



Community  
Literacy of  
Ontario

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# Research Bulletin on Under-Represented Groups: Success Stories in LBS



[info@communityliteracyofontario.ca](mailto:info@communityliteracyofontario.ca)



[communityliteracyofontario.ca](http://communityliteracyofontario.ca)



(705) 733-2312



@CommunityLitOn



@CommunityLitOn

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## Introduction

As part of its 2024-2025 business plan deliverables, Community Literacy of Ontario researched innovative approaches to working with under-represented groups in Literacy and Basic Skills programs.

Adult learning is a multifaceted process that requires a deep understanding of the individual characteristics and motivations of adult learners. Adult learners are typically motivated by intrinsic factors and seek knowledge that is applicable to their personal and professional lives. This underscores the importance of creating learning experiences that resonate with their real-world challenges and aspirations.

To this end, these five programs have developed unique programming that serves the distinct needs of their communities across Ontario. We are pleased to share the following five success stories.





# Targeted Programming - Foundational Training for all Goals

NIAGARA WEST ADULT LEARNING CENTRE

The Niagara West Adult Learning Centre (NWALC) has been helping residents of Lincoln, West Lincoln and Grimsby to improve their reading, writing, numeracy and digital skills for over 25 years. NWALC's office is located in a historic 1847 schoolhouse called Howard House on Queen Street in Beamsville and their Executive Director is Jacky Catterick.

## OVERVIEW OF NWALC'S SERVICE OFFERINGS

NWALC provides services on-site in this location, but also works with partners to provide learning opportunities in surrounding communities. In addition, they provide online learning opportunities so people can learn from the comfort of their own home through online workshops and tutoring sessions.

Like many regions of Ontario, NWALC's service area is not connected to a formal bus service. There is a van on demand service which users book in advance, but there



are no set routes or times. Because of this, NWALC's staff travel between cities in the area to deliver programming. The main hub

is in Beamsville, and in other areas of the region, they partner with local libraries as service locations.

One of their popular and most successful programs is the Computer Basics program. It is provided in partnership with the public library which provides the instructors. NWALC provides six laptops that are transported between the different libraries, on different days of the week to serve a diverse set of learners.

To support the community's digital skills needs, Jacky developed a program called "How to be an Online Learner." This workshop covers online learning styles, online learning platforms, how to navigate in an online classroom, and online learning opportunities. Once a learner completes this workshop, there are three main referrals that can take place:

- A referral to The Learning Hub ([www.learninghub.ca](http://www.learninghub.ca))
- A referral to the local high school for credit courses
- Completion of one-time online training requirements such as WHIMIS

## STRONG COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

NWALC has a strong partnership with The Learning Hub as well as Contact North.



Many learners will complete NWALC's foundational training and will then complete more focused training with The Learning Hub. They will gradually move on to further training with Contact North. Jacky noted that NWALC's foundational training is key to the learners' ongoing success with the programming available through both The Learning Hub and Contact North. Without the initial assessment and foundational training at NWALC, many learners are not able to succeed.

Jacky noted that during the pandemic lockdowns, public schools switched to online lesson delivery, and not all students were successful with a digital and remote



learning environment. Because of this, some students were not able to complete their credits on schedule. The "How to be an Online Learner" workshop is a great intervention for younger adults whose education was interrupted by the lockdowns, and provides the foundational training needed to set them up for success with online learning.

Another common demographic in the community is older adults who are employed or have been employed, but don't have the digital skills for the changing workplace's digital demands. Again, with the pandemic lockdowns, many workplaces saw sudden changes in technology as they

adapted to remote work. For many adults who grew up without the vast expanse of technology we see today, adapting to rapidly changing technological requirements in the workplace is very challenging. By accessing the foundational training at NWALC, these adults are able to build the adaptability necessary to succeed in their workplace.

To advertise these programs, NWALC uses very simple visual ads online on their social media and website to drive interest in digital skills upgrading. Then, once the prospective learner calls on the phone, they provide all the details of the program and what to expect. Jacky noted that people are very interested and are very open to the programs when they see them online.

