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Assessment beliefs of higher education staff developers

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Abstract

This research focuses on the assessment literacy, that is the understandings of assessment terminologies and how they relate to each other in academic staff developers in the UK, collected via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Academic staff developers have been trained and certified to support new higher education lecturers in learning, teaching and assessment practices, and provide continuous professional development for more experienced staff. Results showed inconsistent and differing understandings between and within individuals: these inconsistencies may reflect the lack of consistency of terminology in the literature. This lack of common understanding has far reaching implications and needs reconciling to enhance personal and collective assessment literacies, particularly since our respondents have responsibility for training the next generation of academics.

Key words: formative, summative, theory, practice, staff developers.

Introduction

Recent work (Taras 2008a; Taras and Davies, 2014) on assessment literacy has examined university lecturers' beliefs and opinions relating to assessment in university departments of education and science in the UK in order to explore their understanding of assessment issues.

This paper reports on a similar study investigating whether understandings and opinions of assessment are clear, cogent, coherent and shared among a group of UK academic staff developers. Most HEIs in the UK require new staff to undergo training into learning, teaching and assessment practices and subsequently to have regular continuing professional development. Academic staff developers are experienced lecturers in HE who have responsibility within their respective institutions in relation to teaching and the support of learning (i.e. as staff developers). All the respondents in this study had a national profile through involvement in the external recognition of taught programmes for junior academic staff in learning and teaching and all had broad and long teaching experience in higher education and had established institutional practice.

Each participant contributes to development of practice in relation to the training of academic staff in learning and teaching. Staff developers have an important influence in framing assessment practices directly through their own views and experiences, and also indirectly through the literature they utilise and recommend.

We deliberately chose the term 'beliefs', as opposed to 'knowledge', as the focus here because available understandings of formative assessment (FA) and summative assessment (SA) show inconsistencies, a paucity of alignment and a lack of clarity (e.g. Taras and Davies, 2014). Furthermore, beliefs are linked to knowledge, but also to past experience, practice and one's own thinking, all of which we wish to explore.

Background

With the development of 'Assessment for Learning' there appeared its counterpart, commonly called 'Assessment of Learning'. This dichotomy normally signals on the one hand the use of assessment to support learning, and, on the other, to provide a final judgement on work. 'Assessment for Learning' has been increasingly identified with and considered equivalent to formative assessment (FA) (Black and Wiliam 2009; Wiliam 2007, 2009), while summative assessment (SA) is often linked to final assessments for accreditation and/or examinations.

In the compulsory sector, the work of Black and Wiliam is recognised as having led discussions on and dissemination of 'Assessment for Learning' world-wide, beginning with their seminal review article of 1998 (Berry and Adamson, 2011). Increasingly cross-sector links, that is, between the compulsory sector and the post-compulsory sectors, through international journals, conferences and collaborations require a better and clearer understanding of sector-specific differences (Havnes and McDowell 2008; Pryor and Crossouard 2008; Taras 2008b), particularly in assessment processes, terminologies and protocols.

Understanding these different terminologies and how they interrelate is part of basic theoretical conceptualisations of assessment, without which we have no common ground for communication and exchange of ideas. Most discussions around FA and SA base the distinction on functions of assessment (Gardner 2006; Harlen 2006; Stobart 2008; Black and Wiliam 2009). Since any assessment can be used in a myriad of ways and therefore perform many and multiple functions, it is a distinction fraught with problems. In addition even if a function or functions have been identified for a particular assessment, there is no guarantee that at a later date these assessments will not be used for other purposes. Therefore basing the whole of assessment discourses on functions seems to be inappropriate.

This begs the question as to why functions have had such a central focus. One putative answer is that focusing on functions is an attempt to overcome or bypass the injustices that assessment often hides (see Broadfoot 2008 and Stobart 2008 who discuss this at length). It is more important to ensure that the processes of assessment are ethical, transparent, valid and communicated (Scriven 1967; Taras 2009).

As regards theory, despite the differences across sectors, much of the literature uses Sadler's (1989) theory of formative assessment as a common baseline. This theory focuses on two issues both of which are adopted from Ramaprasad (1983): the importance of using feedback to improve work; and the necessity of using self-assessment by students in order for the parameters of assessment to be understood and for feedback to be used and therefore to ensure that formative assessment has taken place. There is general agreement in SA theory that it represents an assessment which is a final summation and is usually linked to a grade and external validation (Harlen 2006; Broadfoot 2008; Black and Wiliam 2009). Polemics in theories of FA and SA deal less with what each might be and more with how they relate to each other. Generally SA is linked to final graded work used for validation and accreditation and FA is considered assessment that supports student learning.

