

How Student-Faculty Pedagogical Partnerships Counter Adulthood in Higher Education

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Abstract

Higher education students, formally adults, are nevertheless subject to adulthood. The co-authors of this article—the director of the Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) program and three undergraduates who have worked in pedagogical partnership with faculty through SaLT—discuss how this program counters adulthood on three levels: conceptually, structurally, and personally/interpersonally. We conclude with implications of this work for others interested in creating structures, practices, and relationships that counter adulthood in higher education.

Introduction

Students who join higher education contexts are, by formal definition, adults. And yet, they are often nevertheless subject to forms of adulthood that cast them as children to be directed rather than as partners to be engaged in the co-creation of learning and teaching. In an early discussion of adulthood, Bell (1995) argued that its underlying behaviors and attitudes are based on the assumption that adults are superior to youth and “entitled to act upon young people without [their] agreement.” More recently, writing specifically about higher education, Peseta (in Peseta & Suresh, 2024) asserted that, “mostly, students are kept at arm’s length, treated as people who don’t know things, and usually, they have the least power to change

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or influence...practices because they're not given the conceptual or material tools to do so." These forms of acting upon students and preventing their empowerment mean that the assumption that faculty know better than students what and how those students should learn shapes most student-faculty relationships and most educational practices in colleges and universities. In this article we present and reflect on a program that strives to counter these forms of adultism and affirm an egalitarian approach to teaching and learning in higher education.

A pedagogical partnership program called Students as Teachers and Learners (SaLT) has been housed since 2007 in the bi-college consortium of Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College, two liberal arts institutions in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. SaLT is premised on this definition of pedagogical partnership: "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7). Key to this definition is the phrase "equally, although not necessarily in the same ways." It is precisely the differences of position and perspective that make partnership work powerful—and that counter adultism. In the SaLT program, this partnership work typically takes the form of semester-long, one-on-one partnerships between faculty members and paid undergraduate students who are not enrolled in the faculty member's course. The student partners observe one of their faculty partner's class sessions each week, meet weekly with their faculty partner, and meet weekly in cohorts of other student partners with the first author of this article, Alison, in her role as director of the Teaching and Learning Institute in which SaLT is situated (Cook-Sather, Bahti, et al., 2019).

Contrary to adultism's assumed superiority of older people over younger people, the SaLT program positions young adults alongside older adults as having essential knowledge and respect-worthy capacity. The student partners who participated in the pilot semester of SaLT in 2007, all of whom were BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), were positioned as "holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106) about teaching and learning alongside and in collaboration with their faculty partners (Cook-Sather, 2018b; Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013). After the pilot semester, the identities of student partners diversified, but the commitment remained the same: to co-creating equitable teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, 2022) through drawing on students' identities, experiences, and insights both to affirm those students and to redress forms of harm that equity-seeking students often experience in higher education (de Bie et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, SaLT's basic one-on-one partnership model expanded to include Pedagogy Circles for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, co-facilitated by pairs of experienced SaLT student partners with the goal of supporting dialogue among faculty, professional staff, and students (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023). In particular response to the intersection of the pandemic and anti-Black racism,

we developed Pedagogy Circles for BIPOC Faculty, co-facilitated by experienced BIPOC SaLT student partners (Cook-Sather, Stewart, et al., 2023), intended to be spaces of joy and celebration as well as spaces for discussion of how to navigate predominantly white institutions.

As suggested by the description above, SaLT strives to counter the premises of adultism not by asserting that young adults are superior but rather by arguing that the work of teaching and learning—and, more generally, developing as human beings—needs to be done in partnership. The program operates on the assumption that the experiences and perspectives of both older and younger adults are essential to the creation of equitable, inclusive, and productively challenging teaching and learning in higher education. In short, it strives to replace adultism with egalitarianism.

