T&L

NATIONAL FORUM FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF
TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

ASSESSMENT

FOR

AS

LEARNING

Forum Insights

Expanding our Understanding of Assessment and Feedback in Irish Higher Education

March 2017

This **Forum Insight** aims to expand our understanding of the terms associated with assessment within the Irish higher education sector. It is the result of a number of national conversations organised by the National Forum with staff and students across the sector regarding how assessment might be defined and understood within an Irish context. It is part of a series of Insights in the Forum's Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning enhancement theme.

Why do we need to expand our understanding of assessment?

Helping students to develop as self-directed autonomous learners who are responsible for making judgements on their learning is a key aim for educators in Irish higher education. We strive to enhance students' ability to self-monitor, judge their work and graduate with a sense of shared responsibility for their learning. Assessment has the potential to develop these skills, but only if we start to think about the term 'assessment' differently, to develop a wider understanding of its purposes and to gain a more nuanced understanding of some of the characteristics of each type of assessment. Essentially, assessment can only be as effective as the *assessment literacy* of staff, students and others involved in higher education.

A better understanding of the scope and purposes of assessment can lead to:

- a more effective use of staff time, resulting in more sustainable approaches (Carless et al., 2011);
- students gaining a greater sense of responsibility within the assessment process (Lysaght & O'Leary, 2013; Sadler, 2010); and
- a greater ability to link the different purposes with the design and achievement of key graduate attributes required within Irish higher education.

Some of the key purposes of assessment are:

- *to demonstrate learning achievements* at points in time. This is assessment as staff and students usually describe it;
- *to get and give feedback* that is timely, actionable (feed-forward) and useful to students to improve their learning;
- *to give feedback* to staff to improve their teaching; and
- to empower students to *self-regulate their learning and critically evaluate their performance* now and throughout their lives (Evans, 2013; Lysaght & O'Leary, 2013; Nicol, 2010; Sadler, 2010)

Enhancing our understanding: Some common terms

Assessment, teaching and learning are inextricably linked activities and concepts. The alignment between these three elements is a key component in the planning, implementation and experience of a curriculum and forms the basis of modern Irish curriculum design. The most common related terms that staff and students use and hear about are 'assessment' and 'feedback'. These terms can overlap and as a consequence other terms have emerged to help distinguish them, often used more by staff than students. Among these are 'summative' and 'formative' assessment (see Figure 2).

Summative assessment is also termed **Assessment OF Learning**, to emphasise its nature as assessment of an activity that has occurred (i.e. after a period of learning). However, the term also emphasises a numeral aspect and it is often associated with a number or letter grade. Where this grade gets high weighting, or has significant consequences for progression, it can be termed '*high stakes assessment*'.

Formative assessment is related to the concept of 'feedback' on learning. The importance of learning as a result of feedback to students has led to the use in some contexts of the term **Assessment FOR Learning**, which emphasised the *learning* aspect. Many authors stress that it is only 'feedback' if it has an impact on student learning (Evans, 2013). Assessment FOR Learning also includes the idea of feedback to staff on their teaching. It emphasises the importance of a *dialogue* between teachers and students (Nicol, 2010). Feedback needs to be timely, actionable and understandable.
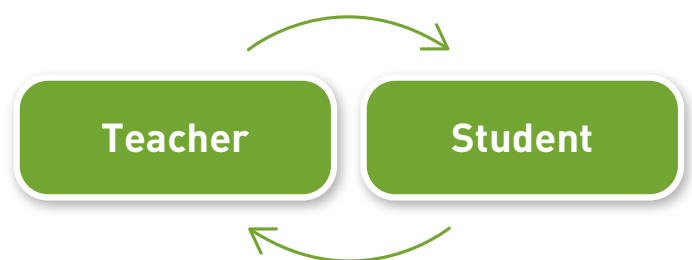

Figure 1 Assessment FOR Learning

Assessment FOR Learning has often been extended to include the idea of the empowerment of students to self-regulate and critically evaluate their own learning and performance (Carless et al., 2011; Sadler, 2010). Some authors separate this concept to highlight this important skill and title it **Assessment AS Learning** (Earl & Katz, 2006). Students needs support to develop this skill (Evans, 2013).

The teacher is most responsible in summative assessment, he/she is the key decision-maker, whereas in formative assessment, in particular in Assessment AS Learning, it is the *student* who becomes more empowered, is more responsible and can become the key decision-maker (see Figure 2). As the teacher usually holds the power, there is a more extrinsic locus of control for students in summative assessment and this shifts to an intrinsic locus of control in formative assessment.

