Chapter 11
Feelings About Feedback: The Role of Emotions in Assessment for Learning

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Abstract Feedback is a key element of quality teaching, which both evaluates and supports student learning. The role of emotions in assessment and feedback is less well understood than cognitive and motivational components. However, emotion is just as important – a student's willingness to engage with feedback is determined in part by its' emotional impact. This chapter provides an overview of key developments in the area of university students' emotions pertaining to feedback drawing on recent research from social psychology and education. Given that emotions and feedback are an under-explored area of research, the question of how understanding emotions can contribute to the scaling up of assessment for learning is problematised. Potential strategies for learners, teachers and faculty-student partnerships are discussed. Depth and sustainability are presently the most relevant dimensions of scaling up for emotions, assessment and feedback due in part to the psychological processes underpinning the self-management skills needed to regulate emotions.

Introduction: Feedback in Higher Education

Feedback is a key element of quality teaching (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 1998), serving a variety of purposes, which fall under the two broad functions of evaluation and the support of student learning (Rowe, Fitness & Wood, 2014). Purposes may include grading achievements, clarifying instructional expectations, developing students understanding, motivating students and communicating praise in student's work (e.g. Sadler, 2010; Shute, 2008).

Research shows that students want quality feedback, e.g. timely, comprehensive feedback that explains their performance against assessment criteria and identifies areas for improvement (e.g. Rowe, 2011). However, conceptions of quality have changed in recent years following the re-examination of feedback in teaching and learning scholarship (e.g. Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 2010). Previously, the focus was

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on the practicalities of feedback delivery, i.e. 'its' promptness, level of detail, clarity, structure and relevance' (Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014, p. 102). Recently attention has shifted to the individual meaning of feedback for the learner and learner interactions with feedback and teachers (Boud & Molloy, 2013a). This view of feedback as a process of two-way communication and dialogue within specific social contexts, rather than one-way transmission of information from teacher to student, offers a new model positioning students as active learners (Dowden, Pittaway, Yost & McCarthy, 2013; Nicol, 2010; Nicol et al., 2014; Sadler, 2010; Yang & Carless, 2013).

Despite its importance, dissatisfaction with feedback is widely reported both within Australia and the UK (e.g. ACER, 2009; Brinkworth, McCann, Mathews & Nordström, 2009), and as noted by Carless (this volume, Chaps. 1 and 8), such findings underpin the recent scaling up of attention to feedback in assessment for learning (AfL). This chapter shows how better understanding the role of emotions in AfL, and feedback in particular, may provide valuable insights into the contribution of feedback to student learning and offer new directions for improving feedback practices in higher education.

Whilst it is acknowledged that the high-stakes nature of assessment creates the potential for strong feelings (Falchikov & Boud, 2007), until recently little was known about the role that such feelings play in how students respond to assessment and feedback in higher education. Indeed, emotions and learning is an emerging area of research and scholarship, which hasn't attracted the same level of attention as feedback in AfL. Once thought of as a barrier to rational and objective thinking, the role of emotions in promoting learning has only recently been recognised. This may be due in part to emerging work which supports the idea that learning involves the 'whole person', of which emotions are part, and also includes cognitive, neural, motivational and social factors (e.g. OECD, 2015).

In this chapter key current developments in the area of university students' emotions pertaining to feedback are explored. Specifically, the latest empirical research is synthesised, and a proposal for how emotion theory can inform our understanding of assessment and feedback in higher education offered. Finally, attention is given to how understanding emotions can contribute to the scaling up of AfL.

Why and When Do Students Experience Particular Emotions?

Much previous educational research has acknowledged the presence of affect and emotions generally (e.g. Crossman, 2007; Poulos & Mahony, 2008) but has not 'unpacked' or examined these concepts in relation to learning in a systematic way. Further, much scholarship has largely been based on dimensional approaches that effectively treat all discrete emotions (e.g. anger, sadness, joy) as globally 'negative' or 'positive' affective states. When discrete emotions are combined into

overall negative or positive dimensions for analytical purposes, we can overlook the different antecedents, functions and outcomes associated with discrete emotions (Gooty, Gavin & Ashkanasy, 2009). That is, emotions are preceded by an event (student receives extensive praise for their work); they serve a particular function (feelings of pride lead the student to desire obtaining further praise in the future) and lead to outcomes (increased effort for the next assessment).