The co-authors of this article have participated in SaLT in one of two ways: as director of the program, from her primary role as a faculty member in the Education Department and in the Bryn Mawr/Haverford College consortium (Alison), and as student consultants (often called “partners” in other such programs)—paid undergraduates who work in one-on-one or small-group partnerships with faculty and staff (Abyssinia, Brisa, and Abhirami). Alison co-created this program in partnership with students, faculty, and staff in the Fall of 2006 and has facilitated it ever since, supporting the participation of hundreds of faculty and student partners. Abyssinia joined SaLT as a student partner in the Spring of 2023, working in a one-on-one partnership, and since then has worked with two different faculty in one-on-one partnerships and co-facilitated two Pedagogy Circles: one open to all faculty, staff, and students, and one Pedagogy Circle for BIPOC Faculty. Brisa joined SaLT as a student partner in the Fall of 2023 and recently completed her first partnership as of this writing. Abhirami joined SaLT as a student partner in the Fall of 2022, has worked in several one-on-one partnerships, and has facilitated two Pedagogy Circles: one open to all faculty, staff, and students (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023), and one that is centered around experiential learning.

We also bring different dimensions of identity to this work. Alison is a white, middle-aged, able-bodied, cis-gendered woman educator who has worked for nearly three decades in an Education Department in the predominantly white bi-college consortium of Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Abyssinia is a black, first-generation, fourth-year undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College majoring in sociology, with minors in dance and education studies. Brisa is a white, cis-gendered, queer, third-year undergraduate at Haverford College majoring in anthropology and education studies, hopefully with an independent minor in disability studies. Abhirami is a Tamil-Indian American, fourth-year undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College who identifies both with the South Asian diaspora and with being raised in the United States and is majoring in mathematics and minoring in education studies.

In this article we share some of the core concepts we bring to our work in the

SaLT program to offer a sense of the thinkers and practitioners who have informed this work. We then draw on our core concepts and on our own (and our awareness of others') experiences in SaLT to suggest that this program counters adultism on three levels: conceptually, structurally, and personally/interpersonally. We conclude with summarizing how this pedagogical partnership work creates structures, practices, and relationships that counter adultism in higher education.

Core Concepts

The core concepts we bring to this analysis include: reciprocity as informed by the work of Freire (1972) and scholars of pedagogical partnership in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leota & Sutherland, 2020); the culture diamond (Griswold, 2012) from sociology; recognition of students with disabilities as resources (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023); and listening as a central practice (Schultz, 2003).

The core concept Alison brings—reciprocity—is informed by a tenet of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, to which she was introduced more than three decades ago in graduate school. While much of Freire's work has informed Alison's teaching and her facilitation of the SaLT program, most directly relevant to this discussion is Freire's (1972) idea of teachers as teacher-learners and students as learner-teachers working in dialogue and with mutual respect. The sense of reciprocity Alison embraces is further informed by Māori principles to which she was introduced a number of years ago when visiting Aotearoa/New Zealand to give several talks on pedagogical partnership (Cook-Sather 2018a). While there, Alison learned about the Māori principles of *mana ōrite* (the prestige that other people attribute to you; to be the same as, equal) and *ako* (to learn and to teach through a process that is relational and social) (Leota & Sutherland, 2020), both of which inform Alison's thinking about respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility in teaching and learning (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Abyssinia brings the core concept of the culture diamond. According to Griswold (2012), the culture diamond is made up of four different elements: social context, cultural objects, creators, and recipients. One is not more or less influential than the other; rather, all elements interact and inform one another to create culture. The diamond is an accounting device for culture that imposes theories but is not a theory within itself, and you can put arrows on the diamond in any direction. Abyssina sees the cultural diamond as a useful way to analyze the culture of a teacher-centered classroom in comparison to a co-created classroom.

The core concept Brisa brings—recognizing disabled students as resources—focuses on accessibility approached through appreciating the different strengths teachers and students bring to partnership work and to teaching and learning. We have laws and frameworks for accommodation, but what does that look like in reality? Bringing in voices of people who need the accommodations, learning from

them what they actually need, and beginning to rethink the idea of accommodation are all ways student partners can work with faculty (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023). While teachers have knowledge of content, students can provide important insights into how to make classrooms accessible, and student consultants in particular can bring voice to what accessibility could look like (Price, 2011).

