Isicathamiya saseStoffelton: Reflections on an education for democracy project

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Abstract

For many rural, impoverished South Africans who continue to live in conditions of political and economic oppression, ten years of democracy have not reduced their marginalisation.

Started in 1999, the Human Rights, Development and Democracy project is a co-operative initiative between an NGO offering adult basic education (ABE) in rural centres in KwaZulu-Natal, and the Centre for Adult Education, of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The project aims to serve participants in rural areas, who are undereducated, mostly unemployed, and whose participation in democratic procedures is extremely limited.

Informed by, among others, Mezirow's transformational theory, the project combines adult basic education with education for democracy and income generation projects, with a view to enable people to reach new perceptions of their lives and South African society.

The article shows how participants moved from early expectations, and how different paces and rhythms of different participants had to be accommodated within the project paradigms.

It focuses on:

1. the combination of education for democracy with adult literacy classes, and the setting up and running of community projects by participants.
2. the extent to which the aim of the projects (to provide real practical opportunities for exercising newly gained rights, accessing resources and negotiating with various other organisations) was met.
3. difficulties encountered in using two languages (English and Zulu) in training, and attitudes of students to Zulu as an indigenous language used as a language of higher learning
4. attempts to evoke a critical attitude on the part of educators and rural participants
5. the development of published informal basic education materials drawing

on practical experiences from this project.

Introduction

This article reflects on successes and challenges in an education for democracy project in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa which is run by the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and Tembeletu (a community NGO in Pietermaritzburg) and funded by the Embassy of Finland.

South Africa's Constitution is hailed by many as one which is particularly protective of human rights and conducive to democratic governance. Yet for many South Africans, life is much the same after eleven years of democratic government, as it was under the apartheid government.

At the Centre for Adult Education, we believe that education for democracy should be included in adult education programmes. Constitutional rights are hollow for people who do not know that they have these rights, or how to exercise them, or do not understand the duties that accompany them. It is appropriate for all South Africans to know :

• how to access their rights and the resources that support them
• what is meant by accountability and transparency
• how people should be served by representative political systems, and
• what ordinary people have to do to support a democratic society.

In pursuance of this, in 1999, with support from the Embassy of Finland, the Centre for Adult Education and Tembaletu, started a project that attempted to make South Africa's democratic changes real for a group of ordinary people in rural areas. The project is called the Human Rights, Development and Democracy (HRDD) project, and runs in seven rural areas in KwaZulu-Natal.
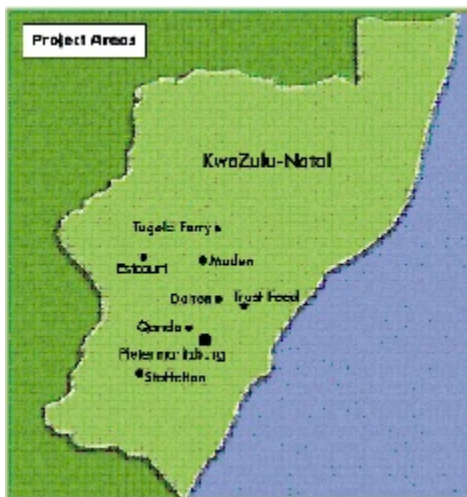
The project is informed by a number of writers, including Freire, Habermas and Mezirow. By committing itself to making democracy real for ordinary people, the HRDD project explicitly chose what Freire (1972) calls education for liberation. In the course of implementing the project, staff at both the university and Tembaletu have become very aware of the negative power of deeply ingrained and limiting habitual perceptions, and the need for constant critical reflection. Living in a democracy implies accepting that citizens from different backgrounds have diverse experiences and expectations. Official policies of our democratic dispensation value our diversity, and, since races are no longer forcibly separated, this diversity offers opportunities for learning. This article focuses mainly on what Habermas (1984) calls emancipatory learning and Mezirow (1991) calls transformative learning. This learning enables people to liberate themselves, through critical reflection, from psychological factors that limit their control over their lives (Gravett, 2001). However, reflection is necessary for transformative learning to occur (Mezirow, 1991), and we argue that the value of diversity lies in participants' willingness to reflect and question the validity of their presuppositions. For people in a democracy to gain from their diversity, they need not only to communicate freely, but also to question each other's premises and presuppositions, as well as their own. This is where transformative learning and democracy meet.