The field of social psychology provides a useful conceptual framework from which to understand why and when particular emotions are experienced by students and what happens as a result of such experiences. Several concepts can be applied; firstly social factors 'are implicated in emotion in many ways and at many levels' (Parkinson & Manstead, 2015, p. 372), and feedback occurs within a social context. A substantial body of evidence supports the importance of relationships (both student–teacher and peer relationships) to learning broadly (e.g. Cornelius-White, 2007; Crossman, 2007) and to feedback (Rowe, 2011). Indeed, some evidence suggests that students view relationships with teaching staff as a factor mediating their perceptions of and responses to feedback (Dowden et al., 2013; Rowe et al., 2014). Supportive student–teacher relationships are fundamental to the establishment of dialogue which is central to feedback, and feedback is reciprocal in the sense that it involves both giving and receiving.

Secondly, emotions are notoriously difficult to conceptualise, with terms such as 'emotion', 'affect', 'mood' and 'feelings' often used interchangeably and inconsistently in the literature. Cognitive approaches to emotions, whilst not accepted by everyone, offer 'a clarifying perspective because they focus on the fundamental issues of how emotions are caused and what their effects are' (Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 2014, p. 134). Social functional and cognitive appraisal theories are two approaches offering explanations that can help to elucidate reasons for and likely timing of specific emotional reactions in response to different teaching and learning contexts, such as feedback.

Of relevance is the strong body of empirical evidence supporting the notion that emotions serve a range of intra- and interpersonal problem-solving functions, i.e. they motivate, organise and regulate behaviour (e.g. Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 2014). For example, emotions motivate adaptive behaviours in order to avoid negative outcomes (e.g. conflict, failure) and promote positive ones (e.g. achievement, social affiliation). Within feedback contexts, emotions may, for example, help students to recover from negative evaluations, provide protection against rejection, make sense of feedback and promote cooperative relationships with teaching staff and peers (Rowe et al., 2014). The social functional approach thus provides a framework from which to understand why particular emotions occur.

Cognitive appraisal models propose that emotions arise as a function of people's appraisals, or interpretations, of particular situations/events and concerns such as success, failure or perceived criticism (Lazarus, 1991; Moors, 2014; Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 2014). It is the appraisal, not the event itself that elicits an emotion. Appraisal theory has gained substantial empirical support and a high degree of consensus exists about the kinds of appraisals underpinning emotions such as fear,

anger and sadness (Scherer, 2001), i.e. whether the situation/concern aligns with the person's goals, the extent to which they feel able to control and cope with the situation and who or what is perceived to be the cause (another person, themselves or random circumstances). Within feedback contexts, a student may experience anger if they assign blame for a critical evaluation to their teacher or experience sadness/disappointment if they perceive the feedback to be caused by their own shortcomings. The different emotions experienced have varying implications for behaviour; an angry student may complain to their lecturer rather than engaging with feedback, whilst a sad student might withdraw from the course if they feel they weren't good enough to pass. The experience of emotion can prompt both approach and withdrawal behaviours which have potentially different outcomes for student learning (see also Pitt, this volume, Chap. 10).

Thus, cognitive appraisal theory helps us as teachers, academic developers and researchers to understand when particular emotions are experienced, why different emotions can be experienced in response to the same event and what behaviours are likely to result. Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz and Perry (2007), for example, have proposed a control–value theory to account for the role of appraisals and emotions in educational contexts. This chapter similarly adopts a cognitive approach, conceptualising emotions as responses to appraisals of situational events or concerns, which are associated with various response tendencies involving coordinated changes in physiology, motor readiness, behaviour, cognitive processing and subjective experience (e.g. Lazarus, 1991). Emotions are experienced for short periods of time and viewed as fitting into discrete categories of emotion families (e.g. fear, joy), rather than more general or dispositional feeling states.

What Emotions Are Important in Feedback? Do They Enhance or Hinder Learning?