Scriven (1967) is a lynchpin in definition discussions as he was the first to differentiate between 'formative' and 'summative' assessments. There is controversy over understandings of Scriven's seminal article (Wiliam 2007; Taras 2009). Where Wiliam (2007) interprets Scriven's distinction of SA and FA as referring to assessment functions, Taras (2009) reads his distinction as focusing on the processes of assessment: she argues that focusing on processes of assessment eliminates many of the issues that have been discussed in relation to functions of assessment. Very little discourse focuses on the explicit relationship between summative and formative processes of assessment apart from Scriven and Taras, making it difficult for the academic community to engage with and think about this critical issue. We naturally have our own opinions and beliefs about the relationships between SA and FA, but since this research aims to explore opinion from staff developers we do not consider it appropriate to superimpose our own beliefs on this exploratory paper. Our beliefs can be found in Taras (2012b) and Taras and Davies (2014). Readers are

encouraged to engage directly with Scriven (1967) in order to form their own understanding of his work.

The following form part of a body of work that has evidenced that tutors and students all have very individualistic and uncoordinated assessment literacies. Maclellan (2001) researched tutors' and students' perceptions and understanding of assessment by asking them to complete a questionnaire on assessment. The focus was on their views of principles and concepts of assessment and the questionnaire examined purposes, mode, content, timing and marking. Inconsistencies were evident between students and tutors, and within each group. Also, tutors' beliefs and principles were not reflected in their practice. Similarly, Taras (2008a) and Taras and Davies (2013 and 2014) demonstrated the lack of consistency within staff groups whether in education or science departments through a questionnaire identical to that employed here focusing on the relationships between aspects of assessment. In the compulsory sector, Hargreaves (2005) asked teachers about their concepts of assessment for learning and found these contradictory. Again, beliefs and principles were not reflected in practice.

The present article explores how disparate interpretations in the literature impact on individual understandings of assessment terminology. The questionnaire was designed to disentangle elements of theoretical frameworks as understood by the respondents, and balanced questions between different aspects of assessment: process, product, functions, formative, summative and self-assessment. The present study focuses on staff developers, who play diverse national roles in UK HE and present their views and understandings to future generations of educators. We hypothesised that since these staff were responsible for guiding policy development in both their own institutions and more widely in the UK, there would be a high degree of congruence in their understandings of assessment terminology and relationships between various assessment processes.

Method

The theoretical basis for the development of the present survey was examined at length in the 2008a paper and is therefore not repeated here. In addition, since a body of work exists which has built on this survey (Taras and Davies 2013, 2014), it was deemed more advantageous since it provided greater comparability and improved numbers to use the identical items than to adopt or improve them for this research.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire of 44 questions (Appendix 1) was issued in 2011 at a single event to twelve UK-based higher education staff developers with a responsibility for academic staff, and in 2012 to a further participant. Individuals were selected opportunistically as they gathered for an event on learning and teaching practice. All had a national profile through involvement in the external recognition of taught programmes for junior academic staff in learning and teaching; six ran or had ran such programmes; four were or had been head of their HEI's academic development unit or equivalent; all had Fellowship of the UK's Higher Education Academy, some Senior Fellow and some Principal Fellow; at least six were consultants in learning and teaching at HEIs in the UK and beyond; and all had broad and long teaching experience in higher education and had established institutional practice. Some were educationalists but the majority were, at least in the initial phase of their careers, from other disciplines. They were each from different institutions, had different subject backgrounds and were from a broad range of types of provider. They were told that they may complete the questionnaire anonymously, but that if they gave their name this would indicate that they were willing to be contacted for a discussion of their responses. They were also told to answer the questions in order, not to go back, and not to confer. Questionnaires were collected immediately on completion and no respondent took more than 15 min. The questionnaire was not piloted because it was used by Taras (2008a) who had already undertaken a piloting exercise.

Most questions required a yes/no response but some were qualitative in that they required a written comment: questions 1 and 3 asked for a rough definition of firstly summative and then formative assessment; questions 2 and 4 asked for examples of summative and formative tasks, respectively; question 10 asked for an example if summative and formative tasks are conflated; question 16 asked how formative work is related to summative work; and the final questions, 43 and 44, asked again for definitions of summative and formative assessment. The responses to these questions required analysis and interpretation before quantifying. Key words were selected and analysed (a 'semantic' interpretation, that is based on the primary, literal meaning) to find the general trends that appeared from repetition of words and ideas. In addition, where possible the distinctions between assessment 'of' learning, 'for' learning were made. We asked twice for definitions to examine the impact of completing the questionnaire on participants' thinking. We have termed the initial definitions asked for as 'first definitions' and those asked for at the end of the questionnaire as 'second definitions'.

