



Now on Teacher Voice

After the Story's Out

In this episode of Teacher Voice, teachers talk about what happened for them after their writing was published. This podcast is featured in the Fall 2019 issue of *Kaleidoscope*, hosted and produced by Brittany Franckowiak.

Kirstin: You know, I think that it's a relatively new idea that [classroom] teachers can hold knowledge in published articles, that they can hold this information set and that they can share that information set with other people. I certainly couldn't have imagined, when I was training as a scientist, that the knowledge that I would develop from the classroom would be so deep and so, so useful, right? That I could leverage all this knowledge so powerfully. The stories of people working with others and learning things, they're not new ideas. But I really feel that the way that we are now sharing stories and the way that we are learning from each other, as teachers but also as human beings, has really accelerated and changed in interesting ways.

(1:03) **Brittany:** Welcome to Teacher Voice, the podcast dedicated to bringing you stories by teachers about teaching.

Teachers tell stories about their content, about their students, about their communities, about themselves and their colleagues and their contexts. Sometimes, this storytelling is motivated by a sense of confidence and achievement, the feeling that we've learned something through our practice that will be useful for others. Some of our stories are driven by emotion, on behalf of ourselves or our colleagues or our students. And some of our stories are driven by crisis and conflict.

As teachers, we hold knowledge, but we are also constantly building knowledge and seeking knowledge. And we tell stories both to understand and to be understood. Making our teacher stories public can be challenging, both in ways that we expect and in ways that we don't. It's an unpredictable process, and sometimes it's frustrating. Sometimes it's rewarding. But it's always urgent.

And when we make these stories public, we can't control or predict their effects.

(2:06) **Brittany:** My name is Brittany Franckowiak. I teach biology in central Maryland. I'm in my eighth year at my school and I'm an associate editor for *Kaleidoscope*.

Beverly: My name is Beverly Stuckwisch. I've been teaching high school math and chemistry in Ohio for the past six years (but it's my first year teaching at my current school), and I am also an associate editor for *Kaleidoscope*.

Kirstin: My name is Kirstin Milks. I teach high school science in Bloomington, Indiana, and I love my job. I'm one of the editors-in-chief of *Kaleidoscope*, and I've been a teacher for nine years now.

(2:40) **Brittany:** Kirstin, I have to say that I've had a lot of respect for you as a teacher and as a writer the whole time I've known you, and I was really surprised recently when you mentioned that you had had this challenging experience with a piece that you had submitted to the *American Biology Teacher*. Can you tell us a little bit about what happened with the story that you published there?

(3:04) **Kirstin:** Yeah, it was probably one of the most intellectually intense times I have ever had thinking about my teaching and my teacher identity.

So as part of our work with the Knowles Teacher Initiative, two colleagues and I—KD Davenport and Becky Van Tassell—worked together to create a lesson series about evolution, and specifically about thinking about understanding tree-thinking. We published this pair of papers in *American Biology Teacher* (we got reviews back and made adjustments based on those kind-hearted reviews). And after those had been out for a little while, we got an email from the editor-in-chief of ABT.

And he said, “We’ve received this critical response to publish. Are you folks interested in writing a response to that response? We’d publish these two papers—one from this author and one from you guys—in the same issue of the journal.”

(4:08) [laughing slightly] I have a lot of science training, [but] evolution was something that I learned—talking about evolution and framing evolution with students—was something that I learned on the job. And I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under my feet.

You know, I’m reading this critical response, and every sentence makes me feel like I know less and less. And I will tell you [laughing] those ten minutes of reading that response, and just pausing, and reading those responses, and pausing—I had to teach afterwards, and [the students] came in and they were like, “Did your dog die?” I was like, “No, I’m fine, I shouldn’t look that upset, [laughing] I’m really sorry, I have some questions that I have to ask myself now based on this email that just came.”

(4:52) So, after I had calmed down a bit and after we had had a chance to meet, the three of us, we drafted a response that, in retrospect, I feel pretty good about.

Brittany: Wait, so what was the actual criticism here? What was it from your articles that this person had noticed and was challenging?

