

## Exploring Students' Assessment Literacies and why it Matters

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### Abstract

Assessment literacies for both teachers and students matter because assessment is central to learning and influences behaviours and practices of both. Student assessment literacies have largely been ignored, which is surprising given discourses supporting students taking responsibility for their own learning. Here we investigate the understandings of assessment literacies, especially summative assessment (SA) and formative assessment (FA), of a group of 83 year-three health sciences undergraduates. We found limited and ineffective dialogue between students and teachers about assessment. Even after more than two years at university, students show a lack of common understanding, or no understanding, of the terms SA and FA despite them having become common parlance in academic discourses. From their responses we concluded that 29% of students understood SA, 29% understood FA, and 18% understood both. This lack of understanding is worrying since it counters somewhat the notion that students are central to their own learning. The lack is mirrored by teachers, and to some extent by the literature in general. We contend that a lack of common understanding and theoretical framework has potential to hinder the engagement and progress of students and we call for remedy, starting from a student perspective.

**Keywords:** Assessment Literacy, Formative, Student Engagement, Student Understanding, Summative, Theory.

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## INTRODUCTION

Hughes and Hargreaves (2015), in the Editorial of an issue of the London Review of Education devoted to Assessment literacy, noted that, 'Assessment literacy is not yet an established term'. Etymologically, being literate requires an understanding of the subject in question. They further noted (p1) that,

*We might expect that assessment literacy is not something that can be imposed or 'given' to those who undertake assessment, but is a self-directed growth in understanding of assessment purposes and processes that takes place cumulatively over time (Hughes, 2014).*

Without imposing assessment literacies, for their development it is nonetheless expected that a coordinated and coherent theoretical base which negotiates basic concepts and terminologies is shared between tutors and students to ensure they are using the same words in the same way.

Schön as far back as 1995 discussed discrepancies between practices and principles in the context of research and teaching: this is what he called 'espoused theory versus theory in-use', reflecting the difference between what we or our documentation and discourses say and the reality of what we actually do. Research, as explained below, shows continued differences between practices and beliefs and principles making it difficult to have shared assessment literacies.

MacLellan (2001) used a questionnaire on assessment to collect data from tutors and final-year undergraduate students. The questions focused on their views on purposes, mode, content, timing and marking. She found inconsistencies between and within student and tutor groups. Following Schön, tutor practices did not match their beliefs and principles. Further work in higher education (HE) by Taras (2008) and later by Taras and Davies (2013 and 2014) who used a questionnaire on the relationships between aspects of assessment theory and the relationship between them, also highlighted inconsistencies in both education and science

departments. Similar research by Taras and Davies (2017) with HE staff developers found similar results of conflicting assessment literacies, as did Medland (2015) who found varying levels of assessment literacies. Also in HE, Panadero's (2017) review of self-regulated learning found that subject focus detracts from pedagogic and assessment literacies, which are not addressed explicitly.

In the school sector, Hargreaves (2005) found, first, that teachers' beliefs and understandings of assessment were not aligned with their practices, and second, they had competing concepts of assessment for learning, assessment and learning.

Are these discrepancies due to issues of (perceived) compliance with leading 'experts' no matter the level of their assessment literacies, or, are they linked to an inability to relate (theoretical) principles to practical representations? Why do conflicting assessment literacies matter in either tutors or students? Much of the research discussed above concluded that inconsistencies in conceptual understandings of assessment were partly responsible for practices not meeting the ideals tutors claimed to aspire to. Similarly for students, understanding assessment conceptually supported the understanding of practices. As Biggs (1999) notes, which persists strongly in Biggs and Tang (2011), discounting students' judgements is to fail to appreciate that effective learning is in large measure a function of strategic metacognitive behaviour and that engagement is strongly linked to such learning.

