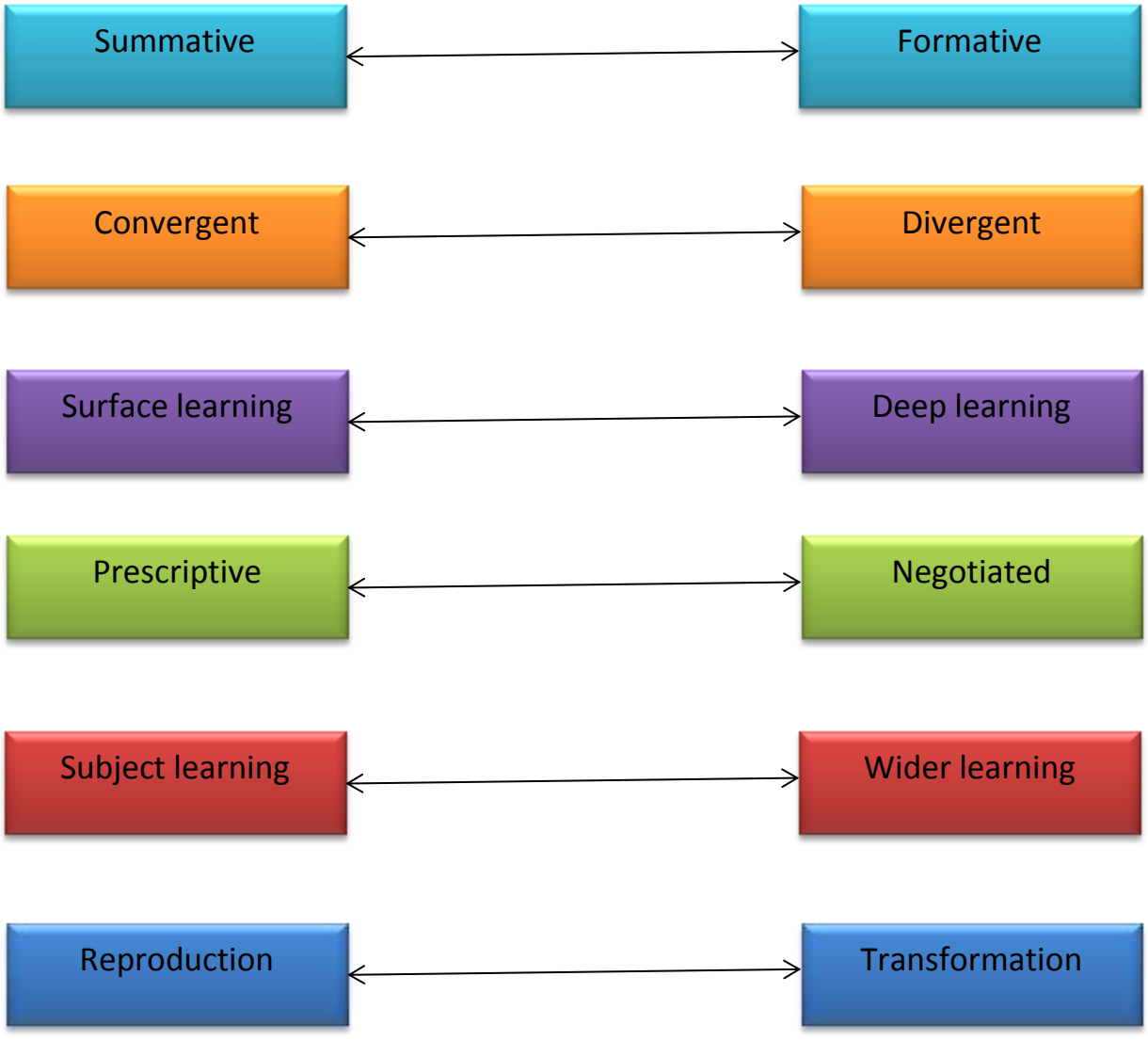
Purposes of assessment in higher education

Exploring the dimensions of assessment

Here we explore the purposes of assessment along different continua. By **purposes** we mean the reason for the assessment in terms of what skills, knowledge and attributes we want our students to develop, not only in their subject or profession but also in the wider context of becoming lifelong learners and demonstrating graduate attributes.

Purposes of assessment can be can contrasted with **types** of assessment (for example, examinations or presentations). One type of assessment, e.g a case study, could be for several purposes or have several outcomes – formative; divergent; deep learning; wider learning.



Summative assessment

Summative assessment is the summing up or checking of learning at particular stages (e.g. end of a module or semester; final examination) by testing or some kind of formal assessment. Such assessment usually involves some kind of judgement of the student's performance and the awarding of a mark or grade. It is assessment **of** learning.

Formative assessment

Formative assessment is designed to promote and improve student learning. Irons (2008:7) states that formative assessment is, "Any task or activity which creates feedback (or feedforward) for students about their learning. Formative assessment does not carry a grade which is subsequently used in a summative judgement." It is assessment **for** learning.

