

RESEARCH

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## LEARNING BY PROJECTS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CLASS: THE OPERETTA *THE COURT OF PHARAOH*

### APRENDIZAJE POR PROYECTOS EN LA CLASE DE BACHILLERATO: LA OPERETA *LA CORTE DE FARÁON*

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#### ABSTRACT

Project-based learning (PBL) is very appropriate to learn the skills set by the high school curriculum from the interdisciplinary approach. Different areas should encourage this type of teaching in which the student learns globally, while stimulating cooperative work. Unlike classical methodology, project-based learning starts from a specific question that students try to answer by building a project. This educational modality acquires more significance today, because of the different levels of learning students have. In addition, teaching by projects helps to combine the different areas of interest that students show. In this sense, *The Court of Pharaoh* is ideal for project work because it is a play where the arts come together in an exemplary manner and whose theme is of interest to students. This operetta is proposed as a project-based learning strategy. Through testing music and dance, team work and valuable skills such as cooperation, respect and accountability for achieving a common goal are encouraged. On the other hand, this type of projects arouses student interest by integrating all knowledge into a final objective.

**KEY WORDS:** learning by projects – Music – Education – skills – interdisciplinary – activity learning – Dance.

#### RESUMEN

El aprendizaje basado en proyectos (ABP) resulta muy apropiado para aprender las competencias que fija el currículo de Bachillerato desde el enfoque interdisciplinar.

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Las distintas áreas deben fomentar este tipo de enseñanza en la que el alumno aprende de forma global, al tiempo que se estimula el trabajo cooperativo. A diferencia de la metodología clásica, el aprendizaje basado en proyectos parte de una pregunta concreta a la que los alumnos tratan de dar respuesta mediante la construcción de un proyecto. Esta modalidad educativa adquiere más significado hoy en día, debido a los distintos niveles de aprendizaje que poseen los alumnos. Además, la enseñanza por proyectos ayuda a aunar las distintas áreas de interés que muestran los estudiantes. En este sentido, *La Corte de Faraón* es idónea para el trabajo por proyectos por ser una obra teatral donde confluyen las artes de forma ejemplar y cuya temática es de interés para el alumnado. Se propone esta opereta como estrategia de aprendizaje basado en proyectos. A través del ensayo de la música y de la danza se fomenta el trabajo en equipo y valiosas habilidades como la cooperación, el respeto y la asunción de responsabilidades para la consecución de un objetivo común. Por otro lado, este tipo de proyectos despierta el interés del alumnado al integrar todos los conocimientos en un objetivo final.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** aprendizaje por proyectos – Música – Educación – competencias – interdisciplinaridad – aprendizaje activo – Danza.

## **APRENDIZAGEM POR PROJETO NA AULA DO ENSINO SECUNDARIO: A OPERETA LA CORTE DEL FARÁON**

### **RESUME**

A aprendizagem baseada em projetos (ABP) resulta bastante apropriado para aprender as habilidades que fixam o currículo dos estudos secundários desde um enfoque interdisciplinares. As distintas áreas devem fomentar este tipo de ensino no qual o aluno aprende de forma global, ao mesmo tempo que estimula o trabalho cooperativo. A diferença da metodologia clássica, o aprendizado baseado em projetos parte de uma pergunta concreta a qual os alunos tratam de dar respostas mediante a construção de um projeto. Esta modalidade educativa adquire mais significado hoje em dia devido aos distintos níveis de aprendizagem que possuem os alunos. Ademais, o ensino por projetos ajuda a unir as distintas áreas de interesse que mostram os estudantes. Neste sentido, *La Corte del Faraón* é idônea para o trabalho por projetos por ser uma obra teatral onde confluem as artes de forma exemplar e cuja temática é de interesse para o aluno. Se propõe esta opereta como estratégia de aprendizagem baseada em projetos. Através do ensaio da música e da dança se fomenta o trabalho em equipe e valiosas habilidades como a cooperação, o respeito e as responsabilidades para a execução de um objetivo comum. Por outro lado, este tipo de projetos desperta o interesse dos alunos ao integrar todos os conhecimentos em um objetivo final.

