Not playing the game: Student assessment resistance as a form of agency

Lois R. Harris

Central Queensland University

Gavin T. L. Brown

The University of Auckland

Jo Dargusch

Central Queensland University

Correspondence should be addressed to Dr Lois R Harris, Senior Postdoctoral Fellow, School

of Education & The Arts, CQUniversity - Australia, Rockhampton, 4701 or by email to

l.harris@cqu.edu.au

Not playing the game: Student assessment resistance as a form of agency

Abstract

Within self-regulated learning, learners exercise agency by setting targets, formatively monitoring progress, and evaluating results in ways which inform their own goal attainment. However, in real world classroom situations, assessment processes can elicit behaviours that are more ego-protective than growth-oriented. Resistance to teacher expectations in assessment can arise from the individual's need to protect his or her own identity or ego within the psycho-social context of the classroom. Additionally, resistance can arise from strategic choices learners make to cope with competing demands on their time and resources. Thus, students may exercise their agency by not following assessment expectations or protocols (e.g., lying, cheating, or failing to give their best effort). These choices seem to undermine assessment validity.

This paper shares student voice data from the Measuring Teachers' Assessment Practices (MTAP) project ($n = 46$ students in seven focus groups) in New Zealand and the Supporting Student Assessment Success (SSAS) Project ($n = 108$ first year university students) in Australia. Both highlight the different ways students resist, subvert, or act in contention with assessment. These data show that students in both sectors do not always act in the growth-oriented ways educators envision. Students reported exercising potentially maladaptive assessment agency via: Assessment dishonesty, Purposeful underperformance, and Doing it alone. These categories were underpinned by three differing rationales: Protection, Strategic prioritisation, and Mini-max. Educators must be mindful of these potential student actions and motives, working to establish psychological safety within the learning environment and make sure links between learning and assessment are clear.

Student Agency in Assessment

During the past two decades, there have been calls to increase student agency and involvement in assessment processes, particularly from the Assessment for Learning movement (e.g., Black and Wiliam 1998; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam 2003). For example, Black and Wiliam (2009) highlight the importance of activating students as instructional resources for one another and as the owners of their own learning. When defining formative assessment, they intentionally name students as potential assessment decision-makers and users of such data because *"anyone can be the agent in formative assessment."* (Wiliam 2010, p. 24; original italics).

The goal of increasing student agency within assessment aligns well with models of self-regulated learning (e.g., Zimmerman 2008), which posit that academic growth occurs when learners set targets, formatively monitor their progress, and evaluate results in ways which inform goal attainment. Winne (2011) argues that "a sense of agency is required for productive self-regulation" (p 28). However, it is perhaps naïve to believe that agency during assessment will always occur in ways that are productive for academic growth and learning. Dinsmore and Wilson (2016) reviewed 32 empirical studies, which included students from all educational sectors (i.e., pre-schooling, compulsory education, higher education, and adult education), to examine the relationship between participation in assessment processes and self-regulation. They concluded that student active participation in assessment processes (e.g., self-assessment, peer-assessment, opportunities to use teacher or computer feedback to improve work) does not automatically lead to better self-regulation. They argued that student abilities to self-regulate during assessment are highly contingent on factors such as: the developmental characteristics of the learner, the task, the domain, and the desired regulatory outcome. Hence, it is important to better understand how student agency during assessment may support or potentially undermine productive student self-regulation of learning.

While the adaptive potential of student agency within assessment is widely discussed, examination of potentially maladaptive forms of assessment agency is largely missing from the literature. Students can exercise agency within assessment by self-regulating, seeking help when needed, setting goals, and many other behaviours positive for learning. However, resistance, subversion, and contention are also potential manifestations of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and clearly students are able to resist or subvert the assessment practices in which they are involved.

While many studies highlight the potentially negative emotions students may experience before, during, and after assessment (Reay and Wiliam 1999; Vogl and Pekrun 2016), few studies examine, within normal classroom contexts, student acts of resistance, subversion, and contention in response to assessment situations alongside their motives for these acts. Literature reviews indicate that a substantial percentage of research around academic dishonesty and cheating (Murdock, Stephens and Groteweil 2016) and student effort (Wise and Smith 2016) investigates contexts where assessment stakes are high for the student, system, or both. For example, Reay and Wiliam's (1999) study in the United Kingdom examined student responses to high-stakes testing. During preparation for these tests, researchers observed a range of negative student behaviours (e.g., leaving classroom to avoid practice tests, expressing anger, scribbling on the test paper, and belittling peers who did well). These students saw performance on these tests as tightly linked to their life chances and expressed considerable fear and anxiety. Hall, Collins, Benjamin, Nind, and Sheehy (2004) also found examples of students decreasing their effort, showing boredom, and expressing a dislike of school due to intensive test preparation.

