

Akram Ahmadi Tavana
Papers
Our Art Room Saturdays
2022



Transnational tomorrows today:

Graduate student futures
and imaginaries for art education

Guest Editors:
Anita Sinner, Kazuyo Nakamura
and Elly Yazdanpanah

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ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

IRAN

OUR ART ROOM SATURDAYS

AUTHOR

Akram Ahmadi Tavana
Mehrhouse (NGO)

ABSTRACT

This article is a selection of my experiences and observations of a series of workshops held on Saturdays. I have been conducting workshops for Afghan immigrant women in Iran since the summer of 2021 as part of a curatorial project on Afghan immigrant artists in Iran. This educational process, formed by various practices, is designed for immigrant women who are not previously familiar with art. It is based on the impact of art on individual discipline and social participation, aiming at increasing the quality of life for individuals and their families. I discuss the experiences gained from a practice entitled, 'What do you know?' In this case, we focus on sharing each person's skills in relation to others. In this workshop, the role of teacher and student is continuously shifting, and everyone experiences both roles as teacher and learner.

KEYWORDS

immigrant women, workshops, quality of domestic life

INTRODUCTION

In the process of conducting workshops with immigrant women, my knowledge of traditional skills and Indigenous arts among participants expanded by learning to crochet while we shared in successive conversations for several months. Where the art of crocheting is concerned, the process of making by way of learning a process proved more important than the resulting object. In this way, the importance of producing an art object and its value were questioned, and in return, in an educational process, the individual affects and social functions of art were highlighted. In addition, women's arts, traditional teachings, handicrafts, applied arts, housework, and daily affairs have a different stature and were especially important in our conversations. Partaking in a group activity and practicing a social role in the new society have also been considered as a result. Together, we considered how the domestic and social lives of women align with the SDGs, and this is reflected in the scope of the project (United Nations n.d.). While the art room workshop was ongoing, efforts were made to provide women in the workshop with an opportunity for self-confidence, a closer look at specific abilities, and the development of individual skills. In addition to theoretical aspects and the work of professional artists, the process I shared with these women in the workshop was an important part of my educative and artistic project. Furthermore, practicing crocheting was added to my previous daily activities as a new form of artful expression.

The art room workshops for Afghan immigrant women began in the summer of 2021 as a part of my ongoing project on the art of Afghan immigrants in Iran. During the decades of the civil war in Afghanistan, a multitude of immigrants came to Iran, including many artists and those who later turned to artistic endeavors. My preoccupation with the art of Afghan immigrants was inspired by conversations with a number of them who, with numerous examples and evidence, objected to their unequal opportunities for education. The arts provided a means to overcome those limitations. Many were seeking to join Tehran's art scene. My observations of the art scene and the condition of my Afghan students at the university proved to me that their claims were well founded.

Although I started this project to support and introduce artists to the art scene, gradually, due to my educational pursuits for immigrant women, other practices were added to it as well. I designed practices not for artists alone, but for non-artists also, to encourage their encounters with art as a mode of social engagement and personal expression. Basically, the idea of this project, and the creation of these educational practices reflect my previous activities for Afghan immigrants at a NGO called Mehrhouse. I have been volunteering there for many years as the curator and editor of their annual newsletter. This independent organization is dedicated to supporting and educating children and women. I work with Afghan immigrants who, due to being deprived of stable social and economic conditions, find access to educational resources challenging. After a long period of meeting, talking, and holding art workshops for Afghan women who had no background or experience in art, I realized the potential for art to be influential in various aspects of their personal lives. In this project, I aspired to find art practices that were relatable and consequently understandable and influential for the participants who may not have any prior art experience. I advanced this practice by relying on their everyday skills. Working with the women inspired not only new methods but also a different approach to my curatorial project, so that as a curator, along with the experience of working with professional artists, I continued to engage with marginalized populations. Extending Deleuze and Guattari (2005), the population of immigrant women with this socially defined identity are akin to citizens in the minority. Thus, my workshops were meetings established every Saturday morning at the NGO. This article is about my observations, experiences, impacts, findings, and conclusions from one of the art room workshops based on the practice of 'What do you know?'

