

Walking the Assessment Well-being Talk

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<https://sites.google.com/ualberta.ca/acme> <https://crame.ualberta.ca>

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I loved that the Summit session overview stated that “assessment and well-being are an uncommon pair.” I have written something very similar in grants, chapters, and papers on multiple occasions over the last few years. As much as they may be an uncommon pair, it is equally important to recognise that assessment and well-being are not antithetical. They cannot be. Even at the most basic level of measurement theory, well-being, or lack thereof in the form of anything from experiencing test anxiety to racism, is a form of construct irrelevant variance (Crooks et al., 1996). It is noise. It is not knowledge. It is not a skill. It is something else that interferes with the validity of inferences that can be made from any given assessment. Importantly, this position is as relevant to contemporary justice and anti-racist perspectives on validity (Randall et al., 2022) as it is to classical test theory.

The Summit gave me a chance to pull together ideas, literature, and evidence about classroom assessment and well-being, unified under the umbrella of motivation theory. I went back and forth on what to say. What to ask. What to confess. What to push. Ultimately, I landed on four questions that I am sometimes scared to ask, and to which I definitely did not have answers:

1. Will measurement and validity have a role in the future of assessment for equity?
2. Is intrinsic motivation a sufficiently inclusive conceptualization of well-being?
3. Why is there so much resistance to the idea that assessment can support well-being?
4. How do we collaborate to advance well-being while creating good assessment?

At the Summit, I shared these ideas out loud with people who nudged my thinking. Based on those conversations I would now offer the following tentative answers:

1. Yes.
2. Probably.
3. Because.
4. Differently.

Almost immediately after the summit, an analogy came to my mind about the presentations, ideas, questions, and conversation that we shared in our session. It was a walking analogy laden with different routes, speeds, and duration, but all headed in the same direction - better assessment for the well-being of students. Even though it's not how I would usually write, I let that analogy guide this paper. So now, I invite you into this walk. We'll start with a trip down memory lane before charting the territory related to motivation theory and evidence and how it might be applied to classroom assessment to support student well-being.

An Uphill Rocky Start

Classroom assessment was one of the first courses I taught as a brand new assistant professor in 2008. It went terribly. I was given pre-prepared slides and a textbook and exams and in-class activities. It was well-designed and well-intended. But, for me, it flopped.

And I mean, flopped.

Students told me it flopped in person as they complained about the pace of the course and in the course evaluations where I scored more than a point lower than any other course I've ever taught. Yes, student evaluations of teaching have all sorts of egregious flaws (Uttl, 2021), but in this case they revealed that my course design, delivery, and assessments (aka “my teaching”)

needed improvement. My students were right. The flop wasn't them being mean; it was the truth. I was not an expert in classroom assessment. I was never a school teacher. My PhD was in Social Psychology, and my research focused on student motivation and emotions. Test anxiety was the closest I'd ever come to thinking about assessment. To teach it a second time, I read a lot of books and articles to increase my knowledge of the content, and I revised the activities and pace to be in keeping with my teaching philosophy. But at the root there was a disconnect I couldn't reconcile: As a motivation researcher I had lots of evidence that effort, mastery, and persistence were desirable outcomes. In assessment, these were still desirable parts of learning but they were not supposed to be directly linked to students' grades. And I could not get students to stop talking about grades. Sure, they'd entertain formative assessment and feedback and such, but the conversation always returned to the external motivator of grades.

For lots of reasons, including this tension, the assessment course fell lower and lower on the list of things I wanted to teach. Then, for a while I wasn't teaching anything undergraduate. I was in an administrative appointment and was released from undergraduate teaching because "my skills were needed at the graduate level." We always seem to think that undergraduate teaching is easier to hand off. To delegate. To compensate. More and more, I do not think this is the case. Teaching undergraduates makes me a better professor. So does teaching classroom assessment. When that leadership appointment ended, I was a much more seasoned scholar and two things allowed me to feel ready to take on the classroom assessment course again. First, my program of research had clearly revealed that classroom assessment needed motivation theory. Or more precisely, students needed classroom assessment to do better, and I was confident motivation theory had something to offer in reaching that goal. Second, I felt up to the challenge of making the undergraduate course my own and showing that motivation and emotions are critically linked to assessment and measurement.