Semi-structured interviews

The understandings of seven of the respondents were further explored by recorded and transcribed audio interview, at least two months after the questionnaire was completed. Respondents were all those who agreed to participate in interviews following completion of the questionnaire. We deliberately left a time gap so that the influence of completing the questionnaire on the interview responses would be minimal. All interviewees were asked the same questions (Appendix 2) though for some participants we planned to ask additional participant-specific questions to clarify responses given in the questionnaire. In most cases, however, the response to generic questions was such that specific questions were superfluous. The questions focused on contentious issues in the literature in an attempt to explore and expose the extent of diversity between individuals who constitute a cadre of specialists in learning and teaching in higher education.

The transcripts were initially analysed to capture the essence of the content relevant to the questions asked. A second phase involved classifying the content (opinions) as they related to SA, FA or both. The classifications enabled the exploring of participants' beliefs and understandings of these central aspects of assessment and how other factors related to them. The process of analysis was carried out by the two authors together using the notions that SA is linked to final graded work used for validation and accreditation and FA is considered assessment that supports student learning, and most categorisations of FA and SA were expressed clearly. In the cases where the data were less clear for us in the immediate, further contextual clues were used to shed light: these generally sufficed. Having two persons to discuss and reach a consensus greatly helped to avoid misrepresentations.

Results

In order to minimise the researchers' personal views from interfering with the reporting of the data, minimal discursive elements were used: the discussion and interpretation of the data will take place in the 'Discussion' chapter which will also summarise the key ideas.

Questionnaires

The results of the questionnaires are considered question-by-question in the order in which they were asked, apart from the initial and final definitions which were analysed together (Appendix 1). They are grouped according to the aspects of understandings that we explored, as indicated in the sections below. The proportions quoted are based on the number of responses to each question. Since the number of respondents was not always the same, the denominator may vary. Percentages are given to the nearest percentage point.

First definition of summative assessment

Semantic analysis

Five respondents indicated a notion of 'end' or 'final' and ten indicated that in SA marks awarded should '*count*' and be used in validation of learning, though three used both the

ideas of final and validation. One respondent used the word 'formal'. One response indicated that feedback to students was the focus of SA.

'of' or 'for' learning

Twelve responses were classified as 'of' learning (two explicitly using the term), and one 'for' learning'. The latter stated, *'Feedback (written and/or verbal) against given criteria often with a numeric grade to indicate level of achiever.'*

Second definition of summative assessment

Semantic analysis

Eight respondents used a notion of 'end' or 'final' and eight a notion of validation of learning, with five mentioning both. The word 'formal' was not used. Two used the notion of feedback to learners, one indicating that this defined SA.

'of' or 'for' learning

Nine responses were classified as 'of' learning (one explicitly using the term), one as both 'of' and 'for', one respondent did not answer this question, and one was classified as unrelated (*'As per Q1'* was written). The respondent giving an answer to the first definition of SA classified as 'for' learning did so again: *'Verbal, written or self-reflection on progress with a specific learning task which might aid enhanced achievement.'*

First definition of formative assessment

Semantic analysis

Seven respondents mentioned *'feedback'* or *'feed-forward'*, and for a further four feedback to students on their performance, including self-assessment was implicit in the response. One equated FA with feedback. Three noted explicitly that marks were not for validation of learning. There was a strong link (ten respondents) between FA and its developmental purpose. Five defined FA as something that will improve performance, i.e. is used by students, and five that it offers an opportunity to improve performance, implying or indicating that it might not necessarily be used as such. One indicated that FA does not involve the issue of marks to students.

'of' or 'for' learning

Eleven responses were classified as 'for' learning (one explicitly using the term), one as both 'of' and 'for' learning, and one was not linkable to either meaning: *'Test/exam/quiz/etc where mark doesn't count'*

Second definition of formative assessment

Semantic analysis

One respondent equated FA with feedback (a different respondent to the one who had done so in giving a first definition of FA), four more respondents mentioned *'feedback'* and for a further four feedback to improve performance was implicit in the response. There was not as strong a link (six respondents) between FA and its developmental purpose as in the first definition of FA. Two defined FA as something that will improve performance and four that it offers a development opportunity that may or may not be taken up by students. One noted that FA *'contributes to overall grade'*, and one noted explicitly that marks were not for validation of learning. One respondent indicated that FA functions *'with a view to ... adapting teaching/learning methods'*

'of' or 'for' learning

Nine responses were classified as 'for' learning (two explicitly using the term), two as both 'of' and 'for' learning, and two were unrelated: *'As per Q1'*; and, *'Where the mark doesn't count'*.