Students in HE are focused on assessment, as national study surveys across continents testify (Yorke 2013). This is because assessment determines their grades, which are high-stakes factors in their subsequent employability, self-predicted success, and personal satisfaction. Further, and in part as a consequence, assessment is central to learning: it shapes learning activity by both teachers and students, and in many cases influences learning much more than does teaching. Thus naturally, the understandings of HE students about their learning, assessment and feedback have been explored many times, but prior to this study, their understandings of the theory and purpose of assessment have largely gone unexplored. Theory is important for students, because, as with teachers, it forms the basis of their understanding of the terms used and permits a better shared understanding of the contexts, processes and products of assessment. Research has considered students' beliefs about institutional processes (e.g. MacLellan 2001), and much has concerned feedback to students on their performance: what they want and find useful (Jonsson 2013; Pitt and Norton 2017; Shafi *et al.* 2018; Denton and McIlroy 2018); whether students use teacher feedback or not, and if not why not (Winstone *et al.* 2017); and how they use the feedback (Taras 2001, 2002, 2003; Orsmond *et al.* 2005; Jackson and Marks 2016; Zimbardi *et al.* 2017). Though undoubtedly useful,

this body of work has captured students' practical concerns and behaviours but not the students' understandings of the framework within which those notions and behaviours sit. Students have not been asked what they understand by summative assessment (SA), formative assessment (FA) or student self-assessment (SSA), and importantly, how these are linked, even though some teachers have indicated that they use these terms with students (Taras and Davies 2014). Students report the importance of assessment as part of their academic journey (as noted in the above literature) but their understandings of assessment and how it is applied and communicated to them by their teachers is unknown. This is particularly important for self-assessment which has the power to engage them directly with assessment processes and products and develop their self-regulated learning (Panadero *et al.* 2016; Panadero *et al.* 2017; Taras 2018; Taras and Wong 2023). The focus of this paper is to gain an insight into students' understandings, and the researchers' position has not interfered with these.

The discourses that have dominated higher education over the past 20-30 years have increasingly focused on learner- and learning-led priorities for education and learning and teaching processes, and research has increasingly followed this focus. It has also been acknowledged that assessment has fallen far behind the progress made in learning and teaching (Knight 2002; Lau 2016). As part of the discourses of learner- and learning-centredness, where students have a voice and have agency as part of their learning experiences, there is a move for learner independence and self-regulated learning to be prioritised for life-long learning principles (Taylor and Robinson 2009; Taras 2015; Panadero 2017; Panadero *et al.* 2018), exacerbated to some extent by the CoViD-19 pandemic (e.g. Garg *et al.* 2020). Such prioritisation, of course, requires a more in-depth understanding of basic principles and theories for learners to be able to make the informed decisions they need to make. Therefore, theory is central for students as well as for teachers, and hence this study investigating student understanding of assessment theory.

But we must not start from the point of assuming that teachers themselves have a firm grasp of assessment theories. Taras (2008), Taras and Davies (2014) and Davies and Taras (2016, 2018) examined teacher assessment literacies in the UK, asking teachers how students are included in assessment, and what they told students about assessment practices. The results were mixed and in many cases teachers were confused about the purposes and processes of assessment. This work is a starting point for examining student assessment literacies, and in future the aim is to explore qualitative data.

## METHOD

### Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed for the purpose of this study with a total of 35 questions, divided into two parts (Figure 1). Part A mainly focused on lecturers' (teachers') use of assessment from the point of view of the students and Part B mainly focused on students' own understanding of assessment. To facilitate some comparison between students' and teachers' understandings of assessment, the questions are similar to those deployed previously on teaching staff (Taras 2008; Taras and Davies, 2013). Of the 35 questions, 28 required 'yes' or 'no' (and occasionally 'sometimes') responses, and 7 asked for qualitative responses.

The questionnaire was piloted on six students at the same academic level in cognate disciplines at the same University as the participants. The piloting revealed that though the students sometimes did not understand the terms formative or summative, the expectations of the questionnaire were clear. As a result the questionnaire was not modified prior to deployment.