Freire (1972) warns that uncritical conversation is no different to monologue. Thus questioning each other's presuppositions requires critical thinking, which encourages learners to be "skeptical of quick-fix solutions, of single answers to problems, and of claims of universal truth." (Brookfield, 1987).

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Highlighting the significance of critical thinking, Shor (1987) argues that education that does not encourage learners' critical thinking only furthers their oppression. However, critical thinking and transformative learning can be sensitive and risky (Mezirow 1991 and Brookfield 1987).

> Questioning the assumptions under which we have been acting, is psychologically explosive. The effect can be appreciated by visualizing an explosives expert who lays dynamite charges at the base of a building requiring demolition. When these charges ignite at key points in the structure's foundation, the whole edifice comes crashing down. Beginning to question key assumptions is like laying down charges of psychological dynamite.
> (Brookfield, 1987, p.30)

Sensitivity and riskiness of critical thinking is severe in challenging people more powerful than oneself (Shor, 1987). It is because of this that systems thinkers such as Ulrich and Midgley argue that ordinary citizens can hardly debate with experts since experts have significant advantages, knowledge power being one of them. However, Ulrich (1998) and Midgley (2000) argue that experts do not have rightful power over ordinary citizens when it comes to boundary judgement. By boundary judgement they mean drawing boundaries within which presuppositions that inform analysis cannot be challenged. Ulrich (1998) and Midgley's (2000) argument is that experts tend to make boundary judgements, which lead to elimination of certain facts, and thus questionable conclusions. Their argument is that ordinary citizens should be able to question the experts' boundary judgement (Ulrich, 1998 and Midgley 2000). Our reflection in this article is guided by the notion of boundaries and empowerment. Boundary judgement is crucial, since where we draw boundaries determines which presuppositions can be challenged, and which cannot. The way we use the concept 'empowerment' in this report has two connotations. Firstly, it means giving people skills they need to be active citizens in a democracy. This is like letting people learn to swim if they are to be in the deep end of a swimming pool. Secondly, it means emancipating people so that they are more in control of their development and their learning in a democratic dispensation. This is like giving people space to swim in the deep end of a swimming pool.

So far we have argued that eleven years of democracy has posed new challenges for the role of adult education in addressing new changes. One of those challenges has been to learn from our diversity of experiences and expectations. We take the position that transformative learning can enable ordinary South African citizens to have more control of their lives. We have also argued that reflection, boundary judgment, critical thinking, empowerment, and dialogue are interrelated elements crucial for transformative learning.

Parallels between Isicathamiya and life in a democracy

The name *Isicathamiya sase Stoffelton*, is derived from the Zulu word *cathama,* that means to walk gently on one's toes so as not to disturb others. *Isicathamiya* music and dance is associated gentleness and harmony. Other Zulu names for this dance and music, such as *Ingoma busuku* (night music) also show its gentleness. *Isicathamiya,* one of the few mediums through which black people could express themselves during Apartheid, was sung by migrant workers in mine hostels at night. The singers tried not to disturb those who were asleep. *Isicathamiya* songs are about lives of black people, for instance, some *Isicathamiya* songs are about democracy, and the dangers of alcohol.

The *Isicathamiya* group Ladysmith Black Mambazo sing a song about responsible driving. Although in *Isicathamiya* one person is responsible for starting each song, everybody's voice contributes to the music, since singers sing different complementing parts, and the singers move in harmony with the singing.

The reason for calling this article *Isicathamiya sase Stoffelton* is that the outcome of both *Isicathamiya* and the HRDD project exist only in shared effort. In the same way, each citizen in a democratic dispensation has to actively play his or her role in it.

Just as *Isicathamiya* singers' movement must be in line with the song, HRDD partners must ensure harmony between practice and theory. Without reflecting and critical interrogation, it would be impossible to draw parallels between HRDD partners' actions and interaction, and theories we draw on.

Human unpredictability in both *Isicathamiya* and the HRDD project makes it crucial for each one to be aware of, and respond to, movements of others. Both endeavours require constant communication and response, which depends on participants' willingness and capacity to engage in dialogue. We earlier indicated that empowerment is a prerequisite for healthy dialogue in a democracy.

