

## DRAMA, MUSIC AND MEDIA IN HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role that drama, music and media can play in heritage language learning. The authors will present findings from a project that took place in a community Greek school in London and explore how creative approaches can enhance students' heritage language learning, by bringing together different disciplines as well as different environments such as school, home and community. The project was part of *Critical Connections: Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project*, a collaboration between Goldsmiths, University of London and different community and mainstream schools in four countries.

**Keywords:** Drama, music, heritage language learning, interdisciplinary approaches, digital media, education

### ON INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Interdisciplinary learning is one of the many ways to learn. Rowntree defines the interdisciplinary approach as the approach in which two or more disciplines are brought together in such a way that the disciplines interact with one another and have an effect on each other's perspectives (as cited in: Ivanitskaya, Clark, Montogony, & Prime, 2002). An interdisciplinary approach to learning generates knowledge that is more holistic than the knowledge built in discipline-specific studies. Such an approach seeks meaningful connections between and among disciplines (Ivanitskaya, Clark, Montogony, & Prime, 2002). In this article we will focus on an interdisciplinary approach to heritage language learning; this approach formed the basis for an interdisciplinary art focused research project in which we aimed to see whether drama, music and media can advance students' heritage language learning and in what ways they can be effective in this attempt. In specific, we will present findings obtained from this study, as well as the methodology followed. It is of vital importance to mention that our focus of interest was two-fold: one, to research whether such an approach can improve students' experiences of learning and two, to investigate the learning outcomes from such an approach.

Before going any further, it is important to explain how we use the term heritage language learning. Heritage language learners have a family connection to the language. According to G. Valdes heritage language learners are those who 'have been raised in a home where non-english language is spoken, (...) speak or at least understand the language and are to some degree bilingual in that language and in English' (as cited in: Kreeft, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001 p.17). This proficiency which may include dialects that vary from the standard variety taught in the classroom, is generally accompanied by a firsthand knowledge of the culture(s) in which the language is used (Kreeft, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001 p.17). Valdes definition portrays the case of the majority of the students involved in this research project. Most of the students are third generation English-Cypriots who are brought up in an environment where at least one of the parents and/or grandparents speak Cypriot Greek. Further explanations in what relates to Cypriot Greek are necessary in order to understand how things become more complicated in Greek heritage language teaching and learning in this specific environment.

As Charalambos Themistocleous, Marianna Katsoyannou, Spyros Armosti and Kyriaci Christodoulou (2012) point out, Cypriot Greek is the variety of Modern Greek that is spoken by the majority of the Cypriot populace and people of the Greek Cypriot diaspora. It is a markedly divergent variety and differs from Standard Modern Greek in its lexicon, phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax. Even though Cypriot Greek is regarded as a dialect, it is unintelligible to speakers of Standard Modern Greek without adequate prior exposure to it. Greek-speaking Cypriots are therefore diglossic, speaking the vernacular and Standard Modern Greek (Arvaniti, 2006). There is no established orthography for Cypriot Greek and Standard Modern Greek is the language of instruction in Greek Cypriot Education (Arvaniti, 2010).

This creates a series of difficulties. As parents and grandparents of our students reported, they bring their children or grandchildren to school with a lot of enthusiasm but most of the time they are not able to help them with homework due to the incompatibility of the Cypriot Greek that they speak, and the official language learned at school, which is Modern Greek. Moreover, we observed that students who come to Greek school with a certain knowledge of the language -which is in most of the cases Cypriot Greek- realise, quite early, the difference in the knowledge they bring with the one that they must obtain; this fact is a source of a disappointment which is certainly not beneficial to the learning process.

What is considered as heritage language then, is different from the case of a second language or that of a foreign language. As Joy Kreeft Payton, Donald Canard and Scott McGuinnis (2001) explain further, the differentiation between foreign language and heritage language is essential, considering that the instructional needs of heritage language learners are different from those of foreign language learners. In this, if we want to move further from just the preservation of the heritage language to the development of proficiency in that language we need to develop materials, instructional strategies, assessment procedures and instruments for these learners.

