

Innovative Grading Strategies for the Proficiency-based Language Classroom

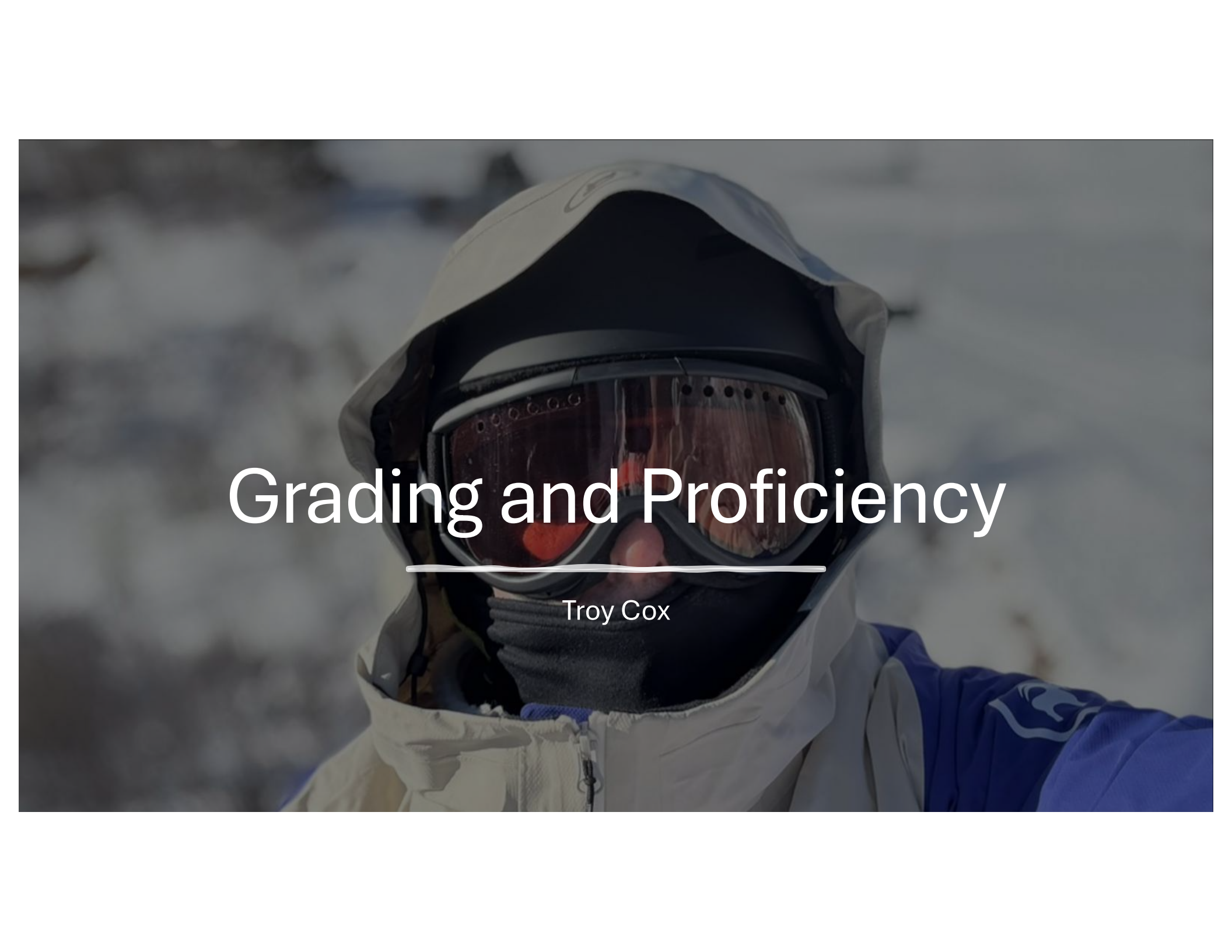
ACTFL 2025, New Orleans

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Brigham Young University



A close-up photograph of a person wearing a white and blue winter jacket, a black helmet, and large ski goggles with orange lenses. The person is looking directly at the camera. The background is a blurred, snowy mountain landscape. Overlaid on the center of the image is the text 'Grading and Proficiency' in a large, white, sans-serif font. Below this text is a thin white horizontal line, and further down is the name 'Troy Cox' in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

Grading and Proficiency

Troy Cox



Do I push myself to failure?
Or do I play it safe?



Harvard College's Grading System Is 'Failing,' Report on Grade Inflation Says





Students walk around Harvard Yard. By Pavan V. Thakkar

By Samuel A. Church and Cam N. Srivastava, Crimson Staff Writers

October 27, 2025

More Harvard College students than ever are passing their classes with flying colors, but the College's evaluation system is "failing to perform the key functions of grading," according to a report released by the Office of Undergraduate Education on Monday.

The 25- page report, which was sent to faculty and Harvard College students on Monday, found that more than 60 percent of grades awarded to Harvard undergraduates are A's, compared to only a quarter of grades two decades ago. It concluded that Harvard's current grading system is "damaging the academic culture of the College."

Harvard Students Skip Class and Still Get High Grades, Faculty Say

Many students don't do the reading and don't speak up in class, according to a report. Now, professors are trying to change a campus culture they say hurts achievement and stifles speech.

Listen to this article · 10:05 min · Learn more



By Anemona Hartocollis

Published Oct. 6, 2025 Updated Oct. 13, 2025

[Leer en español](#)

Harvard University is one of the most difficult schools to gain admission to, with the school turning away some 97 percent of applicants every year.