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** aprendizagem por projetos – Música – Educação – habilidades – interdisciplinaridade – aprendizagem ativo – Dança.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Royal Decree 1105/2014 as of December 26* by which the core curriculum of Secondary Education and the Baccalaureate is set in Spain establishes core competencies, among which are "social and civic awareness" and "Cultural awareness and expression". The purpose of this stage is for students to acquire the basic elements of culture, especially in its humanistic, artistic, scientific and technological aspect. Likewise, annex 1 of the aforementioned Decree refers to the performing arts. In it you can read:

The Performing Arts course aims to provide students with knowledge of the performing arts as manifestations of a social, cultural and artistic nature that have specific and significantly differentiating codes, with possibilities of synergies with the rest of the expressions of art (p. 60360).

It is not easy to determine what we should teach to the students in artistic subjects of the curriculum. However, it is true that, observing the past, we can assess what were the most outstanding creations of each historical moment and what they meant in the creative history of the peoples. In this sense, the operetta *The Court of Pharaoh* by composer Vicente Lleó is ideal to work from different areas the competences that we want students to acquire, using the methodology of project work (Mergendoller, Markham, Ravitz & Larmer, 2006). This methodology, unlike memory teaching, requires more time and learning occurs in a slower, but also more solid and effective way. In addition, as some authors affirm (Bottle and Adell, 2016; Trujillo, 2012 and 2017), the project methodology represents an alternative of proven quality as compared to traditional direct teaching. Students usually show greater motivation to start and, with it, they can achieve more meaningful learning.

Project-based learning is an ideal methodological framework to integrate these disciplines and provide a process of Teaching / Learning to students that allows them to develop multiple competences (Blasco and Bernabé, 2016a). Project work encourages research and entrepreneurship, promotes the realization of experiences and, above all, takes into account the diversity and personal needs of students. Consequently, this methodology, in addition to favoring the interpersonal relationships of young people, promotes success among students through the small achievements that are acquired in the different areas. It is, in any case, a new learning model, although the use of projects as part of the curriculum has long been introduced. In the words of Botella and Adell (2017, p. 149): "The project method proposes students a greater degree of responsibility in the teaching and learning process by applying, in real projects, the skills and knowledge that must be acquired in class. This means radically changing attitudes."

Project-based learning is a methodology that is based on constructivist principles and focuses on students (Kokotsaki, Menzies & Wiggins, 2016) positively impacting their motivation (Blumenfeld *et al.*, 1991; Markham, Larmer & Ravitz, 2003; Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg & Bezon, 2007). In addition, it is not an activity to enrich the way of teaching, but the main work of one or several subjects (Markham, *et al.*, 2003, cited in Botella and Ramos, 2019). Unlike the classical methodology, project-based learning starts from a specific question that students try to answer by building a project. The purpose of the method is "to motivate and involve all members, introducing cross-cutting areas [...] and contributing to increasing social and communication skills" (Rebollo, 2009, p. 1).

With this method, students acquire a greater responsibility in the process of their learning. It is basically based on socio-constructivism through which learning is generated from the previous knowledge of each one, so learning is significant insofar as it is based on an existing substrate (Adell and Botella, 2016). As a summary, we take the definition given by Artalejo (2016) about the ABP when this author says that:

[...] We can summarize the different theoretical foundations defining the ABP as a method that consists of project work, based on a problem or premise that must be approached collaboratively, through individual roles marked by the professor, as well as its guidelines (p. 12).

The European Union sets, through the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, the two premises from which all project-based learning must start: on the one hand, to provide a real project proposed to the student that encourages students to work as a team to find a solution and, on the other hand, full integration of the project in the respective module curriculum so that the subjects taught are subject to its resolution (Gómez, 2012).

One of the main objectives of current Higher Education in the framework of the scientific society is the training of competent professionals who acquire the necessary tools to face the new and changing reality. As stated by Blasco and Barnabas (2016b, p. 64): "Interpersonal relationships are of special importance, given that, in a variety of professional fields, the collaboration of several people is required to achieve the final objective".

Ravitz, Hixson, English & Mergendoller (2012) identified the skills needed to be developed in students in the 21st century (see table 1). These are extremely important, since students will need to acquire them for an appropriate adjustment to the historical and social context in which we find ourselves. To develop all these skills professors have to design a series of integrated activities. Traditional memory learning is no longer enough, since it does not cover the high and specific skills that today's world demands from professionals.