Jacky recommends – as many other LBS programs agree – NWALC doesn't use the term literacy or use stigmatized language. In the program space, it's important to create a safe and respectable environment for the learner. For many learners, they report that they've finally found a place to be themselves, be accepted, supported and encouraged, and not feel judged. They finally feel like they're normal and among peers, and don't need to have their guard up or feel shame about their skill level. LBS programs are powerful spaces in the community which provide a safe space for learners to share their stories and their differences.

As adults, we're supposed to keep learning, and NWALC provides the foundational training to ensure their community members succeed.



## Effectively Responding to Changing Community Needs

SKILLS UPGRADING CENTRE -  
LITERACY COUNCIL YORK-SIMCOE

Trisha Patrick is the Executive Director of the Skills Upgrading Centre - Literacy Council York-Simcoe ([www.skillsupgrading.ca](http://www.skillsupgrading.ca)) in Newmarket, Ontario. Like many other areas, the York-Simcoe region has undergone significant changes in population size and demographics, and there has been an abundance of construction of new homes and infrastructure to serve the growing population. In addition to this, the 2020 pandemic triggered many other changes to the Skill Upgrading Centre's learners.

### ASSESSING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Trisha noted that it is essential to consistently monitor your community to determine its needs as they can change rapidly. LBS programs are effective because they are so agile and can respond quickly to the changing needs of their learners. Trisha stated that the ideal way to assess the community is to:

1. Identify the need in the community
2. Ask: are we the right agency to provide this service? Does it align with our core values and mission?
3. Is there anyone else already doing this work? Would this create duplication of services?

Trisha reported that there has been a change in the literacy levels of the learners accessing services pre-pandemic and post-pandemic. Before the pandemic, approximately 25% of the agency's learners were at literacy level 1 or below and many of these learners struggled with the transition to online service delivery. They were lucky to have a very versatile tutor who set up one-to-one Zoom sessions with the learners and divided the lessons, so they were easier to digest along with building the new digital skills.

Post-pandemic, the learners accessing services were at a higher literacy level with most being around a level 2. The learners had some education and work experience, but they weren't enough to reach their goals for a variety of reasons. For some, their education was over ten years old, and their skills were out of date. For others, they had been out of the workforce or not using



**Trisha also believes that it is important to stay aware of your community's needs by staying connected and sharing information with partners on an ongoing basis.**



their education and had lost their skills due to lack of use. The pandemic shutdowns and job losses similarly contributed to atrophying skills. Trisha noted that for her program, approximately 85% of learners are seeking employment goals and are seeking the quickest pathway to meet their goals.

This new type of learner coming to the agency was ready to learn and reach their goals. To harness this, the agency got a subscription to IXL ([ca.ixl.com](https://www.ixl.com)), an online assessment and learning platform based on the Ontario K-12 public education system. All learners could start immediately and make progress every day, which greatly improved attendance and contributed to building confidence quickly.

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## EFFICIENTLY SERVING LEARNERS

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Learners reported that they preferred LBS programming to other options because it was the quickest pathway to achieving their goals. As an adult learner, there are many other priorities in life and finding the time and money to commit to other types of training and skills upgrading was often not possible. LBS programs are also very flexible and can be scheduled throughout the day

and week to suit each learner's individual schedule. LBS programming is also ideal for adult learners because the programming is so foundational and almost all of the lessons can be transferred between goal paths. This flexibility means that even if a learner changes their goal, there is no wasted training.

Trisha noted that the key to successfully working with adult learners is to first build a respectful and welcoming rapport in which the learner feels safe to ask questions, and secondly to work on building confidence. Many learners can have feelings of shame around their abilities and in turn don't feel safe to ask questions or try to learn new things. Building confidence switches the learner from being afraid of what they don't know, to being excited about building new skills. This empowerment translates into a lifelong learner.



One program in particular is their Customer Service training program. Trisha notes that this is, at its core, a soft skills program, because it teaches the learner how to interact professionally in any type of customer service situation. Many learners have the basic skills needed for a job, but they need to build confidence to be able to start working in a new and unfamiliar



situation. This program provides a safe space to practice those skills and gain feedback and validation before heading out into the working world.