Both *Isicathamiya* and HRDD influence and are influenced by what lies beyond their environment. For instance, some *Isicathamiya* songs have been translated into English for international audiences. Similarly, the HRDD project has undergone changes since its inception, and both face the challenge of undergoing change without losing identity.

Lastly, boundary judgement determines what counts as *Isicathamiya* and what is seen as gains in the HRDD project. For instance one might define *Isicathamiya* only in terms of music, overlooking dress and movement. Similarly, one might define the HRDD project in terms of human rights, and overlook training and other components. Diverse views and ideas in *Isicathamiya* and HRDD can enrich understanding if clearly communicated and perceived, just as they can be detrimental if poorly communicated. This depends on the participants' willingness and capacity to engage in dialogue about each other's mental models that shape their boundary judgements.

The Human Rights, Development and Democracy project

Many rural impoverished South Africans have lived all their lives in political and economic oppression, and stand to gain much from learning experiences that offer opportunities to review and reconstruct their habitual ways of seeing themselves in relation to the world.

There are few reports of development projects in Africa that aim to enable people to fulfil their potential role in the societies in which they live. One, from the Republic of Guinea, is of a women's group that faced formidable odds and showed considerable resilience in recovering from setbacks. This group's salient characteristic appears to be that their endeavours sprang from their own initiative as opposed to the more usually reported pattern, where participants engage in activities suggested by outside agencies (Barry, 2000).

Barry's observation that after three decades of authoritarian rule, the people of the Republic of Guinea had become 'totally passive' (Barry 2000 p.197), resonates clearly with the South African context. Barry notes that development initiatives resulting from endeavours of ordinary citizens of Guinea were rare. Similarly, there are very few development projects based on the initiative of ordinary people in South Africa. Projects are usually the result of external initiation, although attempts to involve members of participating local communities at every level of planning and implementation are increasing . The HRDD project fits this description. Its components are:

- the inclusion of a human rights and democracy component in community adult basic education classes;
- the special admission of community teachers to a university course in community education;
- the setting up of community income generation projects; and,
- the production of adult education material based on events in the running of the project

The partners in the project are:

- community participants, who live in poor and often marginalised conditions in rural areas;
- adult educators, who are members of the communities in which they teach;,
- two organisations working to implement the project, Tembaletu, which runs the rural centres, and the Centre for Adult Education, which provides formative continuous evaluation, and produces education materials; and,
- the Embassy of Finland, who fund the project.

The project runs in seven rural KwaZulu-Natal areas. In one site, Stoffelton, which has seen the most success so far, Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes are held in venues such as creches, churches and households. Although there is little basic infrastructure, the Stoffelton community has worked with development organisations including Department of Agriculture and Farmer Support Group since 1992.

This article describes some interrelated aspects of the HRDD project and their implications.

Partners' expectations

Since the partners come from different backgrounds, with differing needs, they have different expectations.

Judging from project proposals, interaction at meetings, and reports for funders, Tembaletu and CAE would deem the project successful, if, at the end, previously educationally disadvantaged rural participants, had gained a basic education through ABE classes, and were living as active citizens of a democracy by:

- showing a critical awareness of issues that affect the nation as well as the local community;
- communicating needs to their representatives, from whom they would demand accountability;
- accessing resources;
- starting more community projects based on what they learned from successes and failures in the initial funded community projects;
- using dialogue rather than violence to resolve conflicts,
- choosing representatives and leaders according to leadership qualities, integrity and track records of delivery rather than traditional political allegiances, and
- finding, or at least seeking, effective ways of containing crime and vandalism within their communities rather than being held to ransom by young, destructive criminal bands.

Although some of the learners have taken some steps towards some of the above, their priorities are meeting their own basic needs, for instance feeding their families.

Community participants' expectations include the following:

• keeping contact people from the implementing organisations feeling positive enough about the project to ensure the continued trickle of funding into the community;
• earning a little from the income generation projects;
• gaining some education, and, importantly, certificates from ABE classes; and,
• increasing their employability

Stoffelton has met some of the implementing organisations' expectations by forming a Community Based Organisation called Kgotso. Although Kgotso is still mentored by Tembaletu, it manages its own funds and writes its own financial reports with assistance of Tembaletu. Four of the organisation's committee members are ABE teachers and two of them are ABE learners. By showing such a degree of self-reliance, Stoffelton's participants seem to be in be dancing the same step as implementing organisations.

