

Making it Count: Advocating for Videographic Criticism in the Tenure and Promotion Process

Drew Morton and Kevin L. Ferguson

INTRODUCTION: SCHOLARSHIP AND LEGITIMACY

Videographic criticism has blossomed over the past twenty years or so, establishing itself both as a vital form of non-traditional scholarship and as a new pedagogical tool for bridging theory and practice. As of Spring 2020, *[in]Transition*, an online peer-reviewed journal devoted exclusively to videographic work, has entered its seventh year of publication. Moreover, with the emphasis placed upon videographic scholarship within the pages of *Screenworks* and *NECSUS* and the success of the popular NEH Middlebury College workshops “Scholarship in Sound & Image” (2015–Present) led by Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, it appears that the battle for legitimacy within Cinema and Media Studies has largely been won.

The question of “what constitutes a scholarly video essay” is, however, still subject to debate. At *[in]Transition*, the editorial team quickly coalesced around the rather traditional conception that academic videographic criticism must create new knowledge. Initially, this guidance was a bit broad because we wished to see how the format would evolve without strong guardrails. Yet, we would occasionally get back long form written work that was accompanied by a clip reel or its inverse—a clip reel with a prolonged audio commentary placed over it—and we knew that YouTube friendly

conference presentations were not the models we were striving for. Over the past couple years, the editors have revised the guidelines; the journal now asks that submitted work “produce new knowledge about its subject, or about film and moving image studies, through its audiovisual form.”¹ The core of the criteria, however, remains the same: the production of new knowledge. This connotes picking a unique topic and engaging with research on it in a formative way.

Yet, while that criteria may be fairly obvious to those of us in Cinema and Media Studies who practice videographic criticism, institutional questions still remain for scholars publishing videographic work that they want to count for tenure and promotion evaluations. How does one make videographic work legible to interdisciplinary faculty? How do faculty committees perceive the value of non-traditional scholarship like videographic work? How is this work assessed qualitatively and quantitatively? In order to begin to answer them, here we provide two accounts of how we each successfully navigated our tenure and promotion cases with portfolios that included new and innovative non-traditional scholarship. Drew teaches at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, a college serving predominantly first generation and non-traditional college students. Kevin teaches at Queens College, a liberal arts school with under 20,000 students that is part of the City University of New York, the largest urban university system in the U.S. They are both also co-editors at *[in]Transition*.

PART ONE: THREE LESSONS

Drew Morton

Lesson #1: Own it Early

When I was an ABD in UCLA’s Cinema and Media Studies program during the 2011-2012 job season, I applied for close to one hundred jobs, scored a handful of phone interviews, and ultimately ended up with one campus visit and one job offer at Texas A&M University-Texarkana (TAMUT). I had limited myself to two types of job postings: Transmedia/New Media scholars and generalists

who could teach some form of related practice. Somewhat to my surprise, I seemed to gain more traction in the second area and the job posting at TAMUT was no exception.

I cannot remember many of the specifics of my phone interview, but I do remember speaking about the pedagogical importance of bridging theory and practice and teaching through doing. Members of my hiring committee— some of whom sat on my eventual tenure committee —told me this was significant at the time, as the Mass Communication program had a legacy of being technically oriented and they wanted to pivot towards a more traditional Liberal Arts education without alienating the University’s various stakeholders. When I came in for my job talk, I essentially did a 50/50 split between showing “Comics to Film” as a form of introduction and reading my dissertation case study on *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* as an elaboration on the ideas I had been exploring five years earlier. The multimodal presentation made an impression, partially because the committee and attending faculty and administration had never seen a videographic work before but also because they could see how I was bridging the two modes of scholarship—non-traditional and traditional—into a potent combination of theory and practice that could potentially be used in the classroom to prepare our Mass Communication students for the 21st century.