Like Alison, Abhirami brings a commitment to reciprocity, but she chooses to foreground listening and empathy through partnership. As Barthes (1985) noted, “Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act” (p. 245). Furthermore, “the act of listening,” as Shultz (2003) argues, is “based on interaction rather than simply reception”—it is “fundamentally about being in relationship to another and through this relationship supporting change or transformation. By listening to others, the listener is called on to respond” (p. 9). At its core, partnership work creates relationships that change traditional student-faculty power dynamics through both listening and empathy. To have empathy, as Rogers (1975) explains, is to “perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one were the person, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ condition” (pp. 210-211). The multiple kinds of listening that inform and are informed by empathy make pedagogical partnership well suited to counter adultism through replacing hierarchy with reciprocity. These forms of listening consider students a key source of information and insight, through which students are respected for their work. There are many different avenues this work can take, but all of them require and draw on the skill of listening, as well as maintaining a balance of empathy while problem solving and engaging in critical thinking.

How SaLT Counters Adultism

Drawing on our core concepts and our own (and our awareness of others’) experiences in the SaLT program, we discuss below how SaLT counters adultism on three levels: the conceptual, the structural, and the personal/interpersonal.

Countering Adultism Conceptually

Viewed through the core concepts Alison brings, the SaLT program invites faculty to be teacher-learners and undergraduate students to be learner-teachers. In these both/and roles, student and faculty partners engage in weekly, semester-long dialogues based on mutual respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) as they reflect on, develop, and revise teaching and learning. SaLT also strives to be a form of “ako in action,” the name of a pedagogical partnership program developed at Victoria University of Wellington in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leota & Sutherland, 2020). Uniting teaching and learning in a single word, ako calls for shared responsibility among teachers and learn-

ers. These two core concepts require and facilitate a reconceptualization of roles (teacher, student) and responsibilities (teaching, learning) that counter adultism.

Viewed through the core concept Abyssinia brings, the SaLT program helps illuminate and shape the classroom, which has its own culture within the higher education space. Typically, professors are in a higher power position, but SaLT student consultants shift the culture. When a faculty member works with a student consultant, it is no longer just teacher and student, but the third participant, a student consultant, and that shifts the dynamic. Considering how culture is produced, we can understand the social context as the structures of higher education, the cultural object as the way the classroom is run, and the student consultant disrupting the arrow from creator (faculty member) to recipient (students) because a student (student consultant) is also a creator. These shifts counter adultism by altering the typical power dynamics and creative processes.

Viewed through the core concept Brisa brings, the SaLT program reorients dominant conceptions of ability and disability to focus on equity. SaLT recognizes strengths that students and teachers bring to partnerships—acknowledging faculty members' content-specific knowledge and students' lived experiences of navigating higher education contexts. Focusing specifically on access, most institutions see accommodations as a legal framework, but recognizing students as informants can shift how both instructors and students understand their relationship to one another and to how to make the classroom inclusive. It is a shift from accommodation for a few students to equity among all as a foundation for learning. All student consultants can be equity advocates. As one former student consultant explains, she can “see injustice and exclusion more readily” because of her partnership work, and also feels greater “agency and power” to advocate for justice (Abbot in Cook-Sather, Cort, et al., 2023). Students with disabilities in particular can be positioned as mentors to instructors (Dollinger & Hanna, 2023) and as those who can help effect a shift “from accommodation culture to equity culture” (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023). Here it is not adults “entitled to act upon young people without [their] agreement” (Bell, 1995) but rather older adults informed and guided by the experiences and expertise of younger adults.