Kirstin: You know, one of the big criticisms from the person who wrote in—and it’s a valid criticism—was that we were using vocabulary (and the ways that we talk about evolution) in ways that are a bit at odds with some of the traditions of researchers who are currently doing evolutionary biology. Which is true. So we looked back through our sources and we said, “Yeah, these mistakes or these misconceptions that you cite are cited throughout all the things that we used from the College Board and PBS and Berkeley. So yeah, you are right, that’s a place where we all need to grow.”

And then the second big thing that was challenging was that this writer was writing in from a tradition of evolutionary biology where you look at all the characteristics that you can about organisms—be it DNA data, physical characteristics, what have you, and you count them equally, you weigh them equally as you think about what those evolutionary relationships back in time for the existing organisms would be, and we had built our activity to prioritize certain data that we know to be more reliable, like DNA sequencing and protein sequences.

(6:26) **Brittany:** That’s really interesting to me. Certainly when I teach this content to my own students, talking about how we prioritize different sources of data has been almost the crux of what I am trying to accomplish when we talk about evolutionary relationships. So I’m just surprised to hear that this wasn’t the case with this particular expert. Like you, I guess I’m wondering if I’ve been mistaken or sort of wrong in my thinking about this, but my gut is that no, teaching students to prioritize these different data sources feels pretty fundamental for me. But I’m not sure I would know how to push back on someone who’s perhaps more credentialed or more authoritative than me as a high school teacher.

(7:14) **Kirstin:** And so the first part was this bit where it was like, “Yeah, pedagogically, there just aren’t resources for high school teachers that we were able to find and use.” And the second part was: “Actually, this is an intellectual difference we have from this well-meaning, kind-hearted person who’s writing in saying, ‘this activity is broken, it doesn’t work the way you want it to work, it doesn’t teach evolution.’”

If you look through those three papers, it looks very clean and neat. We wrote this response, it was pretty measured. We felt pretty grateful to the person who had written in and surfaced this for us. But the stuff that ended up surfacing was all this, like, shame! Shame and frustration and sadness and worry that maybe I wasn’t serving my students.

And I feel like, in most of the rest of my life, I have this growth mindset about myself, and my students, and my teaching, and this was, this was a time when I really had to develop this sense that I was holding knowledge and it was valuable. And I really do think that if we hadn’t been invited to write the thing—the paper that was going to go alongside this critique of our work—I would still feel really awful about it.

For my colleagues (Becky and KD) and me, writing this thing was a way to surface this knowledge that we were holding and to put the critique that came

to us in the bigger context, so it wasn't just "us versus the critique." It was, in fact, a bigger picture of scientific thinking and also resources that are available to high school teachers.

(9:02) **Brittany:** Interested that you used the word shame when you were talking about your first pass at reading this critique that was sent along to you. Why did you choose that? Why does that word come to mind to you?

Kirstin: I've been reading a lot of Brene Brown, and I think if you had asked I would have stumbled along and not been able to describe it. But Brene Brown's new book particularly, *Dare to Lead*, has been really instrumental for me this year in being able to say my feelings. And I know now what shame feels like for me. It's the thing where you become very, very narrow and there's a weight in your stomach. That's the thing for me.

I don't usually think of myself as somebody who is full of shame or vulnerable. And now, as a grown-up with a couple more years of teaching and learning and being a grown-up I have a better sense of that feeling as an instructive personal tool, right? Here I am, I published two papers, I'm feeling really good about this work, feel awesome for giving back to Knowles, because they've given me so much, and here's someone saying, "Oh no no no, you didn't really understand the things you did, did you." And that didn't really square with what I wanted for my own learning or for my classroom. And it was really vulnerable.

That makes me think about the piece that Bev wrote that came out recently in *Kaleidoscope* about her school and about her experience in having difficult and very vulnerable conversations. Bev, do you want to tell us a little bit about that experience?

(10:39) **Beverly:** A colleague and I helped some students start a gay-straight alliance. We had expected some opposition or some misunderstandings within the community and within the school because it was the first club of that kind in that school, and really in that community as well.

We felt like we didn't have a lot of power to make change, I guess, because we were both new teachers in the school and some of the only teachers who didn't grow up in that community and go to that school as a student themselves.

Kirstin: One thing I didn't know about this story was that you and your colleague were both folks who didn't grow up in this community.

Beverly: I realize now that's not something that I really mentioned, but I think that made us feel like we were outsiders in terms of being able to make change at the school and if we did try to make waves, as someone might say, that it wouldn't be viewed in a positive light. Which I think was another assumption I made, because I'm not sure that ended up being true.