Many of the learners were pursuing the former GED certification because of the misconception that it was a basic requirement for their goals of employment or further training, such as apprenticeship. In fact, only specific credits, such as grade 12 math, are often required instead of a full high school equivalency. Once this is explained to the learner, they are able to more efficiently reach their goals.



**Adult learners are eager to start learning and make progress. Harness that motivation by offering programs immediately.”**  
-Trisha Patrick

Learners start to support other learners as they gain skills and confidence. To support this, Trisha strategically puts learners in groups together to match their skillsets and goal paths. They limit classes to 6 learners with the intention of fostering community. In these smaller group classes, learners get one-to-one attention and a common lesson; they learn together, but individually. The group classes also help with attendance and elevate their overall confidence level and encourage teamwork skills.

Adult learning is a multifaceted process that requires a deep understanding of the



unique characteristics and motivations of adult learners. Central to effective adult education are the principles of self-direction, relevance, and experience-based learning, which the Skills Upgrading Centre excels at. Adult learners are typically motivated by intrinsic factors, seeking knowledge that is applicable to their personal and professional lives which underscores the importance of creating learning experiences that resonate with their real-world challenges and aspirations.

Ultimately, recognizing and addressing the specific needs of adult learners is essential for developing effective educational programs that not only enhance individual skills but also contribute positively to organizational productivity and community development. As we move forward, it is crucial to continue exploring and implementing strategies that support lifelong learning in adults, ensuring they remain engaged, motivated, and capable of navigating the complexities of modern life.



# The Importance of Connection, Partnerships, and Referrals

TRENT VALLEY LEARNING ASSOCIATION

The Trent Valley Literacy Association (TVLA), based in Peterborough, Ontario, has been serving the community for over 48 years. During this time, TVLA has supported many adult learners. Executive Director Dawn Fidler emphasizes the critical role that partnerships with local social service agencies, such as Ontario Works and Employment Services, play in achieving TVLA's mission. These strong relationships enhance TVLA's ability to serve learners efficiently and effectively within the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) community.

## DIGITAL EQUITY

Recognizing the widening technology gap within the digital divide, TVLA partnered with Ontario Works (OW) and the Peterborough Native Learning Program (PNLP) to create a digital literacy initiative. This collaboration aligns with LBS objectives, particularly in supporting individuals on the independence goal path and working toward life stabilization. Through this program, learners receive laptops and smartphones, funded by Ontario Works, though many require additional support to use these devices effectively.

The digital skills program spans seven weeks, with participants attending one session per week. Training covers essential

skills for using both smartphones and laptops. Many learners face significant challenges, and digital literacy helps them access vital online services and support systems. This initiative breaks down barriers to full participation in today's digital society. Additionally, the program incorporates culturally relevant content, making it more accessible to Indigenous learners.

The program has produced numerous success stories. One example is a young man who came to Peterborough seeking better opportunities. After facing financial struggles and relying on local shelters for housing, he joined the digital equity program. With newly acquired skills, he reconnected with family members through social media. Weeks after completing the program, his OW worker reported that he had reunited with his family and returned home.

Building on the program's success, TVLA, PNLP, and OW are launching a new digital equity initiative in partnership with the Elizabeth Fry Society. This program will focus on residents of local transitional housing, 40% of whom identify as



Indigenous. Technology has been identified as a significant barrier for many residents, and the initiative is designed to equip them with digital skills that will support their goals, whether reconnecting with family, pursuing education, or seeking employment. Participants will initially receive smartphones, with the option to transition to laptops if needed. Beyond providing devices, the program ensures participants can safely navigate the digital world, covering topics such as two-factor authentication, secure password storage, and managing their digital presence confidently. A local tech refurbishment shop, Reboot, supports this initiative by offering laptops at not-for-profit prices, making the program both sustainable and community-driven.

For many learners, acquiring digital skills opens doors to opportunities they may not have previously imagined. These digital equity programs empower marginalized individuals to take control of their lives, equipping them with skills to access online services, reconnect with loved ones, and work toward life stabilization.

