Improvising Folk Songs: An Inclusive Indeterminacy

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Improvising Folk Songs: An Inclusive Indeterminacy

Susanne Rosenberg

Folk Song Lab uses interactive group sessions to explore different ways by which improvisation stimulates an attitude towards the song by which it is understood as a cognitive framework that is recreated by the singer in the performance moment. It takes its point of origin in certain conceptual qualities found in traditional folk song and improvisation, stimulated using flow-inducing concepts (Csikszentmihalyi 1990. Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. New York: Harper Collins.) such as risk, mimicry, play and reorientation, and interpreted in musical terms and without written instructions. This empirical study uses particular developed improvisational methods reflecting traditional songs’ cognitive frames. The project raises questions regarding the influence of time in relation to how creativity and flow appear during improvising sessions. Some of the methods explored in the project, such as mirror singing, might be related to neuroscientific findings regarding the function of mirror-neurons, hence reflecting the possibilities for conceiving of human creativity in a collective way.

Keywords: Folk Song; Improvisation; Cognitive Frame; Flow

The Folk Song as a Cognitive Frame for Improvisation

Many Scandinavian folk singers today have learned the lion’s share of their repertoire by ear, often from listening to historical recordings of older traditional singers. Recordings of older bearers of the tradition are widely available in Scandinavia, and through the Internet and CD editions a range of archival material that previously required great efforts to find is just a click away. Being able to listen to recorded sources is, of course, very positive for the community, providing great opportunities for folk singers to extend their repertoire and to adapt qualities of singing style. However, it also tends to lead to a fixation on certain recordings of songs, treated—analogous to original commercial recordings—like they are ‘original’ versions, becoming the canonised versions of the songs and regarded as if they are
compositions. This supports a view among modern singers that, even when learned by oral transmission, it is a fixed ‘original version’ of a song that is learned. The song, in terms of text and melody, is thus regarded as something solid, an entity. This view is also supported by over 200 years of folk song collection by notation, where the object has often been to find the original version of the song (Åkesson 2007). This position is not, however, uniformly taken to be the case. Studies show that modern folk singers make variations depending on the way they learned a song: if learned by oral transmission the individual variation is more prominent than when a folk song is learned from a musical notation (Rosenberg 2019). There is thus a potential for promoting the idea of relating to the song less as a fixed work and more as what I term a cognitive frame to be interpreted anew every time you sing it and promoting the ability to produce variations from a cognitive frame. These questions regarding authenticity, variation and improvisation are constantly relevant for artistic and pedagogical development at the Folk Music Department at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, where the artistic research project Folk Song Lab, which this article will explore, was created.

When listening to older traditional folk singers, through recordings as well as in living tradition, the singers seem not to regard ‘the song’ as an entity. Rather, the song is generally varied to the degree that it appears as a cognitive frame of tonality and form (Tradisjonell sang som levende prosess 2009; Rosenberg 2009). The action of singing, and not performing an already fixed melody and text, can be considered to be the primary thing, with the song being the framework for the act of singing.

The ballad researcher Bertrand H. Bronson’s description of Anna Brown’s singing captures this perspective. He says: ‘What such singers have in mind is a melodic idea, not a note-for-note record; and what anyone else will learn from their singing will inevitably be likewise the idea of a song’ (Bronson 1969, 71). ‘The idea of a song’ could then be interpreted as a recipe for the performance of the song, that might incorporate tonality, a melodic form, a storyline, certain specific melodic or lyrical phrases, rhymes, vocal and emotional expressions, and so on, that are then shaped by the singer in the act of singing based on their performative knowledge—including melodic and poetic formulation style, vocal style, and so on, all of which can be described as the singer’s internalised tacit knowledge to be used when interpreting ‘the song’. Bronson continues: ‘What was it she had carried in her memory? Not a text, but a ballad: an fluid entity soluble in the mind, to be concretely realised at will in words and music’ (71). With this concept the performative attitude could imply that there is a cognitive frame to be interpreted in the act of singing a folk song; the song is to be regarded as an improvisation based on the cognitive framework of the song, rather than in terms of a reproduction of songs. The attitude described by Bronson in his characterisation of Anna Brown’s singing can also be found in recordings and quotations from older traditional singers in the Scandinavian context (Ling 1987; Rosenberg 1993; Jansson 1999)