But once they get in, many of its students skip class and fail to do the reading, according to the Classroom Social Compact Committee, a group of seven faculty members that produced a report on Harvard's classroom culture that has been fueling debate since it was released in January.

When they do show up for class, they are focused on their devices, and are reluctant to speak out. Sometimes it is because they are afraid of sharing ideas that others will disagree with. But often, they have not read enough of the homework to make a meaningful contribution, the report continued.

Rampant grade inflation allows them to coast through anyway, it concluded.

If Harvard is failing with
grades, what about schools
with fewer resources?

What game is being played?

Perhaps the failure is in that students, parents, teachers and administrators are playing different games.

Finite and infinite games



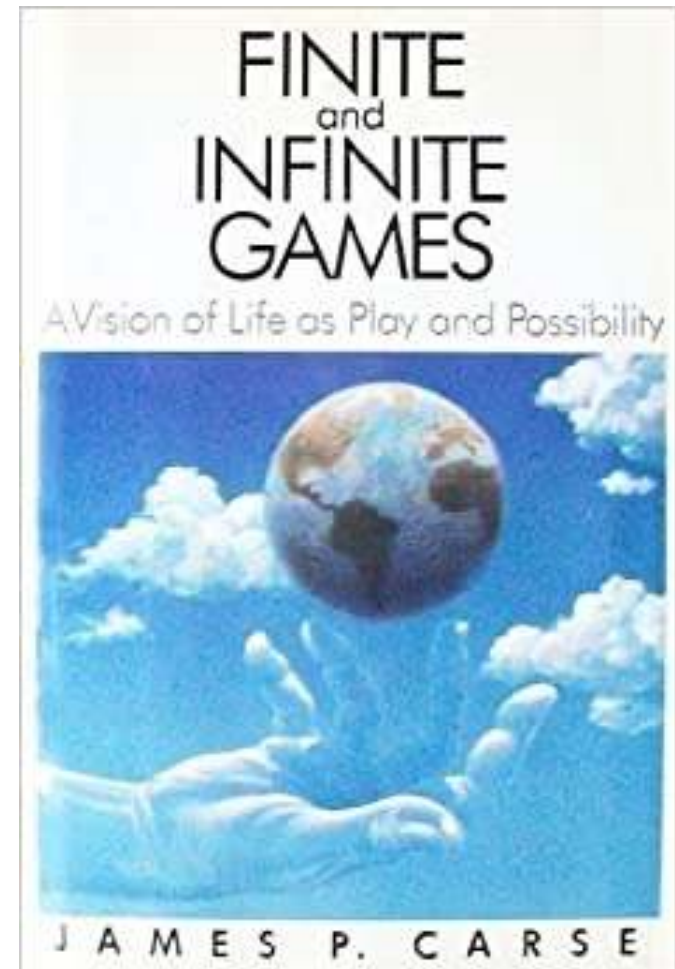
As you watch the video, evaluate the extent to which language learning and grades are infinite or finite games.



After the video, get in groups that are smaller than five people, introduce yourself and discuss your impressions.

