

Bonni: [00:00:00] Most of us invest at least some of our time pursuing research in our disciplines. Today in Episode 17 of Teaching in Higher Ed, Dr. Janine Utell joins us to talk about what we learn when we study our own teaching.

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Bonni: [00:00:26] Welcome to this episode of Teaching in Higher Ed. This is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to increase our personal productivity so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

Bonni: [00:00:51] Dr. Janine Utell is joining us today to talk about what happens when we study our own teaching. Thank you so much for joining us on Teaching in Higher Ed.

Janine: [00:01:02] Well thanks so much for having me.

Bonni: [00:01:03] I want to start first before we study our own teaching and study first, a little bit about you and talk about your research and what you did before you got to this new part of your career

Bonni: [00:01:16] And you got your Ph.D. in English from the Graduate Center City University of New York. And you study and research in the humanities and are still doing that today.

Bonni: [00:01:26] You are the associate professor and chair of English at Whitener University in Chester Pennsylvania. And you teach composition and 19th and 20th century British literature with a focus on narrative theory and what have I left out from your bio.

Janine: [00:01:44] But let's see I started out doing a lot of work on James Joyce and I think I would say that that actually it sounds like it might be a little bit esoteric but it actually has quite a bit informed how I think about teaching and learning.

Janine: [00:02:00] One of the things about Joyce is that he's kind of difficult. And so you're thinking all the time about how to make him accessible and maybe even human. And you know sort of creating a safe place hospitable space and a fun space for working through some of his more challenging fiction.

Janine: [00:02:19] I think a lot of that has really informed how I think about classroom teaching in general. And I ran a book I ran a book group in Philadelphia for a while looking specifically at Finnegans Wake which is of course one of the hardest books probably ever published

Janine: [00:02:33] And even that that sort of collaborative space thinking about reading and sharing ideas as a community I think has really informed my teaching as well.

Bonni: [00:02:41] It's definitely a theme that I have heard from each and every guest is how their area of research is such a good complement to their passion and study of the art and science of teaching. It's wonderful to hear that. Talk to me a bit about how you started to get an interest in in this area of study in our own teaching.

Janine: [00:03:02] Sure. I work with some really amazing people. I should say that right off the bat. So a quick shout out to all of my fantastic colleagues at Weidner. Probably about 10 years ago which is more or less when I first when I started teaching at Whitener when I arrived.

Janine: [00:03:20] We were talking quite a bit about the area of general education and how we would go about designing good assessment for general education. We have a you know we have a fairly well defined general education program for undergraduates here at Weidner and we think it's we think it's successful in creating well-rounded students and graduates.

Janine: [00:03:44] And we think it does a really nice job of exposing the students to quality liberal arts education the skills they need for effective communication and critical thinking.

Janine: [00:03:54] But of course you know you want to make sure that you're doing these things. And so we started talking about assessment and where assessment really got to be meaningful for me was thinking about how what I do in the classroom what I do with individual assignments what I do with specific readings what I do with designing paper topics prompt for reflection etc.

Janine: [00:04:20] How does that work as an individual faculty member sort of inform work that we're doing at the curricular level at the program level even at that apart at the departmental level even at the institutional level.

Janine: [00:04:33] And I started to get really interested in how on even on a day to day basis as an individual teacher how there could be a kind of constant feedback loop between what I was doing in my classroom and what I could be doing for the institution and what I could be doing to have you know a really sort of strong impact on students who pass through who pass through my courses.

Janine: [00:04:59] And so I wanted to sort of think about and reflect what was what was working in my own teaching what wasn't working in my own teaching and what I could do to sort of always be improving my design.

Bonni: [00:05:13] Tell me what does it look like when you or when I study our own teaching what are the kinds of things that we do in our approaches.

Janine: [00:05:22] Well there's a couple there's a couple of things I would say and some of it might be a little bit abstract and some of it might be really practical.

Janine: [00:05:29] So sort of on the abstract maybe more kids maybe abstracts not quite there word maybe on a more conceptual level. I would say making time for reflection as the as part of being a teacher is really really important.

Janine: [00:05:42] And so beginning the process of teaching with reflecting on what we want our students to learn. You know I I guess in a more jargony way of talking about this would be thinking about student learning outcomes or objectives.

