

The value of openness in e-relationships: using Nonviolent Communication to guide online coaching and mentoring

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as a way of developing the openness needed for successful communication in e-mentoring relationships. Using a case study approach research was undertaken with students participating in an online mentoring module that forms part of a Masters degree at a British university. The module involves students in ‘meeting’ and working online, via e-mail, with a mentor whom they have never met face-to-face. From the research collected to date it is possible to conclude that there is evidence to suggest that the use of NVC, with its focus on feelings and needs, encourages trusting personal relationships characterised by openness. The NVC process appeared to obviate many of the communication issues, such as silence and the affects of a limited sensory environment, that have seen to be restrictive in the development of online relationships.

Key Words: e-mentoring, Nonviolent Communication, silence, loss of sensory experience, openness, clarity of expression

Introduction

A number of authors have described how technology has opened doors for a radical rethink of traditional working relationships (Clawson, 1996; Woodd, 1999; Guy, 2002, Goss & Anthony, 2003). Guy goes so far as to suggest “technology is altering the nature of human relationships, particularly mentoring relationships, in fundamental ways” (2002, p.27).

This suggests that, although the purpose of online, or e-mentoring, may remain the same as traditional mentoring, the way in which the relationship is conducted is quite different and requires adjustments to be made to communication styles. Clawson indicates the difficulties that email presents for communication: “The keyboard seems anonymous and encourages us to be more direct, while the difficulty in interpreting on the other hand encourages us to be cautious” (Clawson, 1996 p.8), while Oravec (2000 p.123) identifies how a high level of comfort with computers may serve to “lock individuals into certain modes of e-mail exchange (for example, sending terse, unedited messages instead of more carefully considered ones).”

This paper explores the use of Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2003) as a way of developing the openness needed in order that people can begin to drop their masks and be more explicit, in the way that Clawson suggests. Case study research was undertaken with students participating in an online coaching and mentoring module that formed part of a Masters degree at a British University. The module involved students in ‘meeting’ online

with a coach-mentor whom they had never met face-to-face and beginning to form a relationship using the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) model to facilitate the process.

Parsloe and Wray (2000) have noted that there is no consensus yet on terminology in the field of coaching and mentoring. Traditionally mentoring has been about the transfer of knowledge or information from a more experienced person to a less experienced person (Levinson *et al*, 1978) and certainly the imparting of knowledge about the NVC model by a university tutor could well fall into this category. However, there was also an element of coaching evident, in that students were encouraged to think about and find solutions to the issues for themselves. We therefore, recognise the overlap between mentoring and coaching, but for the purposes of this paper online helping relationships are referred to as e-mentoring.

E-mentoring is the term commonly used to describe technology assisted mentoring. Other terms are sometimes used. Guy (2002) refers to 'telementoring,' and other terms, such as cyber-mentoring or virtual mentoring, have also been used (Single & Muller, 1999). In this study we are referring specifically to e-mentoring carried out primarily via email.

Stokes *et al* (2003, p. 3) ask whether e-mentoring "as an alternative mode of mentoring" can enable mentoring relationships of sufficient depth and quality so that benefits can be gained. This paper responds to that question and is concerned to explore how a particular communication model, NVC, can be used to enhance online one-to-one relationships to enable deep, productive mentoring relationships to form and so overcome some of the traditional challenges to the e-relationship. After outlining some of the challenges of the e-relationship in the next section, NVC is then considered in more detail and results presented that demonstrate NVC in action in an e-mentoring context.

The Challenge of the E-relationship

Many authors have begun to identify the issues confronting the e-mentor and problems of communicating online (Suler, 2000; Harrington, 1999; Zachary, 2000; Gore, *et al*, 2002; Goss & Anthony, 2003; Clutterbuck, 2004). The most frequently mentioned are: -

- the anonymity of cyberspace that has potential to impede the development of openness and trust in relationships (Sztompka, 1991).
- the transactional nature of e-mentoring that can lead to a shallower relationship (Clutterbuck, 2004)
- the loss of sensory experience (Anthony; 2000)
- misunderstandings caused by unclear language use or long silences (Benfield, 2000)

In the area of online counselling, Anthony (2000) suggests that the e-relationship lacks the subtleties of body language and other sensory input. For example, Anthony has questioned whether Buber's 'I-You' relationship (Buber, 1978) can be sustained in cyberspace:

When the client's communication is reduced to text, the question of whether the Counsellor can understand his or her emotion correctly is crucial to the possible emergence of a therapeutic relationship (Anthony, 2000 p. 3).