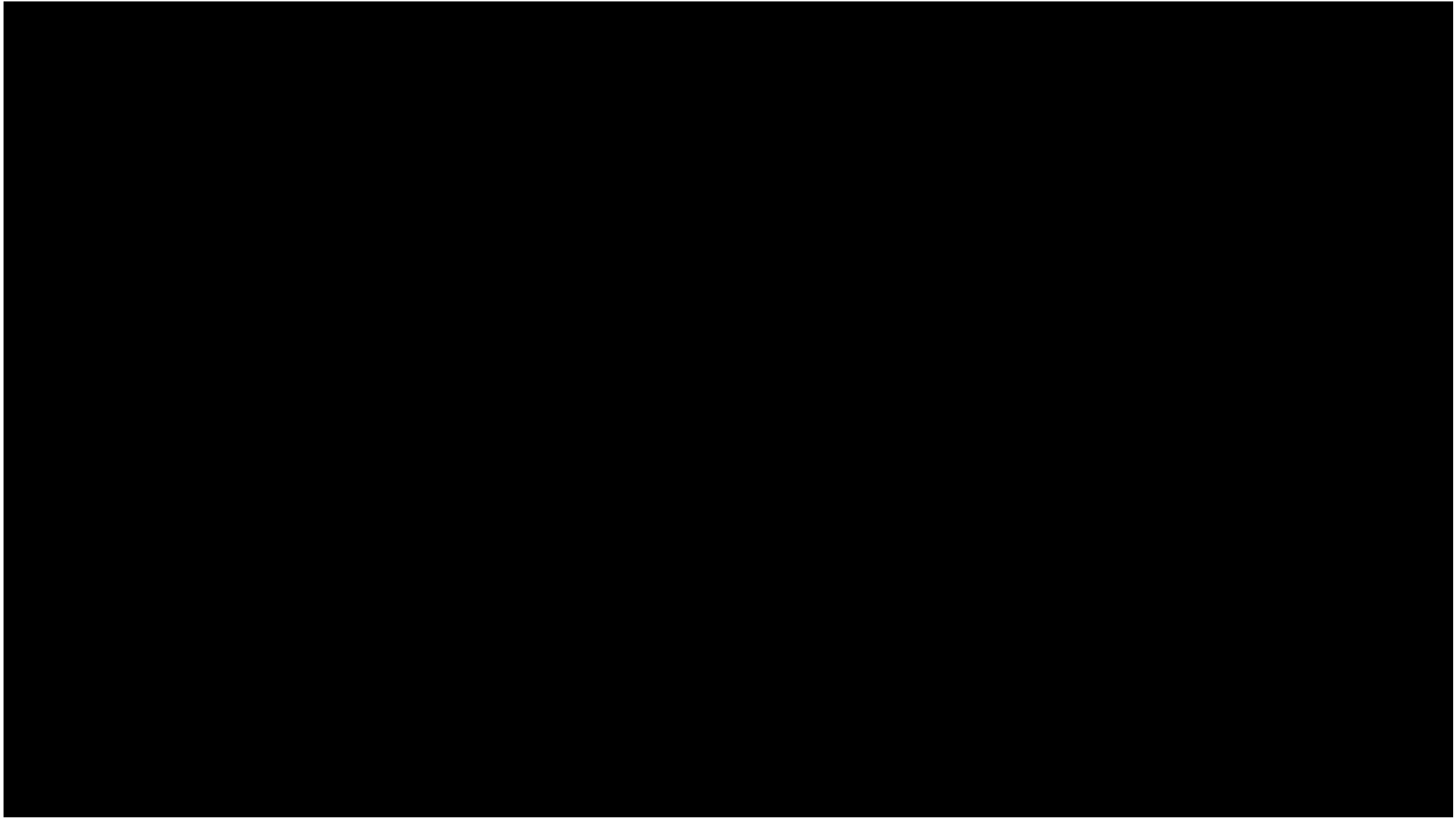


How does Harvard's experience compare with your institutions?



Carse, J. (2011). *Finite and infinite games*. Simon and Schuster.

Sinek, S. (2019). *The infinite game*. Penguin.

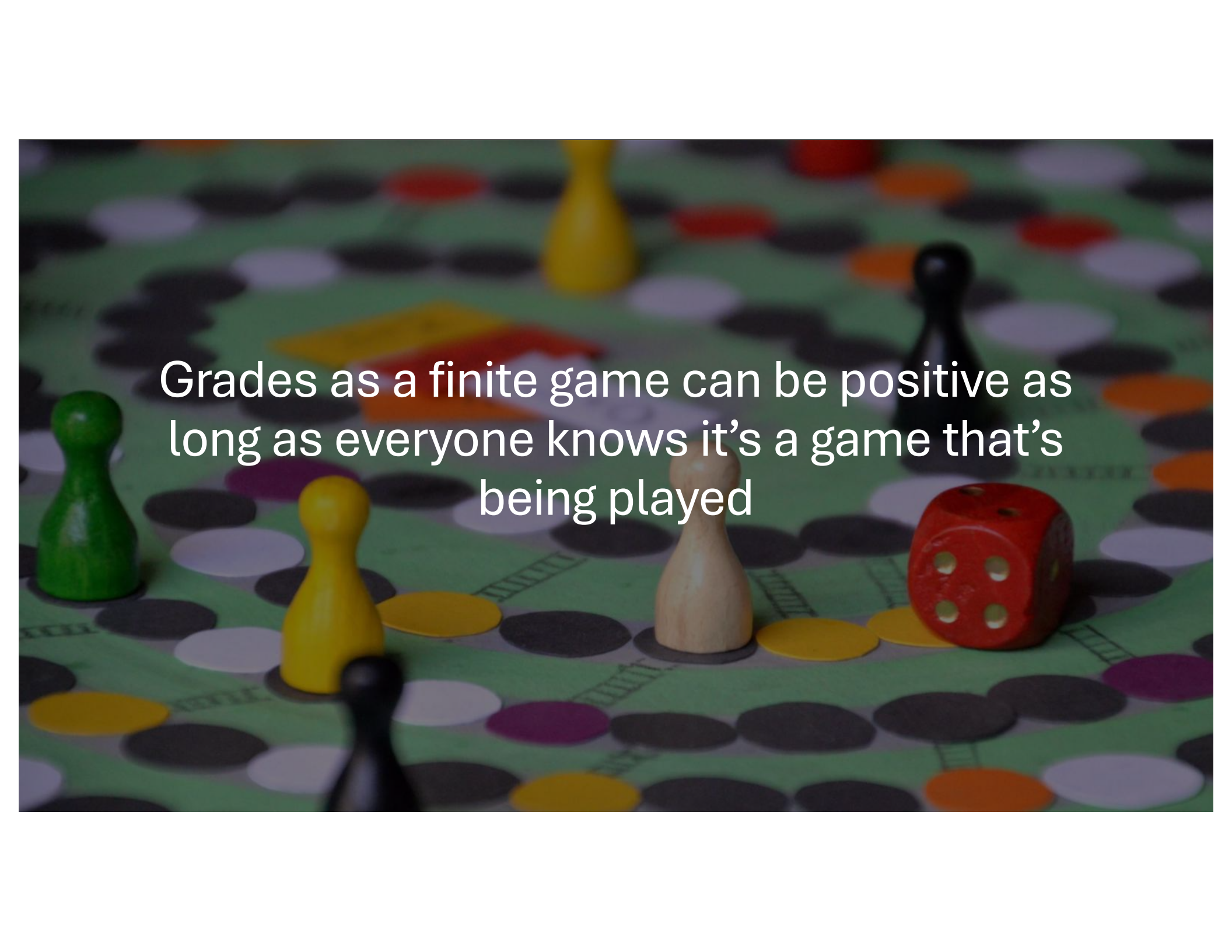


Discussion Question (5 minutes)

- What challenges does your institution face with grading?
- In what ways does this impact the language classroom?
- How can understanding game theory (finite vs infinite) help us produce lifelong language learners?