Through this project we aspired to create a learning environment that could allow the students to engage in language learning through their own means. The main idea behind bringing our fields of expertise together was to develop a pedagogy for heritage language that would situate the focus on creative practice through which students could learn the heritage language rather than focusing on language learning itself. Furthermore, several authors have written on the anticipated learning outcomes of the interdisciplinary approach which include beyond the development and enhancement of cognitive skills more subtle outcomes like modified perspectives and attitudes (Davis, 2011). This was especially important for us as some students showed negative attitudes towards Greek school at the beginning of the academic year; specifically two boys reported: 'I come to Greek school because my mother forces me to come', 'I come to Greek school because my grandpa pays for this because he wants me to learn Greek' (extracts from group discussions). Thus, in bringing different disciplines together we aimed at influencing the stance of our students towards Greek school, helping them advance their linguistic accomplishment and even shaping their knowledge of other disciplines.

### PORTRAYING THE PROJECT

Soon after the beginning of the academic year 2014-2015, we found out about the *Critical Connections* project in a one-day conference about Community Languages and we became interested in becoming part of it. Being part of a bigger community of people that focus on language learning would help us see beyond the Greek community school settings, learn about other language practices in similar environments while the digital aspect of the work seemed very interesting and challenging.

The *Critical Connections: Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project* was a two-year project funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and it was a collaboration between Goldsmiths, University of London and different mainstream and community schools in four different countries. In this project, a group of teachers involved in language learning (languages include Arabic, Chinese, English, English as a foreign language, German and Greek) were guided by the research team, comprised of academic staff from Goldsmiths and ICT specialists, in involving technology in their language classes; the aim of this was to help students create digital storytelling videos which would be shared among the participants. In each year of the project two festivals were held at Goldsmiths, University of London, where schools presented their work. A range of stories was created across various genres (traditional tale, fantasy, history and culture, personal interests etc). We embarked on the project during its second year, with the Greek School of Potters Bar in Hertfordshire. The Greek School of Potters Bar is a Greek Community School that offers language classes from kindergarten up to A'Level. It currently has one hundred and ninety students. Four hour classes are provided every Saturday afternoon for kindergarten up to Year 3 class and six hour classes for Year 4 up to A' Level class (Monday and Saturday afternoon) In this project we involved the Year

3 class, ten students in total, whose ages ranged between seven and eight years old. The project was deployed in eight stages, as presented in the table below.

**Tab 1.** Project Stages (developed according to The Key Stages in the Film Making Process given by project team at Goldsmiths, University of London).

<p>STAGES 1 – 2 Developed according to Cyprus Educational Mission's Aims for Year 3</p>	<p>1. Selecting and Introducing theme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers' choice. The teachers decided on the theme to be explored. We have both worked on the specific story in the past and though that is related to the wider theme of the project on Journeys.</li> </ul> <p>2. Identifying Learning objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All students to cooperate with each other to make their own digital story of the fairytale</li> <li>• To improve their listening and speaking skills. Specially, to be able to answer simple questions concerning the story</li> <li>• To be able to write simple sentences about the story with the use of pictures</li> <li>• To extend their use of vocabulary and correct grammar (adjectives, noun diminutives, present tense) and syntax.</li> <li>• To improve their reading skills</li> </ul>
<p>STAGES 3 – 4</p>	<p>3. A dramatic exploration of the story</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First acquaintance of the students with the story through play and games (narration with the accompaniment of a power point presentation.</li> <li>• Discussions on what they have understood and what they liked the most, what they found interesting and different from the actual story (activity in English)</li> <li>• Acting out the story in the circle based on narration</li> </ul> <p>4. Initial planning of the digital story</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Musical exploration of the story (finding a leit- motif for the Big Bag Pig, finding rhythmical patterns for the building processes, accompaniment of storytelling with musical instruments)</li> <li>• Movement class (exploration of the animals' ways of walking and speaking)</li> <li>• Students play quizzes related to the story (e.g which animal the wolves meet first, from what material is the first house built from)</li> </ul>
<p>STAGES 5 – 6</p>	<p>5. Media Skills Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the use of cameras and experimentation. The students are encouraged to use cameras and mobiles phones in different times (interviewing each other in Greek, videotaping the acting out of the story in the circle, recording for LGR)</li> </ul> <p>6. Researching, Scripting, Storyboarding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students along with the teachers discuss on the characters, places and scenes</li> <li>• The students along with the teachers decide on their roles and choose their lines</li> <li>• The students begin to learn their lines</li> </ul>
<p>STAGE 7</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating, Reviewing, Editing Working on music, sounds, movement and the words of every scene</li> <li>• Filming scenes</li> <li>• Self-evaluation, group evaluation according to the filmed material</li> </ul>
<p>STAGE 8</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presenting Presentation of the digital story to their parents and to the rest of the school</li> <li>• Presentation of the digital story in London Greek Radio (LGR)</li> <li>• Presentation of the digital story to the Film Festival organised by Goldsmiths, University of London</li> </ul>

