

A Classroom Teacher's Perspective on Efforts to Align Instruction with State Academic
Standards for Children with Significant Disabilities

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Introduction

This paper will present a classroom teacher's perspective on one of the important requirements of "No Child Left Behind" legislation and aligned language found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 – that of aligning assessment and instructional practices with state academic content standard areas for those special educators teaching students with significant disabilities. This movement has been propelled by the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was renamed No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2001) and reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA) of 2004. While a goal of NCLB is to improve academic outcomes for all students, IDEA 2004 focuses upon meeting this goal by improving access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Both NCLB and IDEA put forward the belief that student output and level of achievement are connected to the level of expectations teachers set (McLaughlin, Shepard, & O'Day, 1995).

Several researchers have indicated that the process of linking assessments and instruction practices to statewide content standards shows promise for students with disabilities (Browder, 2006; Thurlow, 2003; Wiener, 2005). Despite this evidence and federal policy directives, teachers of students with disabilities have been slow to embrace the process. According to a case study conducted by Massachusetts Department of Education (Wiener), special education teachers are often unreceptive to the idea of aligning assessments and instruction practices to content

standards for three basic reasons: (1) the differential of learning performance between the students they teach and of students without disabilities, (2) teachers perceptions that students with disabilities were not represented in the identified learning outcomes for all students, and (3) low expectations of teachers and others regarding the level of learning students with disabilities could achieve, expectations that focus primarily on student limitations (Wiener). In a study conducted by Education Week (2004b), 80% of the respondents felt students with disabilities should not be held accountable to the same educational standards as students without disabilities. Quenemoen (2003), in comments to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, on behalf of the National Center on Educational Outcomes informed the Commission that studies, of which there are many, conclude students generally do what teachers expect of them and that disability categories have often been synonymous with signifying students with disabilities cannot learn. Sadly, this false assumption has been widely accepted by teachers, parents, advocates and policy makers since implementation of PL. 94-142 (1975). Marzano (2003), in a review of studies, found that “what gets taught” is the one school factor that most affects student achievement (p. 8). Unfortunately, low expectations have influenced the decisions of special education teachers when selecting ‘what is to be taught’ as well as the assessment and instructional strategies used to teach that content.

Special education teachers can raise the bar by raising expectations. Just as IDEA (1997) changed legislation to encourage the use of person-first language, teachers of students with disabilities must follow suit and identify learners with special needs as students first, addressing their disabilities as secondary. Similarly, aligning instructional activities with state approved standards will require special education teachers to have a working knowledge of content standards in core academic areas. Research findings indicate that the practice of aligning

assessments and instruction to content standards can be linked to increased learning outcomes for both students with and without disabilities (Browder, 2006; Thurlow, 2003; Wiener, 2005).

Given these findings, special educators should evaluate these studies and consider content standard alignment as a way of initiating positive change and potentially improving the system and its outcomes.

Aligning Assessments and Instruction to State-wide Standards through “Backward Planning”

What does aligning assessments and instruction strategies to the content standards mean for a teacher? For most teachers, especially teachers of students with disabilities, it is a total reversal of traditionally planned instruction. As defined by the American Federation of Teachers, traditionally planned instruction begins with the teacher choosing a lesson from the curriculum, usually following the order of presentation outlined in the curriculum, deciding instructional activities, evaluating level of mastery with a grade or feedback and then proceeding to the next lesson (Jamentz, 2003). Standards-based instruction is developed through a “backward” design planning process. The basic steps in standards-based instruction are: identify standards and the desired learning outcomes for students, determine acceptable evidences of progress toward the standard, and then develop instructional plans and learning experiences that will aid the student’s progress toward the standard (Jamentz).