Harrington (1999) also describes how email is “frequently challenged as being incapable of support as deep a social contact as face-to-face communication,” and Clawson maintains that “if mentoring is to occur on the Internet, people will have to develop a sense of how much they can reveal about themselves without becoming too vulnerable ...” and will have to “develop a means of building trust and openness without the historic foundations that came from face-to-face conversations” (Clawson, 1996 p.14).

With these limitations of the e-medium in mind, this study illustrates how NVC, with its emphasis on the explicit reframing of conversation and on creating authentic ‘tone’, can facilitate sufficient depth of social contact to support e-mentoring to overcome some of these barriers and challenges to the online relationship.

Nonviolent Communication

NVC was developed by Marshall Rosenberg some 30 years ago, and arose out of his work in the civil rights movement in the United States (Myers, 1998, Rosenberg, 2003). There are now well over 150 NVC Trainers world wide, ten in the United Kingdom, certified to use NVC in their professional work. Their work includes explicit NVC training, as well as coaching, mentoring, mediation, conflict resolution and one to one work, and takes place in a variety of settings such as schools, universities, hospitals and prisons. NVC is, therefore, used particularly in situations when building relationships is key.

NVC provides a framework for expressing affective information, which might be expressed non-verbally in face to face situations; in addition, many of the key differentiations in NVC are ones conducive to good coaching/mentoring practice in their own right. The NVC framework involves expressing ourselves and hearing others by focussing attention on four steps, as follows:

1. Observation - what we are observing, expressed without evaluation or judgement
2. Feelings - what we are feeling in relation to what we are observing
3. Needs - what met or unmet needs lay behind those feelings
4. Requests - the requests we would like to make in order either to stay connected with ourselves and others, or to meet our needs

In practice, these four steps are likely to be expressed more colloquially than this structured list might suggest, but always rely on expressing or recording the observations and feelings and basing needs and requests upon these.

NVC was chosen both on the basis of the authors’ previous experience that NVC supports relationship building in a variety of contexts, and because of its emphasis on the awareness of feelings and needs. We predicted that it would provide some of the missing subtlety and sensory input lost over email. For theoretical grounding, we drew on Watzlawick’s work (1980). He sees communication as having two purposes, one to convey information, the other to define and express the relationship between the participants. Simply put, he stresses the difference in communication between the information-giving part and the affective part. At the time that Watzlawick was writing, he was principally concerned with therapeutic relationships. He argues that, unless first the therapist, and then the client, can translate between the information-giving and affective part, the client will not move on (1980, p.100). On this basis, there are strong grounds for predicting that NVC could support change, in that it could provide a way of translating back and forth between the

information part of the communication (contained in the 'observation' and 'request' parts of NVC) and the affective part (contained in the 'feelings' and 'needs' parts of NVC). Moreover, it was predicted that if a practitioner integrated NVC into his/her communication, there would be a way of making sense of both the information part and the affective part, and to translate back and forth between the two: that is, in Watzlawick's terms, he/she would have learned to metacommunicate (1980, p.40).

Much of the interaction between NVC trainers takes place via email and from this, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that it is possible not only to use NVC to build relationships through electronic communication and provide support, even teach NVC skills, but also to plan training initiatives and to resolve conflicts. In addition, one of the authors, also the tutor for the module, has extensive experience in using NVC in coaching situations, including over email. For these reasons, NVC was chosen as the underlying and guiding process for the development of an online coaching and mentoring module.

Research design

In depth qualitative research was undertaken with three students participating in the pilot of the practice based Online Coaching and Mentoring module being developed as part of a Masters Degree at a British University. The students were all practicing coaches or mentors and met with the tutor, online, over a period of four months. Concurrently, each student mentored a volunteer 'client' online, and also used the WebCT online learning environment to explore issues such as social presence and the use of language that may impact on their online mentoring practice. Throughout the module the tutor modelled NVC in her relationship with students and invited them to test it out for themselves in their own mentoring. A telephone call was used with each student near the beginning of the module, in order to clarify and increase the understanding of NVC. Each student also received a copy of one of the shorter NVC manuals – Myers, 1998.