Starter reading and links

Irons, A. (2008) Enhancing Learning Through Formative Assessment and Feedback London: Routledge

Nicol, D.J. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006) Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice *Studies in Higher Education* 31:2, 199-218

Price, M., Carroll, J., O'Donovan, B. and Rust, C. (2011): If I was going there I wouldn't start from here: a critical commentary on current assessment practice, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 36:4, 479-492 http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02602930903512883

Convergent assessment

Convergent assessment tends to be relatively 'closed' or focused on one particular answer or solution. It is about students providing the 'right' answer.

Divergent assessment

Divergent assessment tends to be more open and is intended to generate a range of responses or alternative solutions to problems and to encourage thinking and creativity.

Starter reading and links

Rowntree, D. (1987) Assessing Students: How Shall We Know Them London: Kogan Page Ltd.

Torrance, H. and Pryor, J. (1998) Investigating Formative Assessment: Teaching, Learning and Assessment in the Classroom Buckingham: Open University Press

Surface learning

Surface learning can happen when students just want to get the task or the assessment done. It tends use lower level cognitive skills, memorisation and treating the elements of a programme as unrelated bits of knowledge. Students are less likely to get the 'big picture'. It is more likely to happen when programmes are overloaded with content which has to be assessed.

Deep learning

In deep learning students are interested in understanding ideas in a more holistic way and to make links and connections within, and possibly beyond, the idea or topic. Students attempt to relate new learning to their previous knowledge and experience. It's about building structures of learning and relates to constructivist theories of learning.

Starter reading and links

Surface learning and deep learning are best understood as metaphors rather theories of learning. Bryan and Clegg suggest that they describe approaches to assessment rather than approaches to learning.

Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2011)Teaching for Quality Learning at University (4th Ed.) Maidenhead: Open University Press

Bryan, C. and Clegg, K. (2006) Innovative Assessment in Higher Education London: Routledge

Ramsden, P. (2003) Learning to Teach in Higher Education (2nd Ed.) London: Routledge

Kember, D., Leung, D. and McNaught, C. (2008) A workshop activity to demonstrate that approaches to learning are influenced by the teaching and learning environment *Active Learning in Higher Education* 9:1, 43-56 http://alh.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/1/43

Reproduction

Barnett (1994) writes of the 'reproducing mode of academic life'; Mann (2008) refers to the 'reproducing orientation'. Both of these indicate a view of teaching and learning at university which is based on transmission and reproduction of knowledge. Clearly, there are times when we need to know that students learn and can reproduce information and knowledge and this might be implicit in

certain forms of assessment, for example, objective tests or examinations, but it is also important that students are able to transform knowledge – and themselves.

Transformation

Ramsden (2010) points out, "The rationale for university teaching is not satisfying students, distributing information to them nor changing them, as some condescendingly say. Rather, it is enabling students to change for themselves." In our assessments we should be thinking about developing assessment methods which give students not only to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding but also to transform their thinking and, by implication, themselves

Starter reading and links

Barnett, R. (1994) The Limits of Competence: Knowledge, Higher Education and Society Buckingham: Open University Press

Mann, S.J. (2008) Study, Power and the University Maidenhead: Open University Press

Ramsden, P. (2010) No thinkable alternative The Guardian, 5th August 2010

Prescriptive

At this end of the continuum, assessments may be very prescriptive. Learning outcomes and assessment criteria will set out clearly what the student needs to do and to demonstrate knowledge of. Such prescription is frequently appropriate if we want students to demonstrate secure knowledge of a particular topic, for example of human anatomy.

Negotiated

Prescribed or rigid learning outcomes can limit student learning to the outcomes prescribed and leave little room for deeper learning and understanding. It's probably not possible to have completely negotiated assessments (even independent studies have some constraints). But on this side of the spectrum students will have more influence in what they are assessed on and how.

Starter reading and links

Light, G., Cox, R. and Calkins, S. (2009) Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: The Reflective Professional (2nd Ed.) London: Sage

Subject/ discipline specific learning

Much of our work with students is ensuring that they have acquired and have understanding of a body of knowledge related to our subject, discipline or profession. If we wish to encourage creativity, experimentation, criticism and change we need to provide our students with content and a framework before they can do these things. For example, thinking skills are difficult to develop without something to think about. However, a great deal of the content, particularly in professional courses will soon be out of date – how will our graduates cope then?

Wider learning

Universities and programmes of learning frequently make explicit or implicit reference to the wider elements of learning. Words and phrases such as key skills; higher-level skills; transferable skills; generic skills; graduate attributes and 'graduateness'; 'learning to learn' and, more specifically, employability skills, refer to a range of skills , abilities and attitudes which we want our students to develop over and above subject- specific knowledge, skills and understanding. A key issue, therefore, is the extent to which we can create assessments to develop these attributes.

Starter reading and links

Anderson, J. and Mitchell, H. (2006) Beyond the subject curriculum Bristol: ESCalate Education Subject Centre, Higher Education Academy

Knight, P. and Yorke, M. (2003, 38-9) Assessment , Learning and Employability Maidenhead: Open University Press