

SEEDS OF SUCCESS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**GREENFIELD COMMUNITY COLLEGE
BY LEO HWANG & LINDA MCCARTHY**

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INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Greenfield Community College (GCC) is located in the beautiful and historic Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts, between the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains and the fertile farmland of the Connecticut River watershed. GCC is known for the caring and supportive attitude of the faculty and staff, academic excellence, and for the broad support it enjoys from the surrounding community (<https://www.gcc.mass.edu/about/>). With an enrollment of more than 3,000 students, Greenfield Community College has been engaged in multiple grassroots initiatives focused on increasing the cultural dexterity of faculty and staff, however, the large scale adoption of data to inform decision making has been slow, in part due to the resources available to a small community college with one staff person assigned to assessment for the entire college, and in part due to a culture that has always embraced and emphasized the students' stories as paramount. However, the college is shifting to a more data informed approach in multiple fronts and finding ways to honor the culture means finding ways to collect and analyze qualitative as well as quantitative data. Utilizing participatory action research (PAR) as a methodology has proven to be a rich tool for generating data, learning more about the student experience at Greenfield Community College, and providing a transformative experience for all the participants in the study.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS RACIAL JUSTICE

PAR is a methodology that democratizes research by transforming the relationship of researcher and participants to where they are working together to actively learn about and create change in the world. In the context of student success for Black, Indigenous and other people of color (BIPOC) and other underserved students, the best place to learn about this is by recruiting students to become co-

researchers and engaging students to help analyze the data and collaborate in finding ways to improve student success.

PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture and local context, and embedded in social relationships. The process of PAR should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives. (Baum, McDougall, & Smith, 2006). Reid and Frisby add that PAR focuses on “acknowledging lived experiences, and contributing to social justice agendas to counter prevailing ideologies and power relations” (Reid & Frisby, 2008).

The work of diversity, equity and inclusion is most often driven by a deficit-based approach. Various identities are categorized as ‘other,’ and certain measures are used to identify each identity’s relative attainment or deficit in comparison to a white control group. The greater the disparity, the greater the deficit, the greater the absence, the more powerful the data. This deficit-based approach prioritizes problems and emphasizes the inability of communities to address disparity and a lack of equity. It highlights the intractability of the situation due to the lack of available resources in the form of personnel, funding or time to change things. While the rationale is meant to highlight the existing problems, or sometimes to justify funding and the allocation of resources, the end result is a loss of agency and a general inability to enact change. Asset-based development does not eliminate all of the perceived and real needs; however, it does suggest that there are possibilities that can be utilized to improve and strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives that are already in action, but often unrecognized.

Greenfield Community College was keen to employ asset-based participatory action research as a means to promote, not diminish, agency among faculty, students and staff, and to help them have ownership and authority of the diversity, equity and inclusion endeavor. Community Economy Institute researchers utilized this approach in economic development in the Latrobe Valley in Australia (Cameron & Gibson, 2005) and found it was much easier to imagine what one could do with available and existing resources than to imagine how to overcome the absence of needed resources, policies, activities, etc.

Helping a community recognize that it is doing good things that strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion allows for ownership of the endeavor. It allows a community to overcome initial feelings of shame, blame or persecution. What at a regional or national level feels like an insurmountable crisis, at the local level, is revealed as, not only surmountable, but something always in flux and something where progress is being made in many valid and countable ways.

Professor Linda McCarthy, sociology faculty member, and Dean Leo Hwang, humanities, engineering, math and science, have developed two participatory action research initiatives at Greenfield Community College. The projects were approached with an epistemology drawn from asset-based community development, where it is much easier to strengthen and support assets that already exist, rather than to try to fill lacuna that need resources that do not exist.

The goals of the Seeds of Success Participatory Action Project were to focus on how BIPOC and other underserved students defined success in their lives, and where they found success at Greenfield Community College. Student researchers were recruited to interview their peers once they were trained in PAR techniques and asset-based community development. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed, and the data was then utilized to help inform the development of a program designed to support new BIPOC students at Greenfield Community College.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Asset-based community development emerges out of the work of John Kretzmann and John McKnight, who present an alternative model for development that forgoes

a fixation on needs and deficits, and instead focuses on a community's capacities. Focusing on assets and strengths allows for action and agency to emerge. A focus on assets allows for a sense of possibility instead of being faced with insurmountable obstacles (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).