(12:17) So when we did end up having some challenges with the club, I started to get really frustrated and I started to make a lot of assumptions about my colleagues, about the community, about some of the other students that I was teaching, and I decided to start writing about it just to share my frustrations and more or less to vent with my inquiry partners at Knowles, and when I shared it with them, that's when they brought up to me that, "hey, seems like you've made a lot of assumptions here. You're assuming a lot of opposition here, you're assuming there's not a lot of support for these students. Some of the things that your colleagues have said, or some of things that have been done, you're making assumptions about what they meant there."

Kirstin: So you take this to your Knowles inquiry group and they look you in the face and they say, "Bev, we are here to support and care for you and we gotta tell you, it sounds like you're making a bunch of assumptions." What happens after that?

(13:15) **Beverly:** We identified a common thread: We were all avoiding difficult conversations. We were friends for a reason, we gravitated to each other for a reason, and we were conflict avoiders. So we decided to read a book together about how to have difficult conversations, and we each planned one major difficult conversation that we were gonna have that we had been avoiding at work. And for me that involved setting up a group conversation with myself, the administrators, any other colleagues at the school who wanted to come, students from the GSA, a parent came, and any other students who wanted to come, just to talk about the purpose of the GSA, how the GSA was viewed in the school and just basically give everybody a time to just air their thoughts, their frustrations, and what they felt like the GSA needed to do to move forward positively.

But I still was really nervous about it, and felt very vulnerable, and because of that I waited until the very end of the school year to do it, because if it didn't go well, we'd have the summer to let it blow over, and if it did go well then we'd have some forward momentum to let it go well in the next school year.

Kirstin: Big scary conversation. So what happens?

(14:40) **Beverly:** It did allow a lot of things to air and I felt like the conversation went really well. It gave students an opportunity to speak, cry in some situations, there were some things that came to light in the conversation that I think for both sides they didn't . . . we were misunderstanding each other.

So, for, example a colleague had said, "Well if there's all this bullying going on in the school or if there are all these things that are making the students feel uncomfortable, then they need to be reporting them" and one of the students flat out said "I don't know how to do that. I don't know how to advocate for myself. No one has ever advocated for me."

Even other very well meaning colleagues reached out to me afterward and said, "I had no idea. I had no idea it was this bad for some of these students."

Kirstin: What were some of the things that unsurfaced for you, misconceptions that you or the kids were holding about this issue?

(15:45) **Beverly:** I legitimately thought that there were teachers in the school who just didn't want the GSA to exist. Who just were like, "this is against my personal or religious or whatever beliefs and kind of just wanted us to go away."

And those colleagues who I had those thoughts about? They came to the meeting, and they voiced genuine concern for the students, and they listened to what the students had to say, and I am willing to admit now, and I admitted in the article, I was wrong about those colleagues. So whatever our differences in beliefs, they genuinely do care about the students, and there were just these crossed lines in communication and how things were being done and we were all just misunderstanding each other.

Do I think everything's perfect now? Probably not. But that conversation I do think made things better, and allowed the group to move forward.

(16:45) **Kirstin:** What a huge learning, right, on your part, and on everybody's part. I want to make sure we check in with you about what the writing process, what the storytelling process, what it was like for you and what you gained from it.

I remember you and I took a walk this summer and we were just getting to know each other, and you surfaced this story for me, and I remember walking back into our shared meeting space just with goosebumps and I was like, "that is powerful stuff, and Bev is like the bravest person I have talked to in a little bit." So what was it like going from "I have this

story and I feel it should be told" to actually telling it and having it out there in the world?

Beverly: I mean it was a long process, right? Because when I talked to you, at that point I already felt like I had resolution in this situation and I felt like I was ready to share this story with others even though it did feel risky. When I first started writing it, when I first started sharing it with my inquiry partners, that was all prior to this conversation, I didn't feel like there was any resolution for the students or for me yet. My first draft, my first couple drafts just sounded really angry and judgemental, and hearing that, reading my own writing, having other people respond to that, is what helped me to realize all those assumptions that I had made. And what helped me realize there are things I need to address, there are things that I'm avoiding, I can't just not talk to my principal because I think there's one thing where I don't like how he handled the situation, when I never really gave him the opportunity to explain to me why he handled it that way, because I was too emotional to listen at the time.