When examining student assessment actions more broadly, most examples of potentially maladaptive actions are examined in isolation, relating to just one particular type of behaviour (e.g., cheating, rejecting feedback), and motives are often ignored. For example,

although it is known that students do, at times, ignore or reject assessment feedback (Harris, Brown, and Harnett 2014; Hattie and Timperley 2007), seldom is this examined as a purposeful act by the student for potentially legitimate reasons (e.g., feedback was inaccurate or unintelligible, delivered in a manner which was unnecessarily negative or personal, pertained to aspects of the work which the student did not value, or provided advice which the student did not have the academic skills to implement; Lipnevich, Berg, and Smith 2016). While plagiarism and how to detect it is a major concern, particularly within higher education (Dawson and Sutherland-Smith 2017), the focus of much of this body of literature is on the ways student cheat (and how teachers can best stop them from cheating via software, assessment procedures, and punitive measures), as opposed to reasons why students may feel compelled to do so or how they might rationalise their actions. Within practices like peer- and self-assessment, students may falsify evaluations to avoid potentially negative peer or teacher reactions (Andrade and Brown 2016; Harris and Brown 2013; Panadero 2016). Nichols and Berliner (2007) suggested that students may justify behaviours like cheating if they perceive that the assessment is unfair or unreasonable. Hence, it is possible that in some circumstances, academic dishonesty may be reduced by redesigning assessment tasks in ways which help students see their purpose and make them feel the tasks are fair and achievable.

This paper aims to contribute to understanding student assessment agency by exploring students' perspectives around actions that undermine the integrity of assessment and/or the actual achievement of intended learning outcomes. It draws on student voice data from two studies, one with New Zealand students in Years 5-10 and the other with 1st year Australian undergraduates, to explore student descriptions of resistance, subversion, and/or contention in the face of assessment alongside their rationales for these approaches.

Acts of resistance, subversion, or contention may include a range of behaviours, including choosing:

- not to invest the effort needed to produce the student's best work (thereby threatening the validity of the assessment as the task does not accurately reflect what the student knows and can do),

- to avoid the task or aspects of it,

- to act in academically dishonest ways (e.g., cheating, plagiarism, copying), or

- to reject potentially helpful scaffolding or feedback in relation to the task.

Theorising agency and student assessment actions

Clearly, assessment's effectiveness is dependent on the choices and actions of the main actors (i.e., teachers and students) within the social and cultural conditions in which assessment is enacted (Brown and Harris 2016). As Brown and Harris (2016) remind us:

> What we are trying to do in educational assessment is multidimensional and impacts all dimensions simultaneously. Assessment affects emotions; thinking; behaving; interrelationships with peers, parents, and teachers; and intrarelationships with self— and all this across time, knowledge domains, methods, contexts, cultures, and societies. (p. 508-509)

How and why students exercise agency within such a complex space is vital to understand.

Student agency is seen as a necessary ingredient within both self-regulated learning and Assessment for Learning. However, there are many ways to conceptualise agency. Most educators likely envision forms of student agency aligned with the teacher's instructional goals. One example is the notion of agentic engagement (Reeve and Tsang 2011; Reeve 2013), where students constructively contribute to the flow of instruction while completing a task. Reeve and Tsang (2011) identify myriad examples of behaviours which might be considered signs of agentic engagement, such as when students:

> offer input, express a preference, offer a suggestion or contribution, ask a question, communicate what they are thinking and needing, recommend a goal or objective to

be pursued, communicate their level of interest, solicit resources or learning

opportunities, seek ways to add personal relevance to the lesson, ask for a say in how

problems are to be solved, seek clarification, generate options, communicate likes and

dislikes. (p. 258)

Key to this notion is students' 'constructive' contribution; hence, such 'agentic' actions are

likely enacted in ways that do not undermine or question the task.

However, within the field of sociology, notions of agency are far broader and provide

a useful lens when considering the wide range of student actions within assessment situations.