Finite games can
be within infinite
games but infinite
games can NOT be
within finite games

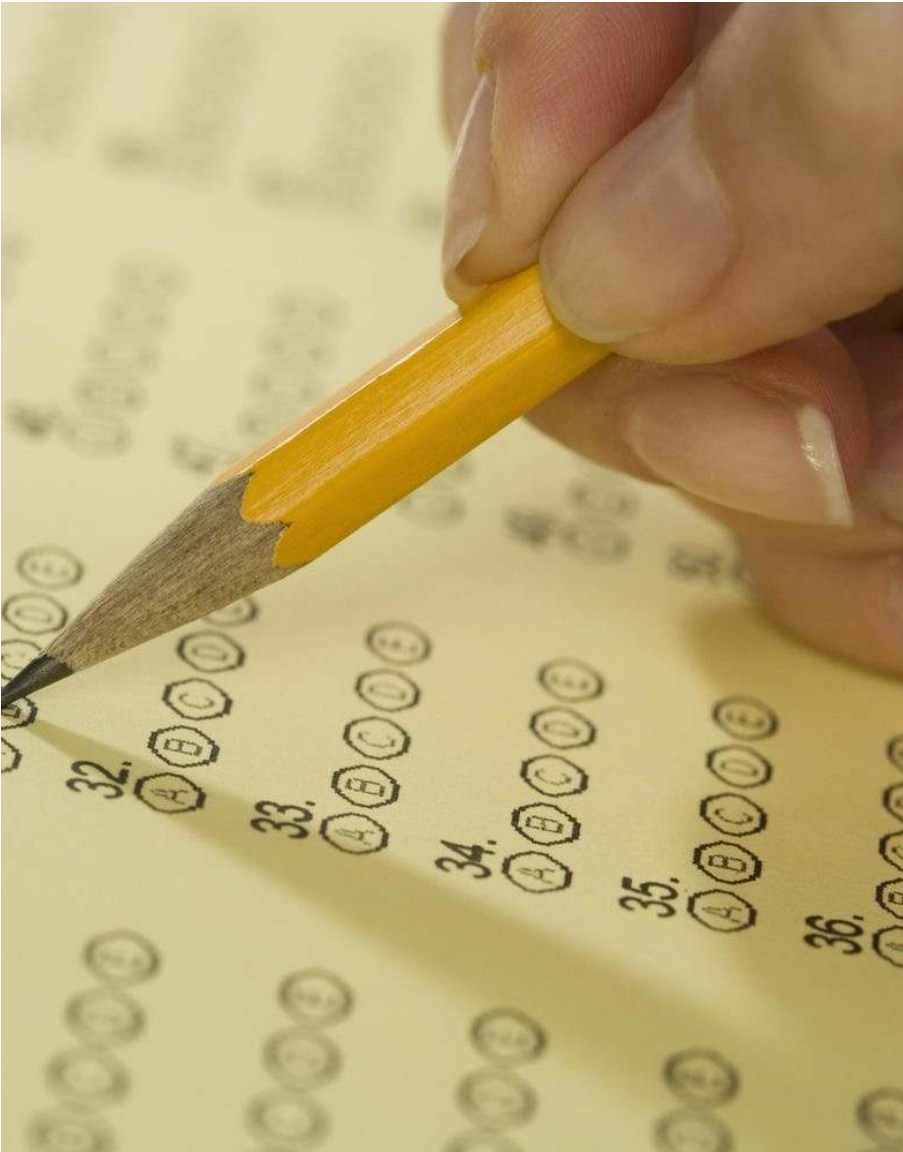


A close-up photograph of a board game. The board is green with a pattern of dark grey and light grey circles. Several wooden pawns in green, yellow, black, and light wood are positioned on the board. A red die with white pips is also visible. The text "Grades as a finite game can be positive as long as everyone knows it's a game that's being played" is overlaid in white.

Grades as a finite game can be positive as long as everyone knows it's a game that's being played

The problem is that
traditional grading
lends itself to a
finite game mindset





What are Traditional Grading Systems?