My first piece of advice to others is to advocate for videographic criticism early and often as a valid form of scholarship and research. Talk about it in your cover letter and your research plan and showcase it during the interview process. If you are interviewing at a teaching institution, tie it back to the evolving job market—which increasingly asks job candidates for a certain level of software proficiency and soft skills—and describe how production exercises make theoretical subjects more tangible. You will inevitably be asked questions about the format, perhaps even asked to define it if you are interviewing for a job at a teaching college or a program with a larger emphasis than Cinema and Media Studies (TAMUT checked off both those boxes). I would also advise those on the market to be attentive to the reactions to this. A few years ago, when I interviewed at an R1 University That Shall Not Be Named for a theory and practice position that specifically asked about videographic criticism, the first question I was asked was “What is your second book about?” This set off alarm bells, as the position announcement seemed to ask for a non-traditional practitioner, but the questions suggested that the faculty only favored traditional forms of scholarship. Needless to say, it did not work out. Broaching the topic early helps both parties understand one another’s expectations and intentions.

Lesson #2: Keep Owning It

Advocating for videographic criticism and trying to gauge and shape expectations is an ongoing necessity. Departments inevitably change when senior colleagues retire, junior faculty jump ship for greener pastures, and Deans and department heads shuffle around like deck chairs. This occurred at TAMUT shortly into my second year. When I arrived at the University in Fall of 2012, I took a bit of a breather with regard to my research. I was also thrown into the frying pan of a 4/4 teaching load with a bunch of new course preps, during which time I was only able to write a few book reviews and to start revising my dissertation into a monograph. I tried to take advantage of my University's emphasis on teaching over scholarship (more on that in a moment) to start working on videographic criticism again and decided to adapt a draft of a rejected journal article into "From the Panel to the Frame: Style and Scott Pilgrim" (2013). While doing so, I openly lamented that there was not an appropriate venue for its publication. My colleague in the English department, Doug Julien, encouraged me to see my position as allowing for a greater degree of intellectual freedom and persuaded me to try to start a peer reviewed journal dedicated to the format. By the end of spring 2013, I had approached Avi Santo and Jason Mittell about involving MediaCommons and we quickly teamed up with Catherine Grant, Chris Keathley, Will Brooker, Chris Becker, and the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* to launch *[in]Transition* in March of 2014.²

The fall after the launch of the journal, my University hosted an awards ceremony designed to celebrate faculty scholarship. I submitted my work with *[in]Transition* for an innovative scholarship award and was a bit surprised when I was not nominated by the committee (which notably, in an effort to keep the awards objective, did not include any colleagues or administrators from my department or college). I was told after the fact that the committee did not fully understand what videographic Criticism was and did not know why an online journal—featuring a unique form of open peer review—was particularly valuable. Needless to say, my University, like any other, suffers from the presence of disciplinary silos. I tell this anecdote to remind my junior colleagues that no matter how much the continual advocacy for our work can be painful, awkward, and ring of narcissism, it is unfortunately often necessary. As my colleague Doug told me after the fact, when you're advocating for your scholarship and your tenure, you need to know your audience—an

audience that does not stop with your departmental colleagues—and craft your narrative appropriately.

The next semester, I volunteered to do an Honors colloquium on my work. In the talk, I traced the different rhetorical histories within the format from argumentative documentary filmmaking and essay films to the poetic and the avant-garde, I walked through a couple of my own works to provide illustrations of these traditions, and I provided a couple useful tips and exercises for those who might wish to get started. It is now a talk I have given at different universities all over the world, typically when departments want to explore or justify why videographic criticism should be a part of their curricula. The next year? I was named our University's Scholar of the Year. Needless to say, you have to be your own advocate and keep doing it.

Lesson #3: Protect Yourself

As previously noted, TAMUT is a teaching college and the emphases in its annual reviews and tenure and promotion reflect that. When I was hired, I was told by my colleagues that I would “unofficially” need one article to successfully make my tenure case. At this point (2012-2015), we did not have specific criteria for what did or did not count as scholarship. Looking back at my first annual performance review, my Dean recognized the value of the field of videographic criticism and the steps we had taken at *[in]Transition* to legitimize it, writing “Because the venue for the visual essay—one of Dr. Morton’s scholarship contributions - has not been addressed in the academic community, he and his colleagues around the country are establishing an organization and an online journal to establish a forum for acknowledging such efforts.”