As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) explain, in addition to the more positive forms of agency

discussed above, actors can exercise agency via resistance, subversion, and contention. Such

actions can potentially bring about transformation of the context in which the agent resides,

particularly when the agent is resisting or subverting existing structures which they do not see

as being in their best interests. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) also remind us of the contextual

and temporal nature of agency; students might make assessment decisions drawing on past

experiences (e.g., I did poorly on this type of assessment last time, so I do not feel motivated

to try this time), the present (e.g., I am feeling anxious), and the future (e.g., If I don't try

hard on this assessment, I won't get the grades I need to pursue my dream career).

While resistance to assessment is not new, particularly in the case of high-stakes or

externally mandated testing (e.g., Nichols and Berliner 2007; Zeichner 2013), most study of

assessment resistance has focused on teacher and/or parent agency (e.g., test boycotts, the

'opt out' movement within the United States; Harris 2015; Harris and Brown 2016; Nichols

and Berliner 2007) or has examined school or district level resistance to larger policy

objectives. Minimal attention has been placed on potential examples of student resistance,

subversion, and contention within normal classroom or course level assessment situations,

even though these could potentially thwart teacher intentions, undermine learning, and/or

jeopardize the validity and integrity of the assessment process.

Even potentially adaptive forms of student agency within assessment (e.g., their self-

regulation of learning via these processes) may prove maladaptive under particular

conditions. The dual-processing model of self-regulation (Boekaerts 1997; Boekaerts and

Corno 2005) shows that students can choose to self-regulate around two different types of

goals: growth or well-being. Boekaerts and Corno (2005) explain that "students strive to

balance these two priorities, straddling the divide between tracks for growth goals and

wellbeing goals" (p. 203). To pursue growth goals, learners must identify and accept

weakness or failure as a prerequisite for improvement. While student well-being is obviously

important, students may, in seeking to maximise their own positive self-regard, inadvertently

avoid challenge or hide weaknesses. Since success in assessment is not usually guaranteed, it

may be that in exercising their agency, students may engage in practices, thoughts, and

motivations that protect their ego, at the expense of academic growth. Such actions may be

entirely rational or strategic within the context of competing pressures and obligations the

student faces. Nonetheless, such agency may not help students achieve intended learning

outcomes. Hence, when examining student rationales for agentic behaviour within assessment

contexts, it seems important to get a sense of what is driving their behaviour and determine if

growth or well-being motives are most dominant.

Methods

Data were drawn from two large multi-year, mixed-method studies. The first was conducted

in New Zealand by the first two authors and funded by the University of Auckland Faculty

Research Development Fund. It focused on examining the relationships between teachers'

assessment conceptions, their enacted practices, students' conceptions, and their academic

results. The second was conducted in Australia by Authors 3 and 1 and funded by the

Australian Federal Government's Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). This project focused on the assessment experiences of 1st year undergraduate students at a multi-campus Australian university. While working with different populations in differing countries, both sought to explore student experiences of assessment and their perspectives on these experiences. Relevant institutional ethical clearance was obtained for both projects and all names used throughout this paper are pseudonyms.

New Zealand (NZ) study context, sample, and data collection

Within New Zealand primary and secondary schools, Assessment for Learning is the official policy-endorsed and dominant approach to assessment (Ministry of Education 2010). While students in Years 11-13 can sit external exams as part of their national qualifications, in primary and lower secondary contexts, schools provide evidence of student progress in a range of ways (e.g., standardised tests of the school's choice, course-work, other evidence of student work and progress, site visits; Crooks 2011). Hence, schools have comparative freedom around how they choose to assess student learning, at least prior to Year 11.

As part of a week of intensive observation and data collection within four classes (ranging from Year 5 to 10), the teachers selected seven focus groups ($n = 46$) from the pool of willing student participants. Two focus groups were run in each class [Isabel's mid-socioeconomic status (SES)Year 6/7 primary school class (Group 1, n = 6, Group 2 n = 7), Danielle's low-SES Year 7 intermediate school class (Group 1, n = 6, Group 2, n = 6), and Sylvia's mid-SES advanced Year 10 high school English class (Group 1, n = 7, Group 2, n = 8)], except for Yvonne's low-SES Year 7/8 intermediate school class, which provide only one (n = 6). Each focus group was conducted by the first author of this paper, lasted approximately one hour and took place in a vacant room in the school during normal school hours, without the teacher. Students described their classroom assessment experiences and

explained their participation and actions. All data were video and audio recorded and were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Australian study context, sample, and data collection

Within Australia, there has been a major focus on increasing participation in higher education, particularly via the recruitment and retention of students from under-represented groups (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, and Scales 2008). This study took place at an Australian multi-campus university, where most campuses were based in regional areas and almost all courses allowed students to study via blended or distance learning. At this institution, while assessment failure might delay student progress and have financial cost, students are given multiple opportunities to succeed (i.e., allowed to repeat courses or sit supplemental assessments) in line with the national agenda of increasing equity and inclusivity.