Viewed through the core concepts Abhirami brings, the SaLT program enacts forms of listening and empathy building that counter adultism. Engaging intentionally in the “psychological act” (Barthes, 1985, p. 245) of listening to younger adults, instructors in student-faculty partnerships are “in relationship” (Schultz, 2003, p. 9) with students. Former student consultant Amaka Eze (2019) describes how she moved from listening to responding to leading as she gained experience through four different pedagogical partnerships with instructors, and in the pedagogy circles that Abhirami has co-facilitated, instructors are supported in engaging in “listening, reflection, and intentionality” (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023, p. 213). Empathy in both directions comes from such listening. Undergraduate student partner Muri Marinho Mascarenhas (2022) explains that they “began viewing my

professors with more empathy; many of them were working very hard to improve their teaching and supporting their students as best they could.” Similarly, instructors develop empathy for student experiences through hearing from their student partners, who offer “insight into students’ experiences” that faculty are “not hearing from students enrolled in [their own] courses” (Hirschfeld, 2022, p. 4). Conceptualizing reciprocal listening and empathy as the basis for the relationship of student and faculty partners counters adultism by making both parties’ experiences the focus of respectful attention.

Countering Adultism Structurally

The core concepts we outline above—Freire’s (1972) idea of teachers as teacher-learners and students as learner-teachers working in dialogue and mutual respect; the Māori principle of *ako* that calls for shared responsibility among teachers and learners (Leota & Sutherland, 2020); the culture diamond (Griswold, 2012) as applied to classrooms as cultures; the idea of positioning students with disabilities as advocates for access (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023); and listening and empathy as central to reciprocity in partnership (Hirschfeld, 2022; Marinho Mascarenhas, 2022; Suresh & Rolfes, 2023)—all inform the design of the SaLT program, which then works on the structural level to counter adultism.

The most basic structure the SaLT program offers is an interrelated set of liminal spaces within which older and younger adults can be in dialogue (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). These spaces typically do not exist in higher education, but through SaLT, older and younger adults are afforded time and supported in dialogue by flexible guidelines that foster an exchange that values younger adults’ experiences and perspectives. The weekly meetings between faculty partners and student partners support teacher-learners and learner-teachers (Freire, 1972) engaging in “*ako in action*” (Leota & Sutherland, 2020) premised on listening, empathy, and re-imagining the culture of the classroom.

Within this basic structure of student-faculty partnership, the weekly meetings of Alison in her role as director of SaLT and groups of student consultants provide another kind of liminal space. In this space, Alison listens to and learns from students, and students listen to and learn from Alison and one another. Students are positioned as experts and knowledge holders about educational practice (Cook-Sather, 2023); in the weekly meetings, they practice articulating their knowledge, perspectives, and questions. There are multiple student consultants in each weekly meeting, and they are there to support and affirm one another as well as guide and learn from one another.

Another way in which SaLT counters adultism on the structural level is through its absence of training for student consultants. There is no prescribed form to the partnerships, no specific subject-matter knowledge that student part-

ners are required to have, and no specific pedagogical knowledge they need to develop. Just being thoughtful learners makes these students experts in creating inclusive and empowering classroom spaces. Student and faculty partners build their own structure based on the strengths they bring; structure is created through the relationship, which also refuses the typical lines along which expertise falls (e.g., disciplinary). The assumption is not that younger adults (in the student role) need to be taught by older adults (in the director or faculty partner role) about how to engage in dialogue and partnership. Rather, the SaLT program trusts students to figure out their roles using guidelines and leaning into the support but not following prescriptions regarding what to focus on or how to interact. SaLT values what students bring—their identities, their experiences, their insights, their capacities. Students share these in an orientation and in weekly meetings, but to train would contradict and violate the principles we are talking about here. The guidelines and weekly meetings are structured as support rather than as constraint; our group sessions support troubleshooting, collaborative problem solving, and celebrating what student consultants accomplish in the partnership work. The structure is the space for talking and working together.

Finally, the fact that students are paid for their work is an additional form of countering adultism: students are recognized as those with expertise (Cook-Sather, 2023). Students are being paid to co-create culture (not just offer or gather feedback), in keeping with the culture diamond that Abyssinia draws on to understand her work as a student consultant. When students with experiences of or expertise in disabilities take on this job, they are recognized for expertise based on a condition that is more often cast as a deficit (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023; Brown et al., 2020).

