

Using discussion forums to support continuing education of workplace learning supervisors: enabling a community of practice

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Workplace learning (WPL) supervisors play a significant and fundamental role in enhancing university students' experiences during their placements. Supervision is a multi-faceted and complex interpersonal and professional activity, which requires continued education to ensure contemporary knowledge, practice and capacity. Increasingly universities are viewing the offering of continued education for industry supervisors as an aspect of their mandate. This research reports on the design, facilitation and evaluation of an online learning module, supported by an asynchronous discussion forum aimed at building capacity of WPL supervisors, and developing cross-disciplinary WPL relationships.

Using a mixed method approach, data were gathered using crude statistical measures including frequency counts of discussion postings, layered with thematic analysis of supervisors' postings to weekly learning activity stimuli. The results of the research illustrate the powerful opportunities for continued education offered by participation in a purposely designed and supported discussion forum. Participants felt empowered, supported by their online colleagues and enlightened by their enhanced awareness of others' practices and perspectives. Participants' capacity to further disseminate their embellished understandings of WPL supervision brought to the fore the far-reaching possibilities of discussion forum use in building professional communities of practice and professional capacity.

Keywords: asynchronous, community of practice, continuing education, discussion forum, online learning, professional learning, workplace learning

Introduction

Workplace learning supervisors play a significant and fundamental role in enhancing university students' experiences during their placements (Rowe, Mackaway, & Wincester-Seeto, 2012). While the role of the workplace supervisor could be primarily viewed as being the *eyes of the university* in monitoring, administering and observing the student, it is important to consider that supervisors offer far more. Supervision is a multi-faceted and complex interpersonal and professional activity, as the WPL supervisor "facilitates exposure to authentic experiences, provides a role-model and enables the student to find the potential for learning in their experiences" (Rodger, Fitzgerald, Davila, Millar & Allison, 2011). Thus, quality supervision is central to students gaining a positive and valuable workplace experience (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010). Given the multitude of responsibilities which encompass the supervisor's role, the question must be raised: Can supervisors effectively fulfil these roles without support and professional development? Thus, for universities, ensuring WPL supervisors are aware of the complexity of their roles and responsibilities is crucial (Patrick et al., 2008), and brings to the fore the call for supervisors to participate in continued professional learning related to supervision.

In order to support quality workplace learning supervision, a WPL academic in an Australian regional university, designed an online learning module offered as continued professional education to WPL supervisors across all health industries/professions. The module design was deliberately framed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice concepts: joint enterprise, shared repertoire, and mutual engagement. The principal aim of the module was to build capacity of WPL supervisors, by providing a communal learning space for the development of cross-disciplinary WPL relationships, knowledge sharing and collaboration. To support the module, an asynchronous discussion forum was used as a tool to *gather* participants with differing levels of experience and competence, and act as a space in which *reflection on practice* could be made visible. As evidenced in the literature, discussion forums "facilitate reflective thinking as multiple perspectives and individual reasoning are made explicitly visible among groups of peers" (Lee-Baldwin, 2005, p. 94).

The module introduced an Australian regional university's industry supervisors to the expectations, roles and responsibilities of the placement supervisor, and offered opportunities for engagement with contemporary

literature and resources to enhance their supervisory knowledge and capacity. Furthermore, by using a technology-enabled discussion platform, supervisors who were geographically dispersed throughout Australia were provided with an asynchronous dialogic space in which to share their experiences, stories, and histories of supervision, and offer ideas and solutions for negotiating the challenges associated with workload, modelling, reflection, debriefing, relationship building and dealing with ‘difficult’ students. The framework used in this research can be applied to a multitude of disciplines and global contexts.

The Modules

Conceptual framing: Communities of practice

As defined by Etienne Wenger, Communities of Practice (CoPs) are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (<https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>). In order to operate and identify as a CoP, three characteristics are crucial: i) domain, ii) community; and iii) practice. In a CoP, the *domain* refers to the commitment that participants have to a *joint enterprise* such as a task or aspect of knowledge, for example quality WPL supervision. As the *community* pursue their interest in the domain, they form relationships which evoke the sharing of information, challenges, solutions and expertise, resulting in *mutual engagement*. The CoP members learn to trust and support each other, and this sense of community promotes openness, discussion and provides conditions for reciprocal learning between members. The third characteristic, *practice*, refers to ways of doing the tasks within the domain of interest. The CoP participants develop a *shared repertoire* of resources: their WPL histories, stories, rituals, ways of dealing with issues, resulting in socially-constructed knowledge and shared competence. Framed by these concepts, the modules were designed to be intrinsically motivating, link to authentic workplace practice, provoke participant responses and promote interdisciplinary engagement (Verenikina, Jones & Delahunty, 2017).