The research sought to explore whether the NVC process facilitates electronic dialogue in such a way as to develop the openness necessary to allow the coach/mentor and the client to address deep issues and affect client behaviour.

To explore the process a qualitative case study was designed to make use of the variety of data collected during the module. Case study is an appropriate approach for research of this nature since it allows for the rigorous exploration "a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context" (Yin, 1984). The data-set comprised:-

1. Notes on telephone calls to the three students
2. Complete sets of email dialogues with the students, collated over a three month period
3. Students' reflective journals
4. Students' final essays, focussing on e-mentoring issues
5. Students' feedback on the module
6. The tutor's reflections during the module

It was not anticipated that students would be able to fully integrate NVC into their online communications in just this short module. However, the inclusion of a reflective journal as one of the course requirements would go part way to helping students to integrate their experiences and move them towards the 'double loop' learning that Argyris (1997) deems necessary for aligning actual behaviours with espoused theory. 'Double loop' learning requires not only that theories are 'taken in', but that ways of working are reconstructed

through critical thinking processes. Reflective journals have been found to provide a medium for doing just this (Hillocks, 1995).

Right at the outset, each student was asked: “Are you willing to allow us to use all of our interactions with you to research your response to the course?” It was agreed that any references would be made anonymous and that we would share what we wrote about a specific student’s response with that student in order to check the accuracy of any interpretations made. We therefore checked our analysis against the students’ own perceptions and meaning making. This served not only the ethical needs of the research, but also the necessity to validate our findings. We saw this way of working as embodying the values of openness, shared critical responsibility and rational autonomy (Elliott, 1991, p.57).

To make sense of the data, a narrative analysis framework was used (Riessman, 1993). Riessman’s work focuses largely on transcripts of spoken interviews. As the data has been analysed her caveat, “adaptation will be necessary if data consist of written narratives” (1993, p.69), has been borne in mind. Riessman offers three practical models of narrative analysis. The strategies chosen for this analysis are closest to those she ascribes to Ginsburg, in that we have searched for similarities and differences and have sought to illustrate interpretations of the data by quoting verbatim from the source material.

In relation to validation, precise evidence of the way in which we have interpreted the data is provided, so that it may be possible for others to determine the trustworthiness of the study, as they see how our interpretations were produced (Riessman, 1993, p.68).

Research findings

The research data is analysed using the e-mentoring issues identified above as themes to uncover whether NVC can in fact help address the challenges facing e-mentoring. The results are presented as a series of narratives. In order to maintain confidentiality pseudonyms have been assigned to the three students (Patrick, Steve and Yohann). Direct quotations are taken from email communications, journals and assignments, and where possible NVC responses are identified and indicated in brackets and in uppercase.

Openness, trust and clarity of expression

Anthony (2003, p.26) has explained how in e-relationships the use of “careful conversational rephrasing is important to create a recognisable ‘tone’ as would happen in a face-to-face or telephone environment, where the voice could be heard.” Such clarification is an important element of developing the trust needed for a productive mentoring relationship. In this section we review the use of NVC as a means of enabling real meaning to be heard and understood and so increase openness and trust.

Drawing on the research data there are a variety of instances where Steve’s email responses are interpreted as characterising openness and a willingness to share personal information, so that trust could begin to be built. For example, the tutor’s first email to the student group, which included personal information as well as module details, was signed off expressing a Need and Request, in the manner of NVC:

I would like to be sure that you have received this email (NEED): please acknowledge it together with any comments you may have (REQUEST).

Steve then responded by sharing personal information, beginning with this statement:

You know my name as ... but I will try to give you a flavour of the person behind the name and what my interests are.

In his next email, Steve shared detailed information about a coaching situation in which he is involved, demonstrating that, after two emails and one telephone call, he was now willing to share and work on real issues, even highly confidential ones: this, it could be argued, represents a significant act of both trust and openness.

The tutor then selected parts of what Steve had written and translated it into NVC to make it clearer and more explicit. For example, she requested that Steve should turn his judgements into observations. The data from later online discussions shows that Steve was able to use this learning in his work with his own volunteer client:

The trust that I perceive she has placed in me has helped develop an open relationship where I have tried to get her to challenge her current thinking and to seek out the Needs (NVC) that have driven responses in certain situations.