For context, this project is in addition to my participation in Tehran's art scene and my teaching at a non-profit university, which in a sense can be considered the institutional powers that have monopolized art and knowledge in society. The workshops are part of ongoing projects being carried out across different platforms, such as exhibitions, workshops, documentaries, articles, and social activities, through which I seek to enhance the possibility of immigrant women benefiting from art education by considering the pivotal

role of mothers and their ability to create a supportive and 'harmonious environment at home, [for] when women benefit from this workshop, it widely impacts the individual, their family, and society' (Fargat 2017: 24).

My primary approach to 'What do you know?' is process-oriented, with group activities and knowledge sharing. These approaches are helpful to promote flexibility based on the creation of an artwork. Participants can literally feel the process in the results of their work. It is the creative process that matters. Interestingly, while no significant results were expected, notable artworks were made. I then adopted new materialism in my analysis to emphasize that all the objects we build and live with are not merely important as objects, but to a greater extent as living activities (Graber 2019). This builds upon my theoretical approaches to feminism, cultural studies and sociology to interpret the dynamics of the workshops.

WHY WAS THE ART ROOM WORKSHOP ORGANIZED?

Just as scholars who believe in the importance of art in creating a meaningful life, my objective in conducting the art room workshops as part of a curatorial project was for Afghan immigrant women to benefit from art education in various ways and, as a means to redefine their everyday experiences through art (Graber 2019). Here, it is presumed that art education has a tangible and practical affect that improves their mental and psychological conditions and quality of social life. Identifying, revealing, accentuating, and activating the individual skills of immigrant women in the process of this art workshop is one of my main goals. The issues of attentiveness, self-care, self-education, self-awareness, as well as emphasizing individuality, avoiding comparisons, increasing resilience, reducing anxiety, and problem-solving, along with increasing the quality of life, were brought up for me both during and in the continuance of the workshop project. In general, instilling a sense of agency that compels women to pay attention to their individuality beyond the usual traditional roles of a wife and mother through a particular educational framework can be a significant outcome of this workshop. This cultural activity, and the subsequent social participation, create, maintain, and strengthen relationships and interactions with people in the community (Rezaei 2011).

I actively try to convince the women that the evident contradictions of their current situation with pre-immigration life, their different social status, and the lack of access to conventional educational resources and the resulting constraints, should not lead to inaction and passivity. Empowering minority groups is the only way to create new possibilities (Moghaddam Shad 2019). Empowerment is an effective way to 'gain the authority of decision-making' (Rezaei 2011: 103). It is a way for women to question the certainty of limitations through new and creative teaching methods, and it encourages them to be able to successfully manage their small family community despite arduous conditions.

My NGO colleagues and I are working with a range of educational activities for Afghan women to create equal access to educational resources that promote gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, understanding of cultural diversity, and the participation of all cultures with a goal of stable development for all learners, regardless of constraints. It is noteworthy that these goals are implemented in a context (NGO) that has no economic affiliation with a particular state institution. Most of the sponsors are retired teachers. Instead of extravagant projects, there is an emphasis on education and empowerment. Consequently, in the face of the unprecedented growth of affiliated art institutions, this NGO helps develop programs with a strong social purpose as public pedagogy. We believe these teaching methods have regional and worldwide influences, since Iran is usually a bridge for migration from Afghanistan to European countries due to its proximity to Turkey.

THE NECESSITY OF DIALOGUE IN THE WORKSHOP

Even though it seems the development of non-verbal skills is the sole purpose of teaching visual arts, speaking and building friendly relationships led to greater participation in the workshop. Similarly, Collins (1998) introduced dialogue, communication, and caring to attain the epistemology of empowerment, which leads to expressing emotions and empathy. From the very beginning of the workshops and initial meetings, it became clear that the first step to effective participation was to gain the trust of the women who have

few non-familial relationships and whose social presence has been very limited in recent years in their new country. To that end, as Tilman (2003) points out, I always 'keep the conversation going ... through close observation' (p. 734).