Data were drawn from telephone interviews with 108 1st year students. All interviewees had previously responded to a survey about their assessment experiences within a particular course. In keeping with the HEPPP focus on reducing disadvantage, participants were selected because they belonged to an identified equity group (i.e., low-SES, regional/remote, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, non-English speaking background, women in non-traditional areas), with low-SES students comprising almost half of the sample ($n = 52$). Student participants came from four different schools in the university (i.e., Nursing and Midwifery, Education and the Arts, Engineering and Technology, and Business and Law). Authors 1 and 3 individually conducted these interviews (each taking about 30 minutes) at the end of the term after all assessment had been submitted. In the interview, students described their course assessment experiences, providing feedback about what helped and hindered their progress. All data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively to prioritise the "rich descriptions and explanations of human processes" (Huberman, Miles, and Saldana 2013, p. 4). Data of interest to the research questions were identified initially through categorical analysis (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The first and third authors examined data from both studies, separating out participant utterances where students discussed decisions and/or actions within assessment situations which exhibited agency that might undermine the student's learning or achievement, and/or threaten the validity of the assessment. These utterances were placed into thematic groups using empirical rather than a priori codes, although in the final stage of analysis, pre-existing terms were adopted if conceptual alignment was strong. Thematic groups were iteratively compared and contrasted, until three broad categories were identified that seemed to account for the variation within the data. The same procedure was then followed when establishing the three categories describing the variation in participant rationales for these behaviours.

Results

Students reported exercising potentially maladaptive assessment agency via: Assessment dishonesty, Purposeful underperformance, and Doing it alone. These categories were underpinned by three differing rationales: Protection, Strategic prioritisation, and Mini-max.

Assessment actions

  Assessment dishonesty. Students shared a range of actions they or their classmates took to artificially enhance their scores on assessment tasks. The school students described methods of subversion including copying from friends and changing results in the teacher's mark book. For example, students in Danielle's class explained "They [students] try to like copy" (Jackson) and "Some people will sneak in with a pen and when nobody's in the class, they'll just quickly do a cross [to mark off their homework on the chart]" (Chelsea).

  While no university participants personally admitted to plagiarism, students did report more subtle forms of dishonesty:

The first reflective paper, I didn't really have anything to reflect on …. so we basically

just had to make it up. (Harry, Engineering)

Subtle subversion was also reported in relation to peer- and self-assessment:

Yet our self and peer assessments, we were sort of almost patting each other on the

back. So you can work with each other, you can have a silent agreement and get

around that [standards]. (Tom, Engineering)

Students within the school sample also reported colluding with peers to boost peer-

assessment results or artificially inflating their own scores in hopes of obtaining better marks

or of hiding weaknesses (Harris and Brown 2013). Across disciplines, university students

were also concerned about purposefully or inadvertently copying from exemplars ["It felt like

I was cheating off someone." (Alice, Nursing) "A lot of the assignments, from what I heard,

resembled the example." (Ellie, Education)].

Purposeful underperformance. Students also described actions which would

potentially depress their assessment results. While these strategies were highly disparate, they

have been grouped conceptually because they are all likely to lead to assessment results

which underestimate the student's capabilities. Both groups discussed strategies like

procrastination and choosing not to invest effort in particular tasks. For example, Prama in

Sylvia's class said "You try to distract yourself and watch TV or listen to some music or

whatever. You put it [assessment] off. You don't want the pressure to get to you". School

students shared a range of sophisticated strategies to resist (e.g., poor behaviour, excuses,

purposeful non-completion) or subvert (e.g., random guessing) tasks:

Yuri: We had this sheet with all this little A, B, C, or D. Theo just did any random

ones because he didn't want to do it [maths test].

Evan: There's like people like Louis who when he has to do a test, he like makes silly

things so he gets to go outside.

Olivia: Yeah and like not do it. Like if we have a basic facts test, and he doesn't do

even one question in the whole six minutes. And Mrs. Brown, she doesn't bother; she

knows he's not going to do it. She tells him off and like tells him to try and do

something, but then, he gets all angry at her. So she like makes him sit out for a little

while. (Isabel's class)

A couple of school students also noted potential negative peer reactions if performance was

too high ["If you do good, you get called a nerd" (Cathy, Sylvia's class)], a consequence also

noted by Reay and Wiliam (1999) and which motivated students to purposefully

underperform.