**Table 1.** Skills needed to be developed in students in the 21st century.

<b>Skills for the 21st Century</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Critical Thinking (CT, Critical Thinking Skills)	Being able to analyze complex problems, research those questions for which there are no clear answers, evaluate different points of view and sources of information and draw appropriate conclusions based on evidence and reasoning.
Collaboration (CO, Collaboration Skills)	Being able to work together to solve problems or answer questions, work effectively and respectfully in work teams to achieve a common goal and assume shared responsibility to complete a task.
Communication (CM, Communication Skills)	Being able to organize their thoughts, data and conclusions and share them effectively through a variety of media, both orally and in writing.
Creativity and Innovation (CR, Creativity and Innovation Skills)	Being able to generate and refine solutions to complex problems or tasks based on synthesis and analysis. Afterwards, being able to combine and present what they have learned in new and original ways.
Self-Direction (S, Self-Direction Skills)	Being able to take responsibility for their own learning by identifying the topics to be followed and the processes of their own learning and being able to review their own work and respond to feedback.
Global Connections (G, Global Connections)	Being able to have a global, geopolitical understanding, including issues such as knowledge of geography, culture, language, history and literature of other countries.
Local Connections (L, Local Connections)	Being able to apply what they have learned to local contexts and community issues.
Use of technologies and tools for learning (U, Using Technology As a Tool for Learning)	Being able to manage their learning and produce products by using the appropriate information and communication technologies.

**Source:** Extracted and translated by the authors of figure 1. *Definitions of 21st Century Skills* (Ravitz, Hixson, English & Mergendoller, 2012).

## 2. DEVELOPMENT OF PROJECT WORK IN THE DIFFERENT AREAS

This project work is designed for students who attend the second year of Baccalaureate in the art mode. To carry it out, the operetta entitled *The Court of Pharaoh* by composer Vicente Lleó Balbastre (1870-1922) has been chosen, as this is a key piece of the Spanish theater stage and the historical course of our country. *The Court of Pharaoh* is a biblical operetta that premiered on January 21, 1910 at the Eslava Theater in Madrid and from which seven hundred and seventy-two performances were performed (Blasco, 2014). Formed by one act and five scenes, it has a libretto by Guillermo Perrín and Miguel de Palacios. Blasco (2014) explains its content like this:

The action was located in ancient Egypt at the time of Israel's captivity. The argument was based on an episode in the Old Testament, specifically the

event between Putifar's wife and chaste Joseph. The work was framed within the erotically cunning genre by dialogues and situations full of insinuations and sexual connotations (p. 211).

In addition, *The Court of Pharaoh* is ideal for developing interdisciplinary work. Keep in mind that theater is not just the place where all the arts come together: music, painting, literature, dramatization, etc.; but also the effective framework for the transmission of historical knowledge and to develop sex education and values. The project is called *the Court of Pharaoh* and the final product will consist in a theatrical adaptation of said operetta in the cultural center of the town where the institute is located.

The second year Baccalaureate subjects, both core and specific, that will contribute to our project being carried out are: *History of Music and Dance, Image and Sound, Graphic-Plastic Expression Techniques, Spanish Language and Literature II* and *History of Spain*. Next, the different activities that we will carry out in each of the areas will be broken down.

In *Spanish Language and Literature* students will first read individually the libretto of the play. Then, the professor will give each of them an operetta character to work on aspects such as diction, articulation, intonation, etc., in order to perfect the future staging. Another activity will consist in syntactically and metrically analyzing fragments of the work to study specific aspects of language such as expressions, vocabulary and style. This way we will work on one of the main objectives of this area, ie recognizing the basic expressive resources, linguistic and non-linguistic, used in communication and taking them as models for the discourse itself. We will also get the student to reflect on the formal elements and mechanisms of language in its phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical-semantic and textual plane and on the conditions of production and reception of messages in social communication contexts, in order to develop the ability to regulate their own linguistic productions.

