

Through the Eyes of Educators: Insights into Student Engagement

PERSPECTIVES & STRATEGIES
FROM EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS
IN THE CANVAS COMMUNITY



Student engagement is crucial to learning and achievement. As K-12 classrooms embrace technology and work to close the pandemic's learning gap, the term "student engagement" has been redefined. Teachers are finding new, innovative ways to engage their students, create excitement, and stimulate curiosity while empowering students to take ownership of their learning.

"Teachers have constructed elaborate room transformations to immerse students in a unique learning environment. Social media showcases teachers' teaching through creative songwriting (and dance moves only those born after 2000 can pull off without injury.) Teachers have pulled every trick out of the magic hat they could think of to capture students and get them engaged," said Ashly Spencer, Digital Learning Specialist, TCEA Instructional Technology Specialist of the Year.

"We've defined engagement as these fun experiences in the classroom giving students something to share at the dinner table when parents ask "What did you do at school today?" While positive student experiences have an impact on student learning, we are missing true student engagement."

Putting students at the center of their learning transforms the learning experience. When students are engaged in learning, they are more confident, ask more questions, and make connections to prior knowledge, which is rewarding for both teacher and student.

We asked education professionals from our community to share their unique perspectives on student engagement, as well as their strategies to enhance learning and boost meaningful involvement, both in and outside the classroom. Read on to explore ways to engage students in your classroom, at any grade level, in any subject, and with all student populations. We hope you find inspiration from these insights, and challenge you to reflect on these ideas and consider how to use them in your classroom.

94%

of educators believe that student engagement is the most important metric when measuring student success.



The Four Factors That Make A Lesson Meaningful and Engaging

When I was teaching, I had what I believed to be the most engaging lesson. I transformed my classroom and spent hours creating fun resources and activities for my students. They were excited when they came to my classroom and worked the entire lesson. I thought I hit a home run. Until their post-assessment. I quickly saw how my students were not learning the content to the depth and complexity needed and were unable to apply what they learned. I had to step back and reframe my lesson. I completely missed what really makes a lesson meaningful and engaging for students: student agency, communication & collaboration, creativity, and student-centered learning.

STUDENT AGENCY

Student agency is about providing students with the opportunity to make key decisions about their learning experience through student choice and



voice. Where are we providing opportunities for students to decide how they engage with the content and showcase what they have learned? We can give students ownership of their learning through meaningful options in what they learn, how they learn, and how they will apply what they learn. Digital choice boards and playlists are a great place to start when implementing student agency.

COMMUNICATION & COLLABORATION

Communication & collaboration are critical life skills, and we have to create opportunities for our students to learn and grow these skills. Collaborative group assignments, discussions, and project-based learning are easy options you can implement in any lesson. A teacher utilized Flip for students to answer a multiple-choice question. Instead of the traditional formatting,

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the teacher posted the question and asked students to respond in Flip, explaining their answer and how they got it. Other students could then respond and provide feedback to one another. The teacher learned so much more about what her students knew through this activity than a simple multiple-choice quiz. Students could also engage with one another and see multiple approaches to solving the problem. Much like our PLN groups, students can gain so much from sharing their learning with each other.

CREATIVITY

These past few years there has been a lot of consumption from our devices with very little output from our students in return. We have to flip the script from student consumption to student creation. Is the content students consume meaningful and intentional? How are students showing what they learned from this consumption? We can have our students create graphics, comic strips, images, videos, websites, and so much more to showcase their knowledge instead of a quick exit ticket or no submission at all. Canva is your best friend for creativity. Providing your students a choice in what they create and how they demonstrate mastery will give you much greater insight into your students.

STUDENT-CENTERED

Student-centered learning is exactly what it sounds like, putting our students at the center of their learning! We have to use the data we collect on students while also building relationships with our students to truly understand who they are and identify their needs. Once we do, we can create those deep, differentiated learning experiences to help our students grow, moving away from our “cookie-cutter activities”. Canvas Mastery Paths is one of the best tools available to achieve differentiation. Students have a custom path based on their data and needs, allowing them to receive the instruction most meaningful to them. 🌟

Creative Curiosity

Everything I've learned about more fully engaging students can be summarized in two words: creative curiosity. Regardless of the age and grade level, the content and subject matter, or the delivery and tech tool(s) in use, a learner who is curious is engaged in their learning journey.