In September of 2015, because the University was rapidly growing and evolving, our college was tasked with forming a committee to author guidelines for Tenure, Promotion, and Mandatory Fourth Year Review.³ During the process, each department was asked to propose reasonable guidelines for their disciplines on what constituted scholarship. My department contributed a list that included a book, an edited anthology, a textbook, an article in a peer reviewed journal (print or online), a book chapter, an invited creative work (a play), or “a juried, curated, and/or peer reviewed creative work (i.e. video essay, a film, an exhibition).”⁴ At the time we submitted the list, I do not recall any

pushback from colleagues or the administration on any of those examples and it was ultimately approved.

That does not completely allay a tenure-track faculty member's fears—at least not when you are as prone to imposter syndrome as myself. By the launch of *[in]Transition* in 2014, I was convinced that my tenure case was on solid ground, given my annual performance reviews. While this process can be somewhat of a headache, I appreciated it because I always knew where I stood with the administration. It also made the logistical process of applying for tenure and promotion much easier because I was essentially doing it as I progressed.

However, I did not want to hold my research output solely to the criteria provided by my present employer. I wanted to stay competitive in case I wanted to move to another school and also because I like a project. I took on the working schedule of one of my favorite filmmakers—Steven Soderbergh—and adopted a one-year-for-me, one-year-for-them model to balance my non-traditional and traditional scholarly output to hedge my bets. I spent one year adapting my dissertation into an academic monograph and I spent the next one making four of five videos. I also tried to balance the output of those videos in between more intellectually robust, argumentative works like “Free Will in Kubrick’s *The Shining*” (2013) and more poetic exercises that taught me more about the software and the aesthetics like “Cross-Cut” (2014). I have found through my editorial role at *[in]Transition* that there are unexpressed prejudices about what the format should look like, with some lamenting the use of voiceover narration as being too confining and others seeing poetic works accompanied by robust written statements as being intellectually undercooked. Part of my rationale for taking this approach to my videos was to walk the tight rope between the poles of the argumentative and poetic because—as a founder and co-editor of *[in]Transition*—I could not publish my work within our journal. Up until recently, we had an editorial agreement that it would be best to avoid the appearance of nepotism and conflicts of interest and that we should look elsewhere to publish. Therefore, I made videos that could split the difference and be curated both by popular outlets like *Press Play* and by scholarly journals like *NECSUS*.

As much as I think videographic criticism counts as a valid form of scholarship, I would never advise someone to stake their entire career—be it at the level of job market or tenure and promotion—on it. There are simply too many external variables to account for and, given the competitive nature of the academic job market, it is imperative to have an ace or two on your C.V. in case you want to

pivot from a theory and practice gig to something different. I think both Kevin and my paths to tenure reflect that. I have yet to see the videographic equivalent to an academic monograph (Jason's videographic book on *Breaking Bad* seems to be on the horizon), but I do think an openly peer-reviewed submission at *[in]Transition* is given the same weight as a journal article.

In my fourth year, I was asked to submit a portfolio for the pre-tenure review process. Given my position in my department, which had been newly formed and did not have an Associate Professor with tenure on our roster, my pre-tenure committee largely consisted of colleagues from related Liberal Arts disciplines. After the aforementioned, I wanted to make sure I produced a portfolio that was geared towards readers outside of my silo. While our pre-tenure and tenure reviews are not subject to external evaluation, I asked colleagues like Jason Mittell and Henry Jenkins to write recommendation letters to the committee on my behalf. These letters of recommendation put my videographic work in the necessary context for the pre-tenure committee. The authors wrote about how they had used my work in the classroom and what made my work unique. As Mittell wrote, "The videographic work that he has produced is quite admirable, blending explanatory argumentation with an aesthetic sensibility that marks his own style and voice in this emerging format." Jenkins described the same work as helping create a "gateway to a larger public" and applauded my "creative vision and intellectual leadership." Moreover, my earlier practice of posting drafts and revisions of videographic works in progress was often cited as a helpful gesture akin to a mentor text. When I entered pre-tenure review the year after these guidelines were drafted, my committee cited my videographic work as establishing a "successful track towards tenure and promotion," a sentiment shared by my Dean who wrote "Based upon the current efforts of Dr. Morton in the area of scholarship, I wholeheartedly support him in the area of research."