Whilst it is recognised that assessment is 'deeply personal' (Crossman, 2007, p. 322), creating the potential for strong feelings, less is understood about how discrete emotions affect the way that students are able to receive and process feedback (Dowden et al., 2013; Rowe et al., 2014). Several achievement emotions have been identified as being important to learning generally, including enjoyment, hope, pride, anger, anxiety, shame, hopelessness, relief, boredom and interest (e.g. Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Rowe, Fitness & Wood, 2015; White, 2013). Less is known about social emotions such as gratitude in learning contexts. We know from empirical evidence that positive emotions generally enhance academic learning and achievement, particularly in areas of metacognition, effort on task, self-regulation, strategy use and motivation (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010). Negative emotions, whilst being detrimental to motivation and performance in many cases (e.g. the role of fear in avoidance behaviour), can also be beneficial (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010).

For example, anger might prompt a student to initiate a conversation with their teacher regarding feedback perceived to be undeserved. The promotion of such dialogue (provided it is constructive) is important for students' understanding of and engagement with feedback (Nicol, 2010; Nicol et al., 2014).

Positive and negative achievement emotions are experienced in assessment contexts including feedback, although less is known about the role they play (Peterson, Brown & Jun, 2015; Rowe et al., 2014). Educational literature has pointed to feedback as an important source of confidence and pride (Beard, Humberstone & Clayton, 2014; Pitt and Norton, 2016; Shields, 2015; Theising, Wu & Sheehan, 2014), as well as anxiety and shame (Cramp, Lamonda, Coleyshawa & Beck, 2012; Shields, 2015; Peterson et al., 2015; Rowe et al., 2014). Some studies suggest negative affect at the prospect of assessment and feedback (e.g. feelings of anxiety and doubt) may even heighten subsequent positive affect, e.g. experiences of euphoria (Beard et al., 2014; Cramp et al., 2012). Recent research by Rowe et al. (2014) point to joy/happiness, love (gratitude), anger, fear, pride, embarrassment and guilt, as playing a key role in how students respond to feedback. These emotions are experienced in response to various achievements and academic and social situations/concerns which relate to feedback's dual role as an evaluation tool and source of support (Rowe, 2011; Rowe et al., 2014). 'Self-conscious' emotions – which include pride, guilt and embarrassment – appear to be particularly salient responses to the evaluative component of feedback. This is likely because self-conscious emotions are strongly tied to social concerns (e.g. status, power, attachment) (Hareli & Parkinson, 2008). There is a more pronounced power dynamic between students and lecturers in relation to evaluation than there is to feedback's supportive mechanism, so it is not surprising self-conscious emotions are key here, as they signify the importance of certain relationships, helping to maintain and restore such relationships (Rowe et al., 2014). For example, when guilt is experienced as a result of self-blame for a poor outcome such as a critical evaluation, it might stimulate reparative action by the student to repair perceived damage to the relationship with their teacher, leading to an apology and resolution to work harder in the future (e.g. Hareli & Parkinson, 2008).

Broader social emotions (especially gratitude) and other discrete emotions such as happiness, interest/excitement, anger, fear and sadness also play an important role in how students respond to evaluative and supportive components of feedback (Rowe et al., 2014). For example, memory is enhanced when events have an emotional aspect (Talmi, 2013), and attention is broadened by positive emotions such as happiness and narrowed by anxiety (Huntsinger, 2013). Thus, the type and intensity of emotions experienced by students when receiving feedback may have implications for how well they remember and respond to it. Memory and attention are just two examples of cognitive processes affected by emotion; others include motivation, problem solving and information processing (e.g. Pekrun & Stephens, 2010). In terms of feedback's supportive function, gratitude, for example, has been found to motivate a willingness to forgive and sympathise, attribute positive

outcomes to the actions of others, notice and reciprocate help and act as an antidote to aggression (e.g. Wood, Froh & Geraghty, 2010). It could be inferred from such findings that when students experience gratitude in response to feedback, they might be more likely to approach teachers for help or be less inclined to complain about feedback if it does not meet their expectations in some way, i.e. it sets up a positive basis for communication. Such responses can also be influenced by student's emotional maturity and perceptions/expectations of grading and feedback (Pitt & Norton, 2016).

How Can Understanding Emotions Inform the Scaling Up of Feedback Practices in AfL?