An Unexpected Sprint with some Hurdles

I made that decision in Fall of 2019 at the start of a sabbatical during which I planned to walk slowly while I (a) wrote a new grant articulating the theoretical and empirical rationales to connect classroom assessment and student motivation and (b) revised my design of the assessment course. Things started out well, but were interrupted and reorganised by the pandemic. The pandemic magnified to me the importance of teaching about and conducting research on classroom assessment.. Indeed the field gained a substantial amount of opinion and evidence about classroom assessment during the pandemic including but not limited to exam security and monitoring (Hartnett et al., 2023), student engagement and motivation in response to changes in grading systems (Daniels et al., 2021), instructor decisions about specific practices (Mottiar et al., 2022), academic dishonesty (Newton & Essex, 2023), and urgency for change (Fuller et al., 2020). I was heading in the right direction

As is often the case (at least for me), teaching took priority because I had more than 200 undergraduates who needed a course about classroom assessment in just a few months. For teaching, I saw two options: commit myself to teaching black squares and crossing my fingers for sufficient bandwidth or embrace the potential to be a Youtube star and resign myself to countless hours of video editing. I chose to go the asynchronous video route. When I think back on it now, even though I'd been teaching for 12 years, this was my first really intentional

line-in-the-sand moment for equity and inclusivity. I could not justify requiring students to meet me “to learn” from some corner of their house with who knows what going on in the background and their own fingers crossed for literal and figurative bandwidth. Nevermind trying to complete course assessments under those conditions. I felt compelled to create and deliver a course that *in that intense moment of history* would support students’ well-being so that they could make space to learn as much as possible regardless of their lived experience of the pandemic. To do this, I hit as many asynchronous recommendations as possible (McGee & Reis, 2012): intentional content sequencing, videos no longer than 20 minutes, closed captioning, visually appealing slides with more animation than I was used to, independent online activities with space for questions, and simple assessment with basic monitoring software. Interestingly, most of these decisions were well in keeping with the types of practices I regularly rely on to create learning environments conducive to adaptive forms of motivation. Ah motivation. Let’s shift gears for a little bit to my happy place of motivation theory and research.

Motivation as Moving

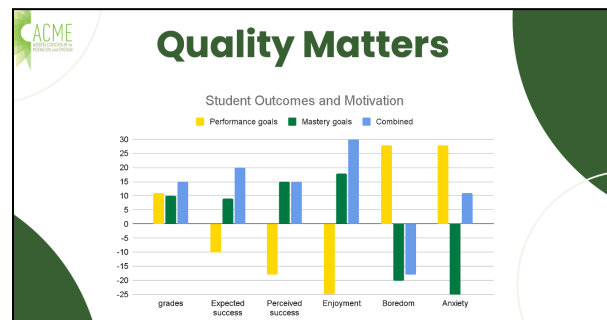
I am shocked every time I say that I’ve been researching motivation for over 20 years. But I started my masters degree in 2002, so the maths say it’s true. The Latin root of the word motivate is *movere*, which means to move. My research into student and teacher motivation has spanned a wide range of theories and considered a host of discrete emotions. We motivation researchers love our constructs: We have tons of them, which is fine for us, but less helpful for practitioners. As such, when working with practitioners, I often treat motivation constructs as belonging to two general categories even though this dichotomy is an oversimplification (Alexander, 2023): a set of constructs that are good for students' cognitions, emotions, and performance, and a set of constructs that are not (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2016). For example, in achievement goal theory, mastery goals tend to be favoured over performance goals (Urdan & Kaplan, 2020). In attribution theory, internal locus is better than external (Graham, 2020). In mindset theory, growth is better than a fixed mindset (Dweck & Yeger, 2020). In self-determination theory, intrinsic is better than extrinsic (Howard et al., 2021). This was the approach I took in my Summit presentation (Figure 1, Panel A), not because the audience doesn’t appreciate the nuances of discrete theories, but because these details may not be so necessary in the conversation about classroom assessment and well-being.

