the skills associated with making claims about the historical significance of a given primary source. It is worth noting that teachers demonstrated improvement in this task following intensive professional development which was intended to increase their content knowledge and historical thinking skills in general. The summer institute did not explicitly include the materials or activities that addressed making claims about historical significance. The historians and educators involved with leading the content sections of the summer institute were not aware of the specific primary sources or prompts that were used in the pre- and posttests. Historians and educators were, however, chosen because of the currency of their scholarship and their ability to engage teachers in actively applying historical thinking skills to investigate new perspectives on familiar core curricular. This study suggests that focusing on content and skills is a promising approach to strengthening teachers' ability to make well-grounded decisions related to framing particular content in terms of its historical significance. The data analyzed for this study demonstrated teachers' increased ability to make connections to and reach conclusions about a variety of phenomena related to the 1852 Frederick Douglass speech. The lens of historical significance may prove to be a powerful tool for making sense of myriad curricular directives that teachers receive and for effectively navigating large amounts of required content. For this reason, the ability to make assertions about historical significance should be more closely examined as a crucial tool that every history teacher should have in her/his toolkit and approaches to making the use of this tool an integral part of professional development should be further explored.

Notes

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21. *Ibid.*, 285.

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24. Pretest response, Participant 297, Score 1: Minimal.

25. Posttest response, Participant 297, Score 3: Proficient.

26. Pretest response, Participant 874, Score 2: Adequate.

27. Posttest response, Participant 874, Score 3: Proficient.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. Pretest response, Participant 266, Score 2: Adequate.

31. Posttest response, Participant 266, Score 2: Adequate.

Appendix: Historical Significance Rubric

Rubric used to differentiate the levels of quality in teacher assertions about the historical significance of an 1852 speech by abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

After reading Frederick Douglass' 1852 oration, describe ways in which his speech is historically significant.

Exemplary (4)	Proficient (3)	Adequate (2)	Minimal (1)
The teacher explains the significance of the speech in multiple perspectives: when it was given, who gave it, and why it was needed.	The teacher explains the significance of the speech in multiple perspectives: when it was given, who gave it, and why it was needed.	The teacher explains the significance of the speech, but does not identify the relationship(s) between the speech and other historical phenomena.	The teacher simply summarizes or restates the speech with little or no interpretation.
The teacher makes meaningful connection(s) to other related historical phenomena, such as the Fugitive Slave Act and the upcoming Civil War, to draw the significance of the speech.	The teacher makes connection(s) to other related historical phenomena to draw the significance of the speech; however, the connections are not clear or well developed.		



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