Module content

Informed by the university’s [online pedagogical framework](#) that includes the elements of learning communities, interaction between students, interactive resources, flexible and adaptive learning, and interaction with the professions, the WPL modules comprised 10 learning activities including:

1. My experiences of workplace learning;
2. Defining workplace learning;
3. What makes workplace learning unique?
4. Good practice principles;
5. Ensuring quality workplace learning;
6. Roles and responsibilities;
7. Building relationships;
8. Professional and practice-based standards; and
9. Personal reflection and evaluation of workplace learning.


Figure 1 illustrates an example of the module weekly learning outcomes and activities.

Defining Workplace Learning

 **Learning outcomes**

This week we will investigate definitions of workplace learning and introduce you to the features that characterise workplace learning.

- Define workplace learning from a personal perspective;
- Investigate CSU's definition of workplace learning; and
- Compare definitions of workplace learning with others.


 **Learning Activity 2:**

My understanding of workplace learning

- Take a photo of an example of CSU student/s participating in WPL or a workplace supervisor organising/assisting to prepare for WPL, OR describe a time when you were supervising a CSU student in the workplace.

There are no right or wrong answers, just what you think **defines** WPL.

- Read several other participants' descriptions of WPL and make note of the similarities and differences between your description and others'.
- What are the key or recurring terms or phrases that appear in the descriptions?

 **Discussion Forum**

- Post your photo on the Discussion Forum, and describe YOUR understanding of WPL.
- Add to your description of WPL, based on your reading of others' posts in the Discussion Forum.

Figure 1: Example of module learning activities

In general, learning activities were introduced with a scholarly narrative, supported by stimulus material such as contemporary literature or media. These inclusions acted as springboards for reflection and interaction between module participants. Scaffolded learning activities, including retrieval templates, sensory charts, and guided discussion questions, assisted participants to gather their thoughts in response to the stimulus material, reflect on their contextual experiences, and respond to the probes/prompts. The time commitment involved for supervisors was approximately 90 minutes - 2 hours per learning activity, except for week 1. At the completion of the modules, supervisors who had posted responses to all 10 learning activities were issued with a certificate of participation.

The Discussion Forum

Technological Framing

An asynchronous discussion forum was selected as a pedagogical tool as it offered a range of affordances for the intended cohort. As the workplace learning supervisors were predominately employed full time, often engaging in shift work, the 'a'-synchronicity provided flexibility and convenience for the individual users. In addition, as a regional university with geographically-dispersed industry partners and campuses, the asynchronous nature allowed supervisors to actively engage despite differences in time zones. In essence, the discussion forum created a space in which all supervisors could participate by posting, which allowed their ideas, opinions and perspectives to be 'heard' by their colleagues. The requirement to respond to others' posts, represented the act of *listening* and acknowledging *hearing* what was posted: much like a 'head nod' in a face-to-face interaction.

Using a simple technology such as a discussion forum, catered for a diversity of participants to engage in continued professional learning without fear of navigating complex technologies, or relying on availability of, or access to, software in their workplace.


The forum was purposely presented in weekly forum categories to assist participants to access the appropriate week's response space and provide commentary on their colleagues' responses. Informed by the characteristic of *joint enterprise*, (Lave & Wenger, 1991) supervisors could focus on a challenge or issue or act of practice each week, and co-construct knowledge. Social interactions, meaningful discussions and developing relationships are the identified characteristics which aid capacity building and awareness raising of quality supervision practice. As a primary purpose of the online experience was to exchange expertise, it was essential to build a culture of discussion, and nurture collective understandings of and reflections on supervision practice (Hendriks & Maor, 2004).