Consistency of definition responses (Table 1)

In response to the two questions that asked for a definition of summative assessment, 9/13 respondents gave answers consistently classified as 'of' learning and 1/13 was consistently classified as 'for' learning. 3/13 participants gave answers classified differently between the first and second asking of the question: 1/13 moved from 'of' learning to both 'of' and 'for'. The remaining 2 participants either gave a blank answer or one that was unrelated. Similarly for the questions that asked for a definition of formative assessment, 7/13 respondents gave answers consistently classified as 'for' learning, 1/13 was consistently unrelated, and one gave a blank answer. 3/13 participants gave answers classified differently between the first and second asking of the question: two moved from 'for' learning to both 'of' and 'for', and one from both to 'for'.

Examples of a summative assessment task

Semantic analysis

Seven respondents mentioned '*exam*' or '*examination*', two '*portfolio*', one '*essay*' and one '*presentation*'. Five used the terms '*end*' or '*final*'

'of' or 'for' learning

Nine respondents gave an example classified as 'of' learning and four as both 'of' and 'for' learning

Examples of a formative assessment task

Semantic analysis

Two respondents mentioned '*presentation*', three '*essay*' and three '*draft*'. Two gave observing students performing an activity as an example, one mentioned peer assessment and two '*feedback*'. One mentioned '*test*', but in the context given below.

'of' or 'for' learning

Six respondents gave an example classified as 'for' learning and six as both 'of' and 'for' learning. One was classified as 'of' learning: '*An in-class test which is designed to assess knowledge of fundamentals.*'

Consistency of examples (Table 2)

For SA, 9/13 of respondents gave both a definition and an example that were classified as 'of' learning, 3/13 gave a definition classified as 'of' learning but an example classified as both, and one gave a definition classified as 'for' learning but an example classified as both. For FA, 6/13 gave a definition and an example classified 'of' learning, and one gave responses consistently classified as both 'of' and 'for' learning. However, 4/13 gave a definition classified as 'for' learning but an example classified as both, one gave a definition classified as 'for' learning but an example classified as 'of' learning, and one was unrelated.

Formative assessment tasks used with students

All respondents used FA tasks with students. Almost all used these tasks in class (12/13) and for homework (11/12). 4/13 stated that they kept FA and SA separate, 7/13 did not, and the remainder (2/13) did sometimes. 8/11 indicated that they conflated FA and SA at least sometimes and each gave an example. However, there was little congruence and commonality in the examples: three concerned learners using feedback, two saw conflation as the provision of feedback and the students using that feedback, one concerned the tutor providing feedback, one the tutor adding marks together from different tasks, and one simply described assessment tasks. Four examples involved the notion of generating feedback for students from SA, though there was no consistency in the process of linking feedback with SA.

Information given to students on formative assessment tasks

12/13 either always or sometimes told students that a task was formative, though 1/13 did not tell his/her students. One responded that informing students that a task is formative '*can be detrimental to effort*'. However, all respondents explained to students how a task was formative. 5/13 indicated that formative work was marked, though few, 3/1 indicated that it was graded. 4/13 indicated that formative mark was sometimes marked and 5/13 indicated that it was sometimes graded.

Information on student self-assessment

Most respondents (10/13) used some student self-assessment and, at least on occasion, used it formatively. Fewer (3/13) used student self-assessment in a summative way. 5/12 thought student self-assessment uses both SA and FA.

Is theory important to us as teachers?

11/13 respondents thought theory was important to teachers, though interestingly one disagreed indicating, '*Do you mean research outcomes (yes) or 'theory' (probably no).*'

Use of summative and formative assessment

All respondents noted that SA can be used for end of course grades, but fewer 4/13 thought that FA can be used for end of course grades. One respondent noted '*End of 'course' grades aren't formative unlike mid-course grades*'. 10/12 thought that SA can be used for mid-course grades and 6/13 thought FA can be used for mid-course grades.