Countering Adultism Personally and Interpersonally

The conceptual and structural ways in which SaLT counters adultism inform and are informed by the personal and interpersonal experiences student consultants have in the program, which counter adultism for individuals and collectively. SaLT's conceptual and structural countering of adultism inform the personal experiences student consultants have in teaching-and-learning-focused relationships between older and younger adults in which both perspectives are not only valued but also essential, thereby affirming what each person brings. Alison often returns to a statement one student offered that captures this sense that student consultants have: being a student consultant “made me feel like who I am is more than enough—that my identity, my thoughts, my ideas are significant and valuable” (quoted in Cook-Sather, 2015). Through SaLT, student consultants are affirmed for who they are and for what they bring to partnership work.

One of the primary ways in which student consultants bring to bear their identities, experiences, and perspectives in is serving as mediators and translators—doing personal and interpersonal work built on internal understandings and enact-

ed through facilitation of relationships. One student consultant describes how she drew on her student identity for this work: “I am often a translator, rearticulating student feedback to faculty members, explaining why I think the students found an assignment unclear or a website confusing” (Cunningham, 2012, p. 2). Other student consultants draw on aspects of shared identity, such as the same first language, to support their faculty partners, as one student consultant explains:

...sometimes [my faculty partner’s] personality didn’t translate very well into the classroom, in terms of humor, and her students thought she was rude. It was [an] interesting experience for me as a partner because she was a Spanish speaker and so was I, and so I understood in a way, but other students didn’t. She would say a joke and I would translate. Trying to say in English what you would say in Spanish doesn’t always work. (Student quoted in Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019)

Still other student consultants speak from their positions as underrepresented on their college campuses but positioned in the SaLT program as those with important perspectives that can contribute to more equitable campuses by supporting the transformation of instructors’ teaching practices. One student consultant reflects:

I am looking at the hierarchy between the professor and the students, and [my faculty partner’s] identity and [the students’] identity, and then there was me, I was the only black person there. ... I remember that being very hard but something we talked a lot about. I remember [my faculty partner] getting a lot from it. Having to change the way he was positioned to listen to students like me and other people. (Student partner quoted in Cook-Sather, Krishna Prasad, et al., 2019)

Because SaLT treats students as adults with contributions to make and professional capacities to build, it contributes to students’ professional development. One student consultant explains how the work affords an opportunity to develop skills through “all-encompassing engagement, transcending information-transfer and activating a fundamental mental musculature of opening up, of leaning into discomfort and the unknown to discover and create common ground through mutual understanding” (Bernstein, 2019, p. 3). Such an experience reflects a personal and interpersonal dynamic that recognizes students as critical thought and practice partners. The core concepts and the structures of SaLT provide student consultants with spaces within which to enact and further develop their professional capacities. As one former student consultant notes regarding pedagogy circles, she “supported many power exchanges amongst faculty, students, and staff and learned how to set a standard of equity and respect for all community members through her facilitator role” (Cook-Sather, Cort, et al., 2023).

Infusing both the personal experiences and the interpersonal exchanges in SaLT is the presence of vulnerability, openness, and honesty. These work against adultism because older adults entrust student consultants with their vulnerability, which shifts the power dynamic. As one student consultant describes: “[My faculty partner’s] trust of me in sharing reservations and roadblocks [about the course

he was teaching] made me trust him in return and make myself vulnerable, too, in sharing experiences and ideas” (Sylla, 2018, p. 5). This is not about the older adult holding all the power; it is, rather, reciprocal vulnerability, which is one of the opposites of power wielding.