A culture of creative curiosity can be made in any classroom at any time. It is a commitment, as an educator, to being a lifelong learner, and creating conditions for my students to be lifelong learners, too.

My two go-to strategies and recommendations for student engagement are student choice and content personalization. The cool part is that these concepts, to me, go hand-in-hand. For student choice, let the elementary student choose their favorite stylus ink color when working digitally and encourage the secondary student to pick their creative platform of choice to demonstrate their mastery of content. For content personalization, I don't mean a teacher creating content unique for each learner; I mean allowing students to take content and apply it to something that is personal to them—how the content relates to their life (or, how it doesn't), how it factors into what they want to do with their life (or, how it doesn't), or how it may help others. It's active learning put into the context of the learner.

If students make a book summary using their platform of choice that is age- and access-appropriate ...

- Elementary learners can press 'record' on a device to share their summary by talking it out, singing it out, acting it out, etc., or they sketch a drawing and capture a photo of it. They submit an Assignment and we look them over as a class to continue the conversation.



- Middle school learners may opt for the same delivery methods used by kindergarteners, or getting even more creative by sketch note-ing their summary, using a template from a third-party tool like Canva, Google Slides, or Wakelet for infographics, newsletters, digital posters and timelines, etc. They submit a Discussion and we share meaningful feedback in Grow/Glow or similar formats to encourage ongoing evaluation and revisions while celebrating current success.
- Secondary learners expand into even greater possibilities with podcast playlists, character personifications in the context of a social media channel, exhibitions, etc. They submit to a publicly-visible Discussion with Peer Reviews.

At all three levels, students interact with content, choose their preferred delivery method, use curiosity to determine how to best create their summary, then personalize it. The freedom to choose makes it personal to them. Added bonus – instead of spending hours searching for remediation and enrichment support, I now have a library of curated resources. Win-win!

How do I tie it all together? Canvas is where it all lives – it's our host, product spotlight page, art museum, recording studio, scrapbook project, portfolio showcase, argument record keeper, exhibition area, and evidence locker – it's our space where learning drives us to be curious about what we are learning about then and create as a result of what we're learning. 🔄



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A Collaborative Culture of Learning

As a brand new instructional coach at Piper High School, I constantly had the fear that no teacher would invite me into their classroom. You can imagine my surprise and excitement when our Kansas State Secondary Teacher of the Year Nominee invited me into her Honors English second block class. Trying to play it cool, I showed up fashionably late, about 10 minutes after the bell. I had assumed I would slip in and be a passive observer, a fly on the wall. I should have known better. Upon walking in I immediately noticed that instead of the traditional rows of desks commonly seen in a high school classroom, the desks in this classroom were in a large circle and all of the students were quietly typing away, engrossed in their work. As I tried to take a seat at a desk in the corner outside the circle, Dr. Amy Adam instead patted the seat next to her, inviting me into the circle. She then shared a Canvas Assignment with me titled “Wraparound 10/15.”

Linked in the assignment was a Google Doc with a table where in each cell was the name of a student in her second block. The document was alive with a flurry of activity as the cells grew with the thoughts and revelations of her students. At the top of the document was a short poem by a contemporary poet with a strong following on Instagram and these three questions: What do you see, from a rhetorical standpoint? What is the impact? What are your thoughts?



After about 5 minutes, Dr. Adam announced that time was up and asked who wanted to start; it was a race to who could get their hand up first to begin the circle of sharing. What happened next was so simple yet so powerful. Before each student shared what they had written, they first began by sharing how they were feeling that day. The simple question of “how are you doing today?” shifted the circle from being content-focused to people-focused and allowed for a real sense of community to blossom in this classroom.