However there is also evidence that the community is still struggling to master some of *Isicathamiya* steps. One expectation of the implementing organisations, applicable in any democratic setting, is for citizens to deal with conflict resulting from diverse views and practices. There are signs that the Stoffelton is still struggling with this. For instance, there is unresolved conflict associated with a chicken house constructed with the assistance of an NGO in 1999. At first, twelve women collaborated to construct the chicken house, but conflict arose when one woman, afraid that a disease would kill the chickens, slaughtered and froze them all without consulting other members. The others were angry and withdrew from the project, the house still remains empty, and people harbour resentment. Here the dance of the community does not match the steps to the "music" of the HRDD project expected by implementing organisations, which would be that adult learners should draw on a Peace Education module they have completed to resolve this situation. Skills learnt in this Peace Education module should equip the community educators to manage conflict, yet they have not intervened in the situation. Although a Peace Education facilitator from CAE volunteered to assist the community deal with any conflict situation, none of the community educators approached him. In this instance, the community is not taking the initiative in resolving its problems.

The question of boundaries cannot be left out of this discussion. The way implementing organisations draw boundaries might be wider than that of the community educators. There is no clear indication of a dialogue around how loud the community educators should sing in the community. Some community educators pointed out that they do not have enough resources to

"dance for the whole community". In *Isicathamiya* language this is like saying that a stage for dancing is not high enough for more community members to see the 'dance'. More dialogue between the community educators and implementing organizations might address this.

Also, sadly, the income generating projects started as part of HRDD have failed to flourish. Seven Stoffelton classes were engaged in chicken rearing projects.

In spite of using the same suppliers, costs of the project were disputed, with different participants claiming to have paid different prices for transport and chicks. No records were kept by the learners about their projects. This is discrepancy between the "song" learnt in ABE classes, and the "dance" of putting learning into practice.

However the ABE learners attempted to bridge this discrepancy between a song and a dance, by drawing on the successful experience of one community member, and following her example of buying chicks rather than hens, which had proved more profitable. This learner ran a training workshop for her neighbours, and shared her knowledge on chicken production. Learners were so excited about what they had learnt they decided to meet more often to share ideas on chicken production. Other learners decided to make blocks so that they will be able to construct a bigger and better ventilated house for their chickens, so that they could order more chickens. They also decided to order chicks and chicken feeds together to minimise transport costs and get discounts from the suppliers. The whole process started with assisting the learners to see limitations of their projects and take advantage of their human capital to find solutions. The learners had been attending classes as early as 2000, but they only learnt in 2004 that they could do something about profitability of their project after critically reflecting on what they were doing.

As participatory researchers, we should state that encouraging the learners to discuss and reflect on what they were doing was quite a challenge. One challenge was to accept that the aspirations of the rural community members were not as high as those of the implementing organisations, or as their entitlement in a democratic South Africa. It was difficult to deal with the fact that the communities might be less ambitious because they have been socialised under Apartheid to regard themselves as second class citizens, without the ambitions of someone who has received education. Sometimes we did not know who had to learn from whom. Although *Isicathamiya* is about gentleness it is still questionable to what extent one should be gentle, especially given that HRDD project has a limited duration.

Key elements of the project

Combination of education for democracy with ABE classes

The idea of combining simple education for democracy with ABE classes initially appeared uncomplicated, and it was assumed that community educators could easily be trained to teach adult learners about the new constitution, and choose texts related to democracy for mother-tongue literacy and English classes. We also assumed that community educators, once trained, could lead discussions on the content of these texts, and the implications of the Constitution to learners' life situations.

In practice, our assumptions proved false. Community educators had difficulty in following a training course on the new Constitution and its implications for ordinary people, since the course required familiarity with academic procedures and greater competence in written and spoken English than most of the community educators had. Afterwards, participants expressed their feelings of helplessness in attempting to keep up with instructors, and few have since managed to put what they should have learnt in this course into practice.