By focusing on digital literacy, we are not just teaching technical skills—we are fostering the confidence and independence necessary for full participation in society. The impact of these programs extends beyond technology use; they are about transforming lives by providing access to essential tools and knowledge in a digital world.



**Adult learners bring a lifetime of experience to the table. We need to respect the skills they do have and support the growth of others.**

- Dawn Fidler

## THE WAVE PROJECT

In partnership with the YMCA's WAVE program, TVLA provides financial literacy as a piece of the program for women re-entering the workforce, many of whom are leaving situations of domestic violence. This program, which uses the Bridges Out of Poverty framework, helps participants navigate services based on their situations and build confidence. TVLA contributes by delivering financial literacy modules, which aim to help women build financial independence.

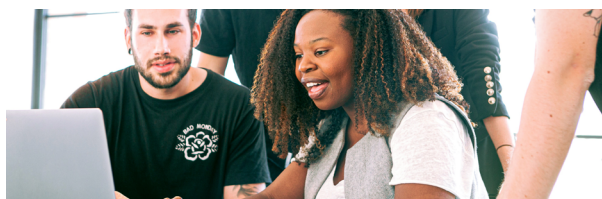
These modules cover topics such as avoiding payday lenders, building credit scores, and effective budgeting. Many participants have



experienced financial abuse, where loans or leases may have been taken out in their name without their knowledge. In addition, some have been emotionally manipulated to believe they are incapable of managing money, which can hinder their financial progress. This program is especially valuable because of the stigma associated with money, which can symbolize control, safety, or freedom. For many, unlearning negative attitudes toward money and building financial confidence are crucial steps. The



program provides a safe, non-judgmental space for women to discuss money and regain control over their financial lives.



## CHALLENGES

Despite the successes of these programs, TVLA faces significant challenges, most notably insufficient funding. Dawn notes, this lack of funding affects the organization's ability to offer competitive wages, leading to staff turnover. This is not due to a lack of interest in the work, but rather the financial constraints TVLA faces, exacerbated by rising living costs.

Another challenge is the emotional toll of hearing learners' stories, including those involving abusive home environments. One learner, in particular struggled with mental health and self-confidence due to emotional abuse. TVLA became a safe space like many LBS organizations, a place where they could begin to rebuild their self-esteem. Emotional abuse can drastically alter a person's self-perception, leading them to internalize negative beliefs about themselves. Helping learners unlearn these harmful thoughts and rebuild their confidence is a key part of LBS programming.

Food insecurity is another challenge for TVLA's learners. Ministry funding does not cover food provisions, so TVLA actively

seeks alternative funding to provide meals. However, shame and pride can sometimes prevent learners from accepting food, even when offered.

Dawn also hopes to reinstate a cooking program at TVLA, as food literacy is vital. This program would teach nutrition, confidence, and budgeting, helping learners prepare meals from raw ingredients—an essential skill for maintaining a healthy and budget-friendly diet. Food literacy also fosters problem-solving skills, as learners figure out how to make substitutions when ingredients are unavailable or too expensive.

TVLA continues to develop innovative programming to meet the evolving needs of the community, empowering learners through education and skill development.



“

We always make sure there is food available in learning environments. Often, we've found that a meal at our program is the only meal they have that day. We keep a freezer stocked in the office.”

- Dawn Fidler



## Innovative Approach to Community Food Security

PRINCE EDWARD LEARNING CENTRE

Jennifer Hunter is the Essential Skills Coordinator at Prince Edward Learning Centre (PELC). PELC is a community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agency serving Prince Edward County. PELC was founded in 1993 and has been serving the community's needs for over 30 years.

often local – food available at wholesale prices to the public. PELC is lucky to have a staff member who is also a registered Holistic Nutritionist to take the lead on this project.

### CHANGING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Prince Edward County is a large, rural geographic area where a lack of services and transportation challenges are issues. This means that partnerships are the norm for delivering services. Prince Edward Learning Centre is co-located with a number of educational partners and has developed unique ways to support adult education in PELC.

During the 2020 pandemic, additional funding was available to support various social service programs in Ontario. PELC took this opportunity to apply for several different grants to start new programs in the community that were largely to serve under-represented groups.