Figure 1.
Slides from Summit Presentation

Panel A. Two Categories of Motivation



Panel B. Outcomes Associated with Motivation



In most of my presentations, I follow up on this two-category motivational distinction with the findings from one of my earliest and still favourite papers - Daniels et al. (2008). As I explained in the Summit, in this paper, I used a cluster analysis with undergraduate students from the University of Manitoba and found that combinations of these qualities of motivation produced similar outcomes in terms of “objective” achievement measured by final grades and GPA, but very different outcomes for students’ cognitions and emotions (Figure 1, Panel B). In that paper I used achievement goal theory, but these patterns are consistently affirmed for all major motivation theories by moderate/strong meta-analytical evidence (e.g., Kriegbaum et al., 2018).

At the Summit, and in each talk I give, I cross my fingers that by the time I have covered this ground the audience is at least willing to entertain the idea that the quality of student motivation matters to student outcomes. To me, this is the critical first step in using motivation research to shape instruction and, as I hope to show, classroom assessment. If the evidence wasn’t this compelling, this would just be another idea for a way forward. But it’s not. It’s solid.

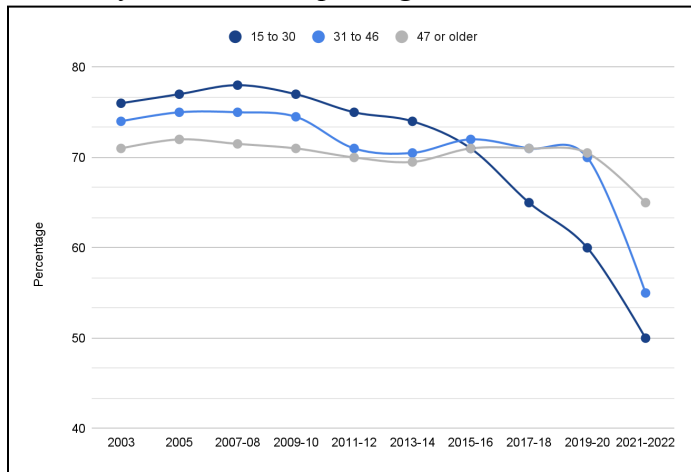
Except for where it isn’t.

Before I continue lauding the robustness and potential of motivation theories, I need to acknowledge that much of the very strong evidence for these two categories of motivation and their associations with student outcomes is white (Usher, 2018). All of the theories were originally formulated by white male theorists researching white middle class north american students. Educational psychology generally, and motivation research specifically, are taking responsibility for this disparity both in terms of prioritising racialised scholars studying motivation and racialised students as participants. I am particularly appreciative of race-reimagined approaches through which researchers apply relevant socio-cultural lenses to motivation constructs and theories (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014) revealing important understandings in the composition, antecedents, and outcomes of motivation that have been obscured by lack of racial diversity. The progress is slow. But I do believe it is meaningful. In my own work, I am more cautious about the generalisability of the evidence promoting the benefit of certain types of motivation relative to others and more attentive to how racialized experiences of school matter for motivation. I am moving forward with humility and care, but I keep moving forward.