Janine: [00:05:56] But I generally think about what I want my students to look like when they're done with one of my courses. And how do I create assignments that give them the space to demonstrate that they are on the path and in the process of becoming the students I would like them to be when they leave the

you know the people the readers the thinkers I would like them to be when they leave.

Janine: [00:06:21] And so reflection is a big part of how I study my own teaching. And I guess that sounds like well you know we like to think of ourselves as reflective practitioners.

Janine: [00:06:30] But if you're thinking of yourself almost as an object of study and if you're thinking about your course as an artifact to be studied or a place to gather data about what you're doing then reflection becomes I think a way to make continuous improvement happen.

Janine: [00:06:50] And so I would say reflection is part of it. I would say keeping keeping essentially keeping track of new things that you try and I actually do think that experimenting on a fairly regular basis is part of how we study our own teaching.

Janine: [00:07:05] So if you think about what your what's important to you what you want to prioritize if you want to prioritize developing writing skills or if you want to prioritize developing good discussion skills on the part of your students what sorts of experiments can you create to see where they are and to see how you can get them to improve.

Janine: [00:07:27] And so one of the areas where I've been thinking a lot about this particularly is discussion based teaching because I do a lot of that and I'm never really sure if it works.

Janine: [00:07:35] I'm never sure if the really sort of robust fascinating exciting stimulating discussions I see in my classes are actually translating into learning pages kind of fun sessions where we all you know we sort of bounce around a lot of ideas.

Janine: [00:07:51] How do I take that. You know those experiences to you know sort of the next stage where it translates into the students learning something and then the students being able to demonstrate to me that they have learned something.

Janine: [00:08:04] And so this is where you might get kind of practical I might say well how do I how do I know that a discussion is going well how do I know that the students are responding to each other in meaningful ways.

Janine: [00:08:16] I might map use sort of a data visualization tool to map the connections that the students are making across the room literally across the room you know who's talking to whom who's bouncing off who's ideas and sort of create a map of the conversation and the people who participated in it.

Janine: [00:08:36] And then I can see who's missing what ideas didn't get covered. I don't want to walk into my discussions with a specific agenda but if something is kind of gone missing how do I sort of do my job as facilitator to make sure that certain things are being covered.

Janine: [00:08:53] Another strategy would be you know something that I'm sure a lot of people do which is video how a class session is going and then have this not even have the students sort of watch the videos although they hate watching and I don't like it either

Janine: [00:09:06] But watch them watch the videos and see you know what got talked about what didn't get talked about who went who went missing. Where did the thread get lost and then not only using a video such as that for critique

Janine: [00:09:20] But also then using it for the students to think about next steps in their learning. How might we generate a paper topic from this discussion. Where are the areas for further research that we might look to from this discussion

Janine: [00:09:35] And sort of involving and I would say finally maybe a third thing besides being a reflective practitioner and you know thinking about how design works in terms of your objectives and then really kind of you know collecting data on yourself.

Janine: [00:09:47] I would say involve the students. Think of the students as collaborators in research. Think of the students as lab partners with you almost and get them involved in the work of studying.

Janine: [00:09:57] You are teaching because you studied your teaching is also helping them study their learning.

Bonni: [00:10:04] Yeah I wanted to go back for a moment and talk about the video because that's something that I was videoed very early in my career far before academia was even something I thought was possible. And it is so painful.

Bonni: [00:10:17] So first for anyone who has put that on the back burner because it just it is a painful thing it is still difficult for me to listen to myself all these years later when it's something that I do a lot and I get asked that a lot. How do you do that. It's just too hard and it is painful.

Bonni: [00:10:35] But when it did things you you were sharing about before we started hitting record was just this idea of the vulnerability that we have to have. If we're going to study our teachings so can you talk a bit about it's not just when we record ourselves or tell me about that vulnerability and the possibility of failure and how it comes into this picture.

Janine: [00:10:57] Sure. Oh well I think this was part of why I sort of began to think about studying my own teaching. I sort of you know began with this kind of big picture institutional perspective.

Janine: [00:11:09] But some of it was also really leaving classes sometimes feeling like I had failed and feeling sort of carrying that darkness around with me for the rest of the day and I shouldn't.