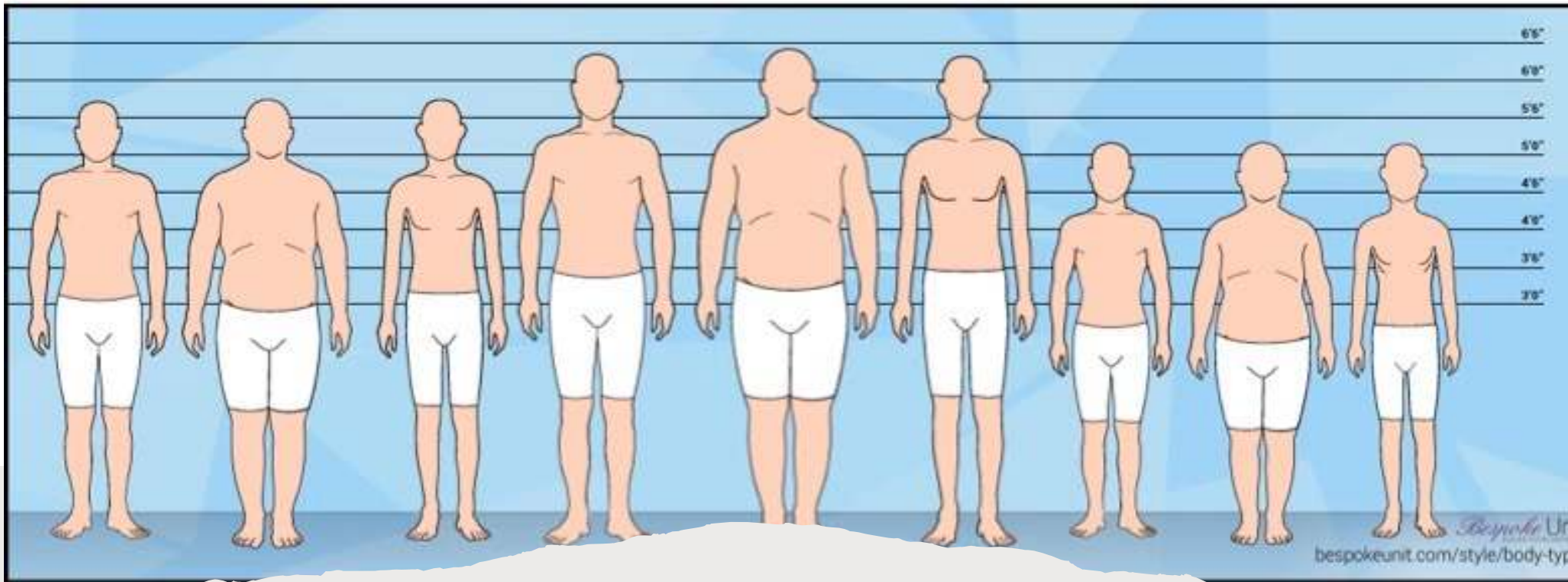
- Definition: Points, percentages, letter grades, weighted categories.
- Often based on the average student and average student learning times
- Strengths: Familiarity; scalable; fine distinctions.
- Weaknesses: Undermines motivation; low validity; high stress; inconsistent.



Story Time

- https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/when-u-s-air-force-discovered-the-flaw-of-averages/article_e3231734-e5da-5bf5-9496-a34e52d60bd9.html

Bespoke Unit's Guide To Understanding Your Body Type



4,063 pilots

10 dimensions (height, chest circumference, sleeve length, etc.)

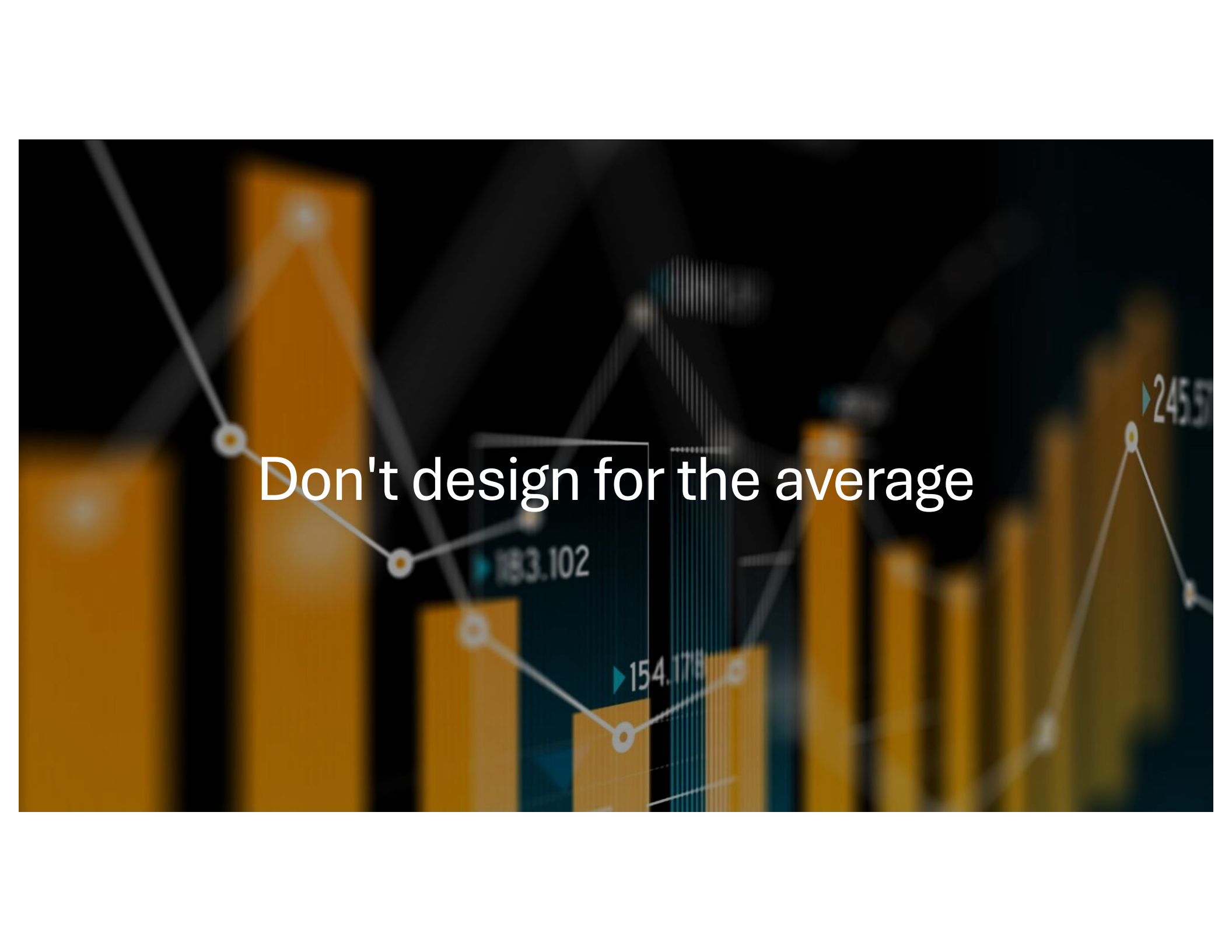
Bespoke Unit's Guide To Understanding Your Body Type