Beginning Steps of Aligning Standards with Curriculum

This presentation is not a highly prescriptive step-by-step process for all teachers of students with disabilities to follow and implement. Instead, this paper offers process suggestions and reports lessons learned in one learning community. Due to varying state standards, flexibility to situational concerns is required in other school settings. Wiggins and McTighe (2005), in their book, *Understanding by Design* identified three problems currently associated with the variety of

state standards: standard overload, and standards that are either too global or too narrow. In states where standard overload occurs, the states simply recognize too many standards such that the number of content standards often is too great for the time frame in which they are to be learned. State standards that are “too global” or what Wiggins and McTighe call “the Goldilocks Problem” (p. 61) are simply too big to give direction as to what learning outcomes the teachers should teach. It often becomes difficult to measure these standards. Conversely, state standards that are “too-small” are those that micro-prescribe outcomes that are too narrow or specific. Wiggins and McTighe aptly described these standards as “factlets that meet someone’s sense of what is important but seem a tad esoteric and arbitrary if required of every student in the state” (p. 61). The too small standards have the benefit of being specific and easily measurable, but they often promote learning of isolated facts rather than understanding. For these reasons, it is not possible to offer a one-size-fits-all approach to aligning instruction with state academic standards.

Teaching in an alternative day treatment program for students dually classified with mental health diagnosis and special education needs presents greater challenges and obstacles when attempting to address students’ academic needs. Students’ ages ranged from six years old through eleven years old. Mental health diagnosis of the students varied from Pervasive Developmental Disability – Not Otherwise Specified, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Intermittent Explosive Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, Generalized Anxiety and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder to name a few. Many of the students also suffered the scars of verbal, physical or sexual abuse.

Special education classifications for the students ranged from Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional Behavioral Disorders, Other Health Impairments, Developmental

Disabilities, and Autism. The common thread for all the students was severe behaviors, which interfered with learning and were severe enough that the student was a threat to the safety of others or self. Teaching students with such a wide age span and varied emotional behavioral needs, the teacher searched for methods to improve delivery of services that promoted increased/improved educational outcomes for all the students. The teacher learned about the successes of aligning assessments and instruction strategies to state content standards and decided to attempt the process to raise the level of educational expectations for her diverse group of students and to achieve maximum benefit from instruction time often shortened or interrupted due to students' crisis.

The first step was to create an alignment chart, to be used as a constant reference when developing standards-based instruction strategies. This required knowledge of the content standards, as well as a deeper understanding of the learning expectations of all students. The State Department of Education provided similar sample frameworks posted on the State Board of Education's website in which curriculum and high stakes assessment were aligned to state content standards. This simplified the task as the State Department frameworks could then be adapted and modified to meet instructional planning needs for the classroom.

Creation of Curriculum Alignment Chart

For the curriculum alignment chart, a simple template was created using a computer spreadsheet application. In the y-axis cells the state content standards were cut and pasted into the template. The required curriculums and supplemental curriculums were listed in the x-axis. The purpose was to create a curriculum alignment template that was more than a checklist, but also served as a working document for recording a brief statement describing the content skill covered in the curriculum. The completed chart (insert 1) stated the content standard, a brief

statement of the objective as addressed in the curriculum and the curriculum page number.

Creation of Assessment Alignment Charts

To assist in alignment of assessments to content standards, templates were created to address pre-assessment (diagnostic), on-going assessment (formative) and post-assessment data collection (summative) (Guskey, 2005; McTighe & O'Conner, 2004). The previous spreadsheet template created to align curriculum to content standards was used and adapted for this purpose. Once again, the y-axis cells contained the content standards, which were cut and pasted into the cells. The x-axis listed the available classroom assessments. Teacher evaluation was listed as 'yes' or 'no' in the columns to denote if the assessment information gathered was aligned with the content standard. This provided an indication of how well the assessment data was aligned with specific academic content standards. The completed chart (insert 2) stated the content standard, the assessment procedure, and which content standards that assessment area addressed. It also provided information for further evaluation and identification of more specific assessment instruments to be used with the student.

The next step included assembling three assessment notebooks; 1) a pre-assessments notebook, 2) an on-going assessments notebook and 3) a post-assessments notebook. A pre-assessment alignment spreadsheet was also developed. The y-axis cells for the template listed the students' names while the x-axis cells stated the pre-assessment data that would be used. Personal or demographic pre-assessment information was recorded on the chart and placed first in the pre-assessment notebook with the actual pre-assessments filed behind the spreadsheet. Notebook dividers were labeled by assessment types with corresponding students' pre-assessments placed alphabetically behind each divider for easy access and reference.