Student consultants experience these personal and interpersonal dynamics of the SaLT program differently depending on what they have experienced in education—and, in some cases, partnership—previously. Abyssinia came to partnership work through an already established relationship with a dance professor, and that provided a foundation for the subsequent partnership work she did with faculty outside of the Dance Program. Brisa’s parents are teachers, so she grew up in educational settings, and her parents have talked to her as a peer. This experience contrasts how Brisa has experienced most classroom spaces, but it gave her a sense of partnership that she could bring to her work as a student consultant. And in reflecting on her experience of co-facilitating pedagogy circles, Abhirami and her co-facilitator noted:

Without even knowing us, faculty participants trusted us with their most vulnerable concerns. The trust we had in each other as co-facilitators was something they were able to connect with and draw on in conversation and learning. To be validated for our experiences is incredibly joyful and empowering. (Suresh & Rolfes, 2023, p. 213)

Implications

The ways in which SaLT counters adultism in student-faculty pedagogical partnership also carry over into the ways in which many faculty partners begin to reconceptualize their work with students enrolled in their courses. The relationships that student consultants foster with faculty through SaLT pave the way for faculty to view their courses, classrooms, and pedagogy through the process faculty member Brenda Thomas articulates: “Learning happens through relationship” (Thomas & Sorbara, 2023, p. 212). This relationship is informed in part by getting to know students. As Lauren Crowe writes: “Understanding more about how social identities affect experience in the class has shifted how I seek to understand the student experience in all classes and how I view my own growth as an instructor” (Abraha & Crowe, 2022, p. 8). Similarly, Amy Hirschfeld (2022) notes: “By better understanding the student perspective and experience from my [student] partners, I became committed to transforming my pedagogy to better meet the needs of students and to disrupt inequitable academic power structures,” specifically though looking for “ways to make students feel welcomed and valued in the classroom as their whole selves, fully deserving of flexibility, empathy, and understanding” (p. 1, p. 5).

The arc of the partnership work moves from the young adults in consultant mode, offering their experiences and perspectives, to more confident young adults in a partnership role: collaborating to co-create equitable and inclusive learning

spaces and approaches. Student consultants move from trying to figure out their role with older adults, which contrasts sharply with most of their experiences in higher education, to more of a collaborative relationship through which they are working on shared goals. In short, they move from assisting to co-creating.

Conclusion

Faculty member Tina Wildhagen captures the shift in mindset many faculty who work in partnership experience: “What I have learned through working in partnership with [my student partner] Dionna is that active reflection introduces the possibility for teaching to become the thing that it should be: an ongoing project between teachers and students, open to improvisation, revision, and reflection” (Wildhagen & Jenkins, 2020, p. 7). This rethinking of teaching replaces the forms of adultism that cast students as children to be directed with an understanding of students as partners to be engaged in the co-creation of learning and teaching. Rather than keeping students “at arm’s length” and treating them “as people who don’t know things” (Peseta in Peseta & Suresh, 2024), SaLT affirms an egalitarian approach to teaching and learning in higher education that positions young adults alongside older adults as those with essential knowledge and respect-worthy capacity.

We have discussed the ways that SaLT embraces and enacts core concepts that affirm reciprocity between older and younger adults in teaching and learning relationships, as informed by the work of Freire (1972) and scholars of pedagogical partnership in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leota & Sutherland, 2020). We have also drawn on the sociological concept of the culture diamond (Griswold, 2012), argued for recognizing students with disabilities as resources (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023; Dollinger & Hanna, 2023), and asserted the power of centering listening as a practice (Schultz, 2003) in partnership. In addition, we have discussed the ways in which SaLT counters adultism structurally, through offering an interrelated set of liminal spaces within which older and younger adults can be in dialogue (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017), through replacing training with support that draws on student consultants’ existing and evolving strengths and capacities, and through remunerating the labor in which student consultants engage. Finally, we have discussed the personal and interpersonal dynamics that the SaLT program draws on and fosters, affirming the whole selves that student consultants bring to partnership work, positioning student consultants to bring to bear their identities, experiences, and perspectives as mediators and translators, and supporting student consultants’ professional development.

We hope this discussion of student-faculty partnership as an egalitarian practice will inspire others to develop such programs to counter adultism within pedagogical partnership programs and in the classrooms such programs support.

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