The motivation for the current study is to search for artistic methods and concepts to promote this performative attitude, arguing for folk singing as, for today’s singers,
a language for musical expression in the moment, and for the song as a cognitive framework. This includes determining methods that can help in developing an understanding of a folk song as a cognitive frame and of what constitutes the frameworks of folk song and folk singing style, as well as methods for stimulating creativity and improvisation in the moment, following from earlier experiments (Rosenberg 2013). Can today’s folk singers learn to master such an attitude shift, from reproduction to creation, through the act of singing? The project aims at using features of style, form, variability and improvisation found in traditional Swedish folk song as a basis to stimulate the ability to improvise in the moment, developing the ability to use tacit knowledge, a language for musical expression in the moment, in an interactive context.

The exploratory artistic research study Folk Song Lab aims at addressing these questions inspired by the folklore ‘performance’ attitude described above. The idea of a ‘lab’ refers to a space and time for improvised folk song performance, designed as interactive, collective sessions constituting a platform for inclusive music making from the cognitive frames of traditional folk songs. Parts of this ongoing exploratory work are described below. The improvisation methods are developed from earlier experiments using Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) flow-concept as applied to improvisation in folk singing (Rosenberg 2013). In the Folk Song Lab project artistic tools for creating a challenge in the moment are developed from the flow-parameters, namely: play—risk—mimicry—reorientation—feedback—real-life-performance. This formulation of play suggests that the performer needs challenges to develop skills, but that the challenge should be just enough for the performer to end up in the flow-channel, to be in the moment, in flow. These ‘flow parameters’ are the foundation of the methods created in the folk song lab project.

The Folk Song Lab Platform and Methods

The Participants

The artistic experiments in Folk Song Lab have been performed in sessions stretching between 30 minutes and 2 hours. From 2014 until today more than 500 individuals have participated in more than 50 Folk Song Lab sessions. Some of them have participated only once, others several times. This cohort of participants consists of singers, non-singers and musicians, folk or traditional singers and those not familiar with folk music at all, amateurs and professionals, men and women. The age span is between 18 and 85 years of age, and the group size has varied from 4 people up to 80 people (or more) in one session. Sessions have been set up primarily in Sweden, but also in Finland, Ireland, Estonia, Turkey, Belgium, and Norway, with participants from Sweden, Ireland, Finland, Norway, Estonia, Turkey, Canada, USA, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Lithuania and England. Sessions have been organised as public events, as part of conferences and at
various pedagogic or artistic meetings, but most sessions of *Folk Song Lab* have been arranged at KMH in Stockholm, with invited volunteers participating on a more regular basis. The participants at these sessions have been students, teachers or alumni from the Department of Folk Music at KMH. Since 2019 there has also been a professional group of four folk singers, including the author, experimenting in a separate research project of *Folk Song Lab* supported by the Swedish Research Council. This initiated and intense artistic improvisatory work will be presented in a separate article.

**The Structure of Sessions**

A session at *Folk Song Lab* is designed according to certain conditions, methods and concepts intended to stimulate presence and spontaneous musicianship. These conditions serve the purpose of helping participants focus and immerse in the activity. They consist in: 1. A **physical location**, a space in place, a room to make music in and where it’s possible to achieve concentration. This room has to be separate, where no others come and go or need to pass. 2. A **temporal site**, a space in time, agreed to last a given period, stretching from around thirty minutes up to two hours. 3. An **interactive context**, promoting the moment, the form and the
collective creation in a way that provides simultaneous feedback. 4. A **mentally focused place**, where other distractions such as mobile phones or computers don’t disturb. 5. An **interactive non-judgmental location**—everyone in a session participates on the same terms and contributes to the creation in the moment, seated or standing in a circle. All of this sounds simple, but in today’s media-connected and digitised environment these conditions can almost be seen as endangered. How often is concentrated time spent in one place for an hour without any disturbing elements?

The participants are encouraged to write down their reflections at the end of a session with only one instruction: describe your experience. Sometimes this is also followed by a conversation, starting from their own written reflections.

