Composition Theory in Practice: Piloting a Mixed Mode Writing Clinic at the Durban University of Technology

Dee Pratt
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Composition Theory in Practice: Piloting a Mixed Mode Writing Clinic at the Durban University of Technology

Dee Pratt, Durban University of Technology, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract: A mixed mode Writing Clinic was introduced as a teaching and learning development project at the Durban University of Technology in 2006. The theory underpinning the Writing Clinic was developed in doctoral research on written composition within a critical realist orientation, and took the form of theoretical and applied models of written composition. The composition theory thus developed informed the design of a process-based writing tutor program which could be customised by the user to suit various contexts. The theory also offered insight into how/why other interventions (e.g. conferencing) operated, and formed the basis for the inclusion of discussion forums and other online (and offline) resources. This paper will carry out a critical reflection on the process of applying composition theory in actual practice at a recently merged UoT, showing how, in spite of institutional constraints, the modus operandi employed in this project could be seen to cater for composition instruction needs at various levels (i.e. from first year to master’s and even doctoral level). It will also be suggested that the mixed mode Writing Clinic works best when supplemented by a “live” help desk, and will show how the Faculty of Arts & Design at DUT is providing for this facility. It is hoped that reflecting on the operation of this project will offer insights into the practical application of composition theory in order to meet instructional needs of a diverse staff and student body at a multicultural university of technology.

Keywords: Composition, Mixed Mode, Courseware, E-Learning, Academic Literacy

Introduction

"INTRODUCING newt@dut" is a project which has been run at the Durban University of Technology since 2006, funded by a Department of Education Teaching and Development grant. The project was intended to provide a mixed mode writing clinic for DUT staff and students, with the “mode mix” including online materials, discussion forums and educational software, as well as more traditional options such as live workshops and hard copy workbooks. NEWT (the “New Electronic Writing Tutor”) was developed in doctoral research as a versatile courseware application which could be customised to fit a variety of different educational contexts, and is underpinned by a theoretical model (Franck 2002) of communicative functions. While other process-based writing tutors have been developed (see Rowley & Meyer 2003), NEWT is currently the only process-based writing tutor program which takes into account both the intra- and extrasystemic operation of the social function in written communication. NEWT will eventually be made available to all students and staff as a free download, and will be used in conjunction with online forums, webpage composition instruction and face-to-face consultations to develop academic composing expertise at undergraduate and post-graduate level. This paper, then, deals with the practical application of theoretical research into written composition, as well as reflecting on the potential benefits of a mixed mode approach to composition instruction. It will first give an overview of the products of the research, that is the composition theory and artefact (i.e. composition software) developed in the course of the research, showing how the components of the Writing Tutor Program are linked to the theory. Next, it will show how other features were included in the Writing Clinic service to supplement the composition software. After a critical reflection using both the project leader’s experiences and student and staff responses to the Writing Clinic, the paper will conclude by suggesting that the project is congruent with DUT’s mission and vision as a University of Technology, that is, it combines teaching and learning, research and community engagement in an attempt to transform the quality of life for participants.

Research Products: Theory and Artefact

The doctoral research was carried out at the Durban University of Technology in 2005/2006 and involved developing a model of written communication which might inform composition software (Pratt 2006). It drew on the findings of a long term study (1986-2006) involving the formulation and refining of a practical model of composing, involving over 60 video protocol analyses of students composing academic assignments in various disciplines. With the formalising of the study for the doctorate, Franck’s (2002) modelling process was used to hypothesise a system of communicative functions which could
be seen to underpin communication in the various modes. Franck’s modelling process uses a type of reverse engineering, or classical induction, to arrive at the system of functions underpinning a social process (i.e. a theoretical model, Franck 2002:141). The theoretical model thus formulated is validated by means of an empirical (i.e. practical) model, which in turn is compared with actual social functioning. In this study the theoretical model of composing was found to be a system of functions necessary for effective communication, namely, the contextual, ideational, interactive, social and reflexive functions. Communication, then, requires that the communication process is set in some context, and that message content is generated in an interaction, which is governed by social constraints and regulated by means of feedback. These communicative functions were thought to be prerequisites for all types of communication, and not just written communication: empirical (i.e. practical) models could then be developed to show how these functions might be carried out in the various modes.