### Participants

The questionnaire was deployed to undergraduate students approximately one-third through their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of study (level 6 on the UK Framework for Higher Education Qualifications). The students were in a single health-related academic faculty at a UK university and were studying either Biomedical Science or Pharmacy. Successful Biomedical Science students would graduate with an honours degree at the end of that academic year, and successful Pharmacy students would graduate a year later, since theirs was a four-year undergraduate Master's programme. Analysis of the data revealed no salient differences according to the programme of study and so the data were pooled. Data were collected by programme during normal teaching activities on two occasions, 3 days apart. Students were invited to access the questionnaire on their mobile devices via a projected QR code linking to the questionnaire (<http://bit.ly/2CrOnvf>), produced using Google Forms. They were asked to answer the questions in sequence and not to discuss with their peers. One questionnaire was spoilt and was excluded. Not all students present responded to the questionnaire, and the total sample size was 83, 25 from Biomedical Science and 58 from Pharmacy.

As concerns ethical approval, the university offers self-certification of low impact projects, when applicants have completed the self-certification course. This is what took place for our research.

## RESULTS

Only about half of the students reported that their teachers used the terms summative and formative, with more reporting the use of formative than summative (Table 1), and much smaller proportions indicated that

their teachers explained what is meant by formative and summative (Table 2); only 13% reported that their teachers had explained summative (Table 2). 31% reported that their teachers had used both summative and formative, and 35% reported that their teachers had never used either term. Large proportions of students (75% for FA and 60% for SA) reported that they were not always or were never informed of the nature (FA or SA) of assessments in advance (Table 3), and about half the students reported that they receive a grade for their FA tasks (Table 4). Students reported that they were exposed to FA more in class than as homework, and about half reported being exposed to FA and SA combined in a single assessment (Table 5). However, only 14% of students provided examples of where FA and SA were combined, with the most common (4 students) being end-of-course examination, though two referred to team-based learning. One student responded, '*I don't actually know what they [FA and SA] are.*'

In general, students showed a poor understanding of SA and FA. 23% of students reported that they did not know what summative meant; and 25% gave a response indicating some form of summary, with a further 14% indicating some notion of adding things together. 13% referred to a final or end-of-course assessment or outcome, and 10% indicated that SA referred to assessments that contribute to overall grades, though two (2%) thought the opposite. 19% of students referred to '*exam*' as an example of SA, 12% each to multiple choice questionnaire and coursework, and 10% to team-based learning. Two referred to quizzes at the end of a lecture, and one to '*practice questions.*' We examined the definitions and examples given to come to a judgement about whether students understood SA (as a notion of assessment at the end of a period of study or that contributed to a formally recorded judgement), and concluded that 29% did.

Although 25% of students reported that they did not know what formative meant, 11% referred in their answer to feedback and 7% referred to a positive influence on learning. 8% understood that formative related to assessments that did not contribute to a final grade, but 5% understood the opposite. In comparison to SA, students had more diverse understandings of FA. Examples included, '*Exam style questions that integrate lectures*', '*the outcomes that [a] student should know*', '*taken in exam conditions*', '*optional*', and '*we are being examined on a portion only of the whole content of study.*' Although when asked to give an example of FA one student reported '*I thought all assessments were formative*', the most common response (17%) related to some element of coursework. 12% mentioned the notion of submitting a draft for comment by teachers, though 12% also referred to examinations. 6% gave examples relating to team-based learning, 5% to multiple choice questionnaires, and 4% to objective structured clinical examinations. Considering the definitions and examples given we concluded that 29% of students understood FA

(as assessment that did not contribute to a formally recorded judgement or whose purpose was to give feedback to the student). Only 18% understood both SA and FA. Of those students that reported that their lecturers had not used the term 'summative', 27% of them demonstrated to us that they understood SA. The corresponding proportion for 'formative' was 16%, indicating that some students' knowledge of SA and FA comes from sources other than their teachers.

About half the students reported that FA is unrelated to SA (Table 6), but of the 14 students that indicated how they are related, the most common response concerned the notion that FA prepares for SA (seven students, or 8% of the total).