I started the first few sessions with a discussion about events in Afghanistan, the educational conditions of their children at the institute, the institute's meetings for parents, news about immigrants who have recently come to Tehran, and similar topics. Since the society of Afghanistan is complex and multicultural (Rezaei 2011) these conversations are a key to understanding their world. I have maintained this process as it has proven effective in my teaching.

After initial communication, they gradually talk about their problems under different pretexts and tell their stories. To further our connection, not only in art but as much as possible, I find common ground by talking about their daily lives (Reason 1994). For example, because of their devotion to religion, it is necessary to be aware of, respect, and use numerous examples of religious rites and rulings. Another example, as a show of support, I briefly took care of a newborn who had been present in a workshop since she was just twenty days old. Also, being a woman in the classroom is very important and reassures them since, according to them, they usually do not have the confidence and permission to communicate with those who are not family.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PROCESS-ORIENTED

This workshop continues as just one of many activities the NGO planned for the empowerment of women, which extends to literacy, sewing, puppet-making, embroidery, and child-rearing and counseling. Art classes provide an opportunity to expand on these activities. Initially, I had decided to teach these classes in the summer, but as it turned out the art room project did not have a definite beginning and end, and like a river with several streams, it continued to flow. During the days of the Taliban's rise to power in the summer of 2021, meetings with Afghan women became an important part of my curatorial project and it continued to grow in scope, in part because of the changing political climate. I kept in touch with some who participated in

conversations in the early days, and new people replaced others for various reasons. The general idea for the workshop was to tailor to the participant's interests and necessities, depending on our budget and available resources. In fact, the next program is always based on their reaction to the previous one.

Inspired by our ongoing conversations, I realized that each workshop should be a creative process, introducing a different art form of interest to the participants. When practices continue for several sessions, the participant's desire to continue often declined. To keep the class schedule and practice in line with their interests and needs, I constantly monitored their satisfaction and enjoyment of the process. So I moved forward with planning short-term results to keep them satisfied and long-term results for educational purposes, which of course, is not at all an easy task. Flexibility in attendance, process-oriented activities, friendly and open communication, connecting art to everyday life, and not paying attention to art production, collectively helped us understand that art can happen anywhere and anytime. As a matter of fact, we realized that making art does not depend on specific supplies or spaces and that it is possible to work with minimal resources available at home. For example, I suggested making a clay sculpture at home, drawing on the pages of expired calendars, and writing journals for those who could not attend class regularly, due to family problems or if they only had a short time each week to show their work at the institution. Alternatively, I introduced books to the literate, which they borrowed from the NGO library.

With a process-oriented approach, I value the act of making art, not solely the final product. As 'in many educational spaces, the goal is not just the production of a beautiful object, but the students and what they gain from interacting with the class' (Graber 2019: 13). This decision does not preclude tangible and physical results. In all the workshop sessions, I clearly saw that the women were satisfied with the results of their work and were thrilled when the works were displayed in small and experimental exhibitions at the institute.

ART? WHICH ART?

Initially, art and the type of artwork proposed had to be defined. For example, the women's perception of painting and sculpture was entirely representative, and such realistic work not only contradicted the workshop goals, but it was also unattainable in regard to their artistic capabilities. So, it was not unreasonable that I continually spent part of my class time throughout the workshop program discussing the parameters of art, although the issue was never wholly resolved for everyone. While the women constantly compared their work with each other and with numerous questions sought my approval, I emphasized that the quality of a painting should be determined by its purpose. They were even eager to see my paintings to find a standard for evaluating their work. I repeatedly explained that calling an object a work of art differs from its artistic value (Barber & Derher 2020). I gave an example that drawing portraits demands a skill acquired over time and requires background knowledge that is unattainable in our classroom. As a result, when they wanted to paint a portrait, they had to focus only on the expression of emotion, mood, and the implied situation.

In time there were multiple exhibitions held in the institute for the participants to see the results of their efforts. Interestingly, despite the joy of having their work displayed and the encouragement they received from the institution and their children, they were ashamed of their making. As expressed by the women, it was 'bad' work. I hope that in time, the workshop will not only help them benefit from the effects of art on daily life, but also cause them to question or fundamentally change their perception of the traditional idea and general paradigm of art.