As I later reflected on this lesson with Dr. Adam, I asked her if all of the students had to share what they had written or how they were doing that day. She shared with me that students are given the option to pass. However, by building this sense of community, it isn't often that they do as they are excited to share their thoughts with their peers. She also shared that making learning public is one of the cornerstones of her educational philosophy and these wraparounds, started with a shared Google Doc, allow for her students to borrow and build on the thinking of their peers creating a collaborative culture of learning among all. 🔄



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Accessibility and Flexibility Can Lead to Empowerment



The following is an excerpt from Krummer’s article “[Accessibility and Flexibility Can Lead to Student Empowerment.](#)”

Engagement is a complex concept and something all educators seek to capture. We are often taught that if students are engaged, they are excited and more likely to interact with the concepts, learn, and show their mastery of learning. This sounds simple enough, right? However, engagement is not always as simple to capture, and the term “engagement” itself is a complex one, made up of many layers. Recognizing there are layers, understanding that variability exists in the learning environment, and designing flexible, accessible options to support learner variability is a way to progress through layers of engagement to reach the level even above engagement: empowerment.

In one of my classes of 7th grade social studies students, one of my students, José, moved to our school mid-year and was quite shy. He loved school but often was quiet in class and was working on his confidence in speaking in English in front of his peers; he spoke Spanish fluently. When José joined our class, I made a conscious effort to ensure all of the videos I provided in class had Spanish subtitles available, as well as the ability to use tools like Immersive Reader to provide picture dictionaries, dictionaries, and translations. I made sure I added more visuals into my materials, too, so that another accessible form of information was available to José. Additionally, I spent time showing him how to use translation tools on his Chromebook, accessibility tools, and text-to-speech features in Canvas LMS.

In the study hall class I had with him, I noticed he was using the tools in his other classes, not just social studies, because he felt empowered by the option to utilize them. As the year progressed, I also noticed José showing other students how to use the tools, too, often sharing his “hacks” and tips for using the tools in all of his classes. He not only felt empowered to use the tools himself, but wanted to support others who may have needed the option. Fast forward several months ahead, and Jose is a much more confident student in class.

For his final project, José chose to create a digital eBook with a peer. In the eBook he included text, images of concepts, audio narration, a glossary of terms, and the audio narrations were in both English and Spanish, as were the dictionaries and text. He even showed his classmates when presenting the project how one could easily translate the whole book into any language they wanted in case they wanted a language other than English or Spanish. When talking to José about his project, I asked him what drove his decision to add in the different multilingual elements to his project, and he shared that he wanted his family to be able to understand the book he created, specifically his little brother, but he also wanted to create a book that anyone could read.

By providing José with the flexible options he needed, the autonomy to use the supportive, accessibility tools he wanted whenever he wanted, and the freedom to show his understanding in a modality he needed, he demonstrated the qualities of an expert learner. 🌟

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Authentic Learning Experiences — With an Element of Fun!

In my physics class, when presenting a demo about the energy and motion of a pendulum, I liked to hold a bowling ball to my nose, release it, and act like I was going to get knocked out. My students were engaged and focused on seeing if the massive bowling ball would somehow smash their teacher's face. It taught a principle with a small element of fun.

I like fun, but I love when it leads to learning. So ensuring that engagement leads to successfully mastering learning outcomes is the key. This applies to professional learning, too. A great example of this is to include gamified elements in professional development classes.

When our district first decided to embrace an LMS several years ago, we knew we'd need to put effort into marketing and training our staff. Instead of bringing everyone into a room and walking them through click-by-click, we decided to bring that element of fun and create a game. Since a majority of our staff are from Generation Z and Millennials, we thought what better way than to go retro with our design and created "Canvas Levels of Learning."

It was a three-level training course, where you had to collect "coins" by completing short quizzes. Each level got progressively harder with more advanced features in Canvas. We even included a "boss challenge" in each level, which was a screencast showing off the skills you had mastered and incorporated into your Canvas course.

We topped it off by sending out a wall cling that had a spot for each badge that you earned from completing a level. This small visual helped encourage participants to complete all three levels. It was a hit with our staff and we had many complete Canvas Levels of Learning.