Self-assessment of both SA and FA work is experienced by few students, a maximum of 11% for SA and 18% for FA (Table 7). Only one student had experienced both.

Most students recognised that SA can be used for mid-course and for end-of-course grades, but a considerable proportion in each case (~30%) did not (Table 8). Fewer, though still majorities, reported that FA can be used for mid-course and for end-of-course grades (Table 8). More students reported that FA cannot be used in grading in comparison to SA (Table 8). 58% thought that SA can be used for both mid-course and for end-of-course grades, though less (40%) thought that FA could be used for both. 31% reported that both FA and SA can be used both for mid and end-of-course marks, though 14% reported that both cannot be used for either type of marks.

Majorities of students thought that SA and FA could be used to assess the product of their work (Table 9), but only 40% thought that both could be used in this way. Most also recognised that FA assesses the process they use to produce their work though less than half recognised SA as assessing process (Table 9). 27% realised that SA and FA can assess both process and product, but 20% thought they both assessed neither.

More (43%) thought that FA assessed both process and product than thought this for SA (28%). 13% related SA to product only and FA to both.

Nearly three-quarters of students recognised SA as helping their learning, though even more (84%) recognised FA as fulfilling this function (Table 10). Except for one, all of the students that felt SA helped their learning also felt that FA helped their learning. Though most students received useful feedback from FA, 35% did not recognise this function, and even more (42%) did not recognise useful feedback arising from SA (Table 10). Almost 50% of the students recognised SA and FA as both providing useful feedback and helping their learning, but for 13% both SA and FA provided neither. 16% acknowledged that both SA and FA helped their learning but did not provide any useful feedback.

Approximately two-thirds of students reported that they focused on SA, and a similar proportion on FA (Table 11); 50% reported that they focused on both, and 22% on neither. However, only 21% both understood (as determined by us) SA and focused on it, and only 3% understood SA but did not focus on it. For FA these proportions were 14% and 12%, respectively. Only 7% both understood and focused on both SA and FA, though 16% neither understood nor focused on either. 25% did not understand both terms but focused on both. Of the 18% that we determined understood both SA and FA, all but one (93%) focused on SA and about half focused on FA, thus about half focused on both.

42% of students reported that assessment at university was different to that experienced before university (Table 12). The most common difference was the increased diversity of assessment tools at university (11%), followed by the use of marking criteria and the notion that study at university was more demanding (4% each). Representative examples included, '*More varied ways of assessments e.g. coursework*', '*More longer mark questions in the exam, given a choice of questions instead of doing all*', '*Different marking and grading schemes*', and '*Harder and more stressful*'.



Please answer the following questions in order, thinking about your UNIVERSITY STUDIES ONLY, not any of your studies prior to University.

[Where 'YES – NO' or 'YES – NO – SOMETIMES' is presented, students were prompted to indicate their choice]

#### PART A

1. In relation to assessment, have your university lecturers used the term 'summative'? YES – NO
  - a. What do you understand by 'summative'?
  - b. Give an example of summative assessment used at University
2. In relation to assessment, have your university lecturers used the term 'formative'? YES – NO
  - a. What do you understand by 'formative'?
  - b. Give an example of formative assessment used at University
3. Do your university lecturers use formative assessments in class/lectures? YES – NO
4. Do your university lecturers use formative assessments for homework? YES – NO
5. Do your university lecturers ever combine summative and formative aspects in a single assessment? YES – NO
6. When an assessment is summative, are you informed that it is summative in advance? YES – NO – SOMETIMES
7. When an assessment is formative, are you informed that it is formative in advance? YES – NO – SOMETIMES
8. Are you given a score or mark or grade for your formative assessments? YES – NO – SOMETIMES
9. Is formative assessment related to summative assessment? YES – NO
10. Do your university lecturers ask you to self-assess (give a mark or grade to) your summative assessments? YES – NO – SOMETIMES
11. Do your university lecturers ask you to self-assess (give a mark or grade to) your formative assessments? YES – NO – SOMETIMES