**The Tools**

The equality of participants, suggested by the circle, the time and the space, is intended to create an atmosphere of trust, allowing participants to be in the moment, creating *flow*. It is an opportunity for participants to let go, beyond their comfort zones, and encourages interactivity in a social context, towards building the improvisation on communication, in a ‘conversation’ with the others. It thus provides conditions to engage in complex artistic expression in flow, where participants can forget themselves and not analyze and reflect during the session.

Through improvisation based on the cognitive framework, the session provides an opportunity to use and develop tacit knowledge in creating music in a folk singing style by improvising, similar to the way a jazz musician develops skills in improvising with reference to, for example, harmonic patterns. The parameters within the folk song cognitive frame that are used in Scandinavian folk song consist of mode (including micro-tonality), musical phrasing, and musical folk song forms such as medieval ballad, epic song, herding-call, lullaby, lyric song and religious song, all with specific forms and formulas used. In the session these forms are used for developing skills in lyric formulation style, narrative form, melodic progression, rhythmic pattern, rhyming, alliteration, repetition, ornamentation and also, to some extent, singing style.

As presented earlier, using the flow-parameters Csikszentmihalyi (1990) formulated in the sense of flow-creating artistic tools, participants are facilitated towards ending up in the ‘flow-channel’. All methods thus include parameters such as play, reorientation, mimicry, artistic risk, feedback and ‘real-life-situation’. The prime focus is on the collective activity rather than the individual performance, creating a shared platform that encourages both creating and listening. My role as leader and researcher is to initiate the activity as lead singer, suggesting the transition between methods. Some of these conditions can also be found within other type of improvisation practice, for example within theatre improvisation.
Every session is documented, by audio and sometimes video, providing the opportunity to analyze the artistic quality of the sessions, for example, afterwards. Participants are encouraged to write reflections after the session, while in the session no talking or other reflection is made. There are no separate instructions before the session other than a few words at the beginning. From the moment the session has started all dialogue or instructions are made merely by singing: in the act of singing. There are numerous methods used so far in Folk Song Lab but in the following I will specifically mention two.

Method: Mirror Singing

The method of mirror singing challenges and highlights the importance of being able to integrate someone else’s general expression by mimicry, and promotes the opportunity to embrace and intuitively understand a musical language than you thereafter can make your own (Figures 2 and 3).

Mirror singing always opens a Folk Song Lab session, and can be described as the participants mirroring, by mimicking exactly, the lead-singer’s improvisation simultaneously to the lead-singer improvising. The participant singers, beside the improviser, are actually mimicking an improvised melody and text in the moment. The result is a nearly unison singing without anyone knowing what comes next. Form and mode

Figure 2 Mirror singing with closed eyes in a session of Folk Song Lab. Photo by Heikki Tuuli.
are introduced, without explanation or oral instruction, through improvisation by the lead-singer.

The cognitive frame here is the herding-call, with continuously spinning, free-metric varied phrases, lasting a breath, within the herding call mode (Ahlbäck 1986). A session with mirror singing lasts for at least 15 minutes, but often goes up to 45 minutes in one stretch. It also includes improvised lyrics by the lead-improviser, that the participants mimic instantly. The method is applied both with open and closed eyes.

Method: Story-Board Ballad

*Story-board ballad* is a method to stimulate improvisation in a meter with both melody and story line in *ballad-form*, drawing from collectively created *story-boards* instead of written text. The participants are invited to create a *story-board*, with inspiration from either an existing narratively or a newly created one, in the cognitive form of the medieval Scandinavian ballad (Jansson 1999). When improvising, the formulation skills and internalised knowledge are put to use; the cognitive frames of the medieval ballad are narrated from a number of scenes with formulas such as *The Grey Horse, The White Sand* or *The Green Grove*, dialogues told in third person perspective with interleaved refrains, repetition, end-rhyme, alliteration, and parallelism.
improvised in the moment. A session with *story-board ballad* lasts for at least thirty minutes, but often up to one hour in one stretch.

These are just two examples from a catalogue of about 40–50 methods developed in *Folk Song Lab* so far, but they form two different approaches to collective and inclusive improvisation (Figures 4 and 5).

**Findings So Far**

As mentioned, this is still an ongoing artistic research project, but still there are some findings to reflect on at this time.