A Surprising New Destination

While I had been convinced of the potential for certain forms of motivation over others, it took me much longer to see that the outcomes associated with adaptive forms of motivation - expected success, perceptions of success, enjoyment, boredom, and anxiety - are part of the nomological network of student well-being. In other words, motivation constructs have a long history of being associated with indicators of student well-being even though they were not typically described as such (Martela, 2023). Now, however, with well-being holding a central focus in all levels of schooling, the nomenclature became obvious to me. When I describe the idea of *assessment well-being*, people want to talk in a way that describing *the benefits of intrinsic motivation* simply does not garner. Don’t hear me use this connection opportunistically. The data on young people’s mental health is compelling (Figure 2). Well-being is not doing well. And if classroom assessment is at all linked to this phenomenon (and we know it is) then motivation theory has an opportunity and a responsibility in this domain.

Figure 2
 Percent of Canadians Reporting Excellent Mental Health by Age and Year



Plotted from Statistics Canada [Table 13-10-0096-03 Perceived mental health, by age group](#)
 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25318/1310009601-eng>

The step after knowing that certain forms of motivation tend to be positively associated with outcomes indicative of well-being is to ask: Do we know how to cultivate that type of motivation?

Notwithstanding the limitations of lack of diversity, the answer is largely, yes.

Each theory offers a set of recommendations to help teachers make instructional decisions that cultivate one construct over the other. In my Summit presentation and current program of research, I focus on the recommendations forwarded by self-determination theory (SDT). At least in part I have chosen SDT because of its longstanding commitment to cross-cultural research (Lynch, 2023), tentative evidence of universality (Church et al., 2013), and the quickly growing body of race-reimagined research (e.g., Bunce et al., 2021; López et al., 2022; Yates & Patall, 2021).

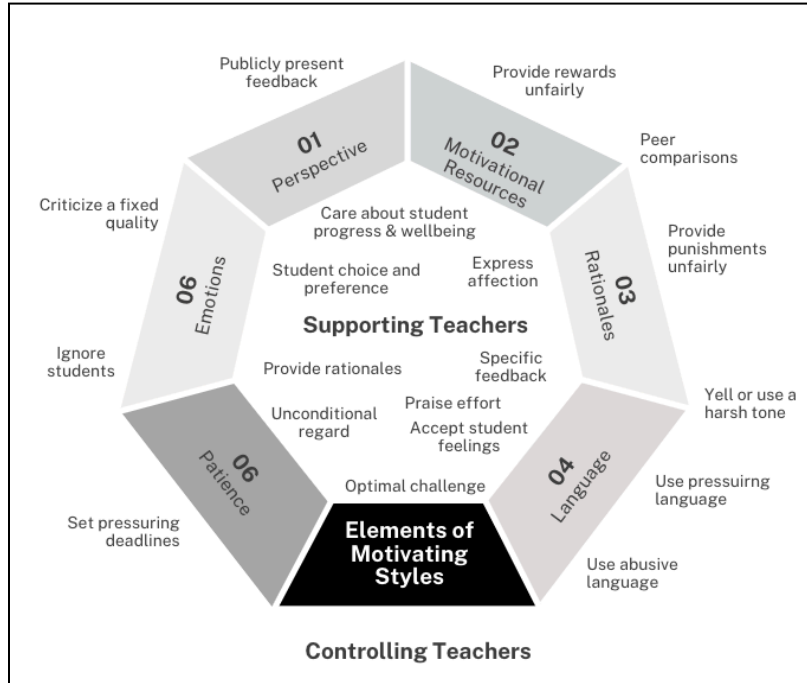
According to SDT, intrinsic motivation is realised as teachers make choices that students receive as either satisfying or frustrating their basic psychological needs (BPN) of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the most recent *Handbook of Self-determination Theory*, Vansteenkiste and colleagues (2023) explain that:

Autonomy refers to the experience of volition, willingness, and authenticity in one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings. Autonomy reflects integrity, as one is “in unison” with regard to one’s aims and actions. When frustrated, one experiences a sense of pressure and inner conflict, thereby feeling pushed in an unwanted direction. *Relatedness* denotes the experience of warmth, bonding, and care and is satisfied when one feels connected to significant others. Relatedness frustration involves a sense of social alienation, exclusion, and loneliness. *Competence* concerns the experience of effectiveness and mastery. When frustrated, one experiences a sense of failure and helplessness. (p. 85)