#### PART B

12. In theory, summative assessment can be used for end-of-course marks/grades. YES – NO
13. In theory, formative assessment can be used for end-of-course marks/grades. YES – NO
14. In theory, summative assessment can be used for mid-course marks/grades. YES – NO
15. In theory, formative assessment can be used for mid-course marks/grades. YES – NO
16. If your lecturers ever combine summative and formative aspects in a single assessment, please give an example.
17. Summative assesses the product of my work. YES – NO
18. Summative assesses the process I use to produce the work. YES – NO
19. Formative assesses the product of my work. YES – NO
20. Formative assesses the process I use to produce the work. YES – NO
21. Summative assessments help me learn. YES – NO
22. Formative assessments help me learn. YES – NO
23. Summative assessments provide me with useful feedback. YES – NO
24. Formative assessments provide me with useful feedback. YES – NO
25. I focus on summative assessment. YES – NO
26. I focus on formative assessment. YES – NO
27. If you think formative assessment is related to summative assessment, how is it related?
28. Is your experience of assessment at University different to that you experienced prior to University? YES – NO
29. If yes, how?
30. Have your University lecturers explained what summative assessment means? YES – NO
31. Have your University lecturers explained what formative assessment means? YES – NO

**Figure 1: The questionnaire issued to students**

**Table 1: Use of the terms summative and formative**

	1. In relation to assessment, have your university lecturers used the term 'summative'?	2. In relation to assessment, have your university lecturers used the term 'formative'?
% "Yes"	41	55
% "No"	59	45

**Table 2: Summative and Formative Assessment explained to students**

	30. Have your University lecturers explained what summative assessment means?	31. Have your University lecturers explained what formative assessment means?
% "Yes"	13	25
% "No"	87	75

**Table 3: Informing students of FA and SA**

	6. When an assessment is summative, are you informed that it is summative in advance?	7. When an assessment is formative, are you informed that it is formative in advance?
% "Yes"	25	40
% "No"	47	41
% "Sometimes"	28	19

**Table 4: Marking/grading of FA**

	8. Are you given a score or mark or grade for your formative assessments?
% "Yes"	51
% "No"	25
% "Sometimes"	24

**Table 5: Use of FA and SA**

	3. Do your university lecturers use formative assessments in class/lectures?	4. Do your university lecturers use formative assessments for homework?	5. Do your university lecturers ever combine summative and formative aspects in a single assessment?
% "Yes"	53	41	46
% "No"	47	59	54

**Table 6: Relationship between FA and SA**

	9. Is formative assessment related to summative assessment?
% "Yes"	48
% "No"	52

**Table 7: Use of Self-assessment**

	10. Do your university lecturers ask you to self-assess (give a mark or grade to) your summative assessments?	11. Do your university lecturers ask you to self-assess (give a mark or grade to) your formative assessments?
% "Yes"	4	6
% "No"	89	82
% "Sometimes"	7	12

**Table 8: Use of SA and FA in mid-course and final marks/grades**

	12. In theory, summative assessment can be used for end-of-course marks/grades.	13. In theory, formative assessment can be used for end-of-course marks/grades.	14. In theory, summative assessment can be used for mid-course marks/grades.	15. In theory, formative assessment can be used for mid-course marks/grades.
% "Yes"	70	54	69	61
% "No"	30	46	31	39

**Table 9: SA and FA assess process or product**

	17. Summative assesses the product of my work.	18. Summative assesses the process I use to produce the work.	19. Formative assesses the product of my work.	20. Formative assesses the process I use to produce the work.
% "Yes"	61	45	65	63
% "No"	39	55	35	37

**Table 10: Feedback and learning from SA and FA**

	21. Summative assessments help me learn.	22. Formative assessments help me learn.	23. Summative assessments provide me with useful feedback.	24. Formative assessments provide me with useful feedback.
% "Yes"	73	84	58	65
% "No"	27	16	42	35