Few university student participants reported purposely underperforming,

understandable given they, as adult learners, had chosen to study. However, several still

described actions which undermined their academic performance (e.g., assessment non-

submission or aiming for a lower result than they were capable of achieving), usually citing

time constraints or disinterest in the task. As one student indicated, being required to

concurrently submit multiple assessments across different units of work "just wasn't a

realistic timeframe" (Alyssa, Business and Law). Whilst her overall grade for the unit was

therefore compromised, she justified non-submission of a particular task because "I've

already passed it [the unit] and Ps [passes] get degrees".

Some university students also reported examples of false-modesty in self-assessment

as they did not want to risk scoring themselves higher than their instructors might ["I don't

want to put something in and get less. I'd rather go for less probably" (Hayley, Engineering)].

There were also examples within the data of imposter syndrome (Clance and Imes

1978), where students, particularly from non-traditional backgrounds, questioned their ability

to perform at the levels required, leading them to strive for lower levels of achievement than

they were actually capable of achieving.

Doing it Alone. Students reported purposely avoiding available help with assessment. In both sectors, some students admitted to ignoring or rejecting instructor and/or peer feedback [e.g. "I didn't really look at much feedback to be honest." (Harry, Engineering)]. In some cases, this was because they could not understand the feedback or how to apply it:

> If you do it [task] at a lower standard Miss goes, "you will get a higher level to do that," but we don't actually know what level it is, so we can't actually do it. (Falah, Danielle's class)

Additionally, some students did not appear ready to admit to shortcomings and may have been in denial about their need for help or feedback. For example,

> I tried to be different and have it [grade nomination] at the end, and then I was advised not to do that and I was like "well, hang on a minute, isn't this our own interpretation of how we" you know? It was quite open-ended. I thought that would be okay. (Ellen, Engineering)

While school students did not admit to contention with teachers about the accuracy of the feedback and/or grades they received, several higher education students did.

In both sectors, disconnects with the instructor could lead them to feel they needed to do it alone:

> I asked a couple of questions [about the assignment] and it was, "well, you're an academic learner. See you later. You work it out". And, okay. Righto. So it was half my fault for getting my little temper tantrum on as well so… If I had've taken a bit more time and cooled down and approached it a little bit differently maybe I would have gotten another answer, but at that point I didn't want to go and cause any more issues. (Imogen, Business)

University students also regularly reported rejecting assessment resources and modes of support because they did not: understand them, align with their learning approach, or need them. For example, Yuan explained:

> I think the lecturer did put them [examples of case study] in Moodle site, but I didn't pay much attention to them. I was mainly just focused on getting the assignment done. (Business)

Rationales

Protection. When examining their rationales, some students acted as they did in order to protect their own ego ["Their friend might laugh at them [if they admit misunderstanding]" (Sally, Danielle's class)]. They also sought protection from negative consequences ["The teacher [gives] detention" (Karl, Danielle's class)], or aimed to safeguard relationships with peers, teachers, or parents ["Well, if someone's your friend, you wouldn't give them a really bad mark because they'd be like "why did you give me that mark?" (Eva, Sylvia's class)]. Particularly within self-assessment, subversion might occur either in hopes of boosting their grade ["I imagine embellishing [my grade] a touch is probably better than being really hard on yourself" (Peter, Engineering)] or to minimise the chances of disappointment ["If I went for a high [grade] and I got less, it would feel a lot like failing, even if it isn't." (Hayley, Engineering)]. Ignoring or rejecting feedback could help students avoid uncomfortable conversations with themselves:

> I already kind of can guess what I did wrong and I know it was totally preventable so I go "hmm", kind of cringe at myself because it's just so easy to fix a lot of the small things that I made mistakes on. (Harry, Engineering)

Rejecting or questioning grades or feedback also allowed students to avoid admitting to shortcomings within their work. In all these instances, students seemed to be prioritising

well-being goals (Boekaerts and Corno 2005). This focus made such students hesitant to take

academic risks, admit to mistakes, or risk teacher, peer, or parent displeasure.