By the time my formal tenure case proceeded, the makeup of my committee was radically different because of retirements and newly tenured faculty members. That was a blessing because my final committee consisted of more English faculty who more easily grasped the work due to our interdisciplinary overlaps. My case was significantly aided by my chair Doug Julien, who had earlier encouraged me to use TAMUT's tenure requirements to do something unique, which led to my involvement in founding *[in]Transition*. The tenure committee's letter of recommendation for tenure and promotion notably draws upon the journal's awards as external validations of the value of the work, notably SCMS's Anne Friedberg Award of Distinction, which was received in 2015.

The Provost, upon review of my tenure binder, also utilized these external validations as a means of making a case for my work, focusing on my invited presentations at universities all over the world. In spring 2018, I was officially awarded tenure and promotion to Associate Professor by the Texas A&M University Board of Regents.

While writing this, I asked my committee chair, Dean, Provost, and President a couple questions about what may have happened behind the curtain on my tenure case to see if my side of the analysis was on the right track. Del Doughty, my Dean for the past four years or so (he was not my Dean during the pre-tenure process, but he was during the formal T&P process) said that he never had any concern about the validity of videographic criticism as scholarship. “It’s a form that makes sense, especially in your field. I see it as a lecture-article hybrid made possible by technology.” He also elaborated and said that he saw value in both the poetic and argumentative pieces and “was pleased to see the range of possibility.” Notably, Del was less keen on weighing external validation in his decision-making process because it ultimately “has more to do with the awarding group than the work itself.” My Provost, David Yells, said the work, regardless of if it was argumentative or poetic, “seemed novel and substantive. I did think it qualified as scholarship...and I tend to defer to subject matter experts [on that].” David, unlike Del, found the external validation helpful because it provided “good evidence of the scholarly nature of the work and how it could contribute to the discipline.” So, in closing, bring your videographic work to the table early, remind your colleagues and administrators of its value, highlight its pedagogic potential, protect yourself by writing traditional scholarship and varying the types of non-traditional scholarship you produce, and bring your case over the finish line with those pieces of external validation (remember, *[in]Transition* is openly peer reviewed for a reason!).

PART TWO: FRAMING THE LABOR OF VIDEOGRAPHIC SCHOLARSHIP

Kevin L. Ferguson

Successful videographic scholarship simultaneously uses the tools and the context of its object of study; that is, the audiovisual texts and techniques that are studied by the videographic critic are themselves used as the means to perform this analysis. Unlike simply “translating” an argument made in written form to a videographic one, videographic criticism requires an attention to the advantages and limitations of videographic rhetoric. Videographic criticism is work written about and with audiovisual materials, not simply scholarly criticism disseminated “on video.” This might be an obvious place to start, but it is an important distinction to stress because it undercuts the misperception that evaluating the scholarly merits of videographic criticism can be done by seeking equivalencies to traditional written scholarship: how many minutes of videographic criticism are the same as 1,000 words of scholarly prose?

It would also be a misunderstanding to conflate videographic criticism with the illustrated lecture or YouTube explainer or to associate it with entertainment rather than scholarship. To explain to non-practitioners, such as tenure reviewers, the distinction in value between illustrated lectures or supercuts that merely describe or illustrate media versus those audiovisual works that create new scholarly knowledge requires making visible the labor behind videographic work. Desktop documentaries frequently do this by virtue of their form, ancillary written process statements can do this, even statements of teaching philosophy can do this. However it is achieved, it is important to make this labor visible, not only for non-practitioners unfamiliar with the technical and intellectual challenges, but also as a rhetorical strategy to make scholarly arguments clearer and more forceful. More explicitly, as with the online teaching that many scholars found themselves suddenly thrust into during the COVID pandemic, this kind of work requires a secondary awareness of how digital contexts inform and transform traditional modes of pedagogy, and how students must be taught to recognize how the work they do in digital environments carries additional rhetorical values they need to attend to.