**Table 11: Students' focus in relation to assessment**

	25. I focus on summative assessment.	26. I focus on formative assessment.
% "Yes"	66	63
% "No"	34	37

**Table 12: Comparing pre-university experience to university experience in assessment**

	28. Is your experience of assessment at University different to that you experienced prior to University?
% "Yes"	42
% "No"	58

## DISCUSSION

Although 41% and 55% of students claim to have heard SA and FA, respectively mentioned by their teachers, when quizzed further on their understanding of these terms, the percentage of students who had heard the terms and expressed a clear notion of what they mean is 18% for SA and 22% for FA. According to the students, during their 2+ years of study at the University, the dialogue between them and their teachers about assessment is limited and is ineffective in conveying to them both the purpose of, and distinction between, SA and FA. This is not a trivial issue, rather it is worrying since discourses claim to include and engage learners in learner-centred and learning-centred pedagogies: it appears that assessment is not included as part of these pedagogies even though feedback, which comes from assessment, is central to learning (Merry *et al.* 2013), making theory central for students as well as for teachers.

Most HE providers require summative assessment methods to be clearly specified to students, either verbally in introductory sessions or/and, in an increasingly contractually-driven system, in writing in student-facing course guides. The assessments that are graded are clearly articulated to students, but not necessarily under the banner 'summative assessment'. Nonetheless, given that SAs are clearly specified it would seem logical that when FA is introduced this would also be situated within the context of the SA requirements specified by the provider, otherwise any FA work would be merely a, possibly *ad hoc*, add-on, subject to the vagaries of teachers. Teachers are free to add ungraded assessments at any point within their course, although these are not necessarily made explicit at the start of the course. These *ad hoc* additions may further confuse students, especially when they are not told of them in advance. It makes little sense to have only graded assessments (SA) clearly presented to students, excluding a large proportion of assessment under the banner of FA. Students are lulled into a false sense of security in understanding what assessment protocols they will be dealing with, and this may undermine their full engagement and participation in the learning process. FA is marginalised by teachers while they simultaneously purport to claim that it is essential to learning (e.g. Taras and Davies 2013): if it is excluded, unexplained and unlinked to SA, how are students supposed to understand or believe in it?

We cannot be certain that information differentiating assessment (SA or FA) is not communicated to students, but we can be certain that it is not communicated effectively. It would be easy to blame the students for not listening or not reading the course guide, but learners will only pay attention to information if it is of consequence to their study and assessment (Jonsson 2013; Pitt and Norton 2017; Shafi *et al.* 2018; Denton and McIlroy 2018; Dawson *et al.* 2019). It is how the information is subsequently used by the teachers during the delivery of the course that decides

how much of it the students remember and understand. It is of course certainly possible that teachers do not fully understand the distinction, find the terms confusing, and have perhaps not admitted this to themselves (Taras and Davies, 2013, 2014; Davies and Taras 2018) and are wary of exposing this position to the students. A more generous interpretation is that they could be confident of their understanding of the terms but do not feel the need or the obligation to include and engage their students in the discussion as they regard this extra effort will have minimal benefits and may confuse their students. However, it may also be the case that they still see assessment as their own prerogative, the power of judgement that is theirs, and do not want to relinquish this, a position supported by the finding that hardly any teachers use student self-assessment.

The fact that self-assessment is rarely used by teachers for either SA or FA also lends itself to one of the above interpretations. Teachers either lack the understanding and therefore do not appreciate the learning payoffs of self-assessment for student engagement in assessment (Panadero *et al.* 2016, 2017), or think of assessment as judgement that is done *to* the students and not *with* or *by* them (Taras 2015).