All respondents who answered indicated that SA assesses for validation at least some of the time, though two did not answer the question and indicated that they did not understand it. Most (7/11) thought that FA assesses for validation at least some of the time. All thought that SA assesses for learning, though three qualified this with '*sometimes*' and one with '*a little perhaps*', and all thought that FA assesses for learning, though again one indicated '*sometimes*'.

Assessing product or process

All respondents regarded SA as assessing product and FA as assessing process. Almost all (12/13) regarded SA as assessing process and most (10/13) that FA assesses product. One respondent noted that there were '*some discipline differences here.*'

Relationship to feedback

All respondents thought FA provides useful feedback, and almost all (12/13) thought SA did, at least '*sometimes*' (2/13), though one qualified the response with '*but too late*' and another with '*limited*'.

The relationship between summative and formative assessment

10/13 regarded formative work as related to summative work and 11/13 regarded SA and FA as similar processes, but 5/12 thought SA and FA were different processes. One thought SA and FA were different processes '*sometimes*'.

Sure/not sure how summative and formative assessment relate

9/11 respondents indicated that they were sure how summative and formative assessment relate to each other, though one qualified this with the word '*reasonably*'. Two respondents were not sure and two declined to respond, which perhaps indicates 'not sure'.

Students' views

12/13 thought that students understood SA, though of those 2/13 indicated '*sometimes*'. Fewer (8/13) thought students understood FA, though three of those (3/13) again indicated '*sometimes*'. All respondents thought students focused on SA, but only 1/13 indicated firmly that students focus on FA and a further 2/13 offered '*sometimes*'.

Audio interviews

The results are grouped according to the questions asked.

How do formative assessment and summative assessment relate to each other?

Of seven interviewees, five explicitly asserted that FA comes before, leads to, feeds into, or supports SA and can improve grades through feedback, for example, *'formative assessment comes at any point prior to that summative assessment. It could even be as near in time as an hour before the summative'*. Two noted that the timing of an assessment within a programme or course dictates or influences whether it is FA or SA, and one that SA occurs at the end and does not provide for students to improve. Despite this last notion, it was further explained that SA can however be formative for the next learning stage. FA was recognised by one as developmental for both students and tutors, enabling the latter to help the former by understanding weaknesses in their learning.

One indicated that FA is much more important because of the feedback it provides: *'formative assessment is the far more important aspect of assessment. It's the build-up of feedback throughout the period of a module, a project, a year, whatever, towards a summative assessment point'*. This respondent also noted that SA, though providing a grade, repeats previous FA processes and tasks, i.e. repeated similar FA leads to a plateau in learning such that feedback on SA is unnecessary and the associated mark is no surprise. One indicated a strong link between SA and mark, though another recognised that FA (in addition to SA) must be linked to learning outcomes and assessment criteria, thereby formalising the focus of FA feedback and not making it an *ad hoc* disembodied guess. Another was uncertain about the relationship between assessment, whether FA or SA, and learning outcomes, not recognising the latter as threshold concepts: *'how can you set learning objectives that are sufficiently open and give space for the person who just barely scrapes a pass and the person who's sailing through to a first'*.

One interviewee noted a discrepancy between theory and practice in that the literature advocates not grading FA, whereas in reality, staff do grade FA to encourage student engagement. This interviewee also noted that while FA generally encourages experimentation and risk-taking by students, this is diminished when FA is graded. Four interviewees showed degrees of individual inconsistency and there were many examples of contradiction, especially in relation to the functions of assessment and feedback. Two used individually-created terms, such as *'interim SA'* (which has the same function as FA but does not occur at the end of a course) or *'semi-formative'* (which was not defined), to explain their stance when the coherence of their argument was challenged. When probed these terms were exposed to be either meaningless, not understood by the interviewee or both. Much of this discourse was framed by the assertion that all assessment is the same process and that SA and FA should be aligned; though this was contradicted by one interviewee who stated there could be no learning in SA unless it contained an FA element and was explicit that FA leads to learning while SA does not.

Four interviewees exhibited lack of coherence in the discourses distinguishing FA and SA. While recognising diversity of interpretations and understandings, one signalled that FA must be a dialogue between students and tutors and also practice for SA, but that there was almost no overlap between FA and SA (because FA is classroom interaction and SA represents tests and examinations).

Where does feedback fit into formative assessment and summative assessment?

Two interviewees spoke generally about feedback but did not link either FA or SA to feedback. Another interviewee believed that verbal feedback is more powerful than written feedback because students must *'pay some attention'* to it.

For FA, four of five emphasised the importance of feedback, though they each recognised the link to feedback.