To organize on-going assessment information, a second three-ring binder with dividers labeled by assessment types was used. Students' on-going assessments were placed alphabetically behind each assessment divider. On-going assessments used were the DIBELS progress monitoring, Accelerated Reader reading quizzes, Accelerated Reader vocabulary quizzes, Accelerated Math practices and quizzes and Accelerated Math Facts in a Flash practices, etc. Not all these assessments were used to determine student grades but are valuable documentation of learning progress aligned with content standards. For example, though Accelerated Reader reading quizzes were not used for a grade determination they are useful to document student reading levels, as well as the level and type of books read by the student, which all responded to required content standard areas for reading.

Portfolios were the final method selected for collecting and presenting standards-based evidence of student learning. Student work products were gathered, and organized in color-coded file folders arranged by subject (yellow for math, blue for language/spelling, etc.). Each student had five folders, one in each color/subject. (insert 3) Standards-based evidence of student learning was collected, such as: test scores, project examples, rubrics, or work products. A tag was stapled to the top corner of each piece of evidence. The 3" X 5" paper tags were labeled with: 1) student name, 2) date, 3) concept/skill, 4) standard number(s), 5) attempt, and 6) correct/total (insert 4). The tagged products were filed in the corresponding student's portfolio.

The dividers in the final post-assessment notebook were labeled by student name. Included in this binder were norm and criterion referenced assessments conducted during the final months of the school year (post-assessment data). With pre-assessments, on-going assessments and post-assessments binders, assessment data could be easily managed for use in

the development of standards-based instruction and standards-based Individualized Educational Plans (IEP).

Making the Connection

Once the alignment templates were developed, the assessment notebooks were organized and a system for portfolio collection was created, the task was to thus connect all the information to develop standards-based instructional strategies that addressed students' individual strengths and needs and recognized the progression of learning from simple to more complex tasks and reasoning. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) stressed the significance of this connection as follows; identifying what is student understanding through the method of good design.

The next task, adapted loosely from the principles of *Understanding by Design*, (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) and the Massachusetts Department of Education's approach to planning instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities, resulted in a process of documenting high expectations and achievement for all children through access to grade level curriculum. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) explain that Understanding by Design (UbD) is not a program, philosophy, or belief in a particular pedagogical method but an "approach to planning" (p. 8). Paralleling the principles in UbD, the Massachusetts Department of Education conducted a case study, which addressed teachers' approaches to planning instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The study concluded that teachers of students with disabilities must first know the purpose and direction of a standard for all students, as well as the educational outcomes expected once students master these goals. The final education outcome for student with disabilities is to achieve or to perform as close as possible to grade-level standards as students without disabilities. UbD and the Massachusetts Department of Education approach both propose teachers plan instructional activities based on the identification of "*big ideas*" or

development of an essence of the content standard to better prioritize learning and instructional strategies. A “big idea” approach, according to Wiggins and McTighe, assists teachers to place in order of importance the content that will be taught while aiding students in understanding the value of the content standards with individualized student objectives (2005). A team assembled by the Massachusetts Department of Education developed the *essence of standard*, which mirrors the objective of the content standard and are based on the main concept of the standard and the proficiency the content standard required (Wiener, 2005). The team then “created a statement of the ‘essence’ of each standard described in common terms” (p. 3). Once the team had consensus on the essence of the standard, the access points for student with significant disabilities were identified based on the teams’ consensus (Wiener).

Big ideas and essence of the standard provided a starting point for the development of standards-based instructional activities that address students’ individual strengths and needs. Using the newly created templates, notebooks and portfolios and combining the parallel formats presented in UbD and the Massachusetts Case Study, it was possible to review content standard areas, identify big ideas, determine measurable/observable student outcomes, and select aligned instructional activities.

An example was developed for the standard area of reading content comprehension. Nine of the grade 5 content standards for reading addressed comprehension or skills that deepened comprehension during reading. The highlighted portions of the content standards were used to develop big ideas or essence of standards and successive entry points in instructional lesson plans.