Janine: [00:11:23] You know I can't take credit entirely for this idea of you know studying my own teaching because I really got the idea from reading a lot of Prof hacker posts on the Chronicle of Higher Education. I'm sure a lot of your listeners are are avid readers of that column thinking about.

Janine: [00:11:41] It sort of began almost is like a defense mechanism or a coping strategy. If I say if I'm going to feel like I'm failing how can I almost regard what I'm doing in a more objective light you know rather than take it personally and feel neurotic and feel very vulnerable. How can I think about failure as a learning opportunity.

Janine: [00:12:02] How can I turn you know turn the you know turn the microscope on myself and say and turn the microscope on my practice and say OK you know this didn't feel like it went all that great. Why. What questions do I need to ask.

Janine: [00:12:18] And that was also when I started to feel like involving the students might be a good a good strategy too because I began to think about teaching as something that you know we're in it we're in it together. Students are collaborating with me creating a course.

Janine: [00:12:34] And so if it's not going well it's not that they're responsible or they have an obligation to step up and save it or save me from myself but they might they might have some insight into what's going wrong.

Janine: [00:12:48] And so I began to think about studying my own teaching as a almost a form of agency. I can take back my sense of my own failure or my sense of my own shortcomings as an instructor and think of think of each new experience as a learning opportunity.

Bonni: [00:13:06] What a wonderful gift you give then to your students because in the last episode Dr. Eyler and I were talking about just the trust that they put in us to say hey I don't I don't know this I want to learn this from you.

Bonni: [00:13:20] And how vulnerable they have to be. It was in context of poking fun of students on social media and just what that does to the trust that they place in us. And

Janine: [00:13:30] My gosh yes.

Bonni: [00:13:31] So think about you're giving them this wonderful gift to say feedback is going to benefit us throughout our entire lives. We can we can really be transformed if we open ourselves up to that kind of deep learning and model that for them.

Bonni: [00:13:45] I think I try to regularly get reminded of what it's like hostel and a theater professor who said on a paper once I had a sibilant S and I remember crying and I was so hurt by this and it's so funny that just I think Wow. First of all I hadn't I just had never had a lot of feedback like that and I just crack up because if now someone said that I'd go wow that's that's not going to be good.

Bonni: [00:14:12] If that's going to hold me back for something. What is a sibilant S. How could you coach me out of it. And so it's I'm not saying that he necessarily did a wonderful job but I was also very sensitive to feedback then.

Bonni: [00:14:23] And it comes in a sort of very transactional way on a paper with some chicken scratch written on it as opposed to when we bring it into the classroom and we're face to face what a wonderful thing.

Bonni: [00:14:34] I was going to mention to a lot of the grading that I do now I do have it on a rubric and have negative feedback but most of it is also

accompanied with some kind of a voice feedback to kids when they can hear the inflection in our voice. I think that helps it with our intent. Come a little bit easier I guess.

Janine: [00:14:53] That's a great idea. That's a lot of times. That's why I'll choose to do it again I'm sure this is something a lot of people do that's often while choose to conference with students rather than hand back papers.

Janine: [00:15:05] And I'll say to them I'm asking you I'm asking you to come see me not because you've done something especially egregious but because if we're talking and I can point things to you and I can you know we can engage in a discussion we can engage in a dialogue then really you know that in some ways helps make the process of giving feedback more human.

Bonni: [00:15:27] And they can really see how much you care too when you do that.

Janine: [00:15:30] I hope so.

Bonni: [00:15:32] What can you tell us about how you balance out when you study your own teaching in the short term. You mentioned about the experimentation that you do and that's what got it right there in the moment. See how it went and then talk to me about the long term how you build upon your study in your own teaching over years.

Janine: [00:15:56] Hmm think about that for a second. I think where where I see it is in courses that I've taught a number of times and some of this is really again sort of that feedback loop where of course we redesign of course and we try new things every time we do it.

Janine: [00:16:15] And what I've started doing is sort of is almost keeping sort of an electronic portfolio of artifacts from courses that I've taught several times especially when I've tried to you know try to I guess is really the operative phrase here tried to innovate with technology.

Janine: [00:16:33] I would say that's been someplace that I've been I've been trying to sort of improve my own practice in and try you know I have been trying to learn more about. And it's been a little bit of a learning curve because I guess I'm a little bit old fashioned. I teach novels with chalk and a blackboard.