*Mirror Singing Versus Mimicking Afterwards*

One preliminary outcome is that methods that requires presence and total attention in the moment, such as simultaneous *mirror singing*, seem to work better than first listening to an improvised phrase and then mimicking. A participant offers the following: ‘To mimic after the lead-singer is tricky, then other thoughts have time to distract. Demands great focus. You have to put away parts of your own intention’ (participant 2014). The same person reflects on the simultaneously mirroring singing experience as being: ‘Intuitive. Present. In the moment. Easier to sing directly, it becomes a form of meditation when you have total “split vision”, purely auditory. It feels like putting your voice in the hands of the person you mimic’ (participant 2014).

One participant has an interesting reflection on the specifics of the method and how it

**Figure 4** A *story-board* to improvise from painted by Maria Järventaus for a session of *Folk Song Lab*. 
works, and compares it to sketching with the wrong hand: ‘As when you do drawing exercises, when you learn to draw, you can change and draw with the “wrong” hand. Then you will draw what you see and not the symbols [as you would do otherwise]’ (participant 2018). This indicates that the ‘musical symbols’ could be in your way when you first listen to a phrase and then mimic.

However, there is no overall preference about the mirror singing method versus mimicking after first listening: ‘Thought it was about as difficult with both mimicking variants’ (participant 2014), or: ‘Interesting to know how time worked for my ideas while we [improvise] various phrasings one by one in group’ (participant 2016).

**Group Size**

The data indicates that the number of people participating in a *story-board ballad* session seems to have an impact on the outcome: the more participants, the less straightforward the story-line becomes. It is a collective process where every person contributes, proceeding in turns, where every person seated in the circle will have a ‘go’ at the story-line, and how often this happens is then dependent on the group-
size. One can speculate that it might be more difficult to keep track of the joint storyline when improvising in a bigger group, or it could be guessed that with more people there will be more alternative ways to tell a story, influencing the collective storyline. Regardless of group size the story will eventually be told, but, when improvised with a bigger group, there will be several detours.

**Aspects of Time Spent**

When it comes to the time spent in a *story-board ballad* session it seems that, from a general perspective, the amount of time devoted to the session, regardless of group size, has significance regarding quality. As one participant reflected: ‘After a while, multitasking ability increased so you could both create rhyme and bring the story forward. Surely great exercise for the brain!’ (participant 2014). To be further examined is the hypothesis that it might be important, in a session where you improvise both lyrics and melody, to let ‘time work’. It seems that the session needs to go on for at least 30–40 continuous minutes to get sufficient quality in the narrative to emerge, and, as the participant states, ‘after a while’ the participant likely adapts to a mode and better listens to the others in the group, giving more room for effective wordplay that deviates from the collective narration to arise. This is consistent with, for example, the duration of long Faroe ballads. But the period of time spent is still delicate, as one participant reflects:

> When we find ourselves in the task [of improvising ballads] for a long time, you start to relax a bit and just let the quirky things come. It is not as prepared or conceived. But it can be difficult to keep the focus for so long, the brain starts to set itself on what to do next when we are done with what we do just for the moment. (participant 2018)

**Improvising Lyrics with or Without Metre**

A general finding is that the participants consider it to be easier to improvise lyrics when sung without, rather than with, a reference pulse. Of course, the internalised knowledge in formulas—use of rhyme, alliteration, etc.—is at work when relating to a metre, but, even so, for most participants it seems that the use of rhyme and alliteration is something that, when sung in relation to a metre, needs to be practiced. As one participant stated:

> To improvise rhymes was great fun and challenging. I realize that it is based on being ahead of the thought, to rather focus on two words that rhyme, then finding the way there, instead of starting a phrase and then trying to find a word that rhymes. The pulse made it both harder but at the same time more focused, to be forced into a pulse. Noticed that we came into [this mode] more and more the longer we did it. And that we were helped to find rhymes [by that]. (participant 2018)
This kind of reflection cannot be found from any sessions with improvised lyrics in free metre.