Another part of the educator training designed to prepare them to offer education for democracy, involved the use of a book produced in the Centre for Adult Education called *The Women' s Handbook.* This book, which has proved to be a central resource in the project, is written in simple language and informs ordinary women (and men) about accessing resources (such as pensions and water schemes), managing negotiations with officials, and about the systems of government. After the lack of success of the instructional type of training described above, a task based style of training was used to prepare community educators to use *The Women's Handbook*. In this, participants were presented with a range of social and political problems, fictitious and fairly colourful, but typical of problems faced by under-educated people in rural communities, and were required to discuss these problems and find some ways of dealing with them. Without any introduction to the book, they were given copies, and told that the book might contain ideas for dealing with the problems. Community educators embarked enthusiastically on this task and, in the course of somewhat lengthy searches for information relating to the problems they had to deal with, found their way about *The Women's Handbook* and familiarised themselves with what it contained. This practical task-based training proved much more effective than the more instructional approach of the first part of their training. Community educators continue to rely on *The Women's Handbook* as one of main resources for the education for democracy in the classes.

HRDD responded to the fact that participants lacked access to information. It publicises relevant issues in communities in *Learn with Echo* (*LWE*)*,* a weekly newspaper supplement written for people with limited literacy and English skills, that devotes space each week to human rights and democracy issues.

In reflection workshops, learners affirmed that the supplement's combination of English and Zulu text makes issues easier to understand, whilst improving English comprehension. Some learners commented that articles about HIV/AIDS assist them in taking care of HIV/AIDS sufferers. *LWE* was also useful in explaining voting procedures during 2004 elections since it reached areas where there were no voter education programmes.

In spite of these small successes, some community educators are not dancing the same step as the implementing organisations in implementing components of HRDD. For instance, some still struggle to integrate literacy, human rights and democracy and income-generating projects. Some say that they do not have enough skills and knowledge for teaching human rights. Some complain that there is insufficient time to thoroughly engage in discussions with learners about human rights. Some point out that, in view of its history of inter-party political violence, the volatility of KwaZulu-Natal makes it dangerous to engage in discussions about human rights. Talk of human rights is associated with one political party, the African National Congress (ANC), and some educators have said that if they raise human rights issues, they will be regarded as ANC affiliates and their lives will be in danger.

Isicathamiya music is context specific, and in the HRDD project, questions remain about the extent to which teaching of human rights and democracy in HRDD classes has been sensitive to context. It is not clear how relevant lessons have been to learners' needs given that human rights and democracy is a broad topic. Answering this question is crucial, since adult learners will learn things that address their felt needs. For instance, do the prevailing circumstances of the learners in each site have an impact on what the community educators teach in the classes? For an example, it has emerged that some communities are dissatisfied with their Councillors. In Dalton some of the community members did not even know where their Councillor was based. In one of the community workshops in Stoffelton a local Induna (a Tribal Authority) disagreed with a suggestion that they should approach their Councillor about the shortage of basic infrastructure in the community, and stated that since 1999 the community has been unsuccessful in inviting the Councillor to the community meetings. He angrily complained: "It is not easy get hold of our Councillor. We do not know how to get hold of him. He is hiding from us. Maybe the only option we have is to go straight to parliament and complain about this because development is not happening in our community." (Stoffelton Induna, 2004)

Although the weekly learning supplement has carried information on how to go about demanding accountability from local leaders, there is no evidence that Stoffelton community educators have used this material in their classes to find their solutions to their problem with the Councillor. In this instance the community is clearly not in step with implementing organizations which expect them to use resources and take initiatives in solving their problems.

Earlier we described how *Isicathamiya* is characterized by gentle, unhurried movement of the singers. Implementing organizations seem to have urged other dancers to attempt to master the steps. For instance, they invited the South African Human Rights Commission to teach human rights on each of HRDD sites. We believe that this will not only provide the communities with knowledge on human rights but, the introduction of this organisation to communities, must improve their network contacts. A strengthened network should improve the communities' capacity to exercise their rights. In the *Isicathamiya* metaphor, the hope was that after this training there would be more dancing (implementation of knowledge about human rights) to go with the singing (knowledge about human rights).