Figure 1: The Theoretical Underpinning of the Writing Tutor Program

In this study the empirical model describing written communication took the form of a composing algorithm in which the functions manifest in five distinct stages: prewriting, draft writing, major editing, minor editing and evaluation (as shown in Figure 1). The validity of the empirical model was established with reference to the literature on composing as well as by the video protocol analyses. The last 13 video protocol analyses were carried out in 2005 to test out refinements to the model, including an input option. The latter development meant that the composition software based on the refined practical model could be customised to suit not only different educational contexts and outcomes but also individual learner needs. The practical model could be seen as a type of social algorithm whereby young people acquire the social competences needed for adult life (Blunt Bugental 2000). Social algorithms not only provide useful templates for educational software, but, according to Blunt Bugental, also tap into inherent human learning predispositions which operate at biological, cognitive and social levels (2000:188). They can be viewed as powerful mechanisms (Bhaskar 1978) driving learning.
NEWT, the Writing Tutor Program, takes the form of a floating help menu based on the composing algorithm developed in the course of the research, and which, in turn, was based on the deep structure of the communicative functions (the theoretical model). Thus the “Help with composing” which forms the core of the Writing Tutor Program is not merely ad hoc advice, but is based on a mechanism for generating meaning, underpinned by a theoretical model of communication. The main menu opens out to display various submenus containing instructional routines and materials, also associated with the theory, and in some cases linked to the algorithmic core. Figure 2 shows a main menu (1) item opening up to display a submenu (2) with the submenu contents (3). Whenever a submenu item is accessed, a screen prompt displays just above the Start bar and remain there even when the NEWT menu is closed: this assists learner writers to keep to the focus and purpose of that particular stage of composing.
Apart from further submenus leading off from the composing algorithm, other items are included in the main menu. Again, these are not merely ad hoc advice, but are based on the composition theory developed in the doctorate. The item “About composing” presents the theory in a form accessible to learner writers. “Composing on computer” shows learners how various features of word processors support best writing practice as described in the composing algorithm. An automatically-marked test, “Assess your writing expertise”, is based on strategies contained in the composing algorithm, and gauges to what extent learners are already – perhaps intuitively – using the composing algorithm. “Help with writers block” is treated as a separate item as well as being linked to each stage of the composing algorithm: the same is done with an explanation of the “Inner dialogues” in which experienced writers engage as they compose. A “Readings database” helps learners to keep track of sources they have used in their compositions: this is linked to the Prewriting stage, but also assists Minor editing later, when academic conventions require sources to be referenced. The “Working notes” item prompts users to reflect on their composing by diarising thoughts and experiences while engaged in composing, and assists with the reflexive communicative function (termed “evaluation” in the algorithm). Later additions include a mind map and flow chart. The former assists with idea generation in the Draft writing stage of the composing algorithm, while the latter assists with reader accommodation in the Major editing stage: used in combination, they provide the learner with a powerful mechanism for generating and structuring text. The holistic structure of the mind map not only allows writers to generate ideas as gestalts (see Figure 3), but also allows them to re-group ideas conceptually once they are displayed in the map: the linear structure of the flow chart (see Figure 4) assists the learner to sequence the ideas generated so that they are “unpacked” in paragraphs for the intended reader.
The Writing Clinic facility, as mentioned earlier, includes online materials and discussion forums as well as a download of the Writing Tutor Program, all of which are managed via a website (see Figure 6). The online component was thought to be the most effective way of distributing the software to over 20,000 students on seven campuses and facilitating interaction with large numbers of participants. Face-to-face workshops and individual tutoring are of course, desirable to facilitate feedback at all stages of composing (carrying out the reflexive function), but not feasible for the majority target audience, given the constraints of geographically separated campuses and limited funding. The print workbook option was included because many of our students do not have access to computers after hours, and hard print resources have advantages over those stored electronically (e.g. portability and easy access).

