



Proximity in coffee shop culture: exploring the potential of a common ground environment

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Abstract

Introduction. Coffee shops have long provided a unique atmosphere that fosters social connection through informal information-sharing. They can provide common ground spaces that allow for civil discourse where individuals can share diverse perspectives. Physical proximity in a coffee shop culture can result in conceptual proximity that enables discussion of contentious matters.

Method. Participant observer analysis of coffee shop engagements and semi-structured interviews with patrons enabled examination of how proximity may afford opportunities for civil discourse even amid conflict in common-ground environments.

Analysis. Data was coded inductively, line-by-line, to identify themes. The Bonnici and O'Connor proximity model provided a framework for determining how noise may be reduced in the communication channels to foster common ground environments, enabling free information-sharing and meaningful dialogue in a fractured society.

Results. The themes of setting, community, information ground, social connection, and information commons emerged as significant contributors to the proximity patrons experienced within the space, revealing the role of proximity in strengthening weak social ties and deepening patrons' sense of belonging.

Conclusion. Coffee shop culture can provide a setting in which individuals can gather in various numbers and groupings to connect in unlikely and meaningful ways, thus enabling information flow that can break down conceptual barriers.

Introduction

We examined coffee shop culture as a medium for social connection. We begin with the historical evolution of coffee shops, establish a theoretical framework using the Bonnici and O'Connor (2022) *model of proximity* and Oldenburg's (1999) concept of *third places*, and the specific research gap and questions that guide this investigation. This paper summarizes the doctoral dissertation work available in *A Good Cup of Coffee, a Little Slice of America: Finding Common Ground Through Information Flow in a Small-Town Texas Information* (Lanier, 2025).

Historical and social context

Coffee shops have long been regarded as spaces where information is experienced through meaningful discussion, social connection, and deeper community (Ferreira et al., 2021). Dating back to the 17th Century, coffee shops have often served as democratic spaces that offer a unique atmosphere of inclusivity, diversity, and intellect, in which people of all backgrounds and education levels can safely exchange information and engage in political debate (Macaset, 2021, p. 1). A coffee shop may serve as *information ground*, or a place where people come together for a particular purpose (e.g., getting a cup of coffee) but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters spontaneous and serendipitous information-sharing (Fisher, 2005, p. 185). While individuals may enter a coffee shop to purchase and enjoy coffee, this gathering of patrons may result in chit-chat, gossip, or other informal information exchanges that, although potentially important, have nothing to do with coffee. Fisher referred to this phenomenon as *information flow*.

Theoretical framework

Coffee shops can embody Oldenburg's (1999) concept of *third places*, or those spaces between work and home that are frequented by individuals who want to relax, be entertained, and connect socially. The presence of coffee shop *regulars* creates an atmosphere that enables patrons with divergent perspectives to find *proximity* with one another.

In this context, *proximity* refers to physical proximity that may yield conceptual proximity. In cases where a considerable conceptual gap exists on some issue, physical proximity may show that there is common ground among participants in some areas, thus enabling discourse on contentious issues—what Bonnici and O'Connor term '*epidata*' (Bonnici and O'Connor, 2022, p. 11). When individuals with contrasting viewpoints come into sustained proximity, this shared *epidata* can foster a closer relationship built on deep social connection and understanding, regardless of differing backgrounds or beliefs. Using the Bonnici and O'Connor (2022) *model of proximity* to frame this study helped determine how *noise*, or that which blocks communication from getting through, may be reduced in the communication channel to foster common-ground environments. This theoretical lens suggests that physical proximity increases the likelihood of discovery of common attributes that establish a foundation for respectful dialogue and meaningful connection.

The current study

We explore ways to enable individuals who would not otherwise connect in their daily lives to gather and exchange thoughts civilly. Qualitative approaches are a useful way to study *common ground* environments typically found in coffee shop culture. Here, *common ground* refers to a shared space in which individuals who disagree can express their viewpoints and hear the perspectives of others in an environment of safety and respect. Our case study provided insight into how proximity may foster communication between individuals with starkly opposing viewpoints.

We used the Bonnici and O'Connor (2022) *model of proximity* of participants in a communication act—essentially the common ground between participants—to frame this research. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used to explore how proximity increases the

knowledge of one another's antecedents to resolve conflicts and to deepen understanding of the Other.