Subsequently, students will contrast the analysis they made with small examples of other writers' works to find the common points and stylistic features of the authors of this theatrical modality. This activity arouses in students the respect and appreciation for artistic works, while revealing that these works are also first-rate sources of information. In addition, students are enriched with the contributions and points of view of their classmates and make them draw conclusions based on reasoning and critical analysis. From here, the students will make an adaptation of the script of the work, adapting it to the stage where the staging will take place, at the time available, etc.

Finally, after having done all these activities, students will rehearse their adaptation of the play for future staging.

In *History of Music and Dance*, students will research the figure of Vicente Lleó Balbastre. This Valencian musician was one of the most significant composers of

Madrid in the early twentieth century, as well as a conductor and businessman (see figure 1):



**Figure 1:** photograph of composer Vicente Lleó Balbastre, author of the score of *The Court of Pharaoh*.

**Source:** *Comedies and Comedians Magazine* corresponding to February 8, 1910, Year II, 8, p. 1.

Lleó took to the maximum expression the erotically cunning genre, a theatrical modality characterized by the appearance of scenes with sexual connotations and harsh criticisms of the society of the time made through acid satires. The plot was based on the event between the woman of Putifar and chaste Joseph of the Old Testament. The work achieved a total of seven hundred and seventy-two performances, a record and it toured with great success the main theaters in Spain and America.

Due to the numerous bibliography on *The Court of Pharaoh*, students will be able to use the computer room available at the center to find information about this operetta in web pages, books, etc. Once again, the usefulness of ICTs as a fundamental tool for the development of Baccalaureate activities is evident.

Another activity will consist in performing different musical auditions of *The Court of Pharaoh* to learn its main aesthetic and stylistic characteristics, and to be able to assess its importance as an artistic manifestation immersed in a given society. This way, we will reflect on the possible cultural, sociological and artistic influences this work has, which will help us so that our students understand that music is part of the cultural heritage of the people. This activity will help students to have a global vision of the culture, politics, history and art of our country in the first decade of the twentieth century, at which time the premiere of *the Court of Pharaoh* was made.

Once they have acquired a deep knowledge of the historical, political and cultural circumstances in which the operetta was composed, the students will be prepared to rehearse, with the musical instruments available, the famous Aryan of the third act *Ay, Ba! ... Ay, Ba!*. This song is, in essence, a song full of sensuality in which the Pharaoh's variety singer and dancer Sul tries to arouse the desire of the Pharaoh. This aria became popular in Spain in the early twentieth century and is one of the few pieces of this type of music that has endured in the repertoire. It is even very likely that it is still recognized by the grandparents of our students.

*Oh, Ba!... Oh, Ba!* is, due to its simplicity, easy to perform and memorize, so that the interpretation of this piece of music will promote success among our students, while delighting the public. This way we will have a part of the "soundtrack" of the theatrical performance ready.

Another activity will consist in rehearsing the dance of the aforementioned song for the staging. To do this, the professor must first explain to his students what the variety song consists in, a light and popular musical style that on certain occasions verges on racy. Through a simple choreography, the professor will teach his students to correctly mark the steps and the sinuous movements of this popular style of the time. This exercise creates an extremely fun environment in class, which contributes to increasing the sense of belonging to the group, by experiencing a relaxed and distracted experience. Finally, we will join music and dance, which is an extremely valuable experience for our students because it will offer them a different artistic perspective due to the mere fact that both disciplines must be in perfect harmony. It will therefore be necessary to make small adjustments in the two specialties to achieve a perfect combination between them and ensure success in its subsequent representation. This way we will reinforce in students the capacity for critical thinking, having to evaluate and solve the new difficulties that have appeared when joining music and dance; collaboration and communication, working together efficiently and responsibly to achieve the common goal they have set; and self-direction, since the students will be responsible for their own work and will carry out a final review of it.

In *Image and Sound*, students will see the movie *The Court of Pharaoh* (1985) directed by José Luis García Sánchez and starring Ana Belén and Antonio Banderas, as well as other leading actors in Spanish cinema such as Fernando Fernán Gómez, Josema Yuste, Juan Diego, José Luis López Vázquez, etc. The fact that the students know the actors, together with the fact that it is a Spanish film that deals with a turbulent historical moment in our country, will make the students develop the ability to establish local connections.