Creation of Instructional Activities Template that Demonstrate the Connection

Using a spreadsheet application, a lesson plan template was created that utilized the

principles of backwards design starting with: 1) the objective which was the big idea or essence of standard, 2) the assessment information gathered, 3) instructional strategies or activities, and 4) the actual content standard. The content standard served as a reference to the big idea, essence of standard objective, and successive entry points to ensure both remained true to the standard. (insert 5).

The curriculum alignment notebook was used to identify the big idea or essence of standard that would be taught each week. The highlighted portions of the standards were referenced to write a big idea statement and entry points statements for the weekly lesson plan. The assessment alignment notebook was used to identify or develop assessments that would provide data to document learning outcomes. After identifying big ideas, entry points, and determining assessment data needed, appropriate instructional activities were developed. Lesson planning no longer began by selecting instructional activities, but instead with selecting student expectations and learning outcomes and the measurement of those specific learning expectations. Selecting instructional activities, the final phase of lesson plan development became standards-based, data-driven, and addressed the strengths and needs of individual students.

Impact of alignment on student learning and teacher instruction

With curriculum content and assessment data aligned to content standards, students' needs assessed, and the big ideas identified, it became possible to evaluate the information and identify appropriate instructional strategies. For some students, the fit was not difficult. For other students, the performance gap between the students assessed needs and content standard expectation was significant, yet by focusing upon the big idea or essence of the standard as the primary descriptor of the learning expectations, instructional strategies were developed and alignment was achieved. Reading instruction was aligned by implementing the five components

(Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension) of best reading practices identified in the National Reading Panel's (NRP) *Put Reading First* document and skills learned in Alabama Reading Academy (2006). Reading instruction was facilitated by the use of learning stations each which addressed an NRP reading component. The stations incorporated the big ideas as identified for each of the content standards. While students rotated through the four stations, a small group of students were selected to receive direct instruction.

An example of backwards design to instructional planning is use of the phonics station, Word Works. The spelling list for the week was used to teach the big idea of phonemic awareness and phonics concepts through manipulation of sounds and words. Word cards were made using the weekly spelling list words (for each group or for individual students) dissected by letters (e.g., c-v-c pattern) or by onsets and rimes. Vowels were always written in red. Letters/onsets/rimes were then placed in separate zip lock bags (insert 6) with the students' names on each bag and the bags clipped together with a ring. Students' selected their bags from the Word Works bucket and manipulated letter cards to make words.

On the first day of the week, students simply made the required words, but by the second day of the week, new initial letter cards were provided and the students made actual words and then, further changed the initial sounds to create new words. For some students consonant letter cards were provided, while other students received consonant blends. In this activity the students switched initial letters to create new words. On the third day, students followed the same process but changed the final sound to create new words, again using provided final letters, or digraphs, depending on student level. On the fourth day, students working on the consonant vowel consonant pattern made new words by switching the medial vowel letter or diphthongs with provided vowels or diphthong letter cards. Each day, the student wrote the new words created.

On the third & fourth days, students wrote 5 sentences, 3 using spelling words correctly and 2 using newly created words correctly in a sentence. Students were allotted a specific time period on day four to pick the best sample of their station work to share with the class. They verbalized the new words created, stated the concept, and read the corresponding sentences they created. The station work product was then tagged and placed in the reading portfolio.

The spelling curriculum or textbook was used as a resource for the lesson rather than being the objective. The lessons were not covered in the order of presentation but were selected based on phonics progression charts. Except for occasionally assigning a spelling page as homework (for certain students) the textbook was rarely used during instruction. By teaching phonemic awareness and phonics, as well as teaching spelling in this manner, student assessments indicated significant improvement on the weekly spelling tests as well as student's decoding skills in fluency drills.

In the Word Works station, practice activities were further differentiated for students by the number of words on the student's list (5, 10, or 20). Students worked in pairs or groups of three whenever possible during practice activity time. An unexpected outcome of station practice was that students holding fewer letter cards often wanted to make more words than was required of the activity. Also, students with single consonant letters for the switch-and-create activity used fellow students' letters (blends, etc.) to successfully make new words.