0 matched all
10 dimensions

4,063 pilots

10 dimensions (height, chest circumference, sleeve length, etc.)

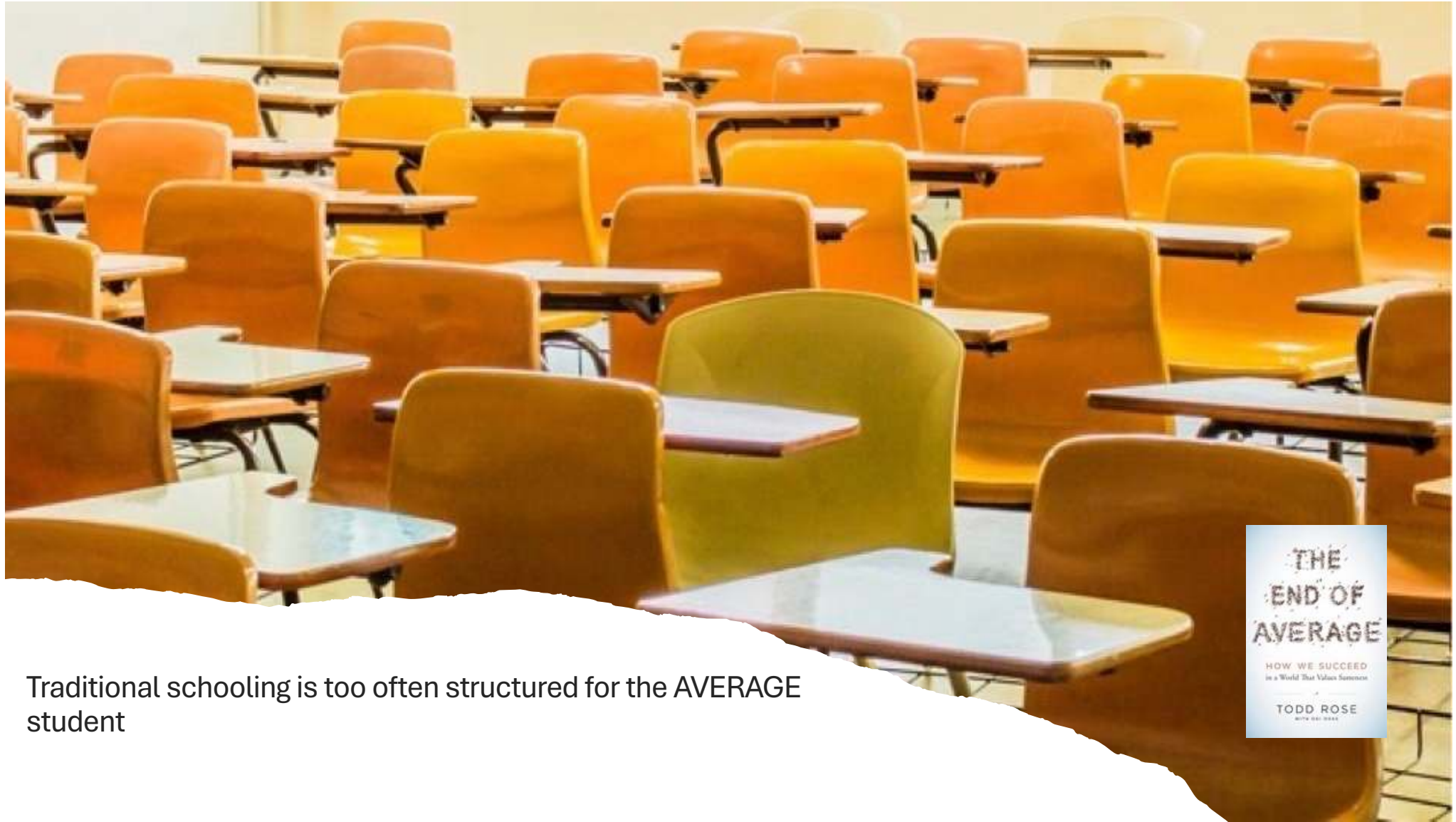


Don't design for the average

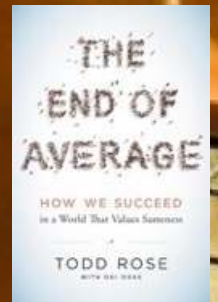
The background image is a blurred financial chart. It features several orange vertical bars of varying heights. A white line graph with circular markers is overlaid on the bars. Some data points on the line graph are labeled with numbers: 183.102, 154.178, and 245.5. The overall image is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the text in the foreground.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand, wearing a yellow shirt and blue jeans, pointing at a control panel on a car seat. The panel is dark grey or black and features several buttons with icons: a reclining chair, a shopping cart, and a button with a left and right arrow. The text "Design for the edges" is overlaid in white, sans-serif font across the center of the image.