One of those programs was the development of their food market ([pelc.ca/food-market](http://pelc.ca/food-market)), which makes fresh – and



### WHY THIS INITIATIVE WAS DEVELOPED

PELC staff became aware of the amount of highly processed fast food being consumed in the community, especially from a particular restaurant located in the same plaza as them. They also noted that the public transportation in the region was not ideal for those without personal vehicles to shop for groceries. In fact, one housing area in the region, which is known to house lower income individuals, had no sidewalks or streetlights which made it dangerous to walk to grocery stores. This area also did not have any small shops which made it a food desert for those living here. PELC and community members raised these concerns with the municipality and were successful in

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Once we understood the need for affordable fresh foods in the area, we started building partnerships and recruiting volunteers to make the market a reality.”

- Jennifer Hunter

getting sidewalks and street lights installed so local residents could safely walk into the town center to access grocery stores and other public services.

PELC’s main location is in the town center of Picton, Ontario and this is where the first fresh food market was established. The staff carried out thorough research in the region by visiting many local farms and producers to build partnerships. Food literacy training events were held to educate learners and the staff on the importance of balanced nutrition, the environmental benefits of eating locally produced foods, and the financial benefits of preparing your own meals.

PELC developed their fresh food market program with several key partnerships in the area. They order the produce from a wholesale distributor which allows them to sell food for approximately 30% less than the local grocery store; therefore, making



fresh food available to those at lower income levels. When in season, they source produce from local farms and they sell pre-made food from local new Canadians, featuring their cultural recipes. Also, the local Food Bank has agreed to purchase any unsold produce at the end of the day which reduces the risk of a deficit. The local Food Bank and Ontario Works offices purchase gift certificates for the market to provide to their clients, creating valuable referrals to the service. The market program serves approximately 100 families across the county.

## HOW THE MARKETS OPERATE

On Mondays, the staff coordinator puts all of the week’s offerings on the website ([www.pecfreshgoodfoodmarket.com](http://www.pecfreshgoodfoodmarket.com)) and emails the contact list with a featured recipe using what’s available that week. Community members can then plan their week accordingly and either order online on market day each Wednesday, or shop in person between 3:00 and 5:00 pm. The market serves many seniors and single people, so they offer the ability to purchase single items, such as one carrot, to combat food waste. The free delivery is also a huge benefit to seniors or people who don’t have the ability to shop in person.

To advertise, PELC hosts a Facebook page and distributes flyers around the region, but their biggest advertising success is through word of mouth. All community members are welcome and PELC does not screen for income or eligibility which creates a welcoming and equitable environment.



Two paid staff members manage the one-day, pop-up markets in three locations, and volunteers manage the day-of operations as well as provide delivery within the region.

## HOW FUNDING WORKS

The funding that was initially available ensured PELC could conduct adequate research and planning to develop and start this project, and now the market runs based

on other sources of funding. The market is a registered member of Community Food Centres Canada ([www.cfccanada.ca/en/Home](http://www.cfccanada.ca/en/Home)). Additionally, in the lead up to the winter holiday season, shoppers can access free children's books provided through the local group, County Kids Read ([www.countykidsread.ca](http://www.countykidsread.ca)).

This highly successful program is a perfect example of what can be accomplished when a community comes together to provide a much-needed service to the people of Prince Edward County.



## Confidence is Key and the Sky's the Limit!

GATEWAY CENTRE FOR LEARNING

Christa Porter serves as the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program Coordinator at Gateway Centre for Learning in Midland, Ontario. Christa took over this role in 2019, unaware of the chaos that would ensue with the 2020 pandemic lockdowns and social distancing mandates. Despite this tumultuous time, Christa and Gateway continued providing LBS programming to the Midland area community.

The following are Christa's most significant findings from her work assisting adult learners in Gateway's LBS program:

## ACKNOWLEDGE HOW SOCIETY HAS CHANGED SINCE THE LEARNER WAS IN PUBLIC SCHOOL

Christa explained that due to the age demographic of the students, this is an extremely important point to remember. Adults between the ages of 40 and 55 make up the vast majority of Gateway's LBS learners, so it is necessary to keep in mind the social stigma that was associated with learning disabilities during the time when these individuals were children and teenagers. Receiving a diagnosis of a



learning disability was generally regarded as a humiliating circumstance, and it was difficult to find accommodations for them. It is, therefore, Christa's recommendation that this subject be approached with caution and support to guarantee that the learner knows that the purpose of this is not to just label the learner but rather to determine whether accommodations may need to be made available.