I love the ability to brand learning experiences and add gamified elements to make learning more fun and engaging. A simple Canvas course, some rad Canva graphics, some retro game ideas, and a splash of just pure fun made it possible. 🎮



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The Power of Data

The 2002 Oakland A's baseball team had such a magical season that it became the plot of a blockbuster movie, Moneyball. Despite having the third lowest payroll in all of Major League Baseball, they were one of the best teams that season. With fewer resources, how were the A's able to outcompete others that season and beyond!? The answer is one word: data. The A's approached data differently than everyone else, analyzing the right data in the right way to unlock the team's potential and success!

In education, we look at data as well. We look at standardized test data to find trends amongst schools, grade levels, and classrooms. Teachers meet in PLC groups to examine student results from smaller formative and summative assessments. While effective, this data only tells us what the student learned and did not learn, oftentimes after the fact. This does not address why the student did or did not learn it. It simply told us what they had learned.

The 'Moneyball' approach to data in education goes beyond just analyzing the outcome of student learning; we must get data during the learning process to tell us why and how students best learn.

Sir William Osler is one of the most influential physicians in modern medicine. He is attributed with a quote that is the basis for this writing and should reshape our efforts when it comes to student learning, educational data, and ultimately student engagement.



"The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease." The great physician understands the patient and the context of that patient's illness." ~ *Sir William Osler*

In other words, the good physician simply treats the symptoms, while the great physician treats the cause. The outcome of student learning is the symptom. By just looking at assessment data, we are only treating symptoms. To be great, we must treat the cause, and that in many cases is knowing our students and their engagement. Student-focused data around engagement has the power to unlock our student's potential in the same way that the Moneyball approach did for the A's.

As a teacher, student engagement data can be simple to collect. Simply ask your students! You can create anonymous forms and surveys around engagement for students to complete during the lesson itself. In my classroom, I used a [custom Plickers set](#) with emojis on the backs of the Plickers cards to quickly collect engagement data in real-time. In treating the source of student performance, the one-time disease of a lack of student learning transforms into a bounty of joy, wonder, and student growth! 🍀



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Active Tech-Enhanced Learning

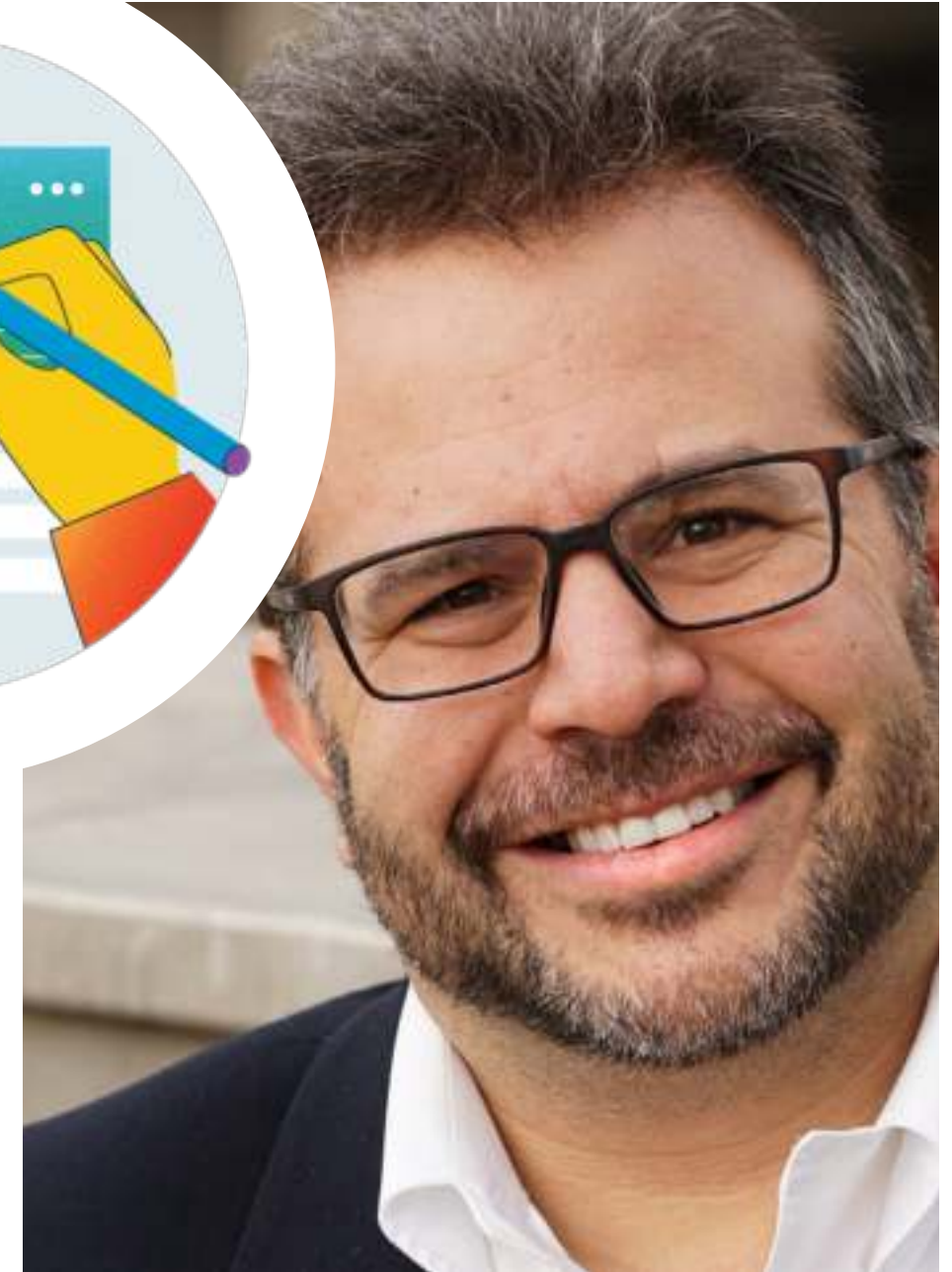
Science Leadership Academy is in its 10th year of using Canvas LMS, and for us, Canvas is a seamless extension of our classroom. As an inquiry-driven, project-based school, SLA uses Canvas to enable students to see their classrooms not only defined by space and time but through their ideas and collaborations.