It is clear that Steve believes that NVC facilitates verbal communication. In his module essay, he argues that NVC is not media dependent. He states that NVC is a “highly rich language” and quotes from Myers (1998, p 26) to first clarify NVC:

NVC is a technique based on feelings and how they are driven by our needs being met/ not being met. It seeks to answer the questions:

- *How am I doing?/ How are you doing?*
- *What can be done now to improve my well being?/ your well being?*

I have been able to use the same format and some of the same questions that I would have used if practising this concept during face to face interaction. For example during the course of our interactions my (tutor) used the following as a question:

‘Is there anything I can do to reassure you?’

This question quite clearly falls into the category of ‘What can be done now to improve your well being?’ - this is one of the two questions described. This demonstrates that this technique transcended the media from where it was initially intended for use to another (online) media.

Student Patrick also wrote in his essay:

In terms of the effectiveness of NVC for rapport building, the evidence is overwhelming. A high degree of trust and openness is achieved rapidly.

The ability of the NVC process to build rapport quickly is also illustrated in a journal comment from Steve, following the initial telephone conversation with the tutor:

I was excited about how the session played out. This excitement was generated from meeting the needs of learning and connection. To share how one is feeling with another at any given space in time and be understood by that other, I found to be highly stimulating. This I believe was heightened by the fact that the other was someone who I have never met but someone I felt, that cared about my spiritual growth.

In this same section, he set himself this goal:

Write down three times everyday from today ... how I felt in a certain situation,

which can be interpreted as his fully engaging with the NVC process. He also wrote that he would:

.. need to use NVC as a guide and not a rulebook and to weave the concept into my normal speech patterns.

This we interpret as an astute observation: NVC students typically learn to use NVC ‘classically’: strict use of the four steps: observations, feelings, needs followed by a request. They subsequently move to express themselves with greater fluency and in more idiomatic ways in the way that Steve anticipates.

Loss of “sensory experience”

Benfield (2000) highlights that in face-to-face meetings body language, facial expressions, gaze, physical agitation or lack of it, gives meaning to any lack of formal response, but laments that “the visual audio and tactile cues we take for granted [...] and which we rely on as guides to our action are utterly absent in the online environment.” It is possible to go further than this, and suggest that while we ‘think’ we are attending to the verbal content, in fact, the nonverbal content may give us powerful and often unconsciously held information. Given the lack of those face-to-face cues, the written work can be intentionally supplemented with information we are willing to give about the present state of our internal world. In NVC terms, this would mean sharing our feelings and needs. Additionally, it is possible to invite the client to do likewise, indicating both a willingness to share vulnerably on our own part and an interest in the well being of the other. In addition, providing we can bring them into our awareness, NVC gives the language tools to safely check out any interpretations we have made. The literature substantiates the necessity of such strategies: Brice (cited in Anthony, 2000) identified ‘speech words’ that can be used within email to describe the contact, thus ‘elevating’ textual communication by intentionally indicating their emotional state via annotated script with visual and auditory-equivalent prompts to aid understanding. Anthony writes: “it may be the case that this way of intentionally writing in a therapeutic manner (“when you told me that, I felt...”, “when you said that, I could ...”), may be perceived as counselling ...”. Indeed, elsewhere Anthony (2000 p.4), states that:

Studies of online counselling show that new methods of communicating emotion (in the face of no bodily presence) are essential. This relates to the client indicating their state via the written word [...]

While it is not possible to compensate on email for the lack of ‘visual and auditory cues’ present in face-to-face contact, NVC is demonstrably sufficiently robust to deal with this lack. It has communication structures which, by attending to our feelings, enable us to be very clear about what needs of ours are as yet unmet, and so garner more proactively what might otherwise have only been found out intuitively.

The following are excerpts from an email dialogue between the tutor and Steve that show how they were both able to use NVC to resolve a potentially difficult incident, exacerbated by lack of sensory input.

Steve wrote about one of his clients:

Steve: What were the drivers to him wanting to change?