## ASSESS THE LEARNING STYLES THAT WORK – AND DON'T WORK – FOR THE LEARNER

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Many adults did not thrive in large class settings in public school, and thus believe they will never succeed at learning in general. Because a person was not provided with alternative ways to learn, they were deprived of the opportunity to find their learning style and become a lifelong learner. During intake and the first few sessions, understand how this person can learn, what accommodations they may need, and what learning styles to avoid. For example, it is common for adult learners to prefer not to do long sit-down tests.

Christa described one learner who determined that they worked best by taking

extensive notes throughout the lesson. That learner soon progressed to assist other learners in small group sessions!

High emotional intelligence is key for practitioners. As we know, adult LBS programming is highly tailored to each learner. Adult education is unique in that an adult brings a wealth of lived experience and skills, but also years of ingrained negative labels and experiences. Christa shared that nearly all of the adult learners she has worked with self-identify as "stupid" and have shared that they were told they were "stupid" by a trusted adult, like a parent or teacher.

## CHANGE THE LEARNER'S MIND

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Christa stated that as a practitioner, you know that the learner can successfully complete their goal, but you need to acknowledge, at the beginning of the process, that the learner believes they cannot. Your first and most important job is then to change the learner's mind about their own abilities and limitations. Christa stresses that "completing the first milestone is not what's important; what's important is the process of building confidence." This sentiment is also echoed in CLO's recent publication in partnership with Trent University, which describes the work being done in LBS programs as more like mental health interventions than educational interventions.

Christa shared the story of one learner whose goal was to go to college, but they knew they needed digital skills upgrading

first. This person had multiple other difficult life circumstances at the same time: breast cancer, a divorce, and panic attacks from the overwhelm of completing tests. By building confidence, breaking down tasks into manageable sizes, and providing a safe, calm, and supportive place, this learner completed the LBS training, was accepted to the college program of choice, attained a 90% average and got a job! A key part of this success was building confidence first, learning their learning style, and building the skills to advocate for accommodations in college.

## TRAINING TUTORS

The LBS world is honoured to have such dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers continuing to show up and support these programs. An important part of this process is training tutors, so they are set up for success when working with adult learners. Christa shared the following key tips for training tutors:

- Creating a safe and compassionate space is crucial, but setting reasonable boundaries is key. It can be challenging to hear a learner's difficult life stories, so it's important to exercise personal boundaries to protect your mental health and to prevent burnout.
- Start small and know you will first need to convince the learner with a small win.
- Some learners need to be gently pushed. High emotional intelligence is necessary to be able to work with different learners.

- You can give a learner options, but they need to take action themselves. Tutors can often have a "fixer" attitude and want to help everyone. So, remember to use referrals and don't do everything yourself.
- You will be constantly learning, especially around emerging technologies.



**Being a tutor for adult learners takes a lot of emotional intelligence. You will need to be able to assess learning styles and create a learning plan that works with the learner, not against them."**

- Christa Porter

## SUMMARY

In summary, confidence is a critical factor that enables adult learners to thrive. It boosts motivation, facilitates the mastery of skills, overcomes emotional barriers, promotes self-directed learning, and builds a sense of competence. Helping adult learners build confidence needs to be a key priority for educators and learning designers.





## CONCLUSION

This **Research Bulletin on Under-Represented Groups Success Stories in LBS** was researched and written by Community Literacy of Ontario. CLO is a provincial network of community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies. We are located in Midland, Ontario. You can learn more about our organization by visiting our [website](#) and by following us on Facebook and Twitter.

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[info@communityliteracyofontario.ca](mailto:info@communityliteracyofontario.ca)



[communityliteracyofontario.ca](http://communityliteracyofontario.ca)



(705) 733-2312



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