Whether it is the collaborative tools built into Canvas or the seamless integration of so many tools, Canvas allows our students to own their education in meaningful ways. Canvas allows teachers to set up online spaces that are progressive in nature - discussions, collaborations, and multiple modalities for students to create and present are all simple to set up and easy to use.

Recently, I was observing an 11th grade History classroom where students were working on documentary film projects. In class, students were having a discussion, with groups pitching different ideas for films. Students would

pitch ideas and receive feedback via discussion groups. Students had dozens of resources listed for them on their class pages and they could see the path for the unit laid out, complete with interim assessments, space for rough draft film critique, and the rubric for the final project. And the thing is – this wasn't a "special," work like this was being done across the school, where Canvas was an essential part of the instructional design which allowed students to create powerful artifacts of their learning with their colleagues

At SLA, we have always said technology should be ubiquitous, necessary, and invisible, and Canvas achieves that goal. It is an essential part of the SLA experience for students and teachers, used every day by every member of our community. Unlike so many technology tools, it's never used as an excuse or a barrier. Canvas is, quite literally, seen as an extension of our classroom space by all, and after ten years, I can't imagine our school without it. 🤖



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Create a Gamified Experience

One of the rising issues in recent years is engaging students with disabilities (SWD) in schools. The need for students to catch up on both math and reading scores has increased dramatically this past year, and our administration is looking for ways to help our students improve their Standards of Learning (SOL) assessment scores by the end of the school year. Because of this, we have begun developing a game board that focuses not only on the curriculum for the SOLs, but also on the behavioral plans. The main idea is to create a gamified activity board that will be used for remediation and practice as well as behavior monitoring for the individual student.

The digital game board, which is created using Canva, is embedded into a Canvas Course in which students self-enroll. It focuses on SOL-centered materials as well as having the students self-monitor their behaviors throughout the year. The shell of the course contains Canvas Modules that use Nearpod and other interactive resources linked directly to the SOL standards with both digital forms and written worksheets, making it a blended experience. Students have the option and opportunity to either print out and write or to submit directly through a Google LTI assignment. Using both Prerequisites and Requirements through the Canvas Modules helps the students stay on track and be held accountable for their progress.