Janine: [00:16:53] And you know there's a lot of sort of Socratic method a lot of give and take a lot of conversation and I always felt a little bit like technology was anathema to me pursuing my my work in that way.

Janine: [00:17:05] And then I realized that there were lots of ways I could be using technology to engage students outside of the classroom and sort of keep discussion and dialogue going in electronic formats beyond the walls of the classroom on the off hours.

Janine: [00:17:19] And so I've started documenting how that works. Basically you know creating an electronic portfolio for myself where I document what I've used. I've documented the results of students using message boards or using online quizzes and I found ways to sort of layer that sort of extra class component into my teaching into courses that I've taught before.

Janine: [00:17:46] And so what I've what this is done is not so much radically altered the design of the courses or what I've been teaching or the content or anything like that but it's really changed how I've thought about engaging with the students outside of the class

Janine: [00:18:01] And so studying my own teaching in that area has actually gotten me thinking more about where teaching is happening outside of the 50 minutes that I'm with them or the three days a week that I'm with them.

Janine: [00:18:14] And so I've begun to think about teaching is happening. I mean and maybe this is a little bit of a scary thought but it's something that's happening all the time.

Janine: [00:18:22] And so how am I engaging with them outside of the class how am I reaching out to them. Well I know that they're doing the reading and possibly struggling. How is it that just being with them for 50 minutes three days a week how is that not quite enough.

Janine: [00:18:38] If I'm being effective in the classroom you know with them how can I be more effective away from them and still engage them and still sort of make sure that the learning is happening with the work that they're doing outside of the class.

Janine: [00:18:52] Because you know over time that's been an area that I've really sort of been trying to target. In addition to sort of the you know asking myself on a fairly constant basis how do I know they're learning what I want

them to be learning or what I think they should be learning how do I know that's happening.

Bonni: [00:19:11] One of the technology tools that I used to keep in touch with students outside the class is called Remind. It used to be called remind 101. But they slashed the 101 and it's just to Remind

Bonni: [00:19:22] And it's a text based messaging service. It allows me to text the entire class without them having my cell phone number and also without them being able to do a bunch to reply all text. So it's just a one way communication.

Bonni: [00:19:36] And one of the days a few weeks ago we had listened to this podcast about a guy starting his own business and the one of the early stories was a young woman who is up and coming and starting her own business she was 9 years old or 11 years old and she was already in a think tank that was all adults except for those really cute and they had her in the beginning.

Bonni: [00:19:58] She was singing this little this little ditty she had a song I'll spare the listener from singing.

Bonni: [00:20:03] So it really got stuck in my head and later in that day I was sending out a reminder text something having to do with with a project or something like that.

Bonni: [00:20:13] And at the end I said Is anyone else have that song stuck in your head. And it was so cute. The next time I saw them say Oh it really was stuck in my head.

Bonni: [00:20:21] And when you're talking I just can't imagine how we never know what happens in our small space that we spend with them. What of it will travel with them and I think sometimes that helps me just do a little pride check for myself in a good way

Bonni: [00:20:36] In the sense of I'm not the only person helping to educate these people were there. There's a whole team of kids and when I have those discouraging days it can be really helpful to remember you're not the only one doing this.

Bonni: [00:20:50] I was going to mention one other thing too I wrote a post a couple of years ago I called it The Dip and I had gone through looking that I

had just noticed this trend in the semester where there would be a pattern not a 100 percent absolute pattern

Bonni: [00:21:06] But you'd see these highs and lows that would come in and I didn't want to become too affected by the lows and get too hard on myself and feel discouraged without recognizing that there is really an archetype to this seasons of a semester.

Bonni: [00:21:22] And this guy in the UK had replied and said Oh I have written about this too and his post was far more sophisticated and end up than mine was but it is fun when we can connect with colleagues and hear about those times when we do fail and we have struggles and just know that it's something that is common.

Bonni: [00:21:40] But if we have the courage to do what you're encouraging to study our own cheating we can just keep getting better and at the same time recognise that we're in my case I didn't even ask this are you mostly 18 to 22 year olds that you teach.

Janine: [00:21:55] Yes yes.

Bonni: [00:21:55] And they're going through their own stage of development too and what a wonderful season of their lives to get to connect with them. But it's still is hard work doing what we do.