When it comes to articulating “what” teaching behaviours support or thwart students’ BPN, the research vacillates between broad descriptions of motivating styles and specific discrete teaching behaviours. Although a full review of these studies is beyond the scope of this paper, I offer details from two sources and a guiding conceptualisation in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Conceptualisation of Teachers’ Motivating Styles and Supportive or Controlling Behaviours



First, Johnmarshall Reeve has led the field in in terms of teaching styles that either support or thwart students’ BPN (e.g., Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve, 2006; 2009; 2016; Reeve et al., 1999; Su & Reeve, 2011). Reeve has identified and refined six motivating styles that reliably distinguish need-supportive teaching from controlling teaching: (1) perspectives, (2) motivational resources, (3) rationales, (4) language, (5) emotions, and (6) patience. He (2016) anchored the six styles along the typical timing of lesson plans explaining that during preparation/planning teachers can choose to either take students’ perspectives or prioritise their own. Then when introducing a lesson, teachers can support students’ BPN by vitalising inner motivational resources rather than introducing external rewards and providing explanatory rationales about the relevance of the topic rather than omitting such explanations. Finally, as the lesson proceeds, teachers can support BPN by acknowledging and accepting negative emotions if they arise, using informational language, and being patient as students learn. Alternatively, trying to avoid negative emotions, using controlling language, and rushing students leads to BPN frustration. These six styles have remained central to conceptualising teachers’ actions in regards to BPN even as researchers looked for greater precision in named actions.

Second, trying to bring consensus to the most strongly agreed upon discrete teaching behaviours that support or thwart students’ BPN, Ahmadi and colleagues (2023) undertook a Delphi study. The study involved 34 SDT experts who engaged in three rounds of ranking 73 discrete teaching derived from systematic reviews and existing taxonomies to 57 behaviours and then to a final

short list of nine BPN supportive and 13 BPN thwarting “emblematic behaviours” (p. 13). The magnitude of expertise and consensus brought to bear on this manuscript suggests we can have a high level of confidence in these practices predictably supporting or thwarting students’ BPN. Howard and colleagues (2024) have meta-analysed many of the behaviours Ahmadi and colleagues’ (2023) listed and have found evidence supporting their theorised associations with BPN support or frustration.

To give you insight about how these teaching behaviours can be applied, let me pull from my own course design. In that Fall 2020 asynchronous assessment course, my team supported student autonomy through pages of FAQs answering almost every question they posed and making whole chunks of course content available all at once so students could work at their own pace. To build relatedness, I made spontaneous videos to try and better explain course content and to extend their really good questions. We tried to feel like a community by creating a Bitmoji classroom accompanied with a class theme song¹. We supported competence through a combination of low stakes weekly activities scored with a holistic rubric and multiple choice exams with a computer exam security program and computer-generated score reports. It was good. Actually, it was really good. And many students commented that they could *feel* us trying to support their well-being aka their BPN. Even online. Even through videos. Even with multiple choice tests. As one student wrote in their course evaluation:

Dr. Daniels clearly cared about students and our learning. This was evident in how she prepared and delivered the course. (Her bitmoji classroom created by her family were also absolutely adorable and I appreciated the opportunity to get to know her on a personal level a bit). She thought meaningfully about course work and assignments. Consolidation activities were appreciated as it ensured I did not fall behind in the class. Videos were manageable amounts of time (as online videos take longer to get through than learning in a classroom) and powerpoints were helpful. Exams were straightforward if you attended to course material. I appreciated the activities she incorporated like the Implicit Bias tests. I also appreciated that there was open dialogue between instructor and students in respectful ways. Her Teacher Talks interviews were tangible ways to get us learning from teachers in the field right now and I appreciate the effort that went into this portion of the class. I am refreshed and proud that the university has someone like Dr. Daniels looking at assessment research. She did an excellent job of incorporating equity perspectives and is doing incredible work advocating for silenced voices in a field that often actively ignores or avoids these concerns. The university, pre-service teachers in this course, and the students we will go on to serve are lucky to have Dr. Daniels working for them.

