

# Formative and summative assessment

**By Mick Walker**

So very crudely formative assessment is generally understood as using assessment to inform future learning or teaching and I tend to stress both learning and teaching. It usually means the use of assessment to check learning has taken place. And is it the learning that we intended it if not what are we going to do directly about this. In short, it has to influence further development. It could involve the learner alone, identifying an area or gap in their knowledge by checking his or her own work, or against an exemplar, or in a conversation with a peer but this really does need structure. Or it might be the teacher asking probing questions to check that learning has taken place and used identify gaps or misconceptions. But either way the action requires a further action.

Summative assessment conversely is usually a term used to describe an assessment at the end of a period of learning. For example, at the end of a topic, at the end of the year or the end of a course to show what has been achieved or not. These outcomes often use information such as marks, grades, pass/fail, merits/distinction. But no other detail is given back to the end-user. But although it's worth trying to understand what people actually mean when they use such terms, I wouldn't get too attached to either of these terms as types of assessment because they're not types. In reality these terms describe in quite blunt terms and very broad terms a purpose to which we put a particular assessment.

Paul Newton listed I think about twenty-two purposes for assessment so the starting point has to be around the purpose. As for educational assessment, be it about questioning, about teaching session, designing the written examination or test, the key questions are 'What really are we trying to assess? Why we're trying to assess it and what are we going to do with the outcomes. How are we going to record or share the outcomes with other people?' Then you can ask about the best way that this can be achieved.

Allocating labels like formative, often refer to Assessment for Learning, and summative, often referred to as Assessment of Learning, is quite blunt approach and can actually be misleading. For example, in so-called summative assessment, for example, a GCSE or a Key Stage Two test even here there are formative possibilities. Both of these assessments result in production of analysis. Item analysis where you can get look at the performance of individual questions, so for example you could analyse the outcome of the questions to see how your school or pupils did on question one compared to question three. And that might be something about how we taught the topic or even did we even teach that topic? The outcome of this investigation may not be formative for the pupils, they've now left the school. But the analysis might help the teacher to identify areas of weakness in the teacher's knowledge gaps. Of course coverage. That could be considered as formative in a sense. At least in my view because that would inform future teaching and probably some professional development for the teacher.

So for me these terms describe the use to which a particular assessment is put – rather than being a type of assessment. In that the same testing someone could be used for either purpose in effect. A particular concern, least to me, is that these terms are too often presented as being polarised as though if there were at some different ends of a spectrum and in opposition. But in reality they're not you could use one test one question and they put the outcome to different purposes. So they're not types of assessment but the dependent on the inferences that we take, the conclusions that we reach or we draw on the evidence that we've elicited from our assessment. So be wary of labels and focus on what it is that you want to assess and what you want to get out of an assessment.