Outside of disciplinary concerns and questions, there are real institutional questions for how to account for videographic criticism for tenure and promotion purposes. Fortunately, this is not unique to videographic criticism; for example, much work produced by scholars in the digital humanities

sits outside the traditional framework of the scholarly article or academic book. Producing an open-source database, a research website, a digital edition of a text, or a historical geospatial map are all common forms of digital humanities scholarship. As with videographic criticism, in arguing that these kinds of contemporary, digital scholarship practices should count for tenure and promotion, the point is not to draw equivalences between the forms—how many database entries are equivalent to 20 pages; how many minutes of videographic criticism are equal to 10,000 words—but rather to point towards the basic questions any scholarly community asks itself when addressing work: does it produce new knowledge? does it engage with other relevant scholarship? does it appear in a respectable publication? how do other experts in the field assess this work? By considering these kinds of questions, videographic critics can refute the false equivalency of translating forms of scholarship that would be ludicrous in other humanities contexts (“how many words is a jazz composition equivalent to? does an oil painting have a thesis?”). While there are a variety of important forms of scholarship that sit between the traditionally academic and the popular/commercial, in the context of making tenure or promotion cases legible to those in other disciplines, I believe it important to avoid using another discipline’s metrics to frame the scope of one’s work.

The first of the two questions I asked above (“does this produce new knowledge and is it engaged with the wider field”) are intrinsic to all forms of scholarship, and successful videographic scholars should be able to answer these directly through their work. The second two (“what is the relative importance of the site of publication and what do other respected experts think of this work”) are quite often outside of one’s control, but are the questions that need to be articulated for tenure and promotion reviewers. They tend to be more opaque to others not in the field of media studies, who are unaware of the current scholarship or field’s venues of research. And importantly, they tend to carry biases that are often implicit, even with (or because of?) blind peer review processes. In my case, for example, I needed to explain to my chair why some journals were more prestigious than others, which journals were associated with scholarly societies, and the relative merits of my publications. But I also know I was advantaged in that process, since my chair and dean were supportive and invested in helping me through the tenure and promotion process. By framing my intellectual labor in terms of its position in the subfield, my chair showed me how to argue for its worth in broader terms outside of the specific mechanics of videographic criticism.

Another successful strategy was to place my work in the larger frame of the digital humanities, where describing process, failure, and replicable data are all disciplinary norms. The Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) endorses a rough affiliation between videographic criticism and digital humanities, sponsoring a scholarly interest group (SIG) that combines the two. Initial conversations around the formation of that SIG focused on the overlaps and differences between the two fields, with the awareness that a somewhat unwieldy name would help recognize disciplinary difference and overlap and allow as many to be involved as possible. While there is a variety of work that fits in one or either or both categories, almost all successful videographic criticism should claim a place in the digital humanities.⁵ Framing my videographic work in the context of the more recognized discipline of the digital humanities no doubt helped evaluators see its value. This in turn helped me create a more coherent line connecting my published scholarship, pedagogy, and conference presentations. Additionally, other recognizable markers of academic validation that reviewers could rely on were conferences, the concept of peer-review, and speaking invitations. I showed videographic work at a few SCMS conferences, which accepts videographic work as equivalent to oral presentations. The award-winning *[in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies* and the older *Screenworks* are both recognized leaders in publishing videographic work, and both emphasize their peer-review process, which is familiar to all academic disciplines. I had brief write-ups in popular online publications such as *The Huffington Post* and *Hyperallergic*. Last, giving invited talks about my work at the Graduate Center, for other Queens College departments, at Middlebury College, and at the Barry R. Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema established that my work was of interest to a wider community.

While there are clear guidelines and milestones for tenure and promotion at my institution, there are much less clearly articulated guidelines for how to evaluate non-traditional scholarship. In my case, that conversation took place more at the level of my department chair, whose annual evaluation letters to the dean shaped the larger sense of whether or not I was proceeding sufficiently. In many of these conversations my chair asked me to articulate the value of my work (although, since he is a medievalist, it was equally important that I explain to him the relevant importance of academic journals outside of his experience). As a junior scholar, I was unprepared for this, but it was a useful exercise in succinctly describing the value of my work to outsiders. This was even more important

as I was not necessarily hired on the strength of my digital work. So, while it was soon clear that I would be including nontraditional work in my tenure and promotion file, it was also clear that I would need to give context for this work, so that my chair could best frame my case to others. In discussing how my videographic work could be assessed, my chair emphasized two primary questions: what was the reputation or “impact factor” of the journal and how would the anonymous external reviewers assess the quality of my work? Thus, as with traditional written work, publishing in the best journals in the field is more important than many publications in lesser-established journals. It was easy to show how *[in]Transition*’s peer-review process and affiliation with SCMS conferred reputational status on that journal. The second crucial component was identifying strong outside reviewers that could speak to my work; my school (Queens College, CUNY) asks that we submit suggestions, while the personnel and budget committee also solicit names and eventually identify potential reviewers drawing from both lists. So, while it was not explicit in the expectations for tenure, my videographic work was essentially treated the same as a print scholarly article, with the primary consideration being not the form of my scholarship, but the publication’s stature in the field and the evaluation of anonymous external reviewers.