**Collective Versus Individual Improvisation**

All of the *Folk Song Lab* methods are performed interactively in group session by alternating between improvising all together at the same time and individually in front of the group. Analysing the reflections of the participants, it can be suggested that most participants experience the individual performance as more demanding in its increased involvement of artistic risk, while improvising at the same time in the group makes it easier to let go:

Fun and creative with improvisation in a group, at the same time. You become a part of something, everyone participates, instead of one by one. Then you can let yourself go for a while, just rest in that you are a small part of something and that everybody contributes. A curiosity is also awakened. To listen. (participant 2018)

Then I experienced that it was a little … that you go into something else there when you start making your own, then justOops! It feels really hard! You have been so much in the group, and then there will be something new in that moment. Aha?! At the same time, that you listen to everyone and at the same time you have to somehow listen to yourself. On your own. So, there will be a slight tinge there. But when you get into it, then it is incredibly beautiful, to create together. (participant 2018)

**Internalised Knowledge**

Some participants have been taking part in these sessions over a longer period of time. One of these participants offered this interesting comment:

By the way, I got a very concrete use of folk song lab last weekend when I sang and played at a wedding. Suddenly the lyric of the song was just gone in my head, but I managed to still sing the finished phrase by using a bit of the previous text and remaking it a little so that it suited. It was really not advanced, but I still think I could handle the situation more calmly thanks to the fact that we practiced on similar things during our sessions! It was fun to discover. (e-mail from participant 2018)

Perhaps one of the more interesting questions is if this improvisation training will give the participants internalised knowledge that they can use in their musicianship outside of these sessions. But it is too early to find any definite answers to this question. Nevertheless, this participant’s answer indicates that this could be a result, and that the methods examined in *Folk Song Lab* promote training in skills not held before. There are several interesting indications in the documentation that the internalised knowledge of the participants seems to have an impact on the ability to
improvise in the moment in numerous ways, showing that it is not always an advantage to have pre-knowledge about the folk song style, repertoire and so on. These findings will be the subject of upcoming articles about Folk Song Lab.

**Cognitive Frame**

It is interesting to observe that it is possible to introduce the idea of a song as a ‘cognitive framework’, which is fundamental to Folk Song Lab sessions, without the need of explanation. Even without explanation some participants seem to acknowledge the inherent contours of a framework: ‘It’s a pretty clear frame with very high ceilings for what you can do. You get to do just about anything within the framework, it gives a lot of peace, and it is a creative room!’ (participant 2015).

**Flow Parameters as Tools**

It seems that the methods that are based on flow-parameters have been shown to be able to make it possible for participants to be present in the moment during the sessions. A huge part of the written reflections indicate this: ‘The time disappeared, it was perceived as shorter than an hour’ (participant 2018), or: ‘Thought—“Should I sit here and waste time”. Suddenly, almost an hour disappeared in a flash, time stood still’ (participant 2018).

Folk Song Lab can be described as a general method for examining the cognitive framework of folk songs in a new artistic context, and at the same time the different methods and artistic concepts that emerge from the cognitive framework of the folk song and the physical, temporal and concentrated place for a session with Folk Song Lab can be considered as being important and part of the result. In addition, it is an artistic development process promoting learning new skills and improvised music-making based on these cognitive frames.

**Discussion**

Several interesting development opportunities emerge from these experiments: how does the participants’ musical skills and backgrounds relate to their preferences and experience of the different methods? Is there a relationship between how internalised a knowledge is and what method you prefer in a session created through musical interaction between a number of people? How does the collective form, the interactive platform, stimulate joint creation, inspiration and input that comes from the work of other participants? It is noticeable that qualities can arise in interaction when switching between the roles of singing and listening, and that the musical event is created by musical interaction between a number of people.

The method mirror singing is an interesting foundation for an upcoming study with an interdisciplinary focus. How can it be explained that mimicking, at the same time, something never heard before works so well? It is worth mentioning that this
particular method has been tried out with different groups in a wide range of contexts, both with participants who have been part of the Folk Song Lab project and with regular audiences in concert contexts, with very good results.