My emphasis remains on the social role of art and its cultural functions without evaluating the work of art. In this regard, Cunha Bastos (2012) reinforces participatory perspectives on art and society by challenging traditional definitions of fine art and popular art, and common classifications that value and prejudge what constitutes art. In the work of the women, visual values and thematic organization, drawing skills, coloring and similar values, give way to expressing the subject as much as possible. In other words, formal

values are abandoned in favor of communicating the content as intensely as possible. In our workshops, the goal is to make use of art that focuses on the health, creativity, and quality of people's lives. The community of the art room workshop promotes a form of art that is not only inspired, by but also impacts everyday life. Therefore, the material and equipment used in the classroom were far from the usual material used in art classes. We embrace today what feminist artists decades past recognized as vital and valuable: Indigenous art and women's handicraft (Parker & Pollock 1981), and this remains one of the most effective ways to form a community of practice among women.

WORKSHOP AS A SOCIAL AND GROUP ACTIVITY

Afghan women participating in my workshops are from a highly traditional and religious community. Over the years, I have found their education level usually falls into one of three categories: 1) completely illiterate women; 2) those who have studied up to a high school diploma or so; and finally, 3) women who are fully literate. According to my observations, the social harms the women suffer from the most are immigration, poverty, unemployment, addiction, social and domestic violence, theft, child labor, and lack of physical and mental healthcare. Lack of access to basic educational resources, being unaware of their social rights, lack of food security, customary and illegal marriages, child marriage and childbirth, lack of emotional support, lack of agency in pregnancy, and lack of access to sexual wellbeing facilities must be added to this list – and all are addressed in the SDGs. In addition, their independence, power, and individual abilities are completely ignored due to their presence in a patriarchal society (Rezaei 2011). Traditionally, having children (in large numbers) and housekeeping are their primary responsibilities. Thus, for immigrant women who have no post-immigration experience of social presence, this art workshop is a rare, even sole opportunity to be in a group besides family gatherings. In this workshop, they talk to each other without traditional restraints and to an extent, get a sense of each other's life and personality. They may have initial acquaintances outside of the workshop, for instance, their children go to the same school, making them, as they say, kindred. In this educational process, they stand together against external

pressures and social forces. Being accepted and together offers women 'social and cognitive development and [it] is critical to improving their self-confidence' (Scott 2012: 15). Since social isolation can be the root of 'many psychological and social problems' (Fargat 2017: 33), I am inclined to encourage them to continue these friendships and to expand their relationships as one of the functions of this workshop.

My focus is on creating a space for commentary, sharing experiences, and initiating conversations. In the planning and overall design of the workshop, I prioritize the opinions and requests of the participants to ensure the curriculum is suitable to their needs (Scott 2012). If someone encounters a problem while working, I encourage everyone to solve it together. By the end of each activity, I ask participants to discuss their work publicly and comment on the work of others. At the same time, I try to make them feel valued and important. Everyone is invited to help with preparing or assembling supplies and equipment. I have developed other group exercises in recent sessions to ensure more collaboration. For example, they have already collaborated on a sizeable painting by dividing the work into small groups.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW? LET US TRANSFORM IT INTO ART

Given the imposed limitations on immigrant women, it was important that the materials and techniques we employed were compatible with their living conditions. This was a key detail to ensure the continuity of their artistic activities during and after this workshop. For our session, 'What do you know?' I constructed two simultaneous challenges. On the one hand, instead of professional painting and sculpting supplies, they encountered hooks and yarns, which they have used since childhood in even the most deprived villages of Afghanistan, as a means for making traditional women's art. On the other hand, I was not the teacher and did not explain the practice this time. I was so inexperienced in working with a hook that I did not know the first thing about it. By reversing our roles in this practice we created a completely different atmosphere, the participants, in the role of the teacher, had to teach me and each other the art they already knew.