(18:33) And writing and sharing my writing with others is what helped me to work through the situation and push myself out of my comfort zone and ultimately be able to move forward. And if I hadn't gone through those multiple iterations, really it just forced me to think about the entire situation and what I needed to do to move forward and if I hadn't done that, I would still be angry and I wouldn't be able to move forward.

(18:58) **Brittany:** Yeah, I think that you know writing sometimes can be a really powerful way to explore and resolve some of those really strong emotions and move past them in the way you were able to do in your context, really kind of unpack these assumptions and learn some really powerful things about how your community operates and kind of move forward from there.

I, in a moment of frustration, threw together an article about professional development, and it was at a point in my career when I think I was, I don't know, maybe in year six of teaching, five or six maybe, and I was actually at the time, I had a formal leadership role in my building where I was actually, we call it teacher development liaison, so it meant I was basically our building's professional development coordinator. So anytime we had anything going on in our building that was related to professional learning, I would sort of be called in to consult on it or schedule it or facilitate it or pitch it to staff or modify it to meet our staff's needs or something like that. And it was a job that I was excited about and there were a lot of things about it that I really

appreciated but there was a lot about it that was super-challenging.

And so this particular article came out of a day when I was sitting in a professional development, not as a facilitator at that moment but as a recipient [share laughter] of this professional development experience. And it was one of those days where you know it was August and the kids weren't back yet and we had some number of days of meetings prior to the beginning of the school year.

I think literally anyone who's had a teaching job has had the experience of sitting in a meeting and having seven different tabs open on your browser where you're trying to write three planning calendars and, you know, put together a lab schedule and reply to some emails and meanwhile in front of you is this presentation that is ostensibly to do something to improve your instruction but really just at that moment for me was not applicable, not urgent, not in my zone of proximal development, not something I was invested in, I didn't choose to be there, and in this particular case the people presenting it hadn't chosen to be there either—they were other teachers in my district who had basically been “voluntold” by some people higher up to present this packaged thing.

(21:39) **Kirstin:** Can we have a moment, a moment for that word.

Brittany: Yeah, a mini-credit for [Knowles Fellow] Jim Lane for bringing “voluntold” into my life. So we're sitting there with some unenthusiastic colleagues of mine who, you know, it was one of those things where like no one, no one in the room wanted to be there, no one in the room found it a good use of time and yet there we all were, wishing we were somewhere else.

So what I started doing in that time was crowdsourcing from other teachers what makes good PD, because most teachers I think genuinely, especially now having facilitated professional learning for several years, you know, a lot of teachers really love learning, I mean that's why we teach. We are learners, that's our thing, that's what we do, we learn and we support others in their learning, and I had grown increasingly frustrated with the perception that many people in administrative positions seem to hold about teachers. Whenever I interact with them, they seem to have this attitude like “teachers just aren't interested, it's hard to engage their interest in professional learning, that they're not interested or invested in this kind of experience,” and that particular day I just kind of snapped. It's like, look, it's not that I don't like learning, it's just, this is not

learning, what you're offering to me and calling learning, it's not that thing, and I'm not going to call it, I'm not going to treat it like it is learning.

And so in one sitting I just spit out this article about what makes for good professional development, because the teachers that I polled in my various networks, I mean everyone has had really great professional development experiences, we've had those in our lives, in our professional lives, and that's just such a stark contrast to almost all of the programming that is presented to teachers as being PD at the school or at the district level. And so all of that came out in the piece, and, you know, I don't even really think I drafted it. To be honest, I think I got some feedback when I sent it off to *Kaleidoscope*, and I honestly don't think I made the suggested changes; I think I was just like, “no, it's fine.” [Kirstin laughing] I'm not going to mess with it anymore, and maybe that's part of why I'm still angry. Perhaps if I had gone back and like reworked it or recouched it ...