This study was conducted in a coffeehouse in a rural North Texas town and was guided by the following questions:

- How does proximity within coffee shop culture impact social connections among divergent groups?
- How do these connections formed through coffeehouse proximity influence the broader community?

Background

Today's political and social climate is marked by significant divisions within the population and frequent social exclusion of the Other—a term used to describe ‘people from whom we often distance ourselves because we have decided that they are not like us’ (The Ethics Centre, 2020). When individuals with starkly opposing perspectives do not communicate, the lack of connection—or the absence of a common ground atmosphere—can be seen as a proximity problem. Noise or lack of common ground may result from mistrust, discomfort, or even fear of the Other, all of which can result in a barrier to communication. These issues can be alleviated by creating opportunities for people with diverse perspectives to connect authentically and find common ground (Lanier, 2025).

As people gather at an information ground, they interact with others socially by engaging in conversations about life and situations both general and specific, which can lead to unexpected information exchanges. Also characteristic of an information ground are key actors who drive the information flow. The presence of these key actors—many of whom are regulars—further characterizes an information ground as a third place, as defined by Oldenburg (1999). In both information grounds and third places, people connect through socialization and various forms of information-sharing, like chit-chat and gossip.

Granovetter's (1973) theory of the strength of weak ties offers an avenue for observing the strength of social ties and how these ties affect the degree of information shared. Granovetter proposed that the stronger the social ties between two individuals, the more they have in common, but that the weaker social ties lead to new or novel information. In a coffee shop environment, weak ties can offer new and valuable access to information not available within one's social circle or from those with whom stronger ties are shared. Because coffee shops may serve as both information grounds and third places, coffee shop culture provides a appropriate setting for observing how people connect through informal information-sharing that may foster a common ground environment. As a result of activities like chit-chat and gossip, regulars and other key actors within the space (i.e., baristas, visitors, etc.) may form weak social ties that lead to new information, but regular attendance within the space can strengthen these ties and lead to unlikely but sometimes deep connections between individuals who would not otherwise have found proximity with one another. The proximity found in coffee shop culture can reduce the noise in the communication channel, enabling a common ground environment to emerge.

Framing model

Physical proximity may lead to conceptual proximity and understanding—what has been called common ground—providing ways to have meaningful, in-person, and sometimes difficult conversations with each other. What establishes common ground? What makes it discoverable? What allows it to flourish? Such questions may be addressed by observing commonalities and translating between antecedents of participants to determine which aspects of the setting may contribute to *noise reduction*, or the removal of barriers to a message getting through to its destination. The Bonnici and O'Connor (2022) model of proximity (see Figure 1) serves as a useful tool for exploring spaces in which individuals may find common ground. Laid over Shannon's (1948)

original communication model, the proximity model returns the concept of meaning and accounts for multi-directional communication by including both the antecedents stimulating the author of a document (purpose, intended audience, language, etc.) and the antecedents stimulating the user of that document. Bonnici and O'Connor (2022) invite the exploration of the characteristics of the relationship between an author, a document, and a user that are unknowable beforehand but that might be useful (p. 12).