**Critical Reflection on the Writing Clinic Project**

As mentioned above, in the modelling process followed, a type of classical induction is used to arrive at the system of functions underpinning a social process. The theoretical model thus identified is validated by means of an empirical model which can be seen to be grounded in real life social functioning. It is customary in such a process for several cycles of reflection, further testing and reformulation to take place (see Figure 5), very much in the manner of the reflective practice described by Zuber-Skerritt (1992a, 1992b, 2001), Wenger (2004) and Corbin and Strauss, in their account of grounded theory methodology (1994,1999). This process of reflection was extended into the practical application of the research in the Writing Clinic project, in terms of the author’s being a “reflective practitioner” (Schön 1983) as project leader, and also by obtaining feedback from participants which was ultimately fed into refining the facility.
Reflections on the Project Design

The system of communicative functions developed in the research not only informs the composition process but also serves as a course design principle, framed around the communicative functions as follows (Pratt 2005:138):

**Contextual:** This relates to the social context in which knowledge is constructed, and requires the course designer to decide how learning is to be contextualised.

**Ideational:** This relates to the source of the knowledge to be constructed, or the process whereby knowledge actually comes into being (it also raises the question of course content).

**Interactive:** As knowledge is constructed in learning interactions (including interactions with resources), the course designer needs to anticipate how participants will interact in constructing knowledge.
Social: The social parameters, conventions or constraints operating in a given learning situation need to be identified and made explicit to learners, particularly in respect of local assessment criteria.

Reflexive: This relates to how participants will reflect on and assess their performance in constructing knowledge, and includes the issue of formal assessment (if any) and how it will be carried out, as well as course assessment.

The above are thought to be features essential for effective learning to take place: using them to analyse course design entails showing how the above functions are carried out in any given course of instruction. The design principle will be used in this section as a framework for reflection on the writing clinic project.

Table 1: Course Design Features of the Writing Clinic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextual</th>
<th>Ideational</th>
<th>Interactive</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Reflexive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Webpage</td>
<td>NEWT lessons</td>
<td>Online forums</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td>Online forums</td>
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<td>Workshops</td>
<td>Online resources</td>
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<td>Online forums</td>
<td>Workbooks</td>
<td>Tutoring</td>
<td>NEWT</td>
<td>Live feedback</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Online forums</td>
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Composition instruction is set in context generally by means of the Writing Clinic webpage (see Figure 6), but can be contextualised more specifically in live workshops. Online forums also help to contextualise learning in terms of any significant situational issues raised by participants. The ideational content (i.e. instructional information) is provided in the Writing Tutor text lessons, in other specialist online material posted on linked online courses, and in hard print workbooks. However, participants also add their own ideas - and sometimes notes or readings - in the online forums. The online forums, workshops and individual tutoring animate and add empathy and immediacy to the operation of the Writing Clinic.

No matter how sound the instructional materials may be, it is the fact that someone is monitoring the learner’s progress, resulting in a well-judged human response at the crucial moment which can make the most significant contribution to learner progress. The webpage, too, has interactive features, but live human interaction is thought to be necessary for the best results. Social parameters (mainly academic requirements, but also the operational conditions of the Writing Clinic) are explained generally on the webpage and more specifically in workshops. As mentioned earlier, the software also has a section which encourages learners to ascertain and input specific local academic requirements for written assignments. Feedback on progress (the reflexive aspect) is catered for mainly by online forums, by email (for private feedback) and to a lesser degree by live feedback given in workshops or tutoring sessions (live feedback is not feasible on the whole, given the numbers involved and distance constraints). As illustrated in Table 1, the online forums turned out to play a greater role in fulfilling the five functions than any other element. The forums were initially included to facilitate the formation of a “community of practice” (Wenger 1998a, 1998b, 2004) of learner writers (staff and students) at the University, in particular, so that learners could act as a resource for effective learning. Learner groups do not just provide materials (i.e. instructional content) for each other, they also help to contextualise learning, collaborate in multiple learning interactions at a number of different levels, clarify academic requirements for each other, and give feedback (possibly why communities of practice have been found to enhance learning). Active engagement of participants, in particular, is thought to be crucial for effective learning, and the online forums facilitate engagement.