In this sense, it is intended that students be able to relate what they have learned, through the different activities, to transfer the new information they have to the current panorama of Spain and be able to understand the complexity of the social situation and politics of our country.

The film is based on previously selected zarzuela musical numbers. The story is framed in the forties, in the middle of the Spanish postwar period and when Franco's dictatorial regime is at the height of its power. The plot was a parody of the regime and Spanish society. Censorship arrests the actors of a theater *troupe* that goes through the villages representing, without permission of the competent authorities, the zarzuela of Lleó entitled *The Court of Pharaoh*.

Once the movie has been seen, students will analyze the script. This is full of criticism of all social sectors, especially the regime, the Church and even the Caudillo himself. The climate of repression and the lack of freedom during Franco's regime is the denunciation carried out by the film, and, therefore, the true theme of it .

It is also interesting that the students know that, for many years, the Spanish censorship prohibited a previous attempt to carry out a homonymous film in Spain, considering it scandalous. The work was put on again thirty-five years later, specifically on August 21, 1975 at the Romea Theater in Barcelona by Josep María Damunt's company.

Peláez (2003), cited in Blasco and Bueno (2015), was right to consider that the film clearly presented a theatrical story in the context of the dictatorship:

*The Court of Pharaoh* of Perrín and Palacios is the pretext that Azcona and García Sánchez use to tell us the stage performance at the end of the forties. The important thing about film discourse is theatrical montage in the historical framework of the dictatorship, because the conflict in the film is generated by this space - time circumstance (post-war Spain). The presentation of the film is tremendously significant in this regard: the arrest of the actors, their beating and transfer to the police station (p. 154).

From the viewing of the film, we will make a critical analysis of the expressive resources used to relate them to the functional and typological characteristics, especially in those scenes that reproduce fragments of the zarzuela, since the final objective we have set to carry out is to make an adaptation of the latter. It is necessary for students to discover that in all audiovisual reality there is a formal and narrative coherence that makes sense. Once you understand this statement, we can introduce new cinematographic scenes of different genres to distinguish the techniques and elements of the audiovisual language that were used.

An activity that will be very important for the achievement of the final project will be to carry out a cinematographic workshop in which the students have the possibility to record themselves while they act so that they can later see themselves in action, as if it were their own film. Being able to review their own work and respond to feedback is necessary to encourage self-direction among students.

The next step will be for the students to prepare a recording with different musical fragments chosen for the successive scenes of *the Court of Pharaoh* that they are going to represent, except the dance music that they have previously rehearsed and we have explained in the subject of *History of Music and Dance*. This selected music

will ultimately have the professor's approval of the aforementioned subject. In *Image and Sound* class, students will experience the selected music in different modern sound reproducing media such as MP3. This way, students can exchange the audio files that will make up the final soundtrack of the theatrical adaptation.

By carrying out these activities we will achieve one of the main objectives of this subject: to train more critical, responsible and autonomous citizens for the use, reliably and responsibly, of information and communication technologies, as well as the development during their training in communication skills, digital and technological.

In the *History of Spain*, two different historical periods of our country will be deepened: the Spain of the early twentieth century and the Spanish civil war and the post-war years. Do not forget that the zarzuela was composed in 1910 and the film, however, is in the forties, very different moments of our history. This way, students will know the societies of both periods and the most important historical events: social classes, customs, culture, beliefs, ways of life, etc. Let us recall that there are three themes in this subject in which students can deepen the historical context in which the *Court of Pharaoh* is situated: The reign of Alfonso XIII: the crisis of the Restoration (1902-1931), The Second Republic (1931-1936) and Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975).

Students will also study the profound social, demographic and financial changes that took place in Madrid at the beginning of the 20th century and transformed the old town into a large city of recognized European prestige. Again, students are given the opportunity to establish local connections to apply and relate what they have learned to the current reality of their city or community (in the case of Madrid students), or of their country, for the rest.