In keeping with quality design practice of discussion forums (Verenikina, Jones, & Delahunty, 2017), the initial call for postings required supervisors to introduce themselves and frame their professional context, and supervisory experience. Figure 2 illustrates the introductory activity requirements. This initial learning activity assisted to establish a positive social learning space (Fleming, 2015).

My Experiences of Workplace Learning

Welcome to the workplace learning module for supervisors of CSU students. As industry partners you play a significant role in supporting, nurturing and professionally socialising our students.

This week we will share our experiences of workplace learning (WPL).




Learning Activity 1:

My experiences of workplace learning

- Click on the **Discussion Forum tab** on the left hand side tool bar of this site.

Locate Week 1: My experiences of workplace learning and prepare a post that responds to the following questions:

1. What is the context of your workplace? (dentistry, podiatry, paramedics, teaching);
2. Briefly describe one experience you have had of workplace learning
 - Which year of student did you supervise?
 - What was your role?
 - For what duration did you supervise the CSU student/s?
3. Why do you consider WPL to be important?
4. Why did you enroll in these professional development modules?



Discussion Forum

- Read and comment on several other participants' Discussion posts.

Figure 2: Introductory learning activity

Operation

The university's learning platform played host to the modules and discussion forum. Participants were enrolled as 'guests' on the system, allowing access to the learning materials. The modules were offered within two of the three sessions of the university calendar, thus creating temporal boundaries for participants. The timing of these offerings was systematic as it aided in creating distinct 'cohorts' who used the university's discussion forum as a dialogic space and were placed to coincide with student WPL placements with industry partners. Creating distinct cohorts aided in building the characteristic of *community* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as supervisors exchanged their responses about workplace contexts, supervision models, and difficult practices. The temporal, relational, and organisational space further supported supervisors to engage in a trusted, safe environment as they shaped professional connections and built relationships and exchanged practice with other disciplinary supervisors: all documented characteristics and activities of a CoP. Enabling a CoP mentality provided opportunities for the co-construction of new knowledge (Wenger, 1998).

Methodology

Research design

The research was constituted by a mixed methods design allowing investigation of the i) rate of engagement with the resource and the forum, and ii) participants' perspectives of their continued education emerging from their online engagement. Mixed method studies allowed for a layering of the data to best understand participants' experiences with, and of, the online learning module. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) state that "mixed methods build on the synergy and strength that exists between quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to understand a phenomenon more fully" (p. 481).

Participant recruitment

Electronic and paper flyers were widely circulated by both academic and professional staff employed to support WPL at the university to promote enrolment in the professional learning module. The promotional material was distributed through industry networks and professional colleagues who practiced in the disciplines, and who were engaged in professional associations. These publicising modes drew on the established connections and relationships between the university and industry partners, further exemplifying the desire to build and strengthen university-industry relationships. The participants completed a guest application, supported by a signed statement to confirm their active and current supervision of the university's students in their WPL professional context. After receipt of the application, the participant was added as a 'guest' to the university's online learning platform (Blackboard) for the duration of the teaching session. The participants enrolled in the initial offering of the module were from a diversity of health discipline backgrounds including dentistry, podiatry, nursing, occupational health, radiography, physiotherapy, social work, clinical psychology, and speech pathology.

Data sources and tools

Ethical considerations

Participants were provided with an Information Sheet and consented to their discussion forum postings being included in the research via email exchange with WPL academic (University Human Research Ethics Approval). A total of 67 participants were enrolled in the online module with 38 formally consenting to the use of their qualitative data in the project.

Data

Data were gathered from two sources. Quantitative data from Blackboard; the university's learning management system, provided a useful measure of weekly log-in frequencies, and total posts. However, in order to layer the investigation, and move it beyond simple metrics, qualitative data complemented the frequency counts. Participants' responses to the final week learning activities were gathered to ascertain the efficacy of the learning opportunities (modules) and the use of the discussion forum as a space for inter-professional engagement and continued education. The final week learning activities required participants to prepare a response to the following guided evaluative questions and post on the discussion forum:

1. What have I learnt from engaging in the WPL online module?
2. How will I apply this knowledge in my supervision of WPL students in my workplace context?
3. What aspects of the WPL module were most beneficial?
4. What aspects of the module could be improved?
5. Was posting to and reading posts on the discussion forum useful?
6. What other WPL topics would I like to explore?
7. Would I enroll in another WPL module offered by X university?