Four interviewees did not link SA to feedback. Of the others, one first indicated that feedback has little or no place in SA, but then changed this by acknowledging that SA shapes learning

so feedback from it is important in learning. Another two believed SA is subsumed within FA and therefore embodies feedback. Of these two, one interestingly clarified that feedback justifies the SA grade, the other that using the feedback from FA for a final SA grade protects the tutor from self-contradiction.

Do you distinguish between assessing a process and a product? If so, how?

One interviewee did not discuss this aspect specifically and a further five gave, at least in part, unaligned rationales, two of which did not relate to assessment. One that did address assessment invented new terms to describe the relationship, for example '*semi-formative*' and, again, '*semi-summative*', though the link to process and product was not made. In three cases product was stated as being an artefact that is assessed and in two of these cases process constitutes '*workings-out*' as is done, for example, in mathematics. One equated SA with product and FA with process. This interviewee stated that SA assesses learning that has happened and FA assesses learning as it happens, and that the development of assessing product occurred in parallel with the development of the phenomenon of learning outcomes.

How do formative assessment and summative assessment assess learning differently?

One interviewee reported that there was no difference. All others did not answer the question and merely give a list of features that can be linked to either SA or FA. For example, SA is a product more rigorous, impartial and considered than FA, whereas FA is a process more '*slapdash*', more immediate, and includes discussions in class.

Is it important to include learners in assessment? If so, how and why?

Two interviewees aimed their response at SA, one felt that it was not a good idea to include learners because it would raise quality assurance issues, the other, contrariwise thought it would help learners understand the grades assigned by tutors.

Two stated that it would be useful to include students in FA. As a general concept for assessment one thought learner inclusion crucial and the other six either useful or desirable. Of these six, three mentioned peer-assessment, one self-assessment, two that it helped learners understand the grades assigned by tutors, and one that it was important to develop group discussions.

Do you want to comment on the questions asked / or the process of enquiry?

Nothing relevant was mentioned.

Discussion

In defining SA most questionnaire respondents recognised SA as contributing to validating learning and classified it as 'of' learning, though there was considerable variation in the semantics between the first and second definitions offered. Most unexpected was that one respondent consistently defined SA in terms of 'for' learning, going against the grain of convention. Although respondents did not identify feedback as a defining feature of SA, 77% of respondents acknowledged that it does provide useful feedback. In the questionnaires there were strong links between FA, the notion of 'for' learning, and the provision of feedback to students on their performance, indicative of a generally shared perception of FA, even though there were again considerable semantic differences in definitions. Interviewees readily linked feedback with FA but found it difficult to exclude feedback from SA and therefore found it extremely difficult to differentiate between the two. As with most of the distinctions between FA and SA this led immediately to internal inconsistencies.

From the questionnaire, SA was generally understood more clearly than FA.

In the interviews SA again provided an anchor since respondents associated it with grades, or end of learning or assessment cycles. There was a general inconsistency attached to the meaning of FA, especially between grades and grading and, overall, between FA and SA.

There appeared to be some degree of within-individual inconsistency about the functions of assessment, given that questionnaire definitions of SA that were consistently 'of' learning were given by 9/13 of the respondents and 8/13 defined FA consistently in terms of 'for' learning (Table 1).

This and similar evidence, such as that more examples given of SA were classified as 'of' learning than examples of FA classified as 'for' learning, and that there was greater consistency between definition and examples of SA than FA, indicate that SA is understood more precisely than FA, which seems to be a more nebulous concept and one that is more difficult to grasp, even for educational developers. Generally in the AfL literature (Harlen 2006; James 2006; Black and Wiliam 2009; Berry and Adamson 2011) the separation of SA and FA has resulted in the belief that they are unrelated. In addition they are rarely seen as processes (Taras 2009, 2012a, 2012b). This would go a long way to explaining why FA has become a nebulous concept, even in HE (Taras 2007), where the work of Black and Wiliam is cited even though the focus of their work is in the compulsory sector.

In general there was agreement on the types of assessment-related activity and methods of presentation that the educational developers used with their students, many of whom will be academic staff in the early stages of their careers. However, there was disagreement on how the activities could be used to promote learning, for example in marking and grading formative work and in whether or not to keep FA and SA separate. Where they did not keep them separate (54%) there was little common ground in approach.

