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Analysing assessment practice – how useful is the summative/formative divide as a tool?

The question in the title has arisen as part of an empirical study of assessment in universities which is in progress. The Assessment Environments & Cultures project has gathered data from a total of 30 academic teachers in three subject areas: Design, Business and Applied Sciences. These areas were chosen to provide maximum variation in features such as: nature of the subject; class sizes; typical teaching, learning and assessment methods; academic/vocational focus. Data was gathered through in-depth individual interviews with accompanying observation of practice. Interviewees were selected through a process of purposive sampling including snowball sampling as participants were invited to suggest other colleagues, whose practices they regarded as similar or very different to their own, as potential interviewees. This strategy again maximised variation, for example academics who were more innovative and others who were more traditional in their practices. The project has a large body of data which we are interrogating with the fundamental aim of a better understanding of how and why assessment operates as it does in a university context. Initial analysis has focussed on the discourses in use and the ways in which academics position themselves as they undertake assessment.

In the educational literature summative and formative assessment are distinguished on the basis of purpose, in everyday terms either summing up the level of performance, often for external report, or feeding into future learning. However there is debate about whether summative and formative assessment are really qualitatively distinct, with some researchers resisting the idea. Taras (2005) argues that formative and summative assessment should be seen as facets of the same activity, linked by the similarity of the processes which each involves. But when there is an attempt to regard summative and formative assessment as complementary aspects of a process, most authors draw back from this fearing that summative assessment will dominate. Harlen (2006, p. 116) concludes that fusing the two will lead to a situation where 'good assessment will mean good assessment of learning not for learning'. Knight and Yorke (2003, p.34) argue that in higher education, practice can be 'fuzzy' blurring the boundaries of summative and formative assessment but this is not effective because of the different characteristics demanded of the two forms of assessment. Similarly Stobart (2006) argues that different validity criteria apply to formative and summative assessment.

A view of assessment as divided into formative and summative has become a taken-for-granted way of thinking about assessment practice in universities, at least in the UK where it is enshrined in national policy and guidance (Quality Assurance Agency, http://www.qaa.ac.uk). Even without prompting our interviewees readily used the terms and, this, alongside the extensive research literature suggests that this is an important and productive way to look at assessment practice. However, we began to question the utility of this as a way to develop new understandings and insights.

Firstly, analysis of our data suggested that whilst formative and summative assessment were talked about as distinct categories, in actual practice they were blurred. For example, when discussing extended projects in design subjects, academics describe a range of activities such as one-to-one guidance from lecturers, group discussion, ongoing peer review and formal displays and critiques of student work in progress. Although they regard these as formative assessment because no marks are recorded, there are strong elements of judging and summing up performance, especially in the critiques where several staff members and often external experts publicly comment on student work. Furthermore at these points the main focus is not primarily on individual students and their progress but rather about benchmarking against the standards of the profession. To take another example, academics regard the final submission of a portfolio for marking as summative assessment. However, judgement is influenced by the knowledge derived from the formative stages of the project. Comments, feedback and the marks themselves are viewed in complex ways as academics evaluate the final performance with reference to outcome standards but also consider the individual student and what will benefit their learning. They report giving comments about progress and effort based on knowledge derived from formative assessment. Feedback is carefully constructed so as not to overwhelm or demotivate the student but give direction for future development. It does not always address all of the standards or outcomes being assessed.

Our questions now concern whether:

- we should regard formative and summative assessment as occupying a shared space rather than being represented as distinct categories or on a single spectrum.
- the focus on purpose in assessment leads to the neglect of other aspects such as the positioning of staff and students, and the use and distribution of power
- purpose needs more detailed analysis in context, for example, in summative assessment - who is reporting what and to whom? - what exactly is at stake? - what unstated purposes are also being served?

References

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