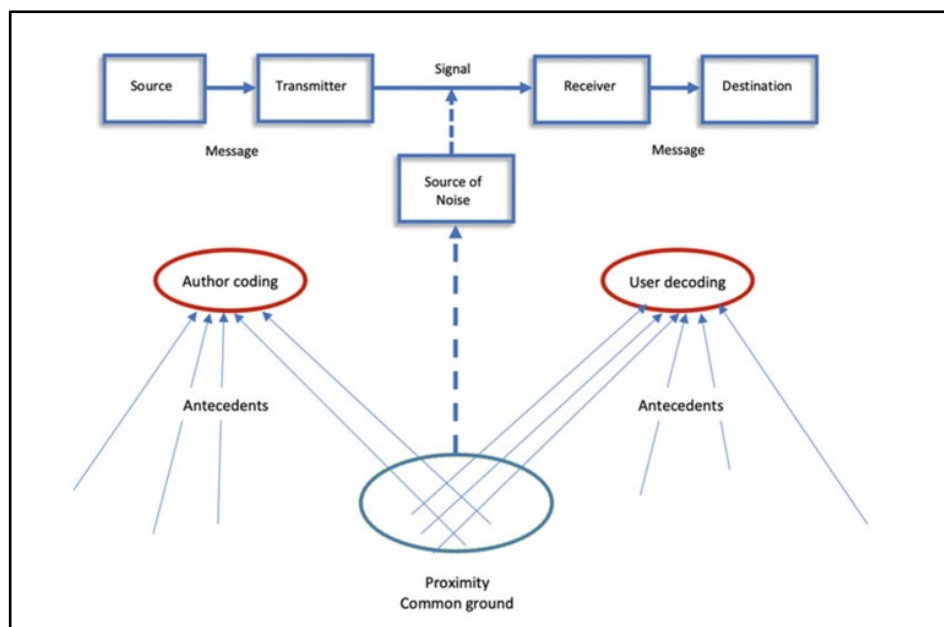


Figure 1. Bonnici-O'Connor model of proximity.

According to Bonnici and O'Connor (2022), coding and decoding is needed in the understanding of documents because it allows for one individual to learn about another's epidata, or the '*clues to finding and understanding useful information*' (p. 5). To fully understand any document, an information user must have proximity to it, meaning that there must be some degree of overlap between the author and user (i.e., language, culture, etc.) to decode and make use of the document. The need for context, or epidata, to gain understanding, may also apply to two or more people in social settings (Lanier, 2025, p. 17).

In Figure 2, the Bonnici and O'Connor proximity model has been modified to represent two-way communication between people as documents. The proximity model serves as frame for investigating the attributes and antecedents of multiple parties, to determine ways in which elements of the coffee shop environment reduce noise in the social communication channel. Kearns (2001) asserts that this translating is like a dance, in which each partner makes assumptions about the other: '*These steps we dance with entropy are information. The dance is communication*' (p. 22).

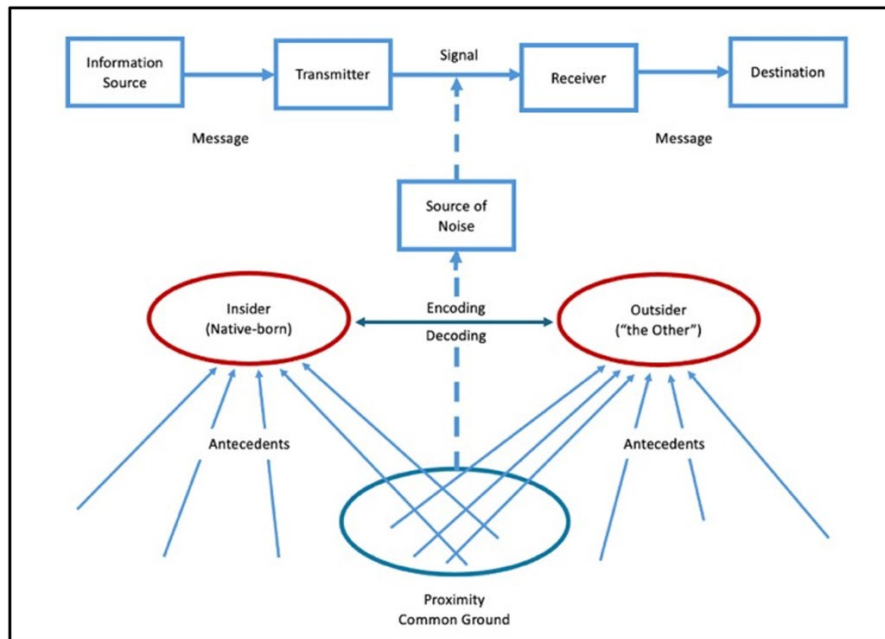


Figure 2. Bonnici-O'Connor proximity model, adapted to reflect two-way communication.

Methods

Participant observation allows for an understanding of how people within a culture or sub-culture make sense of their lived realities, while the researchers use their own experiences, thoughts, feelings, and emotions as data to help them understand the social world (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 371). Semi-structured interviews serve as a two-way conversation, initiated by researchers, and questions may be crafted in consideration of the population from which the subjects have been selected to ensure the appropriateness of those questions (Luo & Wildemuth, 2017, pp. 249-250). Participant observations were employed in phase 1, which allowed for purposive sampling of participants for semi-structured interviews.