Monday of each week, students rotate through 5 stations – fluency, vocabulary, phonics, comprehension and guided reading/direct instruction. Younger students and those with lower ability levels do guided reading/direct instruction activities during the first two rotations. During guided reading and direct instruction, students received new phonics patterns, and would be asked to use them to demonstrate new word construction. Story vocabulary was also introduced

to students at this time. On successive days story elements were taught to develop comprehension skills.

When teaching comprehension skills the same backwards design process was implemented. Big ideas for comprehension were developed and introduced during direct instruction (sequencing, drawing conclusions, etc.) and later added to the comprehension station. In the comprehension station, a short story was provided at the student's individual reading level. Students then completed graphic organizers, such as character charts, story maps, sequencing charts, etc., after reading the short story. On-going formative assessment data documented when students benefitted from repeated practice in story elements. Graphic organizers were tagged and placed in students' portfolios (insert 7).

An unexpected learning outcome, which demonstrated the benefits of standards-based instruction for comprehension, was improved student transfer of learning and study skills. One graphic organizer the students applied was labeled *the tree*. Students recorded the main idea of the story on the trunk of the tree to symbolize the importance of the main idea. Supporting details were listed on the roots, just as roots support and bring nourishment to the tree. On the branches were listed characters and vocabulary that grew from the main idea. One student asked if he could use the tree for a science unit. The student explained he would write the word 'animal' on the trunk and then, on the large branches he would write 'birds', 'mammals', 'fish', 'insects' (no bones), 'reptiles' and 'amphibians.' For the smaller branches, the student stated he would record information pertaining to each large branch. For example, a small branch protruding from the large branch labeled 'birds' would contain the information that "birds lay eggs". The student said he would write vocabulary words on the roots and explained how the vocabulary supports the ideas recorded on the branches. Transfer of story elements and development of study skills had

taken place and the child used them to address his own specific learning style and needs.

Incidental Learning and Content Crossover Also Became Standards-based

To encourage incidental learning within the class library, each of the books was coded for grade equivalence with colored dots and the Accelerated Reader (AR) book level was written on the dot (insert 8). In the students' reading folder a black line of a bookworm was placed. Two color-coded dots were placed on the top of the black line bookworm with the student's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) range written on the dots. Students were taught this method to select books for reading from the class library. Their personal bookworm served as a reminder of their personal book level range. As a book was read and the corresponding AR test taken and passed the student colored in a segment of their bookworm. When all 25 segments were colored in, the bookworm was completed, and then as a reward the student was treated to a special lunch that day and a new bookworm was placed over the old one. AR quiz results were filed in the ongoing assessments notebook so that evaluation and monitoring of students' daily reading progress was possible. Daily monitoring yielded data as to which students were continually and successfully reading and passing the AR tests for books at the high end of his/her ZPD. The monitoring process also indicated which students were experiencing learning difficulty. The ZPD was raised when data supported it and the corresponding dots on the student's bookworm were changed.

The reading content standard was addressed by creating "theme" boxes in which nonfiction books from the class library were placed in a bin corresponding to a relevant science or social studies theme. The children were required to select two books each week from the theme bin and take an AR test on the nonfiction books. Students constantly asked if they could get a book to read from the book-nook. Students, even previously reluctant readers, were

enthusiastically reading and incidentally meeting the content standard of daily reading to improve comprehension and fluency.

Aligning instruction to content standards provided specific data of where students were in regards to the content standards. Direct instruction and station practice were focused on big ideas and were differentiated to meet the students' learning needs while assisting the student to progress toward the content standard.

An example of content crossover learning that met multiple content standards occurred in a 2nd grade reading lesson. In the basal reader "Lemonade for Sale" children in the story created a chart to graph how much lemonade they sold each day. With a good understanding of grade 2 content standards, it was clear this was not only a reading standard (AL R.2.4), but also a social studies standard (AL SS.2.8.1) and it addressed two math standards (AL M.2.9, AL M.2.13). Activities that addressed all four content areas were taught during that week's lesson. The comprehension station provided additional practice in creating charts and reading grids. Social studies and math class time provided additional instruction and practice for these content standards.

As a demonstration of depth of learning, one student commented, "This is just like a candy machine because you have to push B1 to get the candy you want". Not only did the student master the skill and content standards as documented on assessments and work products that week, but also the student identified what Wiggins and McTighe (2005) called "context of use" (p. 113).