Reflections on the Practical Implementation of the Project

The Writing Clinic was set up late in 2006, and funding delays in 2007 (and 2008) meant that it did not run for the whole of the year: not having the funding confirmed also meant that the programming could not be completed in time for the software download to be available. As a result, the NEWT program had to be installed in computer laboratories or distributed on CD. A Writing Clinic webpage was set up, however, and three Moodle courses were linked to it ("Moodle" - "Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment" - is a freeware educational administration program). These were a discussion forum, a section for any specialist subject materials which individual lecturers might wish to upload, and a section containing general tips and advice based on the composing algorithm (although it was subsequently decided to incorporate the latter into the webpage). Apart from ad hoc tutoring, the Writing Clinic was piloted with only one student group in 2007, Mechanical Engineering. Two part-time lecturing staff, Rob Gutteridge and Naadira
Jadwat, ran the Writing Clinic as part of the composition section of the Semester Communication Skills course. Mechanical Engineering was chosen, as this group had been given two extra periods per week to assist with the development of academic literacy, and the Writing Clinic was considered to be an effective option for developing competence in written communication.

Two student responses to the Writing Tutor Program, posted on the online discussion forum, will be used to illustrate some of the benefits of using a blended delivery approach:

**NEWT writing programme**

by TE Khula - Tuesday, 7 August 2007, 03:16 PM

*Focus when preparing to write*

I notice that you must know what you are writing about and how it is going to affect other people, you must be patient when writing, have a good idea about the story that you are going to write about. You must read people’s mind what are they thinking. Not write your own mind you must also summarise what you have search about.

Both of the above were ESL students, moreover, from a demographic (isi-Zulu speakers) which habitually remains silent in English lectures in spite of the need to develop fluency in spoken as well as written English (i.e. to be able to cope with English-medium instruction at tertiary level). Both students chose to rephrase what they had learned from browsing through the NEWT software, and, in spite of some language errors, managed to paraphrase what they had learned reasonably clearly in English. TE Khula was, of course, not completely on track when he wrote: “Not write your own mind”, but at least had moved away from the stock school composition concept of writing as fiction to the notion that, at tertiary level, much student writing consists of summarising information gained from various authorities (this is not to say that it necessarily should do so). When MS Mthethwa wrote: “writers need to have the clear image or picture of what he/she needs to write about”, it showed that the student was responding to the idea that writing is stimulated by visualisation. What is most pleasing is that the student had successfully internalised the concept by expressing it in his own words. It must be remembered that many of our ESL students come from illiterate or newly-literate communities, and are not familiar with many aspects of writing which would be taken for granted by First World students (e.g. focusing on the topic, or visualising what one is going to write). *NEWT* models writing processes for inexperienced writers through various routines, prompts and text lessons.

The online discussion forum option gives learners the option of both expressing, and, in a sense, reflecting on their learning, which not only internalises and consolidates new knowledge, but also shares these insights with peers and teachers. As we have learned from our *Comm. Skills Online* courses, online communication in writing has the potential not only to facilitate development of competence in written communication but also to demonstrate to both the learners and the teacher that learning is taking place. What is most important is that being introduced to the Writing Clinic stimulated both of the above ESL students to start writing, and that in a context where Engineering students (still predominantly young males) profess to “hate” English and shun writing as if it were a social disease. Our *Comm. Skills Online* courses have demonstrated that young males who consider literary skills unmanly, or not particularly relevant to a technical career, blossom when invited to air their views online in writing, as do the isiZulu- or isiXhosa-speaking students who are too shy - or not sufficiently fluent in English - to speak out in class. The Writing Clinic appears to have stimulated interest in writing from the whole class group, where all 36 students responded with unusual alacrity (and thoroughness) to a writing exercise set
by their lecturer, Naadira Jadwat (see “Language exercise” in Figure 7). Until more figures and statistical responses are available, however, it will not be possible to assess the overall effects of the Writing Clinic on student groups.

