What is assessment for?

For teachers and school leaders, the terms ‘formative assessment’ and ‘summative assessment’ are put to regular use as they describe the different modes of assessment they adopt. But while they’re used a lot, they’re actually quite misleading.

Using the two different terms ‘formative assessment’ and ‘summative assessment’ seems to indicate that they are completely distinct entities, different assessments altogether. It’s common to hear education professionals speak of ‘doing formative assessments’ during the course of teaching, leaving their summative assessments until the end of teaching. But the assessments themselves – the actual tests used – are often one and the same, they just get used for different purposes. So technically, there is no such thing as a formative assessment, merely one which has been used for formative purposes.

As an example, a geography department assesses its two year 10 classes at the end of a course unit on Population. The summative grades achieved for each pupil are reported to parents, but it is clear from the low scores on two questions that the majority of pupils are not skilled in using case study examples to support their answers.

The teachers reorganise the classes for three lessons: In one class pupils will receive additional teaching on using case studies, aided by the geography department’s teaching assistant. In the second class, a smaller number of pupils are working on extending their skills in using case studies, comparing and contrasting examples from different countries.

Formative and summative assessment are misleading terms: the tests are often the same, it is only the way the data is used that changes.