The tutor replied, reminding Steve to intuit his client's feelings and needs, rather than analyse:

Tutor: I prefer you consider: what are his feelings and needs? (NEED + REQUEST)

Here the tutor is giving Steve written negative feedback, which Steve could have heard as attack. Steve cannot look at the tutor's face or hear her voice to check for clues as to her intention. In fact, Steve vulnerably shares his feelings as follows:

Steve: I feel displeased with myself because I sent the previous mail regarding some work I had been doing with (my client). I felt unhappy when I read your response to that email and specifically felt embarrassed to read that you felt concerned to model this as NVC, as I would agree with this statement whole heartedly. (OBSERVATIONS)

The tutor responds in kind:

Tutor: I am touched, almost teary, reading your email, (OBSERVATION) especially where you wrote: 'Would you be willing to accept my explanation and allow me to restart this process?' (STEVE'S REQUEST). Answer: but of course - go to it!

These excerpts also confirm Rosenberg's (2003) assertion that the more we connect with feelings and needs behind [...] words, the less frightening it is to open up to other people. It is clear from students' emails and journals that all parties were willing to open up to each other (the quote on 'rapport' in the section above on 'depth of relationship' provides an example), another indication that the use of NVC compensated for the lack of visual clues.

Overcoming the transactional nature of the online relationship

Connection is seen as being achieved through the use of the four steps described earlier. Thus in NVC, the client would be encouraged and supported to express his feelings needs, and make requests to meet them. This would not prevent a mentoring relationship from being "explicitly contracted". It would, however, be likely to prevent a mentor, using NVC, from advising or telling a client what to do without being clear and checking that this was what the client was wanting. In our view, through an explicit use of NVC, a client would be supported to get clear those needs that he wanted to meet through the mentoring relationship, and increasingly take responsibility himself for making requests to meet them.

Harrington (1999) includes this kind of 'focus on progress' as indicative of mentoring. However, Patrick wondered whether NVC could support client progress and expressed his concerns in his journal like this:

*I am currently unresolved about the relationship between NVC as a means of expression and the dilemma of **rapport versus progress**. (Patrick's italics and bold)*

This initial concern relating to the emphasis on building rapport at the seeming expense of making progress was also expressed in an online exchange between Patrick and student Steve:

Patrick: Sounds like you've made rapid progress. Despite having a rich sense of presence I was frustrated by the feeling that we were very much on the preliminaries. I found it difficult to move the process on within the spirit and mechanics of NVC. How did this happen for you?

Steve: I must confess some of the flowery stuff was sacrificed in order to get to issues. It was also driven by the learner who was keen to discuss an issue. She did this possibly even earlier than I would have professed and as a result I know less about her than I would like from her describing herself, hobbies etc. I have had to pick up more of this information from the way she writes, from the style, type of language she uses and fill in the blanks reinterpreting the text into a rich communication in my mind. This however leads to assumptions. We are at a stage where she has proposed actions and articulates to me what she believes are the needs driving her responses (I have challenged these for mine and her clarity).

From Steve's response it can be seen that, although there are still 'blanks' to be completed in knowledge about his client, the NVC process has facilitated a speedy entry into meaningful progress, with Steve's client already able to understand the needs that drive her responses to events.

An email exchange between the tutor and Yohann also illustrates the effectiveness of NVC in addressing deep issues and effecting lasting change. The focus for this exchange between the tutor and Yohann was on 'dependency', and part way through the exchange, Yohann asked:

How do you feel when a client is trying to "hit" back, i.e. trying to get you into justifying and explaining yourself, which of course would turn into a fruitless discussion. Because he feels hurt - he is trying to hurt you or becomes sarcastic?

Tutor: Of course sometimes I can get 'triggered' and go up into my head and engage with argument/discussion etc. The more I practise, though, the less I do this. I have also got more experienced at giving myself "emergency empathy" when I feel hurt: this helps me stay with what is going on in me first and then pay attention to what is going on in the other person. I am not able, once triggered, to pay attention to another person until and unless I look after myself: realising this for me was one of the gifts of learning I got from NVC.

Yohann: I have never really thought about looking after myself in a coaching session. I trained myself to detach and not get drawn into the "problem" of the other person - remain in an objective position. Yet after reflecting on this module and reading the NVC book, this position has probably also prevented me from paying attention to the feelings of the other person.