Given the centrality of students in the learning process we were not surprised that most questionnaire respondents (77%) were using student self-assessments, though we had expected more than 23% to be using student self-assessment in summative work. Their reluctance might be deep-rooted in notions relating to the traditional role of the teacher in marking and grading and issues of power (Taras 2008b; Tan 2004). In the interviews there was a general lack of enthusiasm for the inclusion of learners in assessment, despite a strong body of literature mandating for its use (see Taras, 2010), suggesting a lack of engagement with current issues. Peer assessment was favoured over self-assessment. Although respondents had in the main a shared understanding of the relationships between SA and FA and assessment of process and product, where the deviation from unanimity was the small number (3) who did not agree that FA assesses product, in general there was a high degree of differentiation about the use to which SA and FA are put. In particular for some respondents use appeared to be dependent upon when, during a course, the assessment was made, which is a curious notion though not without precedence in the literature (Bloom et al. 1971; Black and Wiliam 2009; Wiliam 2009). Also, although most recognised SA and FA as similar processes, half also recognised them as different, and almost all stated they were sure about how SA and FA relate to each other. Thus many respondents are sure that SA and FA are not different, yet at some points all respondents identified how SA and FA are different from each other. This is clearly problematic and has already been demonstrated in academic staff (Taras 2008a; Taras and Davies 2014). Most questionnaire respondents agreed that SA and FA are similar processes, yet about half tried to explain considerable differences between the two. In most interviews the inconsistencies were much more marked than they had been in the questionnaires. The most rational aspect was that product was the artefact that is assessed more rigorously, impartially and in a considered manner than FA. FA, on the other hand, is a process that is more informal, more immediate and includes classroom discussions. The above links directly to much of the literature on 'assessment for learning' as discussed by Black and Wiliam (2009) and Wiliam (2007, 2009).

The general perception that students do not focus on FA represents a challenge for the sector, one that reflects the negative perceptions of SA, which is blamed for dominating students' priorities (Broadfoot and Black 2004; Broadfoot 2008; Berry and Adam 2011). Further, just one of our educational developers had managed to create an environment where her/his students focused on FA. Hargreaves (2005) examined teachers' perceptions of functions of assessment and noted that most prioritised assessment for validation

purposes. This could also link to tutors prioritising SA over FA unconsciously and unwittingly, even if they attribute this focus to students.

Conclusions

There are two main limitations to this study. First the use of yes/no answers in the questionnaire may restrict responses from participants, but this was partly mitigated by the use of the semi-structured interviews. Second the small sample size may restrict generalisability, but we were fortunate that our sample was from a broad range of HE providers.

When asked to present their views orally respondents readily displayed greater diversity and inconsistency, much more so than when answering the questionnaire. Further, in many cases oral contradictions came very swiftly, often within a few seconds. On the other hand, they were enthusiastic, even when they were obviously unsure of their argument, lacking in information and two invented phrases to justify their stance. Many interesting ideas were aired that did not fit into the rest of their discourse.

These staff developers, who are likely to have a good command of general and specific educational literature made almost no use of it in explaining or evidencing concepts or their practices or positions on assessment. From personal observation we note that students often do not recognise learning outcomes as thresholds, and this is perhaps because they are not presented as such by tutors. However, we had not expected this common misconception to be present in this context.

The variation in perceptions and attitudes in relation to assessment indicates a lack of accepted definitions for common concepts used in HE by those who are looked upon as experts. Until there is a framework of understanding that individual definitions can be inserted into such that differences are acknowledged and indeed championed, it is unlikely that progress can be made in pursuing academic understandings of the nuances of assessment, how it works and how decisions are arrived at and used. There seems little acknowledgement of the individual differences in such a fundamental aspect of HE and this can lead to entrenchment and positions where individual beliefs are presented by teacher to student (or from educational developer to academic staff) without acknowledgement of the complexity of the concepts and the richness of their interpretation. If there is no shared understanding, or acknowledgment of complexity, by educational developers, who are looked upon as authority figures, what prospect is there for consensus of understanding among academic staff, those who bear the brunt of assessment and its design in HE? The implication is that a much greater sharing of assessment literacies should be an integral part of pedagogic development.

Thus we call for the development of such a framework, perhaps led through active communities of practice that support congruent, rational and logical interpretations of practice that align with theoretical perspectives of assessment. Greater dialogue perhaps mediated by national HE bodies but that permeates within individual HEIs would seem a way forward, maybe even concurrently with activity in other sectors to promote a shared understanding of assessment theories and practices.