Janine: [00:22:07] But I think one of the things I do think we're lucky. I mean we're lucky to sort of be working with students at this moment in their lives. That's absolutely true but it's also and we're lucky to have great colleagues but it's also true that we get to start over several times a year and I think that's really a wonderful thing and just sort of going back to your point about how a semester has rhythms and recognising and being attuned to those rhythms I think is really important and even sharing that with the students you know they have their dips too they have that week where all of their exams are happening at the same time or that moment in November where everything just feels like you know will we ever be done.

Janine: [00:22:47] And I think if we can sort of be human with them and sort of share that we ourselves are on that same you know that same sort of seasonal pattern and we're all in it together. I think that that can be very it can be powerful if they feel like they can sort of see you as a almost like an ally in that area like, "No. You do understand what I'm going through," but it can also just

you know help to keep a good bond and a good dynamic in the classroom and even just that bond or that dynamic can really push you through to the end and keep people motivated because you feel like you're sharing something.

Bonni: [00:23:22] This technique that you're describing or I should say these techniques they sound so much more valuable than the course evaluations. Can you talk about any connections that you see or purposeful disconnections that you see between course evaluations and the work that you do in studying your own teaching.

Janine: [00:23:41] I think that one of the problems with course evaluations is that they're not always keyed well and maybe I mean I don't mean to generalize I'm sure a lot of places are you know have come up with really good robust ways of doing course evaluations.

Janine: [00:23:55] But I think one of the problems with course evaluations is that they're not keyed necessarily to the learning outcomes that you want the students to have at the end of the course and they're not necessarily key to the specific practices that an instructor might be undertaking to achieve those objectives.

Janine: [00:24:15] And they're not necessarily reflecting the ways in which a student can take ownership of or feel empowered by a particular course. And so you know I hear from my colleagues about moments for students really demonstrate moments of empowerment moments of really taking the reins in a course moments where that spirit of collaboration that we really hope for is very visible.

Janine: [00:24:40] And I feel like course evaluations are not necessarily asking students where those moments happened or you know something as basic as you know we try to use a certain set of high impact practices.

Janine: [00:24:54] You know we we try to make sure that students are interacting with us in a meaningful way. We try to make sure that students have a chance to interact with peers in a meaningful way.

Janine: [00:25:03] And I think sometimes course evaluations are just not asking the right question. They're not actually asking questions that make sense in terms of what we're trying to accomplish as teachers they might be trying to ask questions about what a department is trying to accomplish or they might be trying to ask questions about what a particular unit is trying to accomplish. But

they're not necessarily asking questions that are key to the values that we bring to the classroom and the ways those values inform our practice.

Bonni: [00:25:33] So what do you then prioritize higher as you think about the success that you have in the class? The failures we had in the class? What comes to mind as far as these are what I value more than course evaluations?

Janine: [00:25:46] I think failure is actually a good thing to value honestly and I think failure in terms of my own failure. Something I may have tried that didn't work. And also failure on the students part.

Janine: [00:25:59] I've been working with my students now on a particular project that is almost guaranteed to have them not theirs. They can't do well. I'm asking them to do something they don't know how to do and one of the ways I've been thinking about how to assess their learning on this particular task is you know how is this task demonstrating what they know now.

Janine: [00:26:22] How will the task sort of reiterated later on in the semester demonstrate what they've learned over the course of the weeks. How can I help them to see that their failure on this particular project at this particular moment is actually what I need to be able to give them good feedback.

Janine: [00:26:41] So in some ways students not doing well gives me valuable data because then I can see not just data in terms of like are they learning what I want them to be learning but data in terms of who are they as learners right now so that I can act accordingly and I can give them the feedback they need to pursue their own learning in a sort of you know in an active and engaged way.

Janine: [00:27:03] And so I would say maybe course evaluations should actually ask students you know where's the moment where you really felt completely lost not because the professor didn't know what she was doing or wasn't doing a good enough job teaching. That may be so but where did you really feel like you were struggling? Where did you feel like you needed to seriously activate some resilience so that you could move forward?

Janine: [00:27:25] And then what did you do to solve that problem? What Did you do to move forward? Where did you see a challenge and how did you meet it? Grit. Resilience. Getting getting students to think about those moments

where their learning didn't take place the way they thought it might and what they got out of that.