Strategic Prioritisation. Students also described carefully considering which subjects

or units to prioritise and what resources were most important. Due to competing time

pressures, university students often discussed avoiding anything within the course which they

did not perceive as directly relating to assessment:

> I'm getting marked on these assessments that I've got to submit, so anything that's
>
> not sort of involved directly around that, those marked assessment pieces, I'm just
>
> dropping to the side. (Yosef, Education)

For school students, this could mean deprioritising assessment in entire subject areas ["I don't

put pressure on myself because I know that maths is not where I need to be. Like I don't have

a future with maths" (Cathy, Sylvia's class)]. Students also reported deprioritising tasks if

they perceived instructions or feedback were confusing ["I never really understood what I

was meant to do with that despite querying it numerous times. Her explanations just didn't

gel with my comprehension there." (Liam, Business)].

A minority of students also reported actively prioritising their own knowledge and

resources over those of the teacher because they wanted to be independent learners:

> The teacher is like telling you like what to do, like "put this in here" or "put this over
>
> here." You need to like think for yourself because you have to be independent when
>
> you grow up. You don't want to rely on someone, that's what my dad said anyway.
>
> (Gita, Danielle's class)

While fostering independence is a goal of education, effective learners remain open to

feedback. There is obviously a delicate balance between fostering learner autonomy and,

simultaneously, encouraging students to listen to and act upon advice and feedback.

Mini-max. Students also reported making choices to expend the least possible effort within a particular task. Mini-max is a widely held, and potentially rational, approach to learning that involves making the minimal effort for maximum return (Covington and Teel 1996). These students were keenly aware of the amount of effort they needed to get the result which they personally deemed acceptable, even if this might be less than they were capable of and less than the teacher expected. For some school students, this results in purposeful underperformance:

> If I get a 100, I don't like that. Cause that means I go into the top group and I have to
>
> do hard work and hard work makes you think. (Oscar, Yvette's class)

University students described purposely foregoing entire sections of assignments because they did not understand the requirements, were not interested, or did not consider the work was sufficiently valued within the grading structure:

> I think the assignment was out of 40. The assumption section was five marks, so I
>
> forget about assumptions because I'm not sure how to do that. The most I can get is
>
> 35, so I need to try and work on getting as much as I can out of 35. (Yves, Business)
>
> It was not something that interested me, the drawing folder... I talked to lecturers and
>
> found out what the minimum requirement was for that learning outcome that would fit
>
> in with the grade structure I wanted, so I just really did the minimum amount for that.
>
> (Thomas, Engineering)

Rather than doing their best, these students were doing just enough (Meyer, McClure, Walkey, Weir, and McKenzie 2009).

Discussion

While encouraging student agency within assessment is a worthy goal, data reported here remind educators that students do not always act in ways which are beneficial to their own learning or which lead to valid assessment results. Even in classroom and relatively low

stakes assessment situations, there is evidence of student assessment resistance (e.g., purposeful non-completion, task avoidance), subversion (e.g., cheating, manipulation), and contention (e.g., rejecting or challenging feedback) (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Examining students' justifications shows that in particular contexts (e.g., when students fear recourse from the teacher, system, parents, or peers for poor performance) or when focusing on particular goals (e.g., well-being ones), it may become ecologically rational to cheat, underperform, or avoid help and feedback. Students with well-being mindsets (Boekaerts and Corno 2005) may be at particular risk of maladaptive forms of assessment agency. While the desire to work things out for one's self may not always be maladaptive (Brown, Peterson and Yao 2016), effective students do seek and make use of support when they need it. The concern is that academically weaker students may not recognise their need for support and feedback (Dunning, Heath, and Suls 2004).

When comparing the two samples, there were clearly differences between the school students and the university 1st year undergraduates. While there was also variation within these two samples (e.g., mature age university students were more likely than recent school leavers to cite family responsibilities as a motivator for their potentially maladaptive actions), due to sample size, within sample variation was not systematically examined. When examining differences between the samples, we can only speculate about the reasons for these given the many variables present (e.g., student age, level of schooling, cultural context). For example, the school students were more open about academic dishonesty. This may be because consequences for such behaviours are much less severe in school (making them less afraid of disclosing them) or because the particular volunteer sample of undergraduate students within the university study did not happen to engage as much in these behaviours. Another difference was that the university students were able to articulate much more calculated approaches in relation to strategic prioritisation and mini-max, perhaps due to

maturity, or because their more complex responsibilities outside education make such

approaches necessary. University students were more likely to describe going it alone,

perhaps because, as first year undergraduates (many of whom were studying via distance),

they had less developed relationships with their teachers. School students were far more

likely to discuss purposely underperforming, which is to be expected within a compulsory

school environment where students have limited choice about what they are studying.