Gathering these data allowed for an exploration of the depth of engagement in the discussion forum, and the quality of participants' learning (Hansmann, 2006).

Data analysis

A weekly and total frequency count was used to represent the findings of the quantitative data analysis. These simple counts provided an uncomplicated way to monitor participant use of the discussion forum and track related "engagement" or lack thereof. As all participants used the same forum, there was the capacity to provide a simple count of participant log-ins, and participant exchanges.

The discussion forum posts were analysed using coding and intra- and inter-textual analysis to determine themes (Burns, 2000). Data driven coding (Saldana, 2013) was used as the principal analysis method. Preliminary codes were initially assigned to the raw data (discussion posts), followed by assigning a final code that was thematically driven from the initial codes. Coding was a way of indexing or categorizing the text in the interview transcripts to create a framework of themes (Gibbs, 2007).

Results

The results are presented in sections including the affordances of and barriers to the development of cross-disciplinary WPL relationships, knowledge sharing and collaboration, in an online asynchronous discussion forum. Initially, the metrics of use are presented.

Blackboard analytics illustrate participants' engagement with the discussion forum either through their postings to the module learning activities or their responses to their colleagues' posts. Table 1 illustrates these findings.

Table 1: Discussion forum posting activity

Week	Weekly topic	Total posts	Total participants who posted n=68 enrolments
1	My experiences of workplace learning	177	68
2	Defining workplace learning @ X university	135	48
3	What makes workplace learning unique?	106	44
4	Good practice guidelines	77	42
5	Good practice guidelines 2	120	38
6	Ensuring quality workplace learning	78	37
7	Roles and responsibilities in workplace learning	41	37
8	Building relationships in workplace learning	37	36
9	Professional and practice based standards	40	36
10	Evaluating my workplace learning experiences	51	37

Table 1 illustrates the engagement of the 68 enrolled participants in posting responses to the weekly stimulus material. Not unlike a MOOC, after the initial flurry of postings and exchanges through commenting, the participation and active engagement (that was visible through postings) diminished as the weeks progressed, with several of the participants identifying the declining numbers in postings: “discussion dropped off in the later weeks” (P25), and “you could see after a few weeks who was really committed to learning about WPL because the numbers dropped. Those of us who stayed though seemed to write so much more” (P14). As Delahunty, Verenikina and Jones (2014) suggest a lack of engagement, limited interactions among participants and low contribution rates can act as barriers to learning in an online discussion space. Interestingly though, in the evaluation posts, a number of the supervisors exposed that they were often ‘lurking’ in the discussion forum, rather than posting. The act of lurking, is however, seen as *legitimate peripheral participation* in both a CoP and in online discussions (Malinen, 2015). Further, after analysis of the weekly postings, each of the remaining 37 participants, generally each prepared a post for the remaining weeks 7-10. Interestingly, these 37 were a subset of the 38 participants who consented to their data being recorded.

Qualitative Results

The analysis of the qualitative responses to the evaluation questions are presented in relation to the themes which arose from the data coding process.

1. Temporal

The discussion forum allowed space for participants to share their experiences of WPL supervision at times that were convenient to the individual participant. In addition, the participants noted that the asynchronous nature of the forum created opportunities for them to revisit their postings and review them as needed. Broadman (2006) points to the strength of an asynchronous forum’s ability in creating opportunities for participants to “take the time to make sense of what others are saying and then think about and plan their responses”. The forum participants identified this aspect of the forum as follows:

As the postings were not specifically looked at each week by others on the forum, I could go back, think about what I had written and change it if I needed, or sometimes I added more (P29).

Being ‘out of time’ (not sure what it is called) I could sit back and draft my response before putting it up for others to read (P36).

The purposeful choice of using an asynchronous forum was applauded by participants as it allowed them the temporal flexibility to engage as, and when they could. The following participant quotes illustrate this support:

It allowed me to participate beyond my work hours ... I didn’t have to attend a lecture at a particular ... so when I could find a spare half an hour I could log in and read others’ posts and learn about their practice (P23).

I liked the online style of the module and being able to work at your own pace and talk online when I could (P11).