In the past, arts such as cross-stitching, embroidery, and crocheting the edge of a scarf were essential teachings for girls in traditional Afghan families, and women were responsible for preserving this type of handicraft (Rezaei 2011). However, handicrafts have only remained in select families due to numerous social crises, and most young immigrant women are not even familiar with these crafts. So I encouraged references to art that connect them to their Indigenous and regional roots. I observed how this feeling of belonging created a sense of ownership and confidence in the educational process. Since the tools of many of these localized arts are not accessible in Iran, we started with crocheting. Furthermore, I chose not to make intricate patterns or decorative items that have nothing to do with everyday life, but to create practical items such as washcloths. Not only does the effectiveness of this practice in everyday life help stay-at-home mothers with a possible source of income, but it can also meet the needs of large families. The significance of tangible results in their lives was such that they paid more attention to this practice than any other art activity. It seemed that learning to crochet became a kind of necessity for them. One day, when it was possible to choose between canvas painting and crocheting, everyone at the workshop chose crochet. In this way, as opposed to the conventional process of producing artworks, a functional object was made during an educational process in a different role and atmosphere of an art class.

In the past fifteen years, I have learned many lessons from the practices of students, reflective of their memories and skills. For me, the classroom is an educational opportunity to exchange information. Sometimes this information is based on previous studies and observations, and at times, on the creativity of the participants, and their immediate responses to problems. With this approach, the position of power traditionally given to the teacher in the Iranian education system is questioned. As a result, my students and I learned from each other in a more equal position. In fact, I designed this exercise based on my perception of how teaching is reciprocal and that the teacher is constantly learning from the students in the class. Here, by interchanging the position of teacher and student, I try to make the skills of immigrant women the subject of the class. In this way, in addition to highlighting forgotten skills,

participants take up new positions as teachers, and they experience what it is meant to teach someone they have always deemed more knowledgeable, which will likely nurture their self-confidence.

My inability to crochet was gradually accepted, though it was initially met with denial. As a cultural fact, an educated Iranian with a certain social status is unrealistically imagined as a versatile person. For instance, though an art teacher, I am occasionally asked medical questions. The everyday experiences of immigrant women definitely exacerbate this exaggerated understanding of the teacher. In these new circumstances, they taught me humility, and responded to my every question with an apology. I was called smart many times and was praised by different people for learning quickly!

A train of topics and memories ensued as I, a workshop participant, questioned others about when, how, and from whom they had learned to crochet. At the same time, I was directing the conversation so they would remember their previous skills. By doing so, I was creating an opportunity to recognize the fluency of the material: objects that find different functions in a new context. But the point is that the scope of these new functions extends from the object itself to its creator. Because the relationship between the producer and the product is such that as soon as we activate them, we are also activated by them (Hickey Moody & Page 2016). In this way, they remembered past memories, Afghanistan and their roots, to which they had not referred for years in some cases, and thus were on the verge of being forgotten. At the same time they were reminded of their former abilities and their knowledge as artists in their own right.

When we crocheted, there was no central power in the workshop. The teacher was not necessarily important in the class. The classroom became a place and an educational opportunity for us to share our experiences. We discussed crocheting and the issues that came up as a group or in pairs. By helping each other, the friendships between group members deepened. I often saw how each participant happily reacted to others getting results. During this workshop, the peak of inflation in Iran was followed by pandemic difficulties, along with the Taliban gaining power, which collectively disturbed our sense

of security and concentration. Nevertheless, the class was livelier and more peaceful than ever. The sound of laughter was heard several times. And with our bodies strongly involved in the process, crocheting developed deeper concentration. One must be fully aware of their fingers to proceed without error. There were many more relational connections underway in our making too. It was gratifying to hope that new skills would create new possibilities. While everyone was immersed in their own thoughts and stories, from time-to-time someone shared a distant memory. The participants were taught in their native dialect and using their local terms, which made them feel safe and familiar. The scenery of the class shifted, and this offered new insights to teachers and the institute's director. It was immediately recognizable to anyone who joined us.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW? OR, WHAT DO YOU NOT KNOW?

As a result of these mutually educative workshops, part of my curatorial project was works created by ongoing interaction with immigrant women. These women are skilled in handicrafts and cooking, in which I was very naïve. During this course, I learned something from each participant. One might say, 'What do you know?' This led to 'What do you not know?' In this way, the shared experiences of getting to know, and learning art from the participants, were my great achievement. The practice led me to undertake new work through a crocheting technique I learned from immigrant women. Of course, the word 'works' itself is debatable. Like the class, I was more involved in the learning process, and producing an object was secondary, even unattainable. In the first training session, the number of undoings was equal to the stitches, which was very similar to the workshop's process.