The task of translating research evidence into effective instructional practice at scale is especially difficult for feedback and emotions at individual, group, discipline or organisational levels. Surprisingly, feedback practices have remained 'largely uninfluenced by ideas, or practices, or research on feedback from outside the education sector' (Boud & Molloy, 2013b, p. 698). Further, personal dimensions of feedback, including emotions, remain largely unacknowledged and absent from institutional level governance documentation such as assessment policies (Rowe, 2013). On the positive side, there is now recognition (at least in the literature) that timely and detailed feedback, whilst important, are not enough to promote the kinds of lasting developmental changes (such as building of student's self-regulation skills) (Boud & Molloy, 2013b; Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam, 2011; Sadler, 2010) and/or emotional outcomes (such as alleviating concerns about failing) (Shields, 2015) needed to improve student learning. In the following section, emotions are thus problematised as they relate to the scaling up of assessment. Key challenges and tensions are discussed and suggestions offered for scaling up feedback practices in AfL.

The preceding review suggests two key areas in need of further consideration with regard to scaling up. Firstly, that feedback will evoke emotions in students and teachers alike; hence, it is important both understand the roles that positive and negative emotions play in learning, teaching and assessment. Secondly, although perhaps less pertinent to assessment and feedback practices is that some kinds of learning may bring emotion to the fore (e.g. reflection, group work, challenging student assumptions and the development of graduate attributes such as resilience). The first, the evocation of emotion, forms the focus of the following discussion. It is posited that at present, depth and sustainability are the most relevant dimensions of scaling up for emotions, assessment and feedback due in part to the psychological processes underpinning the self-management skills needed to regulate emotions. As such, the following discussion is framed around these two dimensions.

The Challenge of Achieving Depth

What the Teacher Does

Much of the focus of recent educational scholarship on emotions emphasises the need for teachers to understand student emotions and responses to feedback (Rowe, 2013; Storrs, 2012). Specific practical approaches that have been offered include encouraging teachers to 'consider teaching strategies that elicit enhanced positive emotions, as these experiences help to broaden students' cognitive functioning and improve their ability to learn course content' (Goldman & Goodboy, 2014, p. 272), and strategies to reduce anxiety/negative emotions in students which interfere with their ability to engage with feedback (Rowe, 2013; Shields, 2015). Shields (2015), for example, advocates for the incorporation of more low-stakes assessment and/or assessment which offers students a 'second chance' as a way of reducing anxiety, given the links between student interpretations of feedback comments and their beliefs about themselves as learners (i.e. being 'good' enough, 'being wrong'). Other research emphasises the need for teachers to devote additional time to improving dialogue with students, as well as the importance of making changes at a curriculum level, and to individual teaching practice:

> Instructors committed to an emotional curriculum must be informed of the high degree of engagement and time investment required to read and respond to journals and meet individually with students. (Storrs, 2012, p. 10)

Whilst such strategies are undoubtedly crucial, they are associated with a number of tensions. Firstly, they are based on the assumption that 'responsibility for change is in the hands of academics who plan assessment' (Cramp et al., 2012, p. 517). Their focus is on what the teacher does and thus remains grounded within transmission approaches to AfL. Secondly, Nicol et al. (2014) are wary of interventions which potentially increase academic workload and can be seen as 'problematic given current resource constraints and rising student numbers in higher education' (p. 103). A further point to consider is the extent to which teachers in higher education 'feel equipped to facilitate the creation of emotionally positive and emotionally aware learning environments (or indeed the extent to which they see this as part of their role)' (Moore & Kuol, 2007, p. 95). Indeed, there is a perception by some lecturers that student engagement with feedback is limited (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010), and such perceptions are likely to reduce the amount of thought and effort invested by teachers in providing feedback to students. Formal and informal communities of practice and other teaching peer or personal networks are one potential strategy to support staff towards implementing change by building knowledge and skills and offering emotional support (e.g. Storrs, 2012).