Alignment Impact on IEPs

Aligning assessment data and instruction to content standards yielded another benefit - it aided in the development of a standards-based individualized educational plan (IEP). Instead of

writing an IEP where content standards were plugged into annual goal statements, it was now possible to understand the essence of a content standard, where specific students fit within the big picture of the content standard, and how students could progress toward the content expectation of the standard. Data from the assessment notebooks and portfolios documented this process clearly. The profile page of the IEP actually became a glimpse into the student's learning strengths and needs and were standards-based and data driven. Supplemental instruction, modifications and accommodations were no longer just 'stabs in the dark' or based only on high stakes assessments, being based on daily standards-based data, they provided a better understanding of the student and the steps needed to maintain high learning expectations. As data from the assessment notebooks and portfolios were reviewed, a clear, data driven, standards-based IEP emerged.

Conclusion - Alignment Impact on Teacher - Mind Shifts

An unexpected outcome of this experience was the subtle and yet powerful shift in thinking about the critical decisions of "what to teach" and "how to teach it". The mind-set of teacher expectations of students shifted from a focus on student limitations to a focus upon learning expectations. Teachers are able to quickly discover that previously decisions impacting planning, teaching, and even daily discussion about students were focused on students' limitations, and what students could not achieve. Instruction strategies often followed those low expectations and as previously stated, "What teachers expect is typically what students do" (Quenemoen, 2003, p. 4). As the practice of backward design was implemented, a shift in mind-set regarding expectations occurred. The focus was no longer on what student with disabilities could not do, but instead shifted to "the specific learning sought, and (how to collect) evidence of such learning" (Quenemoen, p. 14). Thus, the teacher's expectations of her students were raised.

Students were viewed in light of learning expectations, not limitations.

For years, special education teachers have acted as advocates for the students they teach, which is as it should be. But when advocating for students with disabilities, such teachers often focus on student limitations and fail to see the whole student and how they can fit in the school learning environment and in the larger world outside of school. Aligning assessments and instruction to content standards “equips special educators with the same content knowledge that general educators have, so they (can) put their considerable skills to work adapting and modifying that curriculum, because we know that is what special educators do well” (Wiener, 2005, p. 2) and thus, becoming “even better advocates for themselves and the needs of their students” (p. 5).

A second mind shift that occurred was to realize the distinct differentiation between student acquisition of knowledge and understanding. The matter is further complicated because of “our tendency to use the terms know, know how, and understand interchangeably in everyday speech” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Knowledge consist of the facts, whereas understanding challenges one to use the facts acquired in varied situations. Understanding, involves transfer, “tak(ing) what we learned.... and apply(ing) it to other, related but different situations” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Knowledge and skills are components of learning but is not learning alone. Teachers begin to ask not what do the students know but what do they understand, and how are they using what they understand in other situations?

The third mind shift is the teachers focus away from what was taught, to what students actually learned, which can be an important result of using backward design. By identifying the content standard, designing assessment and finally developing activities for instruction, the teacher’s focus shifted from what was taught to what the students learned.

Summary

This paper has shared a teacher's perspective and approach to planning standards-based instruction for students with significant disabilities. It is a reflection of the desire to raise learning expectations for students with significant disabilities. It validates what Carr and Harris (2001) stated in their book *Succeeding with Standards*: "Teachers sometimes must go through a toilsome process to provide this information, but the power of accessing and revising such a database far outweighs the initial drudgery of putting the information together" (p. 5 & 6). It was also evident that "There is a distinct difference between alignment with the topics of standards and achievement of the expectations included in standards" (O'Shea, 2005 p. 16).

As identification of big ideas and essence of standards provided the connection needed between actual content standards and standards-based instruction and addressed the strengths and needs of all students. This process revealed the need for a connection from "transcription of a standard as a state document to that of a lesson plan" to truly standard-based instruction that "changes expectations for student learning" (O'Shea, 2005, p. 28). This process has renewed and refueled the author's desire to practice the art and science of teaching (Marzano, 2007) by creating genuine standards-based instruction for students with significant disabilities while seeking authentic evidence of student learning.

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