We know it can work for instruction. But this is important: There is currently no research in which these recommendations have been applied specifically to classroom assessment. None. In their 2021 paper, although Reeve and Cheon state that BPN supporting and thwarting practices can be applied “irrespective of what the [classroom] event is” (p. 71), there is no mention of classroom assessment in their paper. I am of the opinion that classroom assessment must be considered as a unique domain because it remains more rather than less controlling simply by its nature in the education system.

So this is the challenge I have accepted in my teaching and my research. To figure out what elements of classroom assessment students perceive as satisfying or frustrating their BPN. I’m making good progress and glad to be keeping the company of thoughtful scholars along the way.

¹ Click this [link](#) for the class theme song.

Summitting Uncharted Terrain

I was pleased to be the third presenter and have the opportunity to make connections between what Drs. Donald and DeLuca had already said. They were gracious with my pragmatism and I was grateful for the open dialogue and sharing that, in my opinion, both looked at assessment right now and imagined it into the future.

As part of my analogy, *there is a marathon underway for assessment, equity, and well-being* and Dr. DeLuca is leading the pack. Listening to Dr DeLuca is inspiring. The paper he co-authored with Dr. Lorna Earl and shared at the summit set a tone for the future of assessment as free from governmentalism. A space that, to me, nearly erases the lines separating curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as well as reduces the power difference between teachers and students. It betrays a longing for real love of learning that many of us have and wish for students, teachers, and the system alike. As inspiring as I find this vision, I truly believe it is part of a marathon. It's a race we have to run, but we need to plan and train and buy the right sneakers. It isn't wise to jump into a marathon even if you'd really like to. I get excited about the systems that could replace what we have but I do not support taking down systems before we know what will take its place. So this is not the right pace for my work.

At the same time, the analogy saw that *unhurried walks through assessment* are available. Dr. Donald's assessment practices show up in my periphery on a regular basis and have often piqued my curiosity. As he pointed out, however, it took an online international summit for our paths to cross even though we are at the same institution. Clearly other daily forces at play curtail my curiosity about the unhurried and personal approaches to assessment that Dr. Donald described. Many of the students I teach have shared space with Dr. Donald and experienced the type of whole person learning and assessment he described during the summit. Listening to Dr. Donald's commitment to the whole person makes it less surprising that there is spill-over from his sacred space into my drab lecture hall. The beauty of his Winter Count assignment was not lost on me in the same way it is not lost on his students who have in previous years discussed this in our assessment class. Can I further unhurry my assessment? Is this scalable to 200? Am I creating spaces for students to feel whole? Do I have permission to try? I am not sure this is the pace for my setting.

So in the midst of the marathon and alongside the unhurried, I find myself approaching assessment and well-being with a *one-step-at-a-time attitude and action plan*. I don't think the well-being needs of today's students can wait for the marathon system change. Likewise, although some students may have a great whole-person experience in one class, they will likely have many more classes in which integration is far from being realised.

Students are writing tests right now.

They are researching papers tonight.

They are pouring themselves into portfolios.

So along the way to systems change and individual experiences, I want to take a tangible first step. I am confident that we know enough about motivation theory and practices to bend what we currently do in assessment and make a step in favour of student well-being.

How, you ask? Good question.