Bonni: [00:27:40] That resilience that you're speaking of is such a powerful thing to give them in addition to the wonderful content that we have to teach, but that resilience is going to carry them a lot a lot further. True true. Absolutely. Well this is the point in this show when we get to recommendations but before I do is there anything we want to say before we close out of the main topic

Janine: [00:28:04] I think I would just say you would say don't be afraid to fail. And I would say if there's any way that people can go into committee meetings where assessment is on the table people are talking about student learning outcomes.

Janine: [00:28:18] People are worried about dashboard indicators things like that. I would say it's OK if we try to figure out how to do what we're doing better and we screw up. So we're going to learn and I I think that that's true for our colleagues. I think that's true for students.

Janine: [00:28:34] I would that would be my last point and also thank you very much for having me come and talk to talk about all this stuff.

Bonni: [00:28:41] Oh I just so am honored that you would accept the invitation. I really am.

Bonni: [00:28:45] So my recommendation I'm not sure is my proudest moment but this one that I would have loved to have seen so my colleagues using yesterday so I'm good That's right.

Bonni: [00:28:55] And that is when you are in the middle of using a PowerPoint presentation for one reason or another you may want to regain the attention of the people that you are teaching or presenting in front of.

Bonni: [00:29:09] And there is a shortcut to do that on the keyboard it's the B key which blanks out or blocks out your screen. And it's hysterical to do if you know about the shortcut because you will notice that every single igual automatically go to you because you've just shifted the focus from the PowerPoint to you.

Bonni: [00:29:27] And then when you bring the PowerPoint back it shifts everybody's eyes back to that.

Bonni: [00:29:31] And like you I do like to use a lot of analog tools. I think I'm a pretty techie person but I like to mix it up a lot I like to let's show a video clip but then let's shut all technology off for a moment and let's do a little text quiz.

Bonni: [00:29:45] But then let's play out a sticky note and do an exercise with that I think that really helps just keep their attention and keep them focused on the learning and assessing their own learning. So I love that beaky on the PowerPoint

Bonni: [00:29:57] And it has to be running so it actually has to be in the show mode. So the PowerPoint screen is filling your whole screen and the Presby and it blinks it out you press b again and it comes back and the W key makes it white. Although I don't that one just makes the light bulb go in your eyes so I don't use that one a lot of us to white it out.

Bonni: [00:30:16] And what recommendation or recommendations do you have for the listeners?

Janine: [00:30:21] Well I think I've been thinking about this and why it would be a book. And I think I would. My first impulse was to recommend the novel Dear Committee Members by Julie Schumacher which is fantastic. I've loaned it to my colleagues. It's an epistolary novel told entirely in letters of recommendation.

Bonni: [00:30:40] Oh wow.

Janine: [00:30:40] And if people haven't read it it's hilarious.

Bonni: [00:30:42] It sounds great.

Janine: [00:30:43] But then possibly like more relevant to some of the stuff I've been saying is another book I would recommend I think Jose Bowen's Teaching Naked which a lot of people probably do know but it informed a lot of what I'm talking about today. And I think he just became the president of Gaucher college which is pretty cool.

Bonni: [00:31:03] I follow him on Twitter and I've seen that book mentioned but I haven't picked it up yet. I'm gonna take you up on your recommendation. Actually both sound great. So thank you so much.

Bonni: [00:31:12] Thanks once again to Dr. Janine Utell for joining us on this Teaching in Higher Ed episode 17.

Bonni: [00:31:20] And thanks to all of you for listening. If you have any suggestions for guests or topics we would love to hear them. You can go to teachinginhighered.com/feedback to find out how to make those suggestions.

Bonni: [00:31:35] And we'd also love it if you haven't yet subscribed to the weekly newsletter that's at teachinginhighered.com/subscribe. We only send one e-mail a week. And it automatically sends the notes from his podcast so all the great recommendations people make.

Bonni: [00:31:51] You can follow up on them and check out the books and movies and other recommendations they have. And it also gets you an article about teaching every week. So again just one e-mail.

Bonni: [00:32:00] And you also get the free ed tech essentials ebook. I hope you'll consider subscribing and thanks again for listening.

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