Students reported that teachers were more communicative about FA than SA (more students reported that their teachers have used the term, explained it, and informed students in advance about its deployment). This could be because SA is still regarded as 'actual' assessment and therefore referred to as simply 'assessment' and FA is the newcomer to the field or the add-on and needs to be properly introduced. Interestingly, a few students were able to express understanding of SA (11%) and FA (7%) even though they had indicated that the term was not used by their teachers. The origin of this understanding is unknown though may have come from pre-university studies, teachers' assessment practice, or other students. This is why we asked students to make the distinction between their university and pre-university experiences.

Since 18% of students showed an acceptable understanding of both the terms SA and FA, we would have expected this understanding to permeate to the rest if the distinction between SA and FA was significant to them in their assessment. However, the lack of common understanding of the terms after more than two years of university study and that there are many who do not know the terms at all, indicates that discourse, and engaging students as central to their own learning, on SA and FA does not have a priority.

Students' confusion of assessment terms and function, evident in the present results, is similar to that expressed by tutors (Taras and Davies 2013; Davies and Taras 2018), and even tutors of tutors (Taras and Davies 2017); thus even if tutors were good communicators of assessment terms to students, the students would remain

confused. A lack of common theory and discourses in literature on FA and SA result in common misconceptions that are replicated within the classroom (Taras 2009) and may be conclusions the tutors and students arrive at themselves, perhaps through shared wisdom in their respective communities. An example is that SA is an assessment associated with the end of the course or the learning therefore it is used more for end of course grading and usually assesses the product (end result) of their work more than the process they used to produce it, while FA is an ongoing process used for grading any work and assessing both process and product. Another that has percolated to students is that FA is an assessment that prepares them for SA (Taras and Davies 2013, 2014, 2017; Davies and Taras 2016, 2018) and it is somehow part of, or a sub-section of, SA. These two examples highlight perhaps the most important aspect of theory, which is necessary for clarifying all these misconceptions, namely how SA and FA interrelate.

It is encouraging that students regard SA and particularly FA as providing valuable feedback and promoting learning. However, it is perplexing that 19% think that FA supports their learning without providing useful feedback. This may seem a contradiction but if FA is used by teachers as mock and trial assessments to prepare students for SA then it is not surprising that it would promote their learning as judged by the subsequent SA even if students do not receive or use feedback from the FA. ‘Dialogic feedback’ has been an important concept here as it requires student engagement and participation in assessment (Merry *et al.* 2013). It is thus disappointing to see it overtaken by that of ‘uptake of feedback’, especially by original proponents of dialogic feedback. Carless (2019) writes of feedback loops and uptake of feedback. Both of these are euphemistic metaphors for tutors’ wishful thinking about students using the feedback they provide on their work. Tutor feedback is in reality information going unidirectionally, therefore, it is ‘telling’ students what to do (what Sadler (1989) calls knowledge of results), rather than trying to get students to engage in understanding and achieving their own goals.

According to about half the students, university assessment differs from pre-university assessment. However, none of the examples given relate to SA or FA in any way. Even after answering 27 questions in a questionnaire focused on SA and FA, the terms are not referred to at all in the responses. This provides further evidence of how irrelevant the terms are to the students, which itself is likely a reflection of their teachers’ practice in delivering assessment.

We contend that some of the responses we recorded probably stem from a lack of understanding of the terms, and so answers we recorded to, for example questions on how SA and FA are used, become to some extent guesswork. But all this does is to further highlight

students’ confusion with the most basic elements of assessment theory, a confusion that is not of their making. Why are we, as practitioners in HE, excluding students from engaging and understanding the nature of processes that matter to them most? In the past we as authors have advocated for the development of a better and more consistent framework that allows teachers, and by extension students, to understand the purpose and process of assessment (Taras and Davies 2013, 2014, 2017; Davies and Taras 2016, 2018) and become more ‘assessment literate’. Thus far we have promoted a top-down approach but now realise that the confusion of students is so serious and may be hampering their engagement and progress that we call for a complementary bottom-up approach, pushed for by students, perhaps through their representative organisations. How can we expect students to embrace a learner-centred position if we deny them opportunity to engage in the theory of assessment and gain ‘assessment literacy’?

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