In some ways this can be explained by what some researchers call mirror-neurons. The existence of mirror-neurons is difficult to verify because we cannot perform the required type of experiment in the brain. But researchers in neuroscience speculate that we, in our brains, have a neurological system that binds together actions, perceptions, languages and our ability to learn to speak and sing through mimicry. This would allow us to anticipate the actions and intention of others, communicate and understand simultaneously (Gazzola and Keysers 2009; Keysers and Gazzola 2006). There is also new psychological research that points out that although visual impressions hold the most of our perceptual capacity, in comparing studies between visual and audio stimulation the voice’s ability to convey emotions takes over (Kraus 2017). Can the fact that mirror singing works also with closed eyes be related to these new research findings? These are exciting issues to be investigate further on in interdisciplinary projects.

In the project a variety of methods and artistic and pedagogical concepts have been formulated and analyzed, and only a very few are highlighted here. The development of methods takes place in a continuous interaction between sessions, analyses, evaluations and reflections, giving rise to new questions, ideas and artistic methods that can then be tried at the following sessions. The tools and methods that so far have been tested within the Folk Song Lab have proved to be interesting. When assessing from the reflections, discussions and evaluation of artistic results, the general concept of a cognitive framework of a song and performance style as a platform for improvisation and artistic expression in a collective interactive context seems to work. And can be concluded, as artistic researchers Henrik Frisk and Stefan Östersjö state, that ‘[k]nowledge produced is identified through action or its workability’ (2013, 47).

An interesting aspect of the sessions in Folk Song Lab is that they seem to offer a position between learning, interaction and ‘real life situation’ that can be investigated as something akin to Csikszentmihalyi’s description of the Flow experience: ‘flow—the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 4). The cognitive frame concept, in turn, takes as a starting point the singers’ (in the act of singing) perspective, and, together with Berkowitz’s definition of improvisation, being ‘the spontaneous rule-based combination of elements to create novel sequences that are appropriate for at given moment in a given context’ (Berkowitz 2010, xviii), concludes that when improvising you need internalised knowledge to be able to create freely. It is well known that improvisatory skills and creativity benefit from the use of returning forms such as a specific tonality, a harmonic sequence or rhythmic pattern, and that internal tacit knowledge would promote being freer ‘in the moment’ (de Manzano and Ullén 2012; de Manzano et al. 2010; Pinho et al. 2014).
This might suggest that tacit knowledge of a cognitive framework is useful when improvising.

The cognitive frame has shown to be a useful concept in Folk Song Lab. The cognitive frame doesn’t grade the art of expression but instead acts as a starting point for making music; you can be more or less daring in relation to the perceived cognitive frame, both as an individual act and between the different occasions when the act of singing appears, while still starting from internalised knowledge. And this does not imply any conscious awareness of the cognitive frame. The song’s cognitive frame, together with improvisation, forms the ground for creating new methods that could stimulate intuitive creativity in the moment connected to the tacit knowledge skills of participants. This might help to challenge their limits: stimulating new approaches in how you tell a story by singing, by improvising a herding call, through methods and tools, and hence promoting a freer approach to music making in an interactive context.

Folk Song Lab is developed primarily as an artistic platform for challenging and bringing forward important parameters in the traditional folk song, but perhaps it could be used outside of this context. One participant reflected: ‘...I do not experience this as a particular genre bound activity—even if it takes its starting point in a folk musical approach, it is something that any genre can indulge in. Classical music would benefit from it’ (participant 2015). Perhaps the specific methods created from the original questions of how to use the traditional folk song language in improvised musicianship today, from a cognitive framework, could also challenge music and lyrical creation even outside the musical domain? A side effect of the project Folk Song Lab is the usability of its methods to promote an experience that many participants point out, an experience of temporal wholeness. Perhaps the methods can be even useful in interdisciplinary contexts, where basic human functions for learning and creating are investigated?

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Susanne Rosenberg, folk singer, professor, and Doctor of Music, has been a pioneer both in rediscovering the older Swedish style of folk singing and in using it in new artistic environments, involving cooperation with contemporary composers and directors, and with her own groups, with which she has toured Europe, Asia, and the United States. Rosenberg has developed the folk singing environment in Sweden by innovative research in Kulning (herding calls), folk song style, improvisation in folk singing etcetera. She is professor of folk singing at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm. In 2013 she finished her artistic doctoral studies, Kurbits-ReBoot: Swedish traditional singing in new artistic context. Rosenberg is presently leading an inter-disciplinary improvisation research project, Folk Song Lab, funded by The Swedish Research Council.
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