Source: From own/ writers' archive.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The decisions concerning the structure of the project, as well as its research orientation, were made upon the needs shaped by our aims and the purposes of the wider project of which we were part. Hence, we intuitively chose a direction in which practice is central and vital in the research process, a characteristic that defines practice-led research (Rust, Mottram, & Till 2007) .

Since there is fluidity in the way that practice-led research and its associate terms are being used it is necessary to define the term in relation to our work. In regard to this project then, it is the practical nature of our research which also forms its core body. Hence, although the term practice-led research pertains to an umbrella term which encompasses various different approaches, we believe that it enfolds our project, based on definitions and explanations of this type of research by Chris Rust, Judith Mottram and Jeremy Till in their AHRC Research Review 'Practice-Led Research in Art, Design and Architecture' (2007) as well as Hazel Smith and Roger Dean in their edited volume *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (2009).

Ch. Rust, J. Mottram and J. Till provide an inclusive term for this type of research, stating that it is the 'research in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design or architecture play an instrumental part in an inquiry' (Rust, Mottram, & Till, 2007, p.11). They explain further that, in this research approach, 'practice is an activity which can be employed in research, the method or methodology must always include an explicit understanding of how the practice contributes to the inquiry and research is distinguished from other forms of practice by that explicit understanding' (Rust, Mottram, & Till, 2007, p.11).

Moreover, H. Smith and R. Dean suggest that:

The term practice-led research and its affiliates (...) are employed to make two arguments about practice which are offer overlapping and interlinked: firstly, (...) that creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs; secondly, to suggest that creative practice (...) can lead to specialised research insights which can then be generalised and written up as research (Smith, & Dean 2009, p. 5)

Both terminologies and explanations resemble the structure and means of our research, as it is practice-oriented, in a research form and generates research outcomes which can be written and generalised; In this study, creative practice played an instrumental part in testing our hypotheses, regarding the vital role that drama, music, and media can play in heritage language learning. On that note, the formation of the creative work was built upon three main axes: Drama, Music and Media. Each one of these approaches will be outlined and explained in the sections that follow, as well as the methods we used pertaining to collecting data.

## METHODS OF COLLECTING DATA

Taking into account the imperative role of documentation in practice-led research projects, the process was documented via the use of digital cameras, recording all the aspects of the project at its various stages. This material was used for

purposes of reflection and self-evaluation, from both students-participants as well as teachers-researchers. We also used semi-structured interviews, providing students with key questions, aiming at exploring their experiences, views and motivations with regard to their participation in the project. These data were used both in our strategic planning as well as the development of our hypotheses and, at a later stage, in assessing the outcomes of the project. In addition, it also enhanced our reflective practice in the process. Apart from the interviews, another method used for data collection, was group discussion, during which teachers and students interacted in a group setting, exchanging perceptions, ideas and experiences. This method was used for assisting the creative process and allowing students to have their own voice in the project and shape and develop their own ideas.