Working from assets engages Community Economies Institute researchers, J.K. Gibson-Graham's theory of possibility. Ultimately, working with possibilities is infectious and makes it easier for more people to become engaged and participate in the work that furthers diversity, equity and inclusion, and when more people become engaged, more assets are brought to the table. By asking students how they are successful, we are building on an already solid foundation (Harper, 2012). By focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses, one can engender a grassroots approach to change that is customized to the culture and history of a particular institution.

As Julio Cammarota and Augustine Romero write, "Students develop an ontological understanding of how to use their 'funds of knowledge' to generate more equitable social relationships by ameliorating conditions and opportunities for themselves, families and communities" (Cammarota & Romero, 2011). There is a transformative experience engendered by allowing students to exercise the very skills that are hoped to be instilled in all students: critical thinking, research, analysis and application. Through PAR, Cammarota and Romero help transform their students into agents of change.

Dorothy Henderson helps conceptualize PAR as a methodology that emerges out of Paolo Freire's blending of scientific research with education and activism. Participatory action research utilizes a collaborative research process that includes participants in the design and execution of the study, gives value to experiential and popular knowledge, focuses on empowerment and power relations, participates in raising the consciousness of all participants, and generates political and social action to change unequal power distributions in society (Henderson, 1995).

PAR is the ideal methodology to utilize for strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion and racial

justice work. By redefining what is valid and important data on the terms defined by students, faculty and staff, and by allowing them to place value on their activities, a new kind of narrative and knowledge making is engendered. By approaching the diversity, equity and inclusion work from a community economies epistemology, the project is able to create a “space” where alternative perceptions, alternative practices, and alternative realities can exist, co-exist with, and sometimes supplant the dominant deficit based narrative. Utilizing a community economies perspective we can also build an ethic that “privileges care of the local community and its environment” (Gibson-Graham, 2006). For students, faculty and staff, this means privileging the community of learners and educators; privileging the community that is built within the college; privileging the physical environment of location that enables a sense of quality of life and balance; and privileging the continued work of students, faculty and staff to make the college more welcoming to a diverse range of students and employees.

Using Gibson-Graham’s postcapitalist framework allows people to choose to reconceptualize student success in a way that is more inclusive of marginalized populations. What this research project has found, in working with students, faculty and staff, is that the college is already engaged in producing a rich representation of practices that strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion. The college is rich with potential assets and successes, as well as challenges and complications, that are framed by the students, faculty and staff’s own conceptualizations of what diversity, equity and inclusion looks like.

As a political act, collaboration is an extension of an epistemological stance that embraces the possibility engendered when people are able to work together in ways that create strength that is not present in its separate parts. The act of collaboration allows for an intersectionality that is more dynamic than can be achieved by one’s self. David Demeritt writes, “the potential rationales for developing more collaborative and participatory social research practices range from the epistemological (more accurate, self-aware, or self-critical research) to the ethical (more just, inclusive, democratic or consensual research), and the instrumental (more empowering, effective, socially transformative or action-oriented research)” (Demeritt, 2005). By extending this collaboration into

the community through the adoption of a participatory action research methodology, community members were included in the process of relaying information about their own experiences at the college, and then, they worked together collectively to analyze their findings and develop narratives and insights, a reflexivity that was shared by and with the community. The conversation that emerges out of collaboration is part of the transformative potential where people begin to share and understand one another and thereby strengthen the bonds of community one interaction at a time.

Collaboration also added a measure of accountability, that the coordinators and researchers had to maintain expectations, both to each other, and to the communities of students, faculty and staff they worked with. This accountability was something that was strengthening and something that connected us fundamentally to each other, and to our communities. The accountability modeled how it was hoped people would be able to draw from and give to each other as the fundamental ethical core of relationships.