The Writing Clinic was piloted with two staff groups in 2007. The first was a multi-disciplinary group, including some Administration staff, which was initiated and co-facilitated by Liz Harrison of CHED (Centre for Higher Educational Development). The second consisted of staff of the Photography Department, for whom I ran a Research Workshop at the end of the year. Because the first group was multi-disciplinary, which meant that finding a common time for meeting was difficult, live workshops sessions were held on Monday afternoons for five weeks, with much of the interaction being online. It was possible to hold a more intensive two-day workshop with the staff of the Photography Department, as lectures had finished by then. However, this workshop was on developing research capacity generally, and only one morning, as well as a follow-up discussion the next week, was devoted to actual writing, in this instance, research publications. Both workshops had different contexts: the first was offered to staff to develop writing competences generally, and the group chose its own focus and intention, namely, the writing of theses and dissertations. The second focused specifically on research publication (i.e. journal and conference articles), following on discussions the previous day about the nature of research at a University of Technology and the potential for research in the field of Photography. Both groups used the version of NEWT and Writing Clinic webpage which had been made available to the students, but were registered on an online discussion forum which was private to University staff. Participants were introduced to other Moodle courses besides those linked to the Writing Clinic webpage, in particular, an Arts and Design (i.e. Faculty) Research Forum and a Higher Degree Research Module. This was because staff in both groups were engaged in their own master’s or doctoral degrees as well as in developing research capacity for their students.
Participants in the multidisciplinary group were at different stages of completing their higher degrees. This diversity acted as a resource, as those who were more advanced with their research projects could offer advice and resources to those who were just starting out and the less experienced researchers could offer a fresh perspective to more experienced colleagues who had become jaded or stalled. Even though it was the busiest time in the academic year (3rd term) and participation was difficult, nearly twenty A4 pages of animated - and erudite - discussion were generated on the online forum, and this did not take into account private email interchanges used to deal with more sensitive or specialist issues. Figure 8 illustrates how new resources can easily be introduced by participants via the online forums. The works cited in Figure 8 generated some discussion and stimulated one participant to attempt to overcome a block (i.e. completing the last chapter of her dissertation, the data analysis) by following the practical advice offered in one of the sources, and undertook to start writing that very night. The author then intervened as follows:

I dare you to share the writing you do tonight with us (i.e. on this discussion forum): if nothing else, it will give you an interested and supportive audience. If it stays in rough note form, so much the better, as you can then get feedback on ideas before investing too much in them.

The suggestion to share the rough draft on a public forum was perhaps a bit daunting, but the participant responded very well to the challenge and soon afterwards sent a rough draft of the problematic chapter to both facilitators via private email. The irony is that I myself had faced - and overcome - precisely the same block, but in a different field, when completing my thesis, as I had been obliged to include new data and insert this into the data analysis chapter in an already polished draft. I could have just told the participant what to do, but sensed that this particular staff member needed to feel in control and find her own way. The literature cited by Liz Harrison offered choices: the participant chose the option which appeared workable to her, took the “dare” in good part, and completed her dissertation. In a less mature group of learners, of course, a more directive approach might have worked better. What this example illustrates is that the interactions in the online discussion allow subtleties of approach to be negotiated without enforcing a method of instruction which may not work with some participants, particularly mature learners who are competent in their subject areas. This is another aspect of the social function in learning: not just the teacher but the whole group acts as the regulator of social mores, a process which is both facilitated and accelerated by use of online forum discussion. Incidentally, the participant concerned had commented that she thought that the NEWT menu item on writer’s block might prove useful, but it was the interaction with the facilitators and the authors of the works provided which appears to have resolved her block (which she had ruefully compared to a “brick wall”) in this case. Of two other staff members just starting out on their MTech research, one used the NEWT advice to interrogate...
audience and purpose for his research proposal, and added that he particularly liked the prompt to open a word processor document (“Working notes” on the NEWT main menu) as he could then feed in other documents (i.e. to consolidate his preliminary notes). The other staff member said that she thought that the insight the program gave her into the composing process would help with her coursework assignments.