But even now I just reread it recently, when it came up as something that perhaps we would talk about in this conversation, and I still stand by it actually, I don't know that it needs anything else around it. And the reception of it was super-interesting, I sent it to my administrative team and I sent it to the various people in my district who oversee PD and I shared it with my close colleagues and I think I put a copy of the journal out and I emailed people when *Kscope* comes out—and I got a lot of positive feedback from like many angles, my assistant principal was like “this is a great piece, I'm so glad you wrote it, it's so insightful, I agree with everything that's in here.” And a couple of people at the district level were like, “Yeah, we really appreciate your honesty here and yeah, this is exactly what good PD should look like” and yeah, I'm not surprised that you know one 750 word article didn't completely reshape PD in my district. But it didn't. You know, I only spent about another year, I think, in that particular professional learning facilitator position largely because a lot of those systemic constraints hadn't changed and I felt like I was unable to make change in a way that I thought was worthwhile or even be especially effective. Honestly, even at some point [I thought,] “I'm not even sure if my professional integrity is being maintained here in this formal role where the thing I'm being asked to do is something I know is not really respectful of my colleagues' time.”

And I think when other teachers have read the piece and obviously I can't speak for every other teacher who's read it but when other teachers who spoke to me have read it, it's always been very much in the

sense of, “Yeah, you did a really nice job putting on paper what we all know to be true.” I don’t think that this particular article was knowledge creation in any way. I just articulated what teachers have been saying for a really long time in a lot of different contexts.

I think that’s part of the reason why I was a little surprised to put it out there, you know, and to have it be positively received by so many people because in some ways it almost didn’t feel original. It didn’t feel like I was adding anything new to the conversation. I was just saying what teachers already know, and that realization was also frustrating, to realize that not only is this not, this isn’t new knowledge, and putting it on paper is just this act of publishing it, isn’t going to change anything. Teachers already knew this, we’ve continued to know that this is true, and apparently lots of other people also know that this is true, and yet for reasons that aren’t clear to me we continue to have these really unfulfilling PD experiences.

Kirstin: Sure but, I mean, we talked about this a little bit the last time the three of us got together to talk. Bev and I read that piece and we were like, “oh my gosh—we are not alone.” Right? I think you’re underselling this like, this really, really, I mean, nobody, misery does love company. That’s not what I’m trying to say here. I’m trying to say that when somebody articulates something that you’ve been living, when somebody has shown you, you know, we’re at a point in our lives now where I think it’s ever increasingly important we listen to stories from other perspectives, we listen to other stories, other than the stories we live with and the stories we tell.

At the same time, to hear somebody who’s living in a different space and time in the classroom say, “Yes, this is where I am” and for you to say, “Yes, that is where I am too”? There’s something really heartening, and courage-inspiring in that, and that’s actually what I really love about both of your articles, right, is that in different ways they are wholesale act of courage. I can’t imagine the bravery to say, “Here’s this thing that happened, here’s this thing that is happening, and to make sense of it in a way that will be useful to others.” That’s what I really appreciate about both of the pieces that [Beverly and Brittany] wrote.

Brittany: One of the things that’s been in the back of my mind since Bev was talking through her article, her writing experience, is just the sheer diversity of knowledge that teachers have to cultivate in order to do the work that we do every day. The situation of you responding to a critic and thinking, “how do I constructively, like, sort of convince someone that my knowledge on this subject is valid, you know even though my job description is high school

science teacher?” That, to me, is something that I’ve struggled with a lot, in thinking, as you’ve said, “I’ve really worked on developing this knowledge in my classroom.” And it’s frustrating sometimes when that is not immediately recognized by folks who are not in the classroom. And that’s just content, right? And Bev is talking about this whole other layer of, “oh, and because we teach young humans, we have to have, or we should push ourselves to develop, frameworks for advocating for these young humans when they are faced with challenges. And for helping other adults learn how to advocate for these students. And, by the way, interacting with all these other adult humans every day in complex ways.”

And so there are all of these layers: yeah, I have to know the math or the science that’s going on in my classroom and yeah, I should be able to live in this professional community where I can interact around content in interesting and professional ways, but, oh, I also have to be able to navigate these relationships and these conversations that are challenging for whole other reasons. It’s just astonishing.

Kirstin: So, the three of us, we live in this world because we work on the *Kaleidoscope* staff where we’re all saying, explicitly or implicitly, [that] storytelling is a way forward. Right? For all three of us, we’re working in this modality where we really value and we see the urgent need for teachers to be able to tell their stories. Either one of you, like, what value do you see, like, for people, for people telling these stories and getting them out there in the world? These stories about the deep knowledge that we have and that we make.