Setting up and running of income generating projects

The idea of assisting the sites to start their Income Generating Projects (IGPs) came in 1999 after Tembaletu discovered that learners could not attend classes since they needed to earn money to feed their families. Initially each site was given R15000 to run an IGP through which it was hoped they would access resources that they had rights to, and implement what they learnt in the classes for human rights and democracy. The implementing organizations assumed that, through guided experience of running an IGP and reflecting on it, the learners would learn from successes and failures so that their projects could grow, provide a small income, and improve people's capacity to fill their roles as democratic citizens. Thus IGPs were giving the learners space for dancing (implementing knowledge) as a response to *Isicathamiya* music (knowledge gained from ABE classes).

The communities chose different projects, such as chicken rearing, block-making, and sewing projects. As indicated above, Stoffelton learners started rearing chickens.

All the projects experienced problems ranging from theft of sewing and block-making machines, theft of learners' money by community educators, or other community structures wanting to reap the projects' benefits, or take control of the learners' projects. The main problem is that the projects do not generating enough money to sustain themselves.

Several factors might have contributed to the failure of IGPs. Although giving R15,000 to the learners was appropriate in the long run in terms of creating citizens that would know how to use their resources to address poverty, it had its own drawbacks. It is questionable whether learners who might be struggling to meet very basic needs have enough skills and social energy to know how to put the money to use for specific purposes. If the learners had been given appropriate skills before the start of IGPs these projects might have been more likely to succeed. This is where an idea of seeing empowerment as a means to an end becomes applicable. However one might argue that as much as a person who starts an *Isicathamiya* song has to give a space for other voices to be heard, so implementing organizations should allow community participants to shape the project. Experience in the HRDD project has shown that there is a thin, easily crossed line between paternalism and partnership based on mutual responsibility.

In *Isicathamiya* each participant has his or her role. For instance one might be given the role of singing bass. In comparison there are grey areas in HRDD when it comes to defining roles of each participant. One of these, the lack of clarity surrounding the roles of community educators, was overlooked by implementing organisations, and has made intervention awkward in some instances. Clarifying the community educators' roles in HRDD might solve the puzzle of integrating human rights and democracy and income-generation components of the HRDD project.

In *Isicathamiya* each participant must be aware of other participants' movement so that harmonious movement can be created. In the HRDD, implementing organisations observed that performance of IGPs was not in harmony with their song, or expectations, and responded to this crisis by attempting to pressure community participants to become more organised in their projects. They did this by announcing that only the projects that presented written business proposals would be funded. Such a solution could be effective, but there were hiccups in practice. For instance, although one of the business proposals was submitted in December 2003, by July 2004 there had been no response from the administering organisation. Thus the implementing organisations' corrective measures did not address the problem of lack of dialogue about IGPs.

In spite of these challenges, there are success stories in the IGP. For instance, participants of the Stoffelton projects reported that the project improved their social capital in that some had learnt to raise chickens, and some had asked the Councillor for materials for their block- making project and received them.

Money Management

One of the tricky parts about HRDD partnership, as in *Isicathamiya*, is that someone has to lead. Tembaletu has the responsibility of managing funds supplied by the Embassy of Finland. Although Stoffelton is still mentored, it has taken responsibility of managing its own funds thus gaining a higher degree of autonomy.

Other sites apply for their funds through Tembaletu. Some stopped receiving financial support when they failed to submit business plans, and even, in some cases, in spite of submitting the plans they had been asked to prepare. The implementing organisation's justification for doing this would be that it would be irresponsible to squander money from the Embassy of Finland on unworkable community projects, and that doing so would jeopardise their reputation. While this argument has merit, this type of action inevitably shifts the relationship from partnership to paternalism.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that democracy has posed new challenges for South Africans. One of these is to learn from our diversity. In this article we maintain that transformative learning is essential for many South Africans to take control of their lives. We used the analogy of *Isicathamiya* to reflect on our experiences of an education for democracy project which aims to offer learning experiences to rural people to aid them in fulfilling their roles as citizens of a democracy. This project still faces the challenge of finding a balance between singing (acquisition of skills and knowledge) and dancing (practice). Also, it must find more effective ways of hearing the voices (concerns and expectations) of the rural communities participating in the project. On the positive side the project can count gains made in Stoffelton as real if limited instances of success. We believe that the challenges presented in this article, once addressed, will have served as a stepping stones for taking the project forwards, and not as brick walls.

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