PUTTING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

In terms of high impact research projects, PAR is not a particularly resource-intensive methodology for funding (though it is fairly intensive for student and faculty/staff time). From the beginning, it is important to foster a sense of commitment from the college president or administration to support the endeavor. This comes in the form of time (release or reassigned time for faculty and staff) for the co-coordinators, funding for the student researchers, any digital recording equipment (if needed), transcription, and lunch or refreshments for each of the large meetings.

Both PAR projects primarily utilized cellphones as audio recording devices. Transcription was completed using online transcription services. Because transcription services charge by the minute, it is very helpful if someone on the team is handy with Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) software. Something as simple as Apple’s GarageBand can import the audio from a phone or digital recorder and cut out long introductions or pauses while people fill out paperwork or get food.

There is an easily overlooked importance to providing food at each of the main meetings. Many of the people participating, except for the student co-researchers, were participating because they were prioritizing this endeavor above other endeavors, whether that is doing homework, prepping for class, or working through an ever-expanding task list. Trying to provide a meal is a small amount of compensation for participating in the project. So, depending on the time of day of the meetings the college tried to provide food (lunch or snacks) for the co-researcher trainings, student focus group, faculty/staff research groups, and each faculty/staff professional development workshop that emerged from the project.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process can seem somewhat daunting, however it is an opportunity to look at your project closely and clarify what you are attempting to accomplish. Like teaching a class for the first time, the IRB application forces one to confront the myriad of details that may not immediately come to mind. The IRB may ask for sample lesson plans for the researcher trainings, templates for email solicitations to students and faculty, handouts for the student researchers, permission forms, and processes for coding and securing the data collected. Some IRB processes also include an online training component where the history of review boards are surveyed, and low stakes quizzes are given on ethics and protocol.

The process also asks researchers to identify the inherent dangers or potential pitfalls of any research that includes human subjects. Potential issues that would arise had to be thought through? How might the research benefit or endanger participants? Embedded in a participatory action research project is the transformative experience of agency and possibility that emerges for the co-researchers and the people participating in the focus groups, but there is also the danger of bringing up current and past conflicts and trauma around race, ethnicity and identity, so it was important to be available to students, staff and faculty, if needed, as well as provide everyone involved with the project a list of resources to turn to for counseling and support.

The two rounds of PAR were conducted two years apart from one another with different cohorts of students, but they shared the same epistemological underpinnings.

The first PAR project, Rethinking Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, began with student researchers asking the core question: Where is the college doing well with diversity, equity and inclusion?

The students were selected primarily for their diversity of identities, for their previous interest in sociology classes, and for an ability or willingness to look at issues from an asset-based perspective. Students co-facilitated focus groups with peers, who identified faculty, staff and offices that they felt supported diversity, equity and inclusion at the college. For the student co-researchers, it was estimated that each student would commit to attend a 2.5-hour training, recruit 4-5 other students to attend a focus group, attend one focus group for 1.5 hours, and attend a two-hour debriefing meeting. In addition, students were invited to participate in an analysis of the transcripts and participate in the facilitation of faculty and staff focus groups. A stipend of \$100.00 per student for participation in the project was decided. There were several students who were more intensely involved in the second half of the project analyzing the transcripts and co-facilitating the faculty and staff focus groups. In hindsight, these students' work would have justified an additional \$100 stipend. Those faculty and staff were invited to another focus group, again co-facilitated by students, to learn what they thought they did that made students feel like they supported diversity, equity and inclusion.

The second PAR project was called Seeds of Success and focused on how underrepresented minority students defined success, and where they were able to find success at the college. For this round of PAR, the student researchers completed at least three individual interviews with peers, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Those interviews were transcribed and coded, and the results will be utilized to help inform the college's Mountain Scholars Program, a cohort program designed for Black, Indigenous, and often People of Color (BIPOC) entering Greenfield Community College.

For this project, faculty and staff identified a cohort of students that demonstrated success and leadership skills. These students, called "seeds," met three times for 2.5 hours each meeting during the first half of the spring semester. Students were compensated a total of \$200. Had students

been available to help analyze the data, they would have earned another \$100.