The study was conducted in a coffeehouse in a rural town in North Texas in the United States, the hometown of one of the researchers—Lanier. The consent of the business owner and IRB approval were obtained prior to the beginning of the study. We acknowledge our positionality and its possible influence on this study's findings and conclusions. Having grown up in this politically conservative town, then spending an extended period away, and now having returned to the area (as it is now being rapidly urbanized), has shaped researcher Lanier's view of the need for a more inclusive stance toward *the Other*, a term referring to newcomers to the area who may not live, think, or believe as the locals do. These circumstances also provide Lanier with insights and community acceptance not necessarily available to an 'outsider'—O'Connor.

Participant observation

Seventeen formal observations were made in the coffee shop, spanning from thirty minutes to three hours, were conducted at various times of the day, on various days of the week, during slow traffic, peak hours, and/or major events. Notes were recorded in a field journal as we observed the varying types of information interactions occurring between key actors within the space. After conducting these participant observations, we coded the data by where in the shop subject was observed, with whom / what they interacted, time of day, etc.. We then created a data-driven observation narrative, providing insight into the event that was observed and into the subjects who participated in it (Roeschley, 2023).

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews offered a flexible method for adjusting questions as interviews progressed on site and for probing beyond a respondent's answers to the predetermined questions. In phase two, ten participants were selected through purposive sampling. Factors considered in the selection of participants included demographics, length of residency, hobbies and interests, age, political leanings, and gender—the goal being to collect data from widely varying perspectives. Three sets of semi-structured interviews of thirteen questions were designed for three types of respondents: customers, baristas, and the coffee shop owner. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their interview. All interviews lasted approximately one hour each and were conducted on site at the coffee shop.

Data analysis

Field notes and interviews were coded line-by-line using NVivo12. Through an ethnographic analysis approach, as we gathered new data we compared and it to previously collected data. This iterative process yielded what Hesse-Biber (2017) calls an '*upward-moving spiral toward creating meaning*' (p. 217). Our descriptions of the data, or codes, became puzzle pieces that fit together to reveal themes.

Findings

Findings show that participants valued the coffee shop setting, the feeling of community within the space, the spontaneous information-sharing, and the common ground environment that evolved through proximity within coffee shop culture. Findings also show that noise was reduced in the communication channel, and that proximity helped alleviate the fear, mistrust, and uncertainty patrons sometimes felt about individuals with whom they would not normally connect.

Five themes emerged as significant contributors to the proximity experienced within the coffee shop, which ultimately strengthened weak social ties and deepened the sense of belonging patrons felt. See Figure 3 for a summary of findings, including themes and sample quotes taken from the data.

Theme	Interview Excerpt
SETTING (atmosphere or vibe that fosters proximity and subsequent social connection)	“When I walk in here, it's just kind of like I'm tired, but I'm so happy to be here. It feels like home.” “I come in for that because it helps me feel more creative, so it gives me permission almost to soften my brain about an idea.” “I trust these walls and I trust the people that come in here, and I trust the friendships I’ve made here. And you can cry, you can laugh, and you're not going to be judged here.”
COMMUNITY (bonds formed through proximity, both within and outside the space)	“We will figure out how to keep this place open, because this place was just too important to too many people. I mean, it's like the cornerstone of this town.” “If I see a particular car out there, I'll just stop in to see if that person's in here. And <u>so</u> it doesn't start at the door. It really starts at the parking lot.” “It’s definitely changing the look and the vibe of the town. It is. And then when this land is sold and developed, it's done. It'll be a memory, and somebody will never even have experienced that.”
INFORMATION GROUND (information sharing and exchanges that foster connection)	“I sometimes will deliberately have meetings in here just for an information exchange, sort of like our church meetings... or, I'll come in specifically for the art show.” “She welcomes everybody. She welcomes all the new people.” “I would call this a non-mainstream media information hub because you can come in here and get information by word of mouth.”
SOCIAL CONNECTION (formation of new relationships, connection across groups)	“The whole coffee shop mentality is a more contemporary approach to the gathering spot than it is for most of the older generation.” “I was an outsider, and the way that I was just welcomed in here with the kindest hospitality ... I try to make sure that everybody that comes in that door is treated and felt the same way that I was made to feel like.” “If the coffeehouse weren't here, we wouldn't be able to connect with each other across our different groups. The Baptists wouldn't be connecting with the theater people. The tourists would have nowhere to connect with any of us.”
INFORMATION COMMONS (environment that enables proximity, fosters civil discourse, and enables unlikely social connection)	“You have super, ultra conservative people coming in here to hang out, and you have super progressive people coming in here, and they sit together, and they have a beverage together, and they talk, and they form relationships because they all feel welcome.” “So, do you think the town is open to newcomers, or are they shunning the newcomers?” “I just want everyone to feel welcome here. I don't care who you are. I don't care what your background is. I don't care what language you speak. I want you to come in and feel welcome. And I definitely think that this town needed that. Yeah, that maybe above everything else.” “And that's another thing that's pretty awesome about this place: two totally different political views, yet they can sit at the same table and have a normal conversation and tell each other they love them before they leave.”