I am working toward that answer one step at a time as well. I have started collecting empirical evidence, but at the moment I mostly have ideas about assessment practices that *in theory* either support or thwart students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Importantly, these recommendations are designed to support students' BPN while simultaneously creating high quality assessments. I'll give you my favourite three ideas:

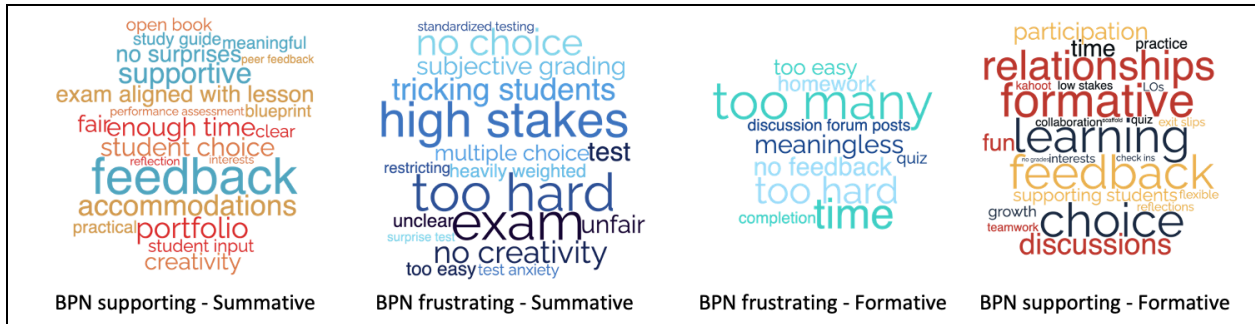
1. *Explanatory rationales.* Of discrete actions, providing students with an explanatory rationale has the second largest meta-analytic effect on supporting students' BPN (Howard et al., 2024) of all actions. One reason it may be so effective is because it is uncommon. Think about it. How often have you heard an instructor offer a rationale for an assessment? An instructor may show that the assessment aligns with learner outcomes, but aside from that, explanations are limited. Why did you choose one type of assessment over another? Having a meaningful and thorough rationale for assessment decisions - even common decisions like using a test - would help students see assessment as intentional and not haphazard.
2. *Assessment blueprinting.* Blueprinting, whether it is for a single test or a whole slate of assessment, creates transparency, offers control, and empowers students (Raymond & Grande, 2019). Instead of an assessment feeling like a trick or a guessing game, teachers who provide students with blueprints of outcomes, topics, and items, communicate to students that the content is aligned with their learning. It gives students' boundaries so they can make plans to study, do their work, and position themselves for success. This should meet the basic psychological need of competence and relatedness.
3. *Grading dates.* The idea here is simple: When you are creating your syllabus, instead of deciding when an assessment will be *due* I suggest you consider when you will start *grading* it. The default in many learning management systems is to set submission times for midnight. Why? Are you going to start grading at midnight? No. Could your students want or need to improve the quality of their work through the night? Yes. I know you don't want your students to work through the night, but that is not your decision. Sometimes 2am is when students have time to do their work. Or to improve their work. And making assessments due just so they can wait to be graded, puts instructor preferences over the complexity of students' lives. Grading dates are a sign of mutuality and should support all three BPN.

Right now these are just three ideas. In my program of research, I am mapping BPN supportive and thwarting practices onto assessment design. I am validating a new domain specific BPN assessment survey. I am making incremental changes to assessments and testing the magnitude of their impact on BPN and well-being. And I'm asking my undergraduate students all sorts of questions about BPN satisfaction and frustration. Asking them if it makes sense. If they think

things could be better. If they are willing to believe that assessments aren't out to get them. And what instructors would need to do to help them feel that. Here is what they have said:

Figure 4

Students' ideas about BPN supporting and frustrating practices



Students get it. They want it. They need it.

It has simply been too long that assessment has been exempt from its role in the student well-being crisis. The presenters in this Summit session on well-being are all in agreement about this. Whether it is one-step, a marathon, or a river walk, there are exciting things in store for the future of assessment for the good of student equity and well-being.

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