Tutor: [...] what you wrote last seemed to me to be an important insight for you: is this the case?

Yohann: It has been an important insight.

It could be argued that Yohann agreed with the tutor for the sake of agreeing, yet he also emphasised this incident in his journal, noting:

Yohann: I am not able, once triggered, to pay attention to another person until and unless I look after myself.

Silence

Silence takes on a new, sometimes intimidating meaning in the context of the e-relationship. Benfield (2000) identifies how one of the most difficult aspects of e-communication is isolation, and explains how this is exacerbated by the asynchronous nature of the communication, which results in silence which may last for hours, days or weeks. Sometimes the silence might be due to technological failure, but what increases the sense of anxiety and separation is not knowing whether it is indeed a problem with a computer, some form of misinterpretation of the last email, illness, accident or merely boredom.

Two incidents arose during the module that could be termed silences, in the sense indicated above. The tutor's dialogue with Patrick began with a 'silence', resulting from the tutor using an old email address for him. There is no evidence that this triggered anxiety for either the tutor or Patrick, though the slightly delayed start may have had some other, presently unknown, consequences. On the other hand, a telephone call arranged early on between the tutor and Yohann, which failed to happen at the time specified, did trigger distress for Yohann, as characterised by comments in his journal. He stated more than once that he felt angry and frustrated in relation to the tutor's not reaching him as she had said she would. Yohann did not express his feelings directly to the tutor through email. Her notes indicate that she experienced a distance with Yohann after the telephone incident, which continued for about 3 weeks, as though it was possible for his feelings to 'leak out', even over email. This then would be an example of silence being an issue. The tutor opted to insert an additional phone call with Yohann, and encouraged him, using NVC, to express his pain over the missed phone call. It is not clear whether the degree of resolution that happened could have been achieved over email alone, or at any rate as quickly.

Zachary & Daloz (2000) discuss how the four sequential phases of the mentoring relationship (preparing, negotiating, enabling and coming to closure) need to be adapted for mentoring at a distance, suggesting that managing and evaluating the effectiveness of each session, and each phase, should be routine in order to reduce the potential for silence. Thus the steps taken to maintain an effective face-to-face relationship are even more important online. It is our conviction, based on previous experience, that had the remedial phone call not taken place, the remaining dialogue between the tutor and Yohann would have been characterised by silences.

Conclusion

This paper began by highlighting some of the issues and challenges facing the development of e-relationships. The question posed was whether the Nonviolent Communication process could facilitate electronic dialogue to such an extent as to allow mentor and client to address significant issues in appropriate depth.

The study drew upon qualitative research undertaken with a small group of three university students taking part in an Online Coaching and Mentoring module and focused particularly on the interactions between tutor and student that were specifically formulated to promote and express NVC thinking.

The evidence presented demonstrates that NVC does have the potential to encourage trusting personal relationships characterised by openness, and also that the students began to try out using NVC to resolve their own issues. We are less clear, however, as to whether the tutor served as a model in terms of the 'focus on progress' (Harrington, 2003). In relation to the development of the module, it is our resolve to be clearer about creating an environment where students are encouraged to state their own needs in relation to the module, and to see how these might be met. Given the short period over which this module runs, this seems to us to be especially important. In Zachary and Daloz's (2000) language of four e-mentoring phases, it might be concluded that there is a need for the module to address explicitly the third 'enabling' phase, while the remaining three phases, preparing, negotiating and coming to closure appear to have been dealt with to a greater extent.

In relation to the benefits and challenges in developing e-relationships, as highlighted by the literature, NVC did obviate many of them. Silence was an issue for one of the relationships evidenced here and NVC was used to ameliorate the situation as it arose. NVC, focusing on feelings and needs, did, in our view, compensate largely for the 'limited sensory environment' (Benfield, 2000) by providing the necessary 'speech words' (Brice, in Anthony, 2000). However, further research with a larger number of participants might usefully compare how this compensation is explicitly formulated by e-mentors and then interpreted by mentees on the receiving end of the email exchange.

The most noteworthy indication of NVC's ability to facilitate electronic dialogue is illustrated through the speed at which in-depth relationships were forged with students, thus allowing them to address significant mentoring issues in the online relationship.

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