During the first two sessions, asking students to reflect on and share about their own identities and experiences at GCC fostered a sense of camaraderie and community. The most powerful activity in the first session was a diversity wheel, where students were asked to identify and reflect on their salient social identities and then share about them with the group. Many powerful emotions came up, and some students were surprised by what they revealed to the group. The sense of intimacy and honesty was palpable, as students openly supported one another in their self-disclosure. In addition to discussing social identities, students were asked to define success and to identify ways that they have been successful. This exercise pushed students to think positively about their achievements.

As a group, many facets that might indicate student success were identified. What makes a good interview question was also discussed. Based on these qualities, as a group, interview questions were created for the project. At the second session, students interviewed each other. These interviews were recorded and are part of the data.

In addition to creating community, students were trained in several key areas: assets-based community development, identity and diversity issues, interview skills, and data analysis. They were also informed about how to follow the important protocol that will ensure confidentiality for their recruited fellow students. Students were able to rehearse the interview protocol during their practice interviews with each other.

“Seed” students were asked to recruit students that they identified as successful at GCC. Like our own group, it was asked that they aim for a diverse pool of students who had been at GCC for at least two semesters, and to keep the interviews focused on assets. They interviewed their peers using the questions that we had created as a group. The students were required to complete their three interviews before the third session. As with the “seeds,” the students that were recruited felt a lift of esteem by being identified as successful by a peer. In the end, students conducted 31 interviews.

For the third session, students were directed to come with an initial list of themes that they identified in their data. A candy-sorting exercise was conducted to demonstrate the challenges of coding qualitative data. In small groups, students shared the themes that they had identified in their data and compared notes. Three themes were chosen (success, identity and relationships on campus) and students further analyzed the data. The third session was wrapped up by inviting the students to continue with the project, and by asking them to co-present at an upcoming conference. A half dozen students committed to the conference that day. We gave the students a final gift of sunflower seed packets as a symbolic gesture of carrying on their work.

INFUSING STUDENTS' ASSETS AND "BLOOMING" INTO GCC'S WORK

The transformative nature of PAR is clearly evident in the way students develop a sense of community as researchers. For many students, the research collaborative was the most diverse collection of students they have participated with at the college. It was striking to see how quickly students built a sense of trust and sharing within the group. They were united in a sense of purpose, and because of the asset-based perspective, a sense of agency.

For both cohorts of researchers, students were pleased to be chosen and once they were given the title of successful, intelligent or inquisitive, they seemed to embody those qualities, even if they did not recognize those qualities within themselves at the start. Similarly, the students interviewed were generally very honored to be seen as successful and were genuinely thankful to the student researchers for choosing them and giving them an opportunity to share their thoughts in a way that was valued and important. Faculty and staff were honored that students selected them for their support of diversity, equity and inclusion at the college, even if they did not initially understand why students picked them. This sense of honor allowed the faculty and staff to also take on the responsibility of sharing their practices with their peers.

For many students, particularly those who did not see themselves as academically gifted, “blooming” did not occur until several years into their academic career. And for some students, it did not occur until after they left the college and returned several years later.

Our research highlighted the importance of relationships with faculty and staff for student success. Unfortunately, those relationships often do not manifest themselves until later in a students' academic career. It is the power of these relationships that enable students to move beyond the limitations they have for their own sense of possibility, and the limitations that society or other people may have placed on them. We called this process "blooming."

"I'm also a college dropout. I'm back after a 13-year break after trying college for the first time."

"I'm a returning student after a few years off to explore the vast world of California."

When faculty or staff noticed students and either helped them through a challenging time, or gifted their work with a sense of value, it made a very strong impression, and sometimes became the turning point for a student's academic career.

"K. helped me figure out how to get food stamps, figure out how to get health insurance, all of that stuff, because I had literally nothing when I came here. . . . It gave me a little bit of hope. Now I feel like I could actually go to school and maybe succeed because neither one of my parents have gone to college or anything like that, so I'm first gen."

"When I had gone to school before I [started to fall behind] and once I started slipping on work, I just didn't know how to catch up from there. I didn't know how to ask for help and no one reached out to me. [But this time... Prof. J.] pulled me aside and offered me personal advice, as well as other resources to look into[....] That allowed me to breathe and relax a little...."

