Difference between Formative and Summative Assessment of Teaching

(Draft provided by John Bean)

Formative assessment aims to help a teacher improve his or her teaching performance across a specified range of criteria (course design, assignment design, lecturing skill, skill at leading discussions, care for students, and so forth). Summative assessment makes a judgment about the quality of a teacher’s performance across the same range of criteria. The difference is analogous to a teacher’s role as coach or judge. As a coach, the teacher aims to help all students achieve the highest possible performance. As a judge, the teacher sets standards, makes arguments about the quality of the work, and assigns the grade. To extend the analogy: formative evaluation is like the comments a teacher might make on a student’s rough draft; summative evaluation is like the grade and accompanying comments on a final product.

In practice, written formative assessments present what the evaluator identifies as strengths and weaknesses or problem areas in a person’s teaching and offers helpful advice on how to make improvements. The tone is usually friendly and collaborative, and the written evaluation is usually preceded by back-and-forth conversation between the teacher and the evaluator. In contrast, summative assessments are rhetorically complex because evaluators must use evidence to support a thesis: “This teacher does/ does not meet the criteria for tenure (or whatever).” The rhetorical complexity stems from the angle of vision determined by the evaluator’s thesis and the ensuing decisions about tone, grammatical loading and emphasis, inclusion or exclusion of counter-evidence, and so forth.

Dangers occur when formative assessments are read summatively. Formative assessments depend absolutely on an atmosphere of trust and safety. If there is any fear—on the part of either the evaluator or the person being assessed—that weaknesses identified in a formative assessment might later be used as evidence in a summative assessment, then formative assessment is impossible. It might be best, in such a case, to make formative assessments confidential and off the record. The only thing placed in a teacher’s permanent file would be an affidavit that a formative assessment was conducted.