Also, the professor will try to arouse the interest of his students in the cultures of antiquity, doing a group work in which any aspect of ancient Egypt is researched: periods, society, economy, language, culture, religion, customs, etc. ., then present it to the rest of the class and submit oneself to the issues that the professor and other students consider appropriate. This way, students will learn more deeply about the profile of the characters they will later represent. In addition, this way we will ensure that there are no anachronistic errors or of any other kind when making the adaptation script. This review process is of great value, as skills such as collaboration, self-direction and global connections are worked on.

The professor should encourage the reading of books that familiarize his disciples with the historical stage intended to be represented. Keep in mind that history should not be presented to students as a series of stories and events in the past that have no impact on the present; but we must teach to distinguish and assess the permanent features of the processes of transformation and change in the different periods, analyzing, in broad processes, the birth of problems, their attempts at solution and their survival in today's reality. Only this way will we develop a

committed, responsible and active sensitivity to democracy and human rights. In addition, we will promote tolerance and solidarity among the peoples of Spain, valuing their cultural differences and their common aspects.

In the subject *Graphic-Plastic Expression Techniques* we will try to enhance creative capacity and communication through experimentation with different materials such as painting, engraving and drawing. Thus, students will be able to verify the incidence of techniques in the process and final artistic result. Remember that the theater has always been the showcase of great designers. Therefore, the next activity is to make a dress for each of the characters. The capricious Pharaoh, the costumes of his advisors and the court, slaves, priestesses, soldiers etc. With this work we immerse our students in the social life of the palace of the Pharaoh. Being dressed, painted and characterized as characters from another historical stage will be extremely fun and strengthen the group identity. Also, you can make a decoration that simulates the great public square of Memphis and the hall of the palace of Pharaoh with all those decorative elements that transport us to ancient Egypt. Students can inquire, with the help of the history professor, about the tools of that period.

Egyptian engraving and drawing techniques will also be studied and then done by the same students. Do not forget that, in ancient Egypt, the art of engraving fulfilled a fundamental function of dissemination of culture. To engrave is to create an image through incisions by using different tools. Thus, for example, students will be able to make a simple print by means of a transfer of the matrix to a paper, using ink and a press that will later serve as a scenic decorative element.

Finally, it is important to underline that *the Court of Pharaoh* is an operetta that is part of the repertoire classified as erotically cunning. These types of works are characterized by having scenes with sexual and spicy connotations. For this reason, in addition to the activities that we have presented so far in each of the subjects, sexuality will be worked on in a transversal way in each of them. Both the content of the operetta and the film will allow us to open dialogues about sensuality, sexuality and romantic relationships. From these conversations, the interpersonal processes related to this theme will be discussed naturally: seduction, sensuality, toxic relationships, affective rejection... etc. In short, you can work on sex education with students from the scenes of this operetta.

Once all these activities have been carried out, students will be ready to represent the adaptation of *the Court of Pharaoh* in the cultural center of their locality.

### **3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

We consider that the project of *the Court of Pharaoh* that we have just presented in this paper is ideal to involve professors in a common program, where all activities are directed towards the achievement of a final goal. In addition, during the process of this project, many important skills in our current context will be developed in the student body.

Specifically, by analyzing the literary texts and seeing the film we will expand the capacity for thorough observation and carry out a deep reflection from different artistic aspects, thus developing critical thinking. Through the rehearsal of music and dance we will promote teamwork and valuable skills such as cooperation, respect and assumption of responsibilities for achieving a common goal. We will also establish and open new communication channels by using the different arts (oral and written language, music, dance, engravings and theatrical performance), which is essential for the development of the organization of thought. Likewise, connections between the different disciplines will be established to integrate a greater global understanding of artistic phenomena and, in addition, students will be given responsibility for their own learning process, reviewing the work in common and, in a continuous process of feedback, they will respond to the stimuli they will receive from their classmates. Finally, creativity and innovation will be enhanced, through the creation and interpretation of the artistic works that we provide from different areas.

On the other hand, this type of projects arouses student interest by integrating all knowledge into a final objective that brings them together. Project work is a novel and effective methodology that takes students' interests into account, while making them protagonists of their own learning process. In this sense, the professor's role can no longer be that of a simple content transmitter; but a guide who turns his students into the true protagonists of their own learning. Project work takes into account all these aspects, since, in this type of methodology, the most important thing is not the result but the process itself.

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