### THE MULTIMODALITY OF DRAMA

Drama as a multimodal pedagogy allows for explorations of new knowledge through different modalities, both verbal and non verbal (Kalantzis and Cope as cited in: Ntelioglou, 2011). Jeffrey Wilhelm and Brian Edmiston affirm this by saying that 'one of the most supportive things about drama is that it combines different kinds of concrete signs with the abstract nature of text: students create the meaning of text through their words: both written and spoken, kinaesthetically through the motion and positioning of their bodies, visually through their stance, artwork and observation of others, emotionally through their feelings often expressed in gesture, music or writing, intrapersonally as they create shared meanings by reacting and responding to the dramatic actions of others' (Kalantzis and Cope as cited in: Ntelioglou, 2011, p. 598).

In the case of our project, the multimodal nature of drama gave way to the students' self-expression to flourish, and communication to be achieved through the body. The students explored the story of the 'Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig'. This is the reverse story of the traditional tale of the 'Three Little Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf' written by Greek writer Eugene Trivizas. We have chosen this specific story as it attends to specific aims, vocabulary and language functions of the Curriculum for Year 3 as proposed from the Cyprus Educational Mission in the UK<sup>50</sup>.

Every week we spent twenty to thirty minutes of our time to explore the text through drama activities and games for a period of five months. The final aim was to create our own digital version of the story. For example, we used drama conventions to explore the text as still images, narration in the circle and collective role (see: Winston, & Miles, 2001), we combined vocabulary learning with warm up activities and pronunciation with music activities. Later on we moved to whole class improvisations and devising based on the text where the cameras were introduced to the students for experimentation and video-recording of the story by

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50 More information regarding the aims, vocabulary and language functions that the specific project attended can be found online in the Critical Connections Teachers' handbook at <https://goldsmithsmdst.wordpress.com>.

themselves. As participants progressed from the dramatic exploration of the text to the creation of their own digital version of the story, focus was constantly on their kinaesthetic engagement.

According to Stephen Krashen, learning a language differs from learning other subjects both because it requires public practice and is influenced by what he terms the affective filter hypothesis. His theory of the affective filter hypothesis suggests that an individual's emotions can either interfere or assist in the learning of a new language (as cited in: Winston, & Stinson, 2011). Drama, due to its playful nature, created this effective space in which students felt safe to practice the language, while raising their levels of self-confidence and their attitudes towards Greek school. According to data collected, parents reported to the headteacher regarding their children's content of coming to school, because of the 'three little wolves' project. One mother reported to us that ever since we started the project her son who is bilingual (Greek and English) is very keen on speaking Greek at home while in the past he was not and that she observed '*he is more confident and open*' (informal conversation at school). Other data collected by video recordings of the process, show students commenting on their language learning in a positive way and even laughing at themselves when not getting the correct pronunciation.

Lastly, the existence of an external audience that would review our work and the expectation of a finished piece of work, namely the creation of the digital story to be presented to the whole school and the film festival, provided everyone with a common aim to work towards and provided a strong context for communication.

## MUSIC

Music has been proved to be beneficial in the learning process, even when it is used as a means of achieving other, non-musical aims. Ronald Berk states that there are twenty possible outcomes concerning the learning value of music in the classroom, including music's ability of grabbing attention, focusing student's concentration, generating interest in class, establishing a positive environment, drawing on student's imagination, making learning fun, decreasing anxiety and tension on scary topics, and finally, improving attitudes toward content and learning (Berk 2008, p. 46).

Music in the classroom environment is often incorporated in non-musical processes and is combined with other subject areas. Through the years, there have been numerous attempts at integrating music with language arts in particular, showing positive outcomes and benefits of this integration (Lowe, 2002). In addition, music and language present common characteristics with reference to their nature: Both (spoken) language and music are generated from a finite set of sounds (notes or phonemes), carved out of a larger possible set of sounds. These sounds are organised into discrete categories, facilitating representation and memory (McMullen, & Saffran 2004, p. 291).

What is observed here is an interrelation between music and language which can be advantageous in the language learning process. Considering the value of

music in the learning process in general, and further the common nature of music and language, music engagement in heritage language learning proved to be advantageous. In the present project music has been used as a means of enhancing the learning experience of heritage language. Specifically, it worked on two levels. Firstly, the musical activities were decided and built according to the dramatic action, and their primary role was to enrich and accompany the story. Children were invited to use their imagination in order to create soundscapes, sound effects and compose melodies; they were also introduced to musical terms such as leitmotif, gaining an experiential understanding of its function<sup>51</sup>.