Figure 3. Summary of findings from data analysis.

Discussion

The Bonnici and O'Connor (2022) proximity model as seen in Figure 2 reflects two-way communication between individuals and the encoding/decoding that takes place due to physical proximity in spaces like coffee shops, especially when they serve as both information grounds and third places. This two-way connection enables the reduction of noise, fostering a common ground

environment. This form of common ground yields, in effect, a multi-partner communication, real-life information environment.

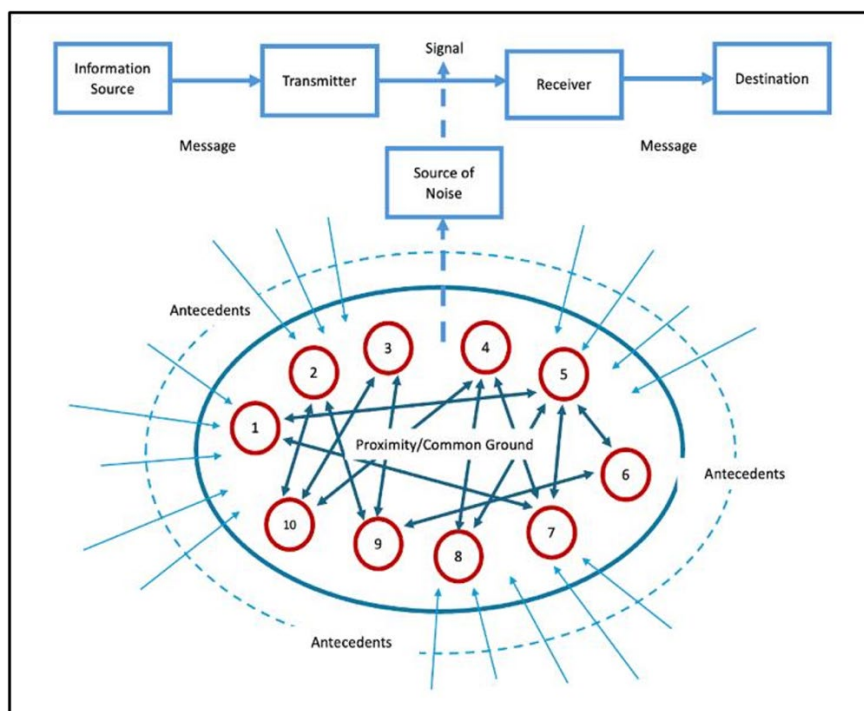


Figure 4. Bonnici-O'Connor proximity model, adapted to reflect information flowing in many directions.

We found that in the coffee shop environment, at least on occasion, two or more patrons might engage in communication acts; in many instances participants had very different antecedents and, so vry different opinions on some matters. Figure 4, by placing the Shannon model at the top and adding the possibility of multiple connections between multiple sets of antecedents, we represent multiple applications of Shannon's model. That is, at any one time we are seeing two partners in communication, but over some period of time, there are multiple iterations of different interacting couplets.

To more accurately reflect the information flow in many directions in an information ground, we adapted the Bonnici and O'Connor proximity model to represent the presence of many individuals, as well as indicators of the various ways in which they might connect (see Figure 4). In real life, this might look like two friends chit-chatting over coffee, a large table of patrons in an organized meeting, or a long line at the coffee counter on a crowded weekday morning. Figure 5 presents some real-life examples of information flow. Figure 6 presents two maps representing the observed information flow on a busy day: on the left are observed interactions, and on the right are impressions of information-sharing within the space by an artist who is a regular patron of the coffee shop.