While I had initially wanted more formal clarity about how nontraditional work would count, getting a larger perspective on tenure at the college made me rethink how effective such guidelines would even be. As I was beginning to prepare my tenure materials, the college instituted pre-tenure workshops led by the dean. These were popular, drawing a large number of participants and successfully clarifying much of the behind-the-scenes process. Most importantly, from a siloed arts and humanities perspective, it was helpful to learn more about the disciplinary norms of other departments. This in turn gave me more context in which to think about my work. In my department, English, the peer-reviewed academic book has of course been the standard, along with the expectation of peer-reviewed journal articles and conference presentations. Teaching and service are also valued. But it was clear that there was room for flexibility in scholarly work, so long as its value could be made clear to the different faculty that would be reviewing my case.

Having said that, I did have a fairly strong case even outside of my videographic work. I had a long service record including serving on departmental and college-wide committees, the Academic Senate, and running our writing across the curriculum program. I had a traditional academic book published, scores of conference presentations, and thirteen non-videographic peer-reviewed journal

articles or book chapters. But, interestingly, when I recently asked my chair about this, he said that if anything, my videographic work was what distinguished my scholarly contribution more than the traditional work. It was received enthusiastically and was seen as exciting by people outside of Arts & Humanities. It is clearer to me now that videographic criticism and other digital humanities-informed scholarly practices should be assessed in relation to tenure and promotion less for their format and more for their impact. Good scholarship is good scholarship, and there is a growing body of practitioners to attest to that, to provide feedback, to support new work, to encourage new efforts, and to promote and normalize videographic criticism.

CONCLUSION: NEW AVENUES

As we were finishing the initial draft of this article in January of 2020, the program for the annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference was drafted and the various Scholarly Interest Groups (SIGs) were asked to sponsor panels. When we put out a call for sponsorships to the Digital Humanities and Videographic Criticism, we were expecting the usual slow trickle of submissions.

Needless to say, we were stunned by the relative geyser of responses we received, many of which were based around panels devoted to videographic criticism and topics like fan vidding, voice over, the essay film, and even one encouraging videographic approaches to Television Studies. Moreover, many of these panels featured a diverse lineup featuring both junior and senior scholars and practitioners. While it deeply saddens us that the conference had to be cancelled this year for all the right reasons, we hope these works find homes in the coming year, be it in the digital pages of *[in]Transition* or at the 2021 SCMS Conference. We are excited to explore these new avenues and learn from our colleagues about where they think the field should go next.

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1. “Contribute to *[in]Transition*,” *[in]Transition*, publication date unknown, accessed July 8, 2020, <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/how-it-works>.

2. A full account of this can be found in the livestream video footage from our SCMS Workshop “Visualizing Media Studies: The Expansion of Scholarly Publishing into Visual Essays” (March 2014) found in the aforementioned van den Berg and Kiss ebook, episode 17 of the *Aca-Media Podcast* co-hosted by Chris Becker and Michael Kackman (September 2014), and in the Chris Becker edited “In Focus” section found in *Cinema Journal* 56.4 (Summer 2017).

3. Texas A&M University-Texarkana Collect of Education and Liberal Arts: Guidelines for Tenure, Promotion, and Mandatory Fourth Year Review,” September 2015, https://www.tamut.edu/Academics/Colleges-and-Departments/CASE/pdf/CELA_Guidelines_Tenure%20and_Promotion_FY_16.pdf.

4. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

5. See Jason Mittell, “Videographic Criticism as a Digital Humanities Method,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, eds. Matt K. Gold and Lauren Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-f2acf72c-a469-49d8-be35-67f9ac1e3a60/section/b6dea70a-9940-497e-b7c5-930126fbd180>.