In addition, music has served as a vehicle in expressing themselves, as well as their ideas and feelings. Moreover, music enriched the process of building the characters, whilst, through exploring animal sounds they experimented with body postures and movements, drawing on dramatic activities. Finally, children had the opportunity to play with small percussion instruments, identifying timbres and being involved in a decision-making process with respect to aesthetic choices.

On a second level, music worked towards improving, among other elements, the pronunciation of specific words and letters. Aspects of phonetics were involved in musical activities in the form of games, based on actions and characters included in the story; for example, sound effects served as a great basis in working repetitively on specific letters, such as the Greek 'ρω', which presents difficulty in its pronunciation concerning native English speakers. Furthermore, leitmotifs' rhythmical and repetitive nature boosted students' memory and improved vocabulary; according to our observations of videos when analysing data, children felt more confident in speaking in Greek when referring to characters for whom they had created leitmotifs. Yet, repetition is not the only characteristic of a leitmotif that helps with memorisation; music itself can be of great significance in developing memory, as the next paragraph explains.

Although the learning objectives of this project were not musical per se, students were introduced to musical components such as rhythmical patterns and the notion of pulse, through singing games. This engagement put on view evidence which is worth of taking into consideration, as there is a strong connection between rhythm and memorisation which can be a valuable tool in language learning. Music and its various components, especially rhythm, have been linked to verbal memorisation and have shown positive effects on memory in general. Suzanne L. Medina (2002), in discussing music's positive effects on language learning, indicates that the ability to memorize is critical to the language acquisition process, since it would be virtually impossible to acquire language without memory. Music reportedly enhances rote memorization. (...) Music and its subcomponent, rhythm, have been shown to benefit the rote memorization process. When various types of verbal information (e.g., multiplication tables, spelling lists) was presented simultaneously with music, memorization was enhanced. (Medina, 2002, p. 5)

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51 Leitmotif is a musical term referring to a musical fragment, which is related with a specific aspect of the drama, e.g. a character or a situation and recurs in the course of a performance. Although the term initially referred to operas, it is now used widely in other forms of music and drama performances.

Hence, the use of music here was advantageous, as it assisted students in memorising words, and thus, in developing their vocabulary. Observations during data analysis have shown that students' memory was boosted and they remembered vocabulary related to their musical compositions. For example, according to video recordings, during an activity in which a character of the story was mentioned children impulsively started performing its leitmotif, an action which was out of context. In other situations, when referring to characters of the story they were switching from English to Greek with confidence and were using the words included in the leitmotif, including adjectives. Hence, music in this case assisted in enriching children's vocabulary.

## DIGITAL MEDIA

Digital equipment such as laptops, cameras, voice and sound recorders were used for and by the students throughout the process. On one level the digital equipment was used by the teachers for facilitating learning (e.g power point presentations of the story, interactive language activities with images for building on the vocabulary and grammar, videos and other recordings while on task for reflection) and on another level by the students to video-record the different scenes of the story that they would act out. The use and effect of digital media here though, will be reviewed in relation to the digital work completed by the students in order to create, present and reflect on their own digital storytelling version of the story of the Three Little Wolves.

According to Prue Wales (2012), researchers have pointed out the 'interdisciplinary/participatory and immersive nature of digital storytelling ... which they consider to be a multimodal inquiry-based form requiring critical and reflective thinking', (p. 537). Students, apart from making decisions as to who is acting out and who is recording at different scenes, aesthetic and technical decisions had to be made as well e.g from which angle they would be shooting, what would be included in each shot, which scenes needed to be re-shot etc. What is more, digital media, as verified by data we collected during the process, affected the way in which they conceived and understood themselves as learners of the Greek language, engaged in new forms of expression and saw themselves as learners within a group. Through a selection of videos we showed to the students in different moments of the project throughout the year they gave the following comments: '*I think I'm too bossy, (laughing at the same time)*' (girl, 7 years old, group discussion), '*I learned that Greek school can be fun and I learned all this new words*' (girl 8 years old, extract from interview), '*I liked it, I mean it was difficult, and sometimes tiring but when you see the video you see all this work we have done*' (boy, 8 years old, extract from interview).