I thought it was good we had the flexibility with response time, however, especially with our job demands (P20).

While many of the participants positively supported the temporal flexibility of the forum, several participants pointed to the “difficulty in keeping track of participants’ comments because they weren’t posting when [I] was” (P17) and “I really wanted to talk to real people ... I know I was, but I wanted to ask them questions then and there about what they had written” (P10). Participants felt that the burden of posting and reading others’ submissions became time consuming. Participants commented:

There was so much to read and not enough time to read all the other participants’ responses (P4).

Keeping up was harder at times and I didn’t get through all the discussion posts (P2).

... did get busy with life and work and wasn’t able to keep up with the weekly postings on the forum, however I did go back and catch up (P6).

Interestingly, one participant voiced her “extreme love of the forum” as she:

could go to class at any time. I didn’t have to wait for a scheduled lecture or weekly professional development meeting. This assisted me to remain engaged as I could just jump on when I had a great idea or felt that I needed to blab about my WPL practice that happened that day or week (P2).

Despite communicating to participants that posting responses to the forum did not need to be performed weekly, and the opportunity existed to post in bundles of weeks, participants expressed “I felt pressured to maintain currency and presence in the forum, and felt pressured to get responses posted on time” (P16).

2. Technological skill

The discussion forum was carefully and purposefully selected as a technological tool as it was easy to use, requiring minimal guidance from the facilitator to effectively engage with others online (Boardman, 2006). The simplicity of access was noted as an affordance to engaging in the online community. For some participants however, “the discussion tool thingy was a barrier to starting the online module as [they] had no prior experience in this format” (P27). One of the participants further noted that “I could not post to the forum because my browser didn’t support the format, so I uploaded my work as an attachment” (P8). Here, we can see that those with some technological skill or experience could create work-arounds in order to engage in the space. Similarly, a participant shared her total lack of previous experience with discussion fora as follows:

I haven’t completed an online learning experience like this before with posting and reading on a discussion forum. The learning experiences were fantastic even though I found it hard to navigate at the beginning. I am NOT very good at IT but I have now gained skills in this area (P5).

While the data analysis revealed that some participants initially struggled with the requirements of the discussion forum, most of the participants commented on the ease of navigation and use of the tool.

I liked the discussion forum. I was so easy to use. Just one click and you could write your posts. It wasn’t hard either to say something about other people’s posts. The first time I mucked it up, but after that I was fine (P11).

3. Opportunity to share and be heard

As the primary aim of the online module and the discussion forum was to foster cross-discipline exchanges and enhance supervisor capability, participants’ evaluative comments certainly supported the success of the module design and discussion forum use. There was a breadth of sub-themes which arose in relation to the coding of data related to this theme. These included i) being heard, valued and empowered; ii) feeling like an insider; and iii) opportunity to broaden professional perspectives.

i) Being heard, valued and empowered

The opportunity to post on a shared discussion forum created a safe and inviting professional dialogic space in which participants could offer their ideas and share their WPL experiences, seemingly without judgement. Framed by the sequence of communicative strategies posed by Verenikina, Jones and Dealahunty (2017), i) foster a positive social space; ii) build collective understanding of ideas; and iii) move toward critical discussion, the participants proffered multiple accolades regarding their feelings of shared safety and value. The online discussion space *invited* participants into a conversation; asking them for their stories, perspectives and practice. This strategy assisted participants to feel heard, even when one participant posted repeatedly on a topic, everyone could respond. In addition, participants had the choice whether to respond to the ‘over-poster’. Participants commented:

I am a rather quiet person in my work meetings. I often can't get a word in. The forum made me *talk* to others and I could have *my say* as well. When people started agreeing with my opinions I posted, I felt like what I said was important and respected (P16).

I felt empowered by the opportunity to say what I thought in a professional forum. No one knew me online so I felt really safe to share my ideas. Sometimes at work I don't share because I know everyone and wonder what they might think of my perspectives and opinions (P9).

I loved the forum. Someone asked what I thought about my work and how I supervised and I realized I had so much experience to share with the newer members of my profession. (P3).