What the Learner Does

Teaching students' self-management skills to more effectively respond to the strong emotions evoked by feedback is another area of focus. This is more in line with student-centred approaches to learning (Rowe, 2013), reflecting the current emphasis on promoting self-regulation in feedback practices, 'the essence of sustainable feedback' (Carless et al., 2011, p. 398; see also Boud & Molloy, 2013b). Encouraging students to take a more active role through monitoring their own work and increased dialogue around feedback practices (Carless et al., 2011; Nicol, 2010) has already been taken up by some disciplines, particularly in the first year. For example, self-management skills are being incorporated into the first year law curriculum as a way of promoting independent learning and reflective/self-assessment capabilities in law graduates, which includes using feedback effectively particularly when it is 'negative' (James & Field, 2013). Such changes have emerged in response to mental health and wellbeing concerns for law students. Emotions are a key component of self-regulation (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz & Perry, 2002), and self-regulation in coping and learning styles can be taught and promoted. For example, teaching learners to reframe (or reappraise) negative feedback in a positive way through cognitive restructuring or cognitive reappraisal techniques (e.g. Gross & John, 2003) may be potentially useful for managing and regulating emotions in feedback contexts, leading to enhanced cognitive performance (Raferty & Bizer, 2009). However, achieving such changes on a large scale presents challenges, e.g. workload implications for lecturers.

Peer and self-assessment are also promoted as a way of increasing student responsibility for learning, developing students' abilities to make judgments about their own and others work and addressing a number of issues including staff workload (e.g. Nicol et al., 2014). Giving and receiving feedback provides opportunities for students to develop different types of skills, than through receiving feedback alone (Nicol et al., 2014), as well as potentially contributing to emotional ones. For example, anxiety can be reduced through supportive learning groups (Cramp et al., 2012). Peer feedback may offer similar potential, with peer assessment found to positively impact on perceptions of self-confidence in some circumstances (Theising et al., 2014). Whilst such strategies seem promising, only students can act on feedback, so obtaining their buy-in is crucial. Some students may be reluctant to adopt practices such as self-evaluation, which require autonomous learning; and teachers similarly may be reluctant to engage in such practices out of concern for negative impacts on their teaching evaluations as well as the consequent loss of time to cover disciplinary content (Carless et al., 2011). Institutional level resourcing to support professional development activities targeted at changing academic attitudes and behaviours is needed (Carless et al., 2011).

Teacher and Learner Partnerships

The third set of strategies extends the student's position from active learner to partners in learning and teaching. Cramp et al. (2012), for example, call for lecturers and learners 'to reflect on experiences of schooling together and anticipate reactions to future assessment judgments' (p. 518), and Boud and Molloy (2013b) call for feedback processes that are 'mutually constructed and co-dependent' (p. 711). Such discussions could be undertaken either at course level (e.g. providing opportunities for students to reflect and respond to feedback with teachers and peers, including staff talking with students about their own experiences of receiving feedback) or at institutional level (i.e. broader high-level discussions about the provision of feedback at university). Clarifying expectations and building shared understandings of assessment and feedback between academics and students are important for developing trust (Carless, 2009) and for cultivating relationships that promote the effective use of feedback (Price et al., 2010). It goes to follow that such experiences would likely promote positive feelings. Emotions such as empathy and compassion are potentially important here because of their relationship with shared meaning and goals and perceived similarities with others (Gibbons, 2011; Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010), although further work is needed to investigate such links in educational contexts.

There are a number of tensions associated with this approach. Firstly, in order to effectively promote students as 'key players in the educational process', such dialogue must be 'genuine' (Carey, 2013, p. 257). There is also the question of the extent to which learners will want to be involved, and their reluctance to participate can be attributed in part to the way institutions frame their engagement:

> Partnership is not a one-off exchange, but an ongoing process that should characterise the whole student experience. There is little value waiting until the curriculum needs an overhaul before inviting students. (Carey, 2013, p. 258)

Finally, any scaling up of dialogue needs to be supported by resourcing and contained by clear boundaries and expectations, e.g. progress reports are useful for providing students with frequent, timely feedback and opportunities to feedforward but can also increase student enquiries, which may contribute to staff workload.