What mattered to me was my unexpected preoccupation with crocheting. Shortly after learning the basics of crocheting, hooks and yarns were placed in the institute's workshop and on my desk, alongside my computer, paper and painting supplies at home (see Figure 1). The atmosphere of the classroom and our friendly relationships extended the art making process, and their practice shifted from them onto me (Tillmann-Healy 2003).



Figure 1.
Author, Learning to crochet.

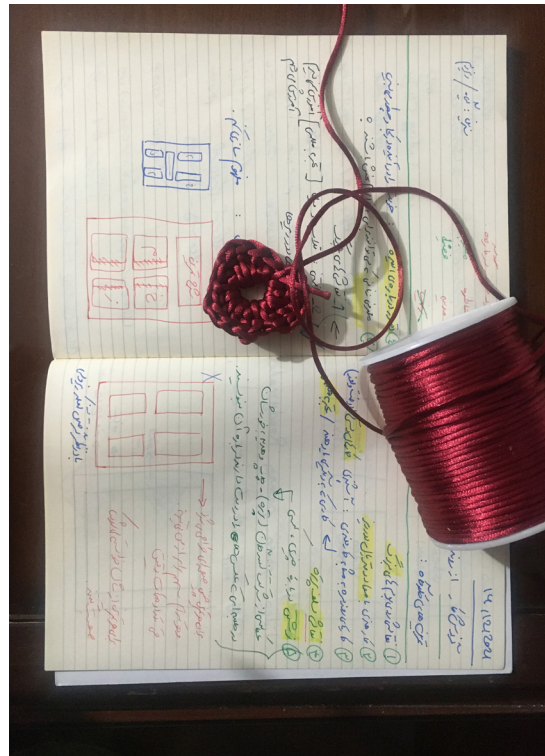


Figure 2 and 3.
Author, Steps in the process.

I realized that withdrawing from practical artwork for a time made me eager for any handiwork. I was curious to test my progress and learning in this different atmosphere (see Figures 2 and 3).

I began to go to shops looking for different threads. Under the workshop's pretext, I always had a sample of appropriate yarn in my bag (see Figure 3). Before buying yarn, and with all the visual precision of a painter, I thoroughly considered and consulted with others about the various options and qualities they each provided.

My first attempt was a productive failure, that is, it does not form a straight-edged rectangle. I have not yet acquired the perseverance, skill, and patience of long, regular crocheting required for a washcloth, and therefore, as for the other participants, I opted to crochet small flowers (see Figure 5). This was more enjoyable, and of course, an escape. Even after a few sessions, I am not up to the standard of our teachers yet. At least in my last attempt, I was able, albeit crookedly, to create six petals.



Figure 4.
Author, Keeping a shopping sample.



Figure 5.
Author, My flowers.

My project on Afghan immigrant artists drew my attention to marginalized groups and the importance of designing curatorial activities, such as art education workshops suited for them. This aligns directly with a number of the SDGs, in particular, quality education and the lives of women. While writing this article, I recognized and seized educational opportunities as a listener and observer in subsequent workshops. This paper was written through my observations and attempts to present the complexities of education and interacting with people in the form of our ongoing crochet practice. As a result, this art room workshop has two focal points: 1) my relationship and interaction with Afghan immigrant women, and 2) how this relationship changed me. By the end of the 'What do you know?' practice, our conversation indicated how we paid more attention to everyday work. New objects, situations, and processes continue to be explored, and forgotten or unrecognized skills were now emerging as new opportunities. Despite avoiding the mandatory production of art objects, crocheting happens to have a quite remarkable potential for display in my curatorial exhibition. At the same time, it was a learning process that

effectively changed me. Despite my initial and constant bias toward learning handicrafts, I was one of the many women who learned a new skill. Parallel to this workshop, while hooked on crocheting, I initiated a new project, and this newly learned skill earned a prominent place in my life.

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