SUMMATIVE

Teacher
is responsible,
is decision-maker

Student
is responsible,
is decision-maker

High Stakes

Low Stakes

FORMATIVE

EXAMPLES:

Students self-assess and receive a grade for this judgement.

Students and staff both grade the work (summative co-assessment).

Students self-review and/or peer review to make a judgment (critical evaluation) of their work.

Students judge their work based on holistic or analytic criteria, or by comparing exemplars.

Students collaborate to develop their own shared assessment criteria.

EXAMPLES:

'High stakes' graded end or mid semester exam, project, essay.

GPA grade/degree classification.

'Low stakes' graded in-class participation; MCQs online primarily for feedback purposes.

Written/oral feedback to students; Staff-student dialogue; Feed-forward (actions to improve); Early feedback to staff to improve teaching.

Students request feedback based on their self-monitoring.

Assessment OF Learning
To demonstate achievement

LEARNING

Assessment AS Learning
To self-regulate and critically evaluate

Assessment FOR Learning
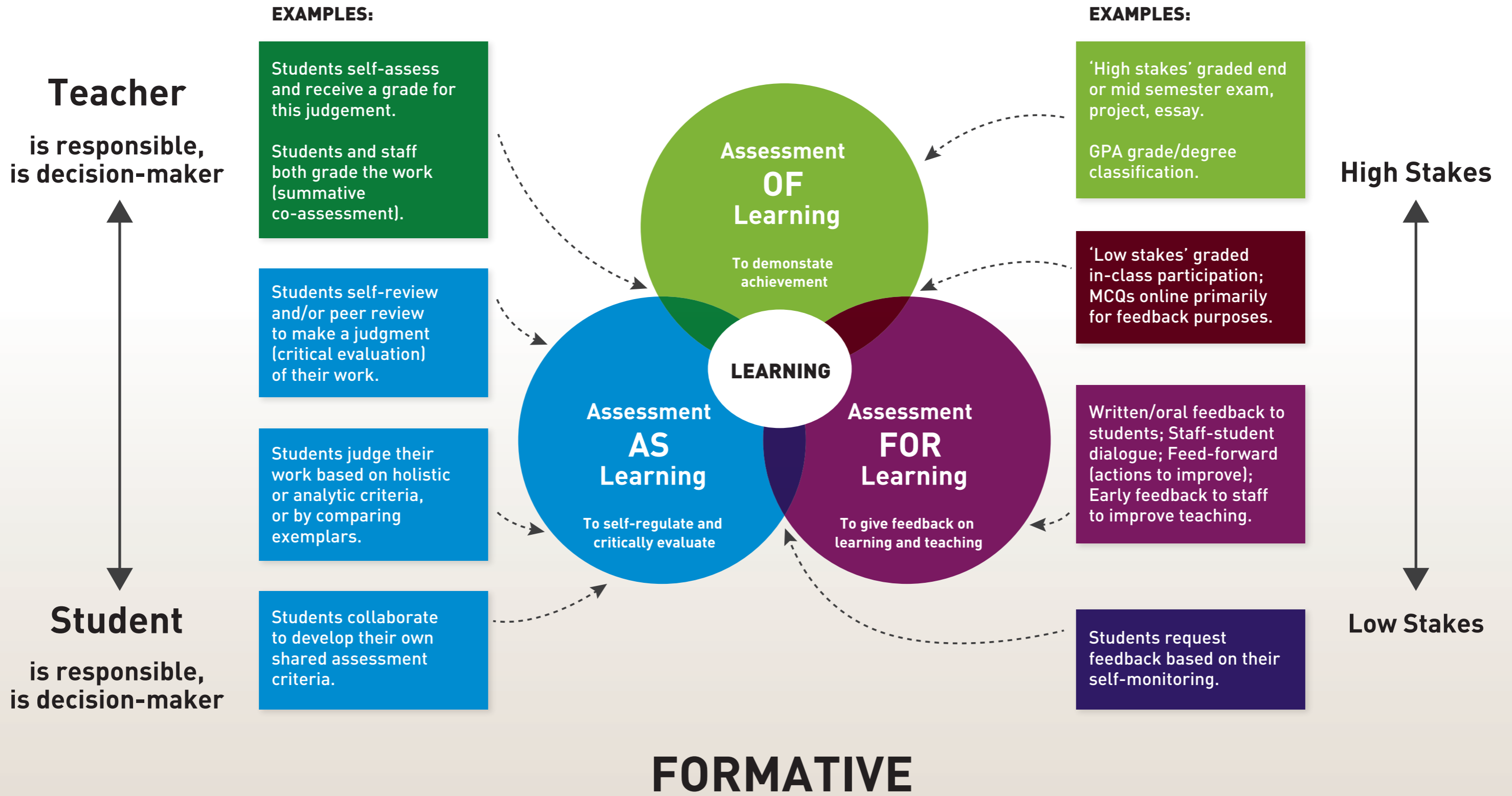To give feedback on learning and teaching