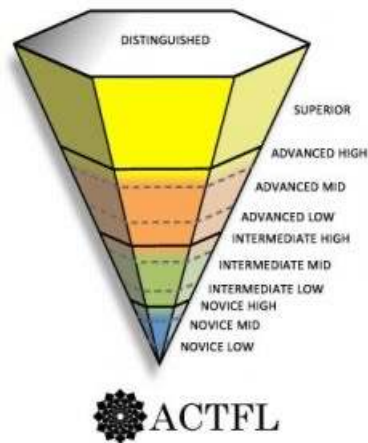
Design for the edges



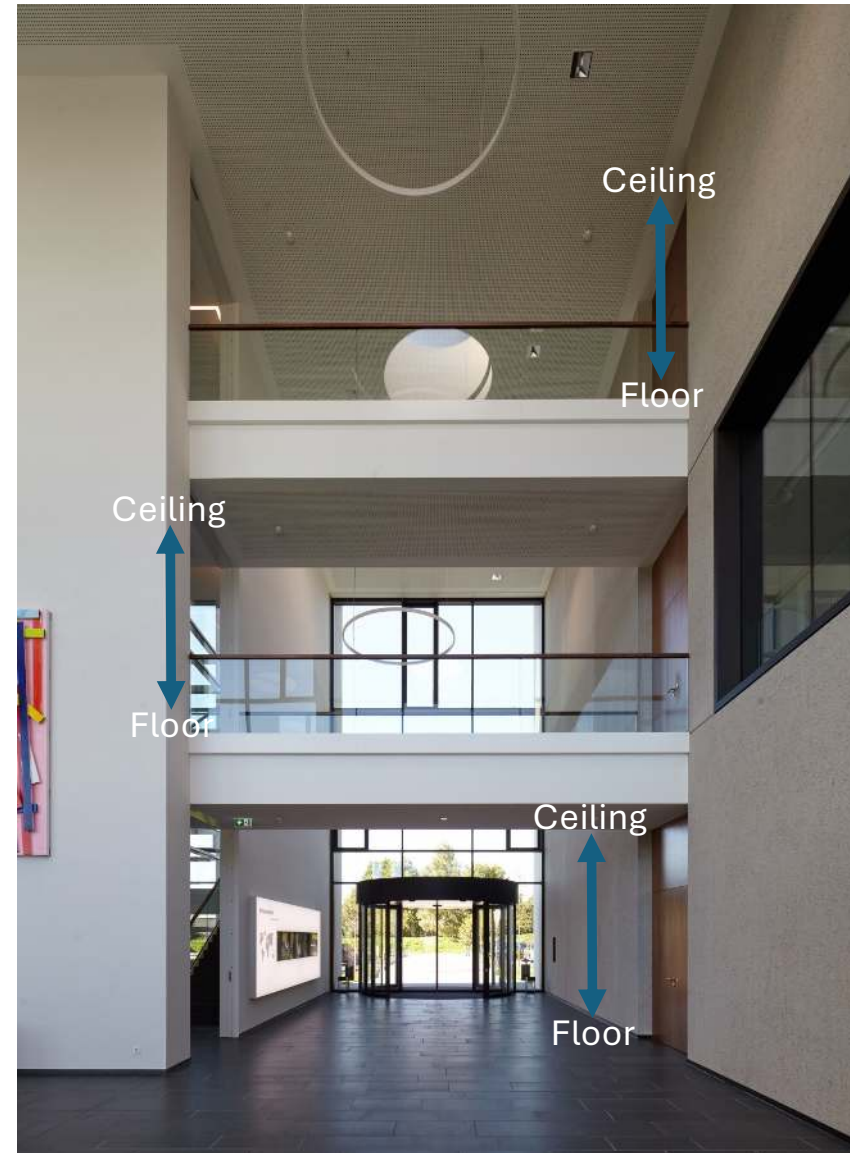
Traditional schooling is too often structured for the AVERAGE student



The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines allows language educators to design for the edges



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If Traditional Grading is
problematic, what
about other systems?

Binary Grading Systems (Pass/Fail)



- Definition: Minimal categories (P/F, S/U). Threshold-based evaluation.
 - Strengths: Low stress; supports exploration; reduces conflict.
 - Weaknesses: Low granularity; may reduce effort; limited signaling.
 - Don't we want students to fail?
 - Finite mindset: Why do more than is necessary to get a passing grade?
- 