What makes the use of digital media of some interest in heritage language learning is that it helps to build on the personal connection that the students very often have with the heritage language. As it was the means to create a complete piece of work to be presented to families, friends and the rest of the school, it was

a great way to celebrate Greek language learning with them. As Boyd explains, the framing of the experience and the potential for an audience to receive our work heightens experience and provides a sense of being in the world (as cited in: Davis, 2011). During the festival, students had to go on stage and say a few words regarding their storytelling piece, before its filming, and receive an honorary plaque for their entry to the festival to take back with them to their school. At that time they presented themselves as students representing the Greek School of Potters Bar and their work on a story by a Greek writer. In interviews that they gave to the festival's crew the students reported that what they learned from this project was *'to work in a group'* (boy, 8 years old) and that they *'learn a lot of Greek'* (girl, 7 years old). A boy also commented that he learnt a lot of Greek and he enjoyed that and he would like to learn more languages like Spanish and Chinese (boy, 8 years old).

However, through our findings we came to the point that not all students approach digital storytelling with enthusiasm and willingness to participate. On the contrary students' interest and engagement in digital storytelling depends on the context and structure of the classes (Anderson and Chua as cited in: Wales, 2012). We had a student, for instance, who was not willing to act out in front of the cameras but was always excited to be the cameraman or direct scenes. Also, to reinforce the problematic assumption that children and young people are *'digital natives'* (Davis, 2011), we found that the participants in our project needed time to familiarise themselves with the digital equipment and the process. Teachers embarking on such projects need to know in advance that



**Pictures 1** (Interviewing Students During the Film Festival) , **2** (Rehearsing at School) & **3** (Improvisation-The three little Wolves in Despair).  
Source: From own/writers' archive.

they need to plan for time to learn both themselves and their students the know-how of the technological means they would like to employ.

Finally, even though students were responsible for the video and audio recordings of the smaller scenes that would be put together, they were not involved in the editing process of the final piece. We consider this fact as one of the limitations of this project. Due to lack of equipment (computers), lack of knowledge on behalf of the students of the editing software and the limited time span in which we needed to complete the project, it was not possible to involve them. This fact does not minimise though the important role that media tools played in this project.

### AFTERTHOUGHT

This article articulates the ways in which an interdisciplinary approach is a potent pedagogy in the heritage language classroom. Being clear that not all drama, music or media teaching leads to advancement of competence in heritage language, what we tried to do was to employ the disciplines above in order to improve the students' experiences of learning. In situating the focus on creative and artistic process through which to develop the language at focus, we observed that students' interest in language learning was enhanced and their motivation to come to school and learn Greek was developed. We consider this the first and crucial condition in order to develop new knowledge or build further on a language.

To manage an interdisciplinary learning environment and the successful achievement of collective activity that relates to such an environment, planning is required towards an engagement with all the different approaches, as well as guiding participant learning, where needed, in order not to lose the focus on the language. Scaffolding strategies such as modelling tasks and activities, tapping into prior knowledge (e.g. some students were familiar with the story from their English school) and pre-teaching vocabulary (introducing vocabulary through images or in contexts they know or are interested in) were necessary.

*Critical Connections* project provided us with a framework and conceptual tools for a fundamental rethinking of language learning. Above all, it helped us see how important is to create personally relevant contexts for learning languages; this is especially important for heritage languages, the learners of which often have a personal attachment to them. It also helped us to understand the importance of fostering active participation of the learners in the learning process and in the school life context. Even though the project we did with Potters Bar Greek School was a small scale research project, it is illustrative of how re-approaching heritage language learning in community contexts in this way can be effective. Further research is required and suggested towards identifying the essential criteria and evaluative strategies in assessing and enhancing students' cognitive development, through interdisciplinary study in heritage language learning.

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