Beverly: One of the things that I was thinking about recently was there’s always value to sharing these stories that the author can’t anticipate when they’re writing it. Right? So the first thing that I wrote for *Kaleidoscope* was a PD [professional development] review that I personally thought was really boring. I got some funding from Knowles to do the PD, and one of the things that I wrote about in my grant proposal was “If you give me this funding, I will write a piece for *Kscope* about my experience.” And then I didn’t get what I wanted to get out of the course that I decided to take.

So my article more or less talked about that: how I managed to get something out of it and what I had hoped for, what I didn’t get. But I think that was the first professional development review that was published in *Kaleidoscope*, and so it ended up being [an example]. When people wanted to write a PD review, they now had an example to go off of, so it was useful at least for that.

When I wrote about one-to-one computing and my experiences with that, there were benefits to having published that that I also hadn't anticipated. I shared [the article] with my job interview for my new job, and I think it's one of the reasons why I got [my current] job. And I know that the same has been true of other authors who have written for *Kaleidoscope*, they've been shocked with some of the ways that their stories have been shared and some things that people have gotten out of it that they haven't thought of themselves.

Kirstin: And, yeah, and like it doesn't always come back to you, right? Like, I have never told you this before but I was thinking a lot about technology for an unrelated thing at my school and your one-to-one article came out and basically the one important thrust of that article is that we often overlook what we're trying to do in favor of having this fancy tool, and that, the example, and the examples you're giving, that it's reasonable to take a step back and think about, wait a minute, what are we really trying to do here, and this laptop, using a one-to-one laptop, where everybody's working individually on a computer, is that really something we're going to use to approach this problem or this challenge or this goal. And you know I'm one reader, right, it was important to me, and . . . yeah . . . this business about like how the stories go out into the world, and like Kscope is beginning to capture a little of that for our stories, but we definitely don't know where our stories are going and who's getting them, and who's learning, and what conversations are going on even if we don't hear those conversations.

Brittany: I feel like that's very, that's a powerful look at like the small scale reverberations that these stories can have. So like another teacher reads it and is like, "Oh yeah this helps me think about what's going on in my school," or a hiring committee reads it and is like, "Oh yeah now we have some idea about what this candidate is thinking about what's going on in their classroom or their school," and so like that's another useful bit of information, but for me like I get most excited thinking about like really big picture, like, potential impacts of like collective storytelling, and this circles back I think to what I was hung up on before about how like teachers knowledge being validated or not being validated in particular contexts, but too much of the public conversation around teaching and education excludes the actual experience of teachers, I think you're much more likely to find a highly publicized piece about someone who left the classroom after a year, then you are to find, like those viral teacher resignation things, which, which have their place, and I think that they are serving a useful function, but we also have all of these career teachers who have a lot of knowledge and have a lot of insight into the challenges that our young people face and into like effective methods of instruction and into their content and insight into some

systemic constraints that are making our jobs harder or some really cool problem solving that has helped get over some of these systemic hurdles in different communities. And we just, I think the more teachers are putting their voices out there the harder and harder it will be for us to be excluded from those larger dialogues about teaching and learning.

Kirstin: And I am thinking a lot in where we all find ourselves in space and time and culture. What it means to be careful with how we see and view each other, you know, Brittany writing about how we need to value each other's time, and priorities, and Bev, you know, you writing about this uncovering of assumptions that multiple stakeholders have had in this difficult conversation. It really strikes me that there aren't a whole lot of other ways forward other than storytelling. And you know like without this format, without a place where, a space where teachers can make time to like share the humanness behind the things that happen, you wouldn't know that writing that criticism for me was totally terrible and emotional and that I learned a whole bunch from it, right, there's not a discourse in many of the, like, like, very useful publication and ways that teachers get teacher stories that have a place in the world, but there also is this piece about, the humans as teachers, and the teachers as humans, that storytelling gets at that other data does not.

Beverly: That just reminds me about when José Vilson came and talked to us about his book and he was so adamant that you guys need to find time to write, teachers who are still in the classroom need to find time to write about teaching, not just teachers who have left the classroom, or teachers who are now administrators, or teachers who are working in public policy, it needs to be teachers who are in the classroom so we can elevate the voice of current teachers.

Transcription by Kirstin Milks



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