These specific students need these skills to pass their SOL tests, so our goal is that the gamification and motivational incentives will help keep students on the right path, allowing them to monitor their progress in both remediation and behavior, complete their reviews, and hopefully have a little fun with it as well. You can check out the gamified remediation prototype [here!](#) 🎮



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Support Student Voice and Choice

The English IV teachers at Cleburne High School decided to give their students an opportunity to create a podcast for their final semester project. The project was also connected to the New York Times Fifth Annual Podcast Competition, where the NYT asked teenagers to complete an original five-minute podcast on a topic of their choice. To draw even more student interest and recognize student effort, the teachers created a local scholarship.

The teachers created Canvas Assignments for planning documents like a podcast research organizer and script, as well as the initial audio file. To support the teachers' efforts, I worked with students in the Apple lab to provide directions on how to refine their audio and add royalty-free music to amplify their message. The students worked independently or in pairs to make the podcasts. Then, the teachers invited a panel of judges to evaluate the final podcast submissions. The participating students enjoyed the

podcast creation process and learned multiple ways to share information. Canvas was a vital tool in this project.

The lead teacher of this project was Piper Davis. The other three participating teachers were Angela Fink Carrizales, Matthew Hilts, and Lindsey Parker. I am very proud of these educators and their students. Here is the [article](#) from the local newspaper that highlights their story.

On a final note, one of our students who participated in the New York Times podcast competition was honored! Rebekah Poteet, a 2022 senior, earned [an honorable mention](#) for her "[Look in a Book](#)" submission. Rebekah has this experience to lean upon as she transitions into her young adult life. Being published in the New York Times at age 17 is quite an accomplishment! Wow! 🎉



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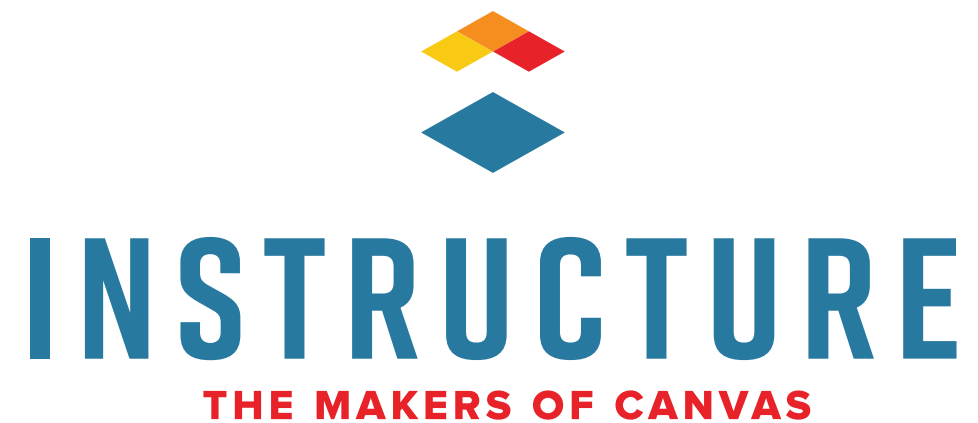
In Closing

Student engagement is not one-size-fits-all. As the educational landscape continues to rapidly evolve, one thing remains: teachers are vital in helping students unlock their true potential. By focusing on creative student engagement strategies, you're creating a learning environment that is more welcoming, personalized, and student-centered, which positively impacts student achievement.

In sharing these perspectives we hope you found nuggets of knowledge that you can reflect on, weave your ideas into, and implement in your classroom.

Learn more about how **Canvas LMS** transforms teaching, learning, and engagement.





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Canvas by Instructure: providing a robust foundation for teaching and learning—both in and out of the classroom—for all students, while seamlessly integrating with other learning tools.



Mastery by Instructure: bringing together the assessment tools and quality content educators need to implement a successful assessment program that drives learning forward.



Elevate by Instructure: Improving the use of data and technology to help solve district challenges and give educators the information they need to make impactful decisions.



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