"He actually made a point to, not like all teachers have to do this, but he gave us his personal contact information, made sure we had rides to get there."

"I love the class.... Up until that point I hadn't had a professor who made an effort to connect with his students and to connect with them outside of the class and outside of the classroom discussion."

"I want to hear your voice there. I think you would be an asset to the discussion."

"Oh, this is of value. We should give you a platform with which to spread the knowledge you've gained. That was awesome."

"We interviewed folks about their experiences growing up and being socialized in terms of gender. We made this giant bulletin board, which is beautiful and still in the East Building, and I'm super proud of it. Then, after that was done, [a professor] saw it and [recommended that the project should be presented at the undergraduate research conference at UMass, Amherst]."

"It was just what I needed to kickstart [my education]. Oh my god, this is why I like being a student again. I do want to be here. When professors make an effort to connect with their students and to help their students think outside the classroom, think about the community, and that's how I think it produces incredible results."

"I think academically I had my most successful academic semester I've ever had here my fall semester. [...] I met friends here; I've established relationships here. I think I even have created good relationships with my teachers, which I don't think I was able to do very well in my previous two college experiences."

"[Success is about] actually understanding the material. I have made good bonds with teachers that help me reach that level, like with the repetition and the learning and all of that, help me reach and understand their curriculum[...]."

Students also talked about their own ethnic and racial identities, and how finding and interacting with peers and potentially faculty that represented a wide range of diversity was exciting and encouraging.

“This is definitely, I think, the first time in my history at GCC where I have been in a room with [more than two] other Hispanic people.”

“I love when I knew there are people from different countries in my class because I know I can learn from them, and it’s always an asset. It helps me think more globally.”

“It’s nice to have those classes where the teacher invites students to talk a little bit about themselves personally so you can identify with people on some level.”

There was also, a challenge with how and when a students’ identity could be recognized and celebrated on a campus that is still predominantly white with very few faculty and staff of color. While the college’s BIPOC student population is growing, there is still a sense by multiple students that their identity is something that is sometimes undervalued, unrecognized, or something that needs to be set aside in an community that may not value that identity.

“I struggle with my Latina identity because I was raised in Vermont by Caucasian parent. I’m just now learning Spanish. I’ve always been aware of the fact that I was Peruvian and that was something I was proud of, but I didn’t really know what that meant, and I didn’t really know about the culture.”

“I think there’s so many ways where a lot of us drop our identity. I think that’s just a part of life. In one way or another we experience that... you’re supposed to do this, but it just doesn’t feel right for some reason.”

“There is a Latino culture and [...] it’s really in me and a part of me, and another part of me feels like I’m lying when I say that.”

“It’s important to know that I didn’t list it as my identity, but I’m usually very careful about who and why I reveal, and when I reveal, I’m not white.”

“I’ve never had a professor of color here, and I can’t wait for that to happen.”

Students also highlighted the value of resources at the college, but many students felt they were not suffering enough to utilize those resources or didn’t qualify to use

them. However, for students who did access the resources, they often made the difference between staying in school and finding an obstacle that was insurmountable.

“It was really great to know that, all right, this is really overwhelming, but I have a support system that’s really helpful.”

“I came to GCC as someone out of high school who had done really well and just financially chose GCC. Then I had a hard moment in my life where I was dealing with mental health issues and had to relearn how to be a student and relearn about myself.”

“The Wellness Center had extra materials, like notebooks, binder, paper, pens, that they actually gave to people in the peer tutoring program to help other students who didn’t have the materials and didn’t know the organizational skills to help themselves succeed in their classes. That’s something we don’t really think about, that not everyone knows how to do that coming into college, and that’s something that is beneficial in many ways.”

It was wonderful to see students who found the relationships, community and resources they needed to be successful.