Student–faculty partnerships are ideally based on principles of respect, reciprocity and shared responsibility between learners and teachers (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014), each of which has a strong emotional underpinning. For example, Rowe et al. (2015) and Beard et al. (2014) have reported both students and teachers feel a duty to reciprocate energy/efforts invested by each other, and this appears to be tied to notions of respect. Feedback is an exchange; thus, it has the potential to promote reciprocity and other prosocial behaviours through feelings of gratitude and appreciation (Rowe, 2013). Involving students as partners in the development of feedback practices, whether at course or institutional level, could contribute to an enhanced sense of belonging (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), with affiliation linked to calming emotions (Gilbert, 2009). Finally, as Beard et al. (2014) notes, 'this emotional reciprocity is activating, and suggestive of a moral imperative'

(p. 638). The effects of an environment promoting the wellbeing of students and mutual care and respect need to be better understood.

The Challenge of Sustainability

Any enactment of sustainable changes in AfL needs to firstly be underpinned by a conceptual shift in how feedback is viewed. Boud and Molloy's (2013b) recent call for a 'fundamental rethinking of the place of assessment and feedback within the curriculum', to enable 'a more robust view of feedback: one that focuses primarily on the needs of learning rather than the capacities of the teacher' (p. 698), is essential here. In practice such rethinking could translate to a shift in focus from providing feedback to the embedding of feedback within learning design and emphasising interactions between students and lecturers (Boud & Molloy, 2013b). Cramp et al. (2012) aptly draw the link between the potential broader impact of such changes on how emotions are viewed in assessment, by observing, 'it is acknowledged that assessment in higher education causes anxiety, but this is often regarded as a 'problem' sited in the individual, not in the pedagogy' (p. 519). Such reconceptualisations have the potential to address critical issues in feedback by focussing on opportunities for teachers and students to communicate, in turn allowing for more depth, meaning and creation with the curriculum.

Conceptual changes need to occur at an institutional level before practice-based changes can be enacted. Ideally institutions would provide 'structural opportunities in terms of adequate time and smaller class sizes to allow students and faculty to experience the learning benefits of such pedagogy [i.e. emotional]' (Storrs, 2012, p.10). In actuality, however, such changes may not be possible nor indeed likely, with contextual factors such as the overloading of teaching staff and increasing class sizes an ever present reality (e.g. Gibbs, 2010). However, changes could potentially be achieved through partnerships between academics, students and professional staff fostered at an institutional level. Kift, Nelson and Clark's (2010) notion of a 'transition pedagogy' for the first year experience is useful here. Initiatives that enable first year students to 'achieve engagement, timely access to support and the development of a strong sense of belonging' require:

> The bringing together of co-curricular and curricular strategies into an intentionally designed and broadly conceptualised curriculum; one which is implemented through the shared knowledge and skills of partnered academic and professional staff in an institutional environment that is committed to an optimal first year experience both at the policy and practice levels. (Kift et al., 2010, p. 10)

Similar approaches could be implemented in feedback practices, e.g. assessment and feedback policies could be reframed to recognise personal, social and emotional factors, as well as the more practical elements of timing. Constructive feedback is particularly important in the first year, orientating learners to the expectations of higher education, as well as supporting their transition generally, with high

anxiety reported amongst many first year students (e.g. Brinkworth et al., 2009; Rowe, 2011). Policies such as graduate attribute statements could also be better integrated, e.g. intentionally align the development of student emotional capabilities such as interpersonal skills and resilience, with the development of students' self-management skills in relation to feedback. Indeed, the requirement to develop emotional and interpersonal capabilities as articulated through graduate attribute statements will likely contribute to an enhanced awareness by staff of emotions in learning more broadly.

Conclusion

Emotion presents a number of challenges to scaling up feedback practices in AfL. Social psychology has established that emotions serve particular functions and are related to student perceptions (appraisals, beliefs about self). Further scientific evidence is needed to determine the precise mechanisms of the processes involved and contribute to the development of new frameworks which better explain the relationship of emotions to cognitive, motivational, neurological and social dimensions of feedback and assessment. At the same time, feedback needs to be 'repositioned as a fundamental part of curriculum design, not an episodic mechanism delivered by teachers to learners' (Beard et al., 2014, p. 698). Theoretical and empirical advances, coupled with a deeper level of engagement and strengthened relationships between academics, professional staff and students at individual, group and institutional levels, are needed to advance feedback practices in AfL.

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