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Biographical notes

Maddalena Taras's research has focused on a range of assessment issues: self-assessment – developing an original framework and examining issues of power; institutional discrepancies and contradictions in assessment practices and discourses; constraints from language, culture and power impacting on assessment perceptions and practices; and critiquing the notion of 'assessment for learning' particularly the theoretical framework.

Mark S Davies is a biologist with a large portfolio of activities relating to learning and teaching in higher education. His research in education concerns formulating strategies for student retention and the use of computer simulations in teaching complex subjects.

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE on Summative and Formative Assessment

Where 'YES – NO' or 'SURE – NOT SURE' is presented, please circle your choice.

1. Give a rough definition of summative assessment.
2. Give an example of a summative assessment task.
3. Give a rough definition of formative assessment.
4. Give an example of a formative assessment task.
5. Do you use formative assessment tasks with your students? YES -- NO
6. Do you use formative assessment tasks in class? YES -- NO
7. Do you use formative assessment tasks for homework? YES -- NO
8. Do you keep summative and formative tasks separate? YES -- NO
9. Do you conflate summative and formative tasks? YES -- NO
10. If yes, give an example.

If you use formative assessment with your students -

11. Do you tell them it will be a formative assessment? YES -- NO
 12. Do you explain **how** it will be a formative assessment? YES --NO
 13. Is formative work marked? YES -- NO
 14. Is formative work graded? YES -- NO
 15. Is formative work related to summative work? YES -- NO
 16. If yes, how is it related?
 17. Do your students carry out self-assessment? YES -- NO
 18. Do you present self-assessment as a formative exercise? YES -- NO
 19. Do you present self-assessment as a summative exercise? YES -- NO
 20. Does self-assessment use both summative and formative assessment? YES -- NO
 21. Is theory important to us as teachers? YES – NO
 22. Summative assessment can be used for end of course grades. YES -- NO
 23. Formative assessment can be used for end of course grades. YES -- NO
 24. Summative assessment can be used for mid course grades. YES -NO
 25. Formative assessment can be used for mid course grades. YES-- NO
 26. Summative - assesses product. YES -- NO
 27. Summative - assesses process. YES -- NO
 28. Formative - assesses product. YES -- NO
 29. Formative - assesses process. YES -- NO
 30. Summative - assesses for validation. YES -- NO
 31. Summative - assesses for learning. YES -- NO
 32. Formative - assesses for validation. YES -- NO
 33. Formative - assesses for learning. YES -- NO
 34. Summative provides useful feedback. YES -- NO
 35. Formative provides useful feedback. YES -- NO
 36. Summative and formative are different processes. YES -- NO
 37. Summative and formative are similar processes. YES -- NO
 38. I am SURE -- NOT SURE how summative and formative relate to each other.
 39. Students understand summative assessment. YES -- NO
 40. Students understand formative assessment. YES -- NO
 41. Students focus on summative assessment. YES -- NO
 42. Students focus on formative assessment. YES -- NO
 43. Without looking back, give a definition of summative assessment.
 44. Without looking back, give a definition of formative assessment.
- Thank you very much for your time and brain power.

APPENDIX 2

Generic audio interview questions

How do formative assessment and summative assessment relate to each other?

Where does feedback fit into formative assessment and summative assessment?

Do you distinguish between assessing a process and a product? If so, how?

How do formative assessment and summative assessment assess learning differently?

Is it important to include learners in assessment? If so, how and why?

Do you want to comment on the questions asked / or the process of enquiry?

Table 1. The consistency of classified responses to the repeated questions asking for definitions of SA (questions 1 and 43) and FA (questions 3 and 44). Numbers refer to frequency of responses that were classified according to the scheme in columns 1 and 2 (“for” learning (for), “of” learning (of), both, unrelated and left blank). Only recorded permutations given.

Classified response to question 1 or 3	Classified response to question 43 or 44	Frequency for definitions of SA	Frequency for definitions of FA
of	of	9	
for	for	1	8
of	both	1	
for	both		2
both	for		1
of	unrelated	1	
for	unrelated		1
of	blank	1	
unrelated	unrelated		1

Table 2. The consistency of classified responses comparing first definitions given with examples given for both SA and FA. Numbers refer to frequency of responses that were classified according to the scheme in columns 1 and 2 (‘for learning’ (for), ‘of learning’ (of), both and unrelated). Only recorded permutations given.

Classified response to question 1 or 3	Classified response to question 2 or 4	Frequency for definition and example of SA	Frequency for definition and example of FA
of	of	9	
for	for		6
both	both		1
for	of		1
of	both	3	
for	both	1	4
unrelated	both		1