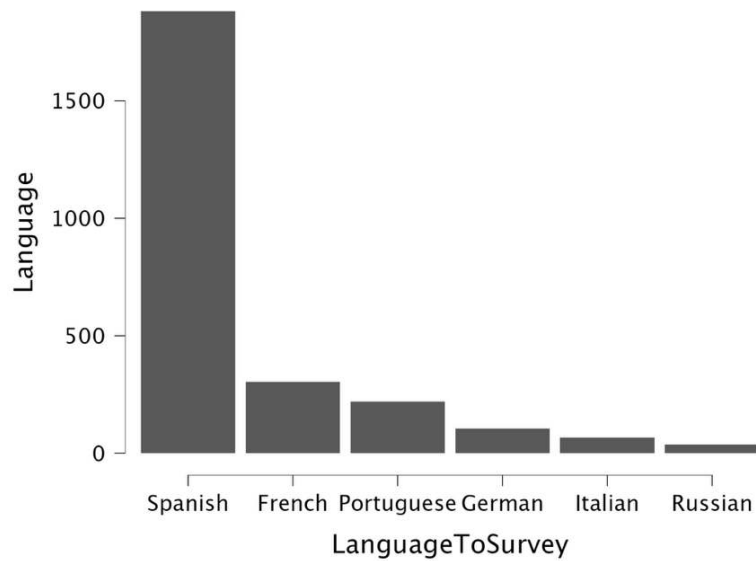
Alternative Grading Systems

- Definition: Contract grading, labor-based, narrative evals, ungrading.
- Strengths: Equity-focused; boosts intrinsic motivation; reflection-oriented.
- Weaknesses: Scalability; workload; unfamiliar to students/institutions (e.g. applying to college/graduate school)



What is Willingness to Communicate (WTC)?

- WTC is a personality trait that dictates the degree of predisposition to consistently communicate across a variety of different situations (McCroskey & Baer, 1985)
- Includes both long-term, permanent variables (traits) and short-term, dynamic variables (states; MacIntyre et al, 1998)
- If we believe WTC helps with language acquisition, then wouldn't we want to encourage it?



Language	Frequency	Percent
Spanish	1,883	72.0
French	304	11.6
Portuguese	220	8.4
German	105	4.0
Italian	67	2.6
Russian	37	1.4
Missing	0	0.0
Total	2,616	100.0

Participants

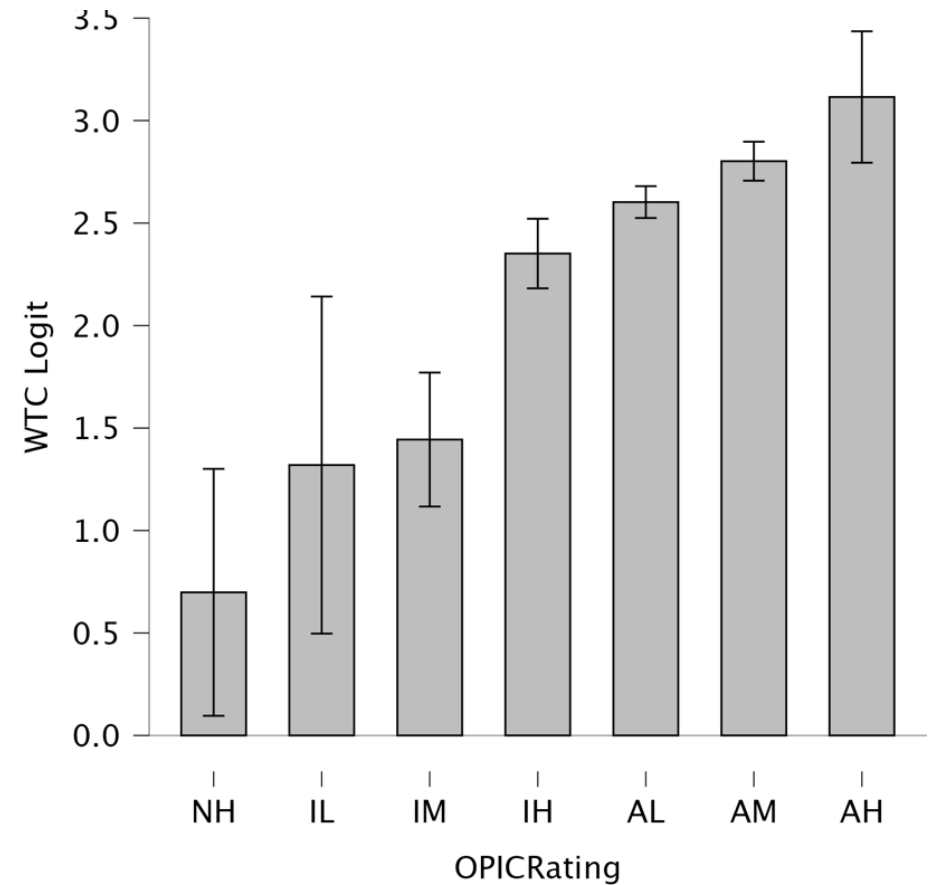
Studying a foreign language at a large US University

Instruments

- Oral Proficiency Interview-Computer (OPIc)
- WTC Instrument
 - WTC section of LASER
 - Section 1—Speaking with native speakers in the participant's home country (k = 6 of 6)
 - Section 2 (new)—Communicating with native speakers online (k = 4 of 7)
 - Section 3—Speaking with L2 TL speakers in a school setting (k = 3 of 5)
 - Section 4—Speaking with L2 TL speakers abroad (k = 4 of 8)
 - Reliability—Cronbach Alpha= .88

WTC and Proficiency

- Mean (logits)= 2.61, SD 4.45, n=2,594
- [$F(6, 2,599) = 39.99, p < .001$]
- Effect size ($\omega^2 = 0.041$) → The effect is small to moderate. OPIc proficiency explains about 4% of the variance in WTC logits
- Tukey Post Hoc
 - IM vs IH → Significant ($p < .001$)
 - IH vs AL → Marginal ($p = .069$)
 - AL vs AM → Significant ($p = .027$)







BADLANDS



TOMBSTONE



LOWER GRIZZLY RIDGE

What grade
would I earn on
my skiing
performance?
Does your
grading system
reward risk-
taking and
failure?