However, both samples did contain examples of each category, with the protection

rationale strongest across both groups. The commonality of this theme across groups

highlights how well-being goals can undermine growth goals (Boekaerts and Corno 2005),

reminding teachers to ensure learning environments are psychologically safe places where

students can take the risks they need to in order to learn. This study leads us to conclude that,

while compulsory and university students may exercise and rationalise potentially

maladaptive assessment agency in slightly different ways due to contextual and age

differences, core practices (i.e., academic dishonesty, purposeful underperformance, doing it

alone) and rationales (i.e., protection, strategic prioritisation, mini-max) appear to be common

across both groups.

However, when interpreting results, it is important to remember that the examples

reported here do not represent how all students in these studies approached assessment.

Instead, they highlight potentially maladaptive forms of student assessment agency which

exist within real world assessment situations in compulsory and university classrooms that

are often overlooked in research and practice. Additionally, while the behaviour may be

considered maladaptive (e.g., not giving one's best effort on a task, potentially limiting the

learning one achieves and jeopardising the validity of the assessment; Meyer et al. 2009), that

does not mean it is maladaptive in all instances. For example, if the assessment task lacks

purpose or is covering material the student already knows, it may be highly adaptive to

deprioritise this task and instead invest effort in a task where more learning is possible. Likewise, given limited resources, it is logical and rational to identify what is most important and work on that first. However, these student strategies can lead to major problems for educators (e.g., students avoiding important learning because it is not directly tied to the assessment task) and for assessment validity (i.e., student results not being an accurate estimation of their real level of knowledge and skills).

These results are significant as they reveal that student agency does not always function in ways productive of learning. These data show students may resist or undermine assessment practices for a range of justifiable reasons, often related to the task itself, the assessment context, the way the teacher implements the task, or the classroom environment. It reminds educators that, despite the intentions of assessment for learning, student actions can threaten assessment's integrity and validity, even in formative and low-stakes situations. It also demonstrates that teachers and school systems must acknowledge the role they may inadvertently play in motivating students to act in strategic but maladaptive ways which undermine deep transformative learning. Particularly within the context of higher education, there is a need to realise that many students may be only focusing on aspects of the course which they deem necessary to complete assessments. In light of this, it seems important to carefully design tasks so links between learning and assessment are clear and tasks are designed so students gain and demonstrate competency in all course or subject area learning objectives via the assessment tasks. The student assessment behaviours described in this paper are likely to continue, even within low-stakes environments, as long as there are competing pressures that learners have to juggle. Educators must be aware of these and continually encourage students to strive towards goals within assessment situations which promote mastery and growth over performance and well-being.

References

Andrade, H. L., & Brown, G. T. L. (2016). Student Self-Assessment in the Classroom. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 319-334). New York: Routledge.

Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). Review of Australian Higher Education. Canberra: Australian Government.

Brown, G. T. L., & Harris, L. R. (2016). The Future of Assessment as a Human and Social Endeavour. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 506-523). New York: Routledge

Brown, G. T. L., Peterson, E. R., & Yao, E. S. (2016). Student conceptions of feedback: Impact on self-regulation, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 86*(4), 606-629. doi:10.1111/bjep.12126

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education, 5*(1), 7-74.

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (2009). Developing the theory of formative assessment *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability 21*(1), 5-31.

Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2003). *Assessment for learning: Putting it into practice*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Boekaerts, M. (1997). Self-regulated learning: A new concept embraced by researchers, policy makers, educators, teachers, and students. *Learning and Instruction, 7*, 161-186.

Boekaerts, M., & Corno, L. (2005). Self-regulation in the classroom: A perspective on assessment and intervention. *Applied Psychology, 54*(2), 199-231. doi:10.1111/j.1464-0597.2005.00205.

Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women:

Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice,*
15(3), 241-247. doi:10.1037/h0086006

Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making Sense of Qualitative Data: Complementary*
Research Strategies. London: Sage.

Covington, M. V., & Teel, K. M. (1996). *Overcoming student failure: Changing motives and*
incentives for learning. Washington, DC: APA.

Crooks, T. (2011). Assessment for learning in the accountability era: New Zealand. *Studies in*
Educational Evaluation, 37(1), 71-77. doi:10.1016/j.stueduc.2011.03.002

Dawson, P., & Sutherland-Smith, W. (2017). Can markers detect contract cheating? Results
from a pilot study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1-8.

Dinsmore, D. L., & Wilson, H. E. (2016). Student participation in assessment: Does it
influence self-regulation? In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of*
Human and Social Factors in Assessment (pp. 145-168). New York: Routledge.

