



Teaching Toolkit

Summative & Formative Assessment

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Summative & Formative Assessment

'Assessment' is something of an umbrella term, encompassing a range of methods and techniques (Biggs & Tang, 2007). One way to categorise or organise the myriad approaches and rationales is using the summative/formative distinction. The main difference between summative or formative assessment is the purpose for conducting the assessment.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is the type with which most people are familiar. It is usually conducted in the last few weeks of term to see how well students have learned what they were supposed to have learned.

The results from these assessments are aggregated and used to determine whether a student has fulfilled the specified learning outcomes and may achieve some kind of accreditation. This usually causes a degree of anxiety since the grades received in summative assessments are final and can affect their future prospects.

In summative assessments, therefore, students are less keen to experiment with ideas and concepts (Biggs & Tang, 2007), preferring to 'play it safe', giving the answers they believe are expected of them, and banking the marks provided.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment does not form part of the student's final grade or mark. It is used to provide constructive feedback to improve learning and understanding. The product of formative assessment may never be quantifiably recorded on a grade sheet.

The rationale is that students learn effectively by making and learning from mistakes which is difficult to do if their academic performance/final grade may be adversely affected. Since there are no marks at risk students can be more experimental, challenging preconceived ideas and developing more desirable higher cognitive skills.

Brown & Knight (1994) suggest that ungraded assessment, where no mark is attached, may become the norm, allowing students the freedom to experiment and be more adventurous in their study and exploration of their subject. Despite the fact that no marks are associated with formative assessment, students do still engage in it *if* its role in helping students improve their grades is clearly explained. Students will be motivated if they clearly see the point of their work; how it relates to the course, the module, and their career goals; if it is inherently rewarding or interesting; or if they can see their skills and expertise advancing.

The following quote has been used to explain the difference between formative & summative assessment:

“ When the chef tastes the sauce it is formative assessment; when the customer tastes, it is summative (Anon) ”