Here I draw attention to *old timers* and *newcomers*: terms posed by Etienne Wenger when describing participants in his original CoP work. Wenger (1998) suggests that there are old timers; participants of a practice with the experience, expertise and knowledge. The old timers bear the responsibility for mentoring the newcomers; by modelling, mentoring and overseeing the "apprenticeship of practice".

ii) Feeling like an insider

Regarding the research findings, this was a very poignant sub-theme. The data analysis of the participants' postings clearly revealed that professional relations had been developed throughout the course of the online engagements. The participants' comments highlighted their shared perspectives and attachment to the "like-minded" online community. Significantly, participants expressed the notion of being an "insider in the group". Several of the participants voiced their alliance to the group and expressed that they had shared their experience of being part of the group with the "outsiders" (their workplace colleagues who were not enrolled in the continuing professional education opportunity). One participant illustrated this notion of being an insider in a conversation and group as follows:

When I added my posts to the forum, I would wait for others to respond and agree with me or thank me for what I have said. I started to feel like we were a group – the insiders – and that my workmates were the outsiders. I think the discussion forum made us a group. A group who had shared so much of themselves and their practice. We had talked about some, I guess, sensitive things, like supervising students who were hopeless. I felt like I had moved from *not knowing* to *knowing*, coming from out of the loop to realising I really do have loads of expertise and I now feel included (P11).

Lave and Wenger (1991) would explain these comments using the notion of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). As newcomers to a community of practice routinely engage in, and learn about, the culture and practices of a professional community, they progressively are encultured in regard to the rituals, practices, habits and perspectives of that community. It was evident that some of the participants who self-identified as new to WPL supervision were gradually moving from the periphery of dialogue in the online forum to central positions and felt like insiders.

iii) Opportunity to broaden professional perspectives

Analysis of the discussion forum posts exposed the marked similarities across professions and disciplinary areas regarding the functions and roles, responsibilities of WPL supervisors, and challenges and potential solutions to issues. The primary aims of the research were explicitly achieved as evidenced by the findings relating to this theme. Participants extended a breadth of commentary that illustrated their enhanced capacity to act as WPL supervisors, through the act of broadening their professional perspectives. The following excerpts from the discussion forum act as evidence:

I found reading the discussion posts very useful. It has highlighted that there are lots of similarities across WPL even though the health services and disciplines are so different. This means that many other people's experiences and subsequent learnings may be able to be transferred to my setting. Numerous posts have discussed ideas I haven't thought about or looked at elements from different points of view. This has enriched my learnings from the workplace activities (P8).

The WPL module has enlightened and enriched my knowledge of the students' WPL journey. What stands out most is that there are so many commonalities between the disciplines and we have now offered solutions to each other's challenges and shared our experiences. There are so many things I hadn't thought of, from others' ways of thinking that I can use and share now with my colleagues (P22).

I can use this new knowledge to help support the students the best I can and help them to gain the most out of their placement. I also feel I can take this knowledge back to my colleagues to encourage them to be more enthusiastic. It has certainly helped to hear all the different ways people, think, do things and solve problems with WPL (P19).

Conclusion

It is clear from the findings that discussion forums have the potential to assist professionals to engage in continued education that builds their ongoing knowledge and skills. Subsequently, this increased capacity can be further disseminated through professional workplace with colleagues who have not engaged in the forum activity. In addition, the benefits of requiring written asynchronous responses to carefully scaffolded learning activities, creates a safe, empowering space for professionals to learn from each other. Specific discipline practices are socialized in the shared space of the discussion forum, and this act empowers participants to engender confidence in their own expertise, knowledge and practice. Furthermore, the evidence prompts us to consider the value of sharing and challenging different perspectives and considering new possibilities. The purposeful design of the forum and the modules have encouraged and allowed time for reflection and considered postings, and generated possibilities for group connection and growth.

The findings further flag that a discussion forum positions participants in a learning space in which they draw on the expertise of *others* in what Wenger (1998) terms *overlapping communities of practice*. The discussion forum has acted as a knowledge, practice and network bridge, linking insiders with the outsiders in the participants' workplaces. Furthermore, the interchange of professional expertise has positioned the participant, not as passive receptacles of learning material, but rather active players who are co-constructing new knowledge with other members of the online community of practice. Thus, the discussion forum; a technologically-enabled dialogic space, has assisted in creating professional connections, and enhanced practice of those in a geographically dispersed community of practice.

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