Dunning, D., Heath, C., & Suls, J. M. (2004). Flawed self-assessment: Implications for
health, education, and the workplace. *Psychological science in the public interest,*
5(3), 69-106.

Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What Is Agency? *American Journal of Sociology,*
103(4), 962-1023. doi:10.1086/231294

Hall, K., Collins, J., Benjamin, S., Nind, M., & Sheehy, K. (2004). SATurated models of
pupildom: Assessment and inclusion/exclusion. *British Educational Research*
Journal, 30(6), 801-817. doi: 10.1080/0141192042000279512

Harris, L. R. (2015, April 16-20). *Reviewing research on parent attitudes towards school*
assessment: Implications for classroom assessment practices. Paper presented at the
American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois.

Harris, L. R., & Brown, G. T. L. (2013). Opportunities and obstacles to consider when using

peer- and self-assessment to improve student learning: Case studies into teachers'

implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 36*(0), 101-111. doi:

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2013.07.008

Harris, L. R., & Brown, G. T. L. (2016). Assessment and Parents. In M. A. Peters (Ed.),

Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory (pp. 1-6). Singapore: Springer

Singapore.

Harris, L., Brown, G. L., & Harnett, J. (2014). Understanding classroom feedback practices:

A study of New Zealand student experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses.

Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 26(2), 107-133. doi:

10.1007/s11092-013-9187-5

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research,

77*(1), 81-112.

Huberman, A. M., Miles, M. B., & Saldana, J. M. (2013). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A

Methods Sourcebook* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lipnevich, A. A., Berg, D. A. G., & Smith, J. K. (2016). Toward a Model of Student

Response to Feedback. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *The Handbook of

Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 169-185). New York: Routledge.

Meyer, L. H., McClure, J., Walkey, F., Weir, K. F., & McKenzie, L. (2009). Secondary

student motivation orientations and standards-based achievement outcomes. *British

Journal of Educational Psychology, 79*(2), 273-293. 10.1348/000709908X354591

Ministry of Education. (2010). Ministry of Education Position Paper: Assessment [Schooling

Sector]: Ko te Wharangi Takotoranga Arunga, a te Tauhuhu o te Matauranga, te

matekitenga. Retrieved from

http://www.minedu.govt.nz/theMinistry/PublicationsAndResources/AssessmentPositi
onPaper.aspx

Murdock, T. B., Stephens, J. M., & Groteweil, M. M. (2016). Student dishonesty in the face
of assessment: Who, why, and what we can do about it. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R.
Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 186-
203). New York: Routledge.

Nichols, S. L., & Berliner, D. C. (2007). *Collateral damage: How high-stakes testing
corrupts America's schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Panadero, E. (2016). Is it safe? Social, interpersonal, and human effects of peer assessment:
A review and future directions. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of
Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 247-266). New York: Routledge.

Reay, D., & Wiliam, D. (1999). 'I'll be a nothing': Structure, agency and the construction of
identity through assessment. *British Educational Research Journal, 25*(3), 343-354.

Reeve, J. (2013). How students create motivationally supportive learning environments for
themselves: The concept of agentic engagement. *Journal of Educational Psychology,
105*(3), 579-595. doi: 10.1037/a0032690

Reeve, J., & Tseng, C.-M. (2011). Agency as a fourth aspect of students' engagement during
learning activities. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 36*(4), 257-267.
doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2011.05.002

Vogl, E., & Pekrun, R. (2016). Emotions that matter to achievement: Student feelings about
assessment. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of Human and Social
Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 111-128). New York: Routledge.

Wiliam, D. (2010). An integrative summary of the research literature and implications for a
new theory of formative assessment. In H. Andrade & G. J. Cizek (Eds.), *Handbook
of formative assessment* (pp. 18-40). New York: Routledge.

Winne, P. H. (2011). A cognitive and metacognitive analysis of self-regulated learning. In B. J. Zimmerman & D. H. Schunk (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance* (pp. 15-32). New York: Routledge.

Wise, S. L., & Smith, L. F. (2016). The validity of assessment when students don't give good effort. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 204-220). New York: Routledge.

Zeichner, N. (2013). Mapping a teacher boycott in Seattle. *Phi Delta Kappan, 95*(2), 52.

Zimmerman, B. J. (2008). Investigating Self-Regulation and Motivation: Historical Background, Methodological Developments, and Future Prospects. *American Educational Research Journal, 45*(1), 166-183. doi: 10.3102/0002831207312909