“I love this school and I want to see more and more students be able to succeed in the same way that I have. I’m going to leave GCC at the end of the summer, but I’m not gone forever. Do you know what I mean? I’ve already achieved a sense of community that I’ve never gotten before. A sense of belonging that I’ve never had before. I hope to, at some point in the future, get the satisfaction of helping other students succeed the way that I did, whether it be to come back as a tutor, or just to help with some of the extracurriculars, or even to teach.”

“For me, personal success is achieving happiness [...] whatever you’re doing in life, make sure that it brings you joy. This associate degree has taken me 10 years to complete. Along the way I’ve taken some really hard hits, but I’ve had some really great highs too. I am a mom now; I’m a wife; I’m back in school. I’ve had ups and downs with working, and career paths. I’ve changed majors, gosh, four times. But at the end of the day, I think I have some personal success because

I'm still happy. I'm still smiling; hell I'm still breathing. It's just taking stock of what you actually have in your life and making sure that you're happy that that's really where personal success lies."

"Success is setting a goal and accomplishing it. Success is doing something worthwhile. And so sometimes that means that you're really enjoying the time while you're doing it. And sometimes it means that you are stressing out and having a miserable time. But when you look back at it, you can say, Yeah, I accomplished that."

"I'm really proud of the way that I have in two years gone from being a high school dropout, to going to UMass, and sort of having a vague career plan and all of that, and so to me that's a success."

The hypothesis is that, if the formation of strong relationships is engendered early in a student's academic career, it would: ensure that BIPOC students' identity is highlighted as an asset and valued in their courses and community; enable access to student resources in a structured way that is integrated into the curriculum; foster the development of personal and academic goals (with mentoring and advising support provided to reach those goals). This, in turn, can help foster the transformative experience of defining and finding success earlier in one's academic career. Each of these structures have been integrated into the college's new Mountain Scholars Program, a cohort program for students of color. Greenfield Community College sees their greatest equity gaps for students of color emerging in the successful completion of college level English and math in the first year, and in retention from the first year to second year (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2020). The hope is by developing a program that connects students of color to a team of faculty and specialized advisors and creates special cohort classes with specific faculty on the Mountain Scholars team, that those relationships will mitigate the challenges our BIPOC students are facing during their first year at the college.

LESSONS LEARNED

The process of facilitating a participatory action research project is very time intensive, but it is equally rewarding and transformative for all the people involved. For the

students, it is an experiential learning experience that allows the student researchers to actively engage in their own learning and in the growth and development of an institution of higher education. For the co-facilitators, it is intense and intensely rewarding work, where the enthusiasm of the student researchers is infectious and inspiring. The research generates data that can inform new practices, but it also generates transformation in the students, and in the relationships of the facilitators and the students. Both groups are changed by the experience and that helps the institution grow and evolve in both large structural ways, but also smaller, but no less important, individual interpersonal ways.

Greenfield Community College is a workplace and an educational environment that aims to inspire lifelong learning for students and to model what lifelong learning looks like. The action research conducted and continue to conduct on diversity, equity and inclusion provides an opportunity to model what lifelong learning looks like. Subjects are able to reclaim their agency by generating and analyzing their own data. The researcher's role shifts from traditional data collection and analysis, to that of moderator and facilitator. Participatory action research facilitates learning, critical thinking, and the development of potential solutions so that communities can develop natively designed, developed and performed approaches to strengthening their own communities. The solutions organically emerge from the students, faculty and staff.

GCC is collaboratively creating living definitions, knowledge that evolves, changes, and transforms in different contexts, times and environments. If the notion of continual transformation is embraced, one can be more generous with forgiveness; with helping others understand; with creating an environment that allows people to ask questions and share their experiences and expertise; and with recognizing those experiences and expertise as things of value. Through the use of participatory action research, the workplace then becomes a location of opportunity to create social change in ways that can strengthen diversity and inclusion.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR PERSON(S) WHO CAN LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS EMERGING PRACTICE:

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Leo Hwang

Institutional role: Assistant Academic Dean, College of Natural Sciences Academic Advising Center

Phone: 413.545.1969

Email: leo.hwang@umass.edu

Greenfield Community College

Linda McCarthy

Institutional role: Faculty

Phone: 413.775.1154

Email: mccarthyl@gcc.mass.edu

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