Figure 2 Assessment and feedback terminology and examples

Characteristics and interaction between Assessment OF, FOR and AS Learning

There is a dynamic interaction between these three overlapping purposes, they are not mutually exclusive. Figure 2 highlights their relationships with other assessment terms. Their characteristics are elaborated on below.

Assessment OF Learning (Summative)

The primary purpose is the demonstration of the achievement of student learning

a) It is graded and is usually high stakes for students, staff and institutions (Earl & Katz, 2006).

b) It usually occurs after a period of learning.

c) It is associated with concepts such as measurement, competencies, standards, regulations and explicit criteria.

d) Its role in decision-making is to communicate students' performance to key stakeholders, often comparing them to other students (norm-referenced assessment) or to competencies (criterion-referenced assessment). Institutions and staff then make decisions on student progress. Based on these results, students also make decisions on their own learning tasks and/or progression routes (Earl & Katz, 2006).

e) It is often a key driver for student learning ('*if it's not assessed it doesn't matter*'). It can be associated with student and/or staff anxiety and workload but also can build student/staff confidence when the outcome is to their satisfaction.

f) Common examples are the end-of-semester exam, essay, project, degree classifications.

Low-weighted assessments (also described as 'low stakes' assessment), such as in-class participation, the purpose of which is primarily for feedback, is an example of the overlap between Assessment OF and Assessment FOR Learning.

Assessment FOR Learning (Formative)

The primary purpose is to give feedback on teaching and student learning. Students and teachers are learners in a dialogue to improve their learning or their teaching.

a) It does not normally receive a grade, however low-weighted assessments are often used for feedback and feed-forward purposes (low-stakes assessment).

b) It occurs both throughout and at the end of the learning process, although feedback is most successful for students when it is timely, valued and action-oriented, i.e., it feeds forward (Evans, 2013).

c) It is associated with terms such as dialogue, feedback, feed-forward and assessment criteria (Nicol, 2010).

d) Its role in decision-making is to help students (and/or staff) to understand their own strengths and gaps in order to plan their future learning. It informs their actions for improvement of student learning or teaching quality.

e) It can have a powerful effect on student and staff emotions; positive feedback can be engaging and motivating, negative feedback can be disengaging and demotivating.

f) Common examples include: written/oral feedback to students, staff and students in a dialogue on the learning (Nicol, 2010), feed-forward advice (actions to improve next assessment), students giving feedback to other students, feedback to staff on their teaching, and low-weighted in-class participation.

Assessment AS Learning (Formative)

The primary purpose is to empower students to self-regulate and critically evaluate their learning and performance.

a) It is ungraded assessment, with the rare exceptions of graded self-assessment.

b) It occurs during the learning process and emphasises the preparation of students for their future learning.

c) It is associated with concepts such as self-monitoring, self-regulation, meta-cognition, learning and feedback (Evans, 2013; Lysaght & O'Leary, 2013; Sadler, 2010)

d) Its role in decision-making is also to help students understand their own strengths and gaps in order to plan their future learning. It informs students' actions for improvement to their learning. It also supports the development of students' self-regulation skills.

e) It attempts to empower students, to give them confidence in their judgements and develop a sense of responsibility for their learning.

f) Common examples include students self- and peer-reviewing their work against holistic or analytical criteria (Sadler, 2009), students using exemplars to judge their and other students' work (Carless et al., 2011), and students collaborating to develop their own shared assessment criteria (Evans, 2013).

There is overlap between Assessment AS and OF Learning when students get the opportunity to receive a grade for their self-review (often called 'self-assessment') or to negotiate a grade on their work with staff (summative co-assessment: Deeley, 2014). When students have had an opportunity to self-monitor and, based on this, ask for 'specific' feedback on their next assessment, this is an example of an overlap between Assessment FOR and AS Learning.

The concept that binds these three terms together, their shared overlap, is that they are all facilitating students in their learning (see Figure 2). Each of these terms therefore has a key role to play in learning, with different emphases required at different times for different purposes. Having a greater understanding of these terms should allow for a more effective and efficient design of learning experiences.

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