As mentioned above, the use of the Writing Clinic with the Photography Department was part of a Research Workshop focusing on capacity building and research publication. While the first staff group was predominantly female, and had a distinctly literary “feel” to it, the Photography group were all male, and tended to view themselves as being primarily technically-oriented with little focus on research or writing. It must be emphasised that this was a mindset, not the reality, as the first day of the workshop revealed that staff were aware of a plethora of eminently researchable topics in Photography, and were all involved in some form of research without necessarily categorising it as such. When asked to do “homework” which involved writing about a research topic in which they were - or could become - engaged, all staff present at the workshop produced written pieces of an excellent standard, which were posted on the online forum discussion. Public display of written work online helps writers to contextualise their writing and adds social pressure to submit and polish work: it also assists both continuity and reflection by preserving a record of where learners have been and where they are going. Continuity is a real problem in developing research capacity and research writing skills: on the second day of the workshop Photography staff experimented enthusiastically with the NEWT mind map application (they liked the visual aspect), but then the workshop was over and I myself was tied up with producing the Faculty Research Report for 2007. Shortly afterwards the term - and academic year - ended, and the group had not yet decided on the various research projects they would focus on in 2008, nor had options for conference participation or journal submission been finalised.

This is where the Writing Clinic project comes into its own, as the forum discussion not only provides a record of what has been accomplished, but also facilitates the process of picking up where participants left off. The composition software, NEWT, provides participants with the option of continuing with composition instruction and following up any particular interests - or issues - without a human instructor having to be present. It must be stressed, however, that the Writing Clinic works best in conjunction with face-to-face consultations. Spurling (2006) stresses the importance of offering consultative tuition in composition, and Cameron et al (2004) include Writing Centres as one of the options for providing such tuition. Writing Centres involving face-to-face consultations are increasingly becoming a common feature of universities in South Africa, each being tailored to the institution’s needs (see, for example, Daniels & Richards 2006, Hermine & Slemming 2001, Hutchings 2006, and Walker 2000). Such a Writing Centre is currently being set up in the Faculty of Arts and Design with a facilitator who will work closely with departments so as to integrate composition instruction with writing in the disciplines. The facilitator is a PT staff member who has worked with our Fine Art Foundation Programme. This facility will offer not only lessons and consultations (using a process conferencing approach) but also opportunities for using the Writing Tutor software and the Writing Clinic discussion forums, so that a variety of media and approaches will be available to suit different learner needs and learning styles.

## Conclusion

Although the Writing Clinic has not yet been made available to the general public, some copies of the NEWT software are being piloted by schools and universities, and the service to the public will become available in 2009. However, before this can happen, the technical aspects (i.e. setting up a dedicated Writing Clinic server with encrypted software download) will need to be addressed, and, next, the legal aspects, as the DUT webpage provider contractual agreement necessitates the Writing Clinic being marketed as a short course. When the general public, including staff and students and staff at other academic institutions, have been included in the project, it will be congruent with DUT’s mission and vision as a University of Technology, in combining teaching and learning, research and community engagement in an attempt to transform the quality of life for the university and wider community. However, the project is not limited to KwaZulu-Natal, or even South Africa, as the ICT aspect makes it available globally, the only limiting factor being the requirement for human facilitators. If readers would like to find out more about the project, or to assist in piloting the Writing Clinic and/or the NEWT software, the author can be contacted via her website on the Durban University of Technology webpage.

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**About the Author**

Dr. Dee Pratt

Dr. Pratt is Research Co-ordinator for the Faculty of Arts & Design at the Durban University of Technology. Her teaching and research are multidisciplinary, involving linguistics, education, the media and computer-mediated learning, focusing in particular on the changes in communication practices brought about by rapid advances in computer technology and expanding worldwide use of hypermedia. She is involved in both web-based learning and courseware design, and is currently testing out a writing tutor program developed in her doctoral research. Her research orientation is critical realism, an anti-positivist philosophy which works sensitively towards social transformation by exploring the complex system of social and natural forces underpinning everyday social functioning. However, her supervision includes approaches such as constructivism and phenomenology. She uses a scaffolded constructivist approach in her teaching, and has developed an original integrated language learning approach which has been implemented in the Department of Media, Language & Communication. She was Faculty Quality Co-ordinator in 2006-7. Her present post as Research Co-ordinator includes designing and running online Research Modules and Forums. She is currently supervising nine doctoral students in Language Practice, and four masters students in e-Learning, Graphic Design and Chiropractic. Her BTech supervision is in the fields of Television and Journalism.
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