By placing the Shannon model at the top and adding the possibility of multiple connections between multiple sets of antecedents, we represent multiple applications of Shannon's model. That is, at any one time we are seeing two partners in communication, but over some period of time, there are multiple iterations of different interacting couplets. Shannon's model is applied in each iteration, each messaging act within each messaging session and across messaging sessions, in some instances.



Figure 5. Real-life examples of information flowing in many directions.

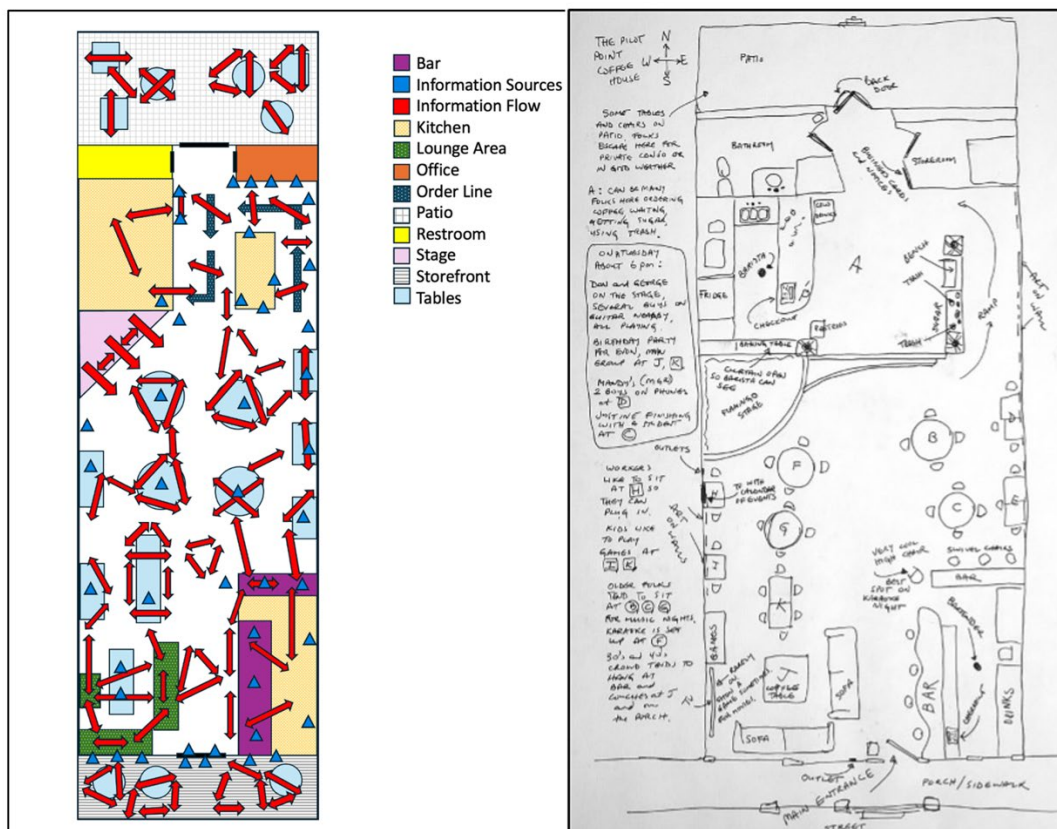


Figure 6. Two diagrams of information flow, researcher-created (left) and customer-created (right).

Within environments that foster physical and conceptual proximity, both the high number of antecedents and an unpredictable combination of those antecedents become more complex as the information flow occurs in many directions. As weak ties grow stronger, the coffee shop culture of

information-sharing can evolve into a common ground environment, enabling the free exchange of information and, thus, the breakdown of societal barriers.

Conclusion

The subtle behaviours central to this coffee shop culture—both spoken and unspoken—were essential in providing a rich and authentic perspective on the power of common ground environments. We have shown that physical proximity in a fostering environment can lead to conceptual proximity that enables engagement over contentious matters. In so doing, we have expanded the representational utility of the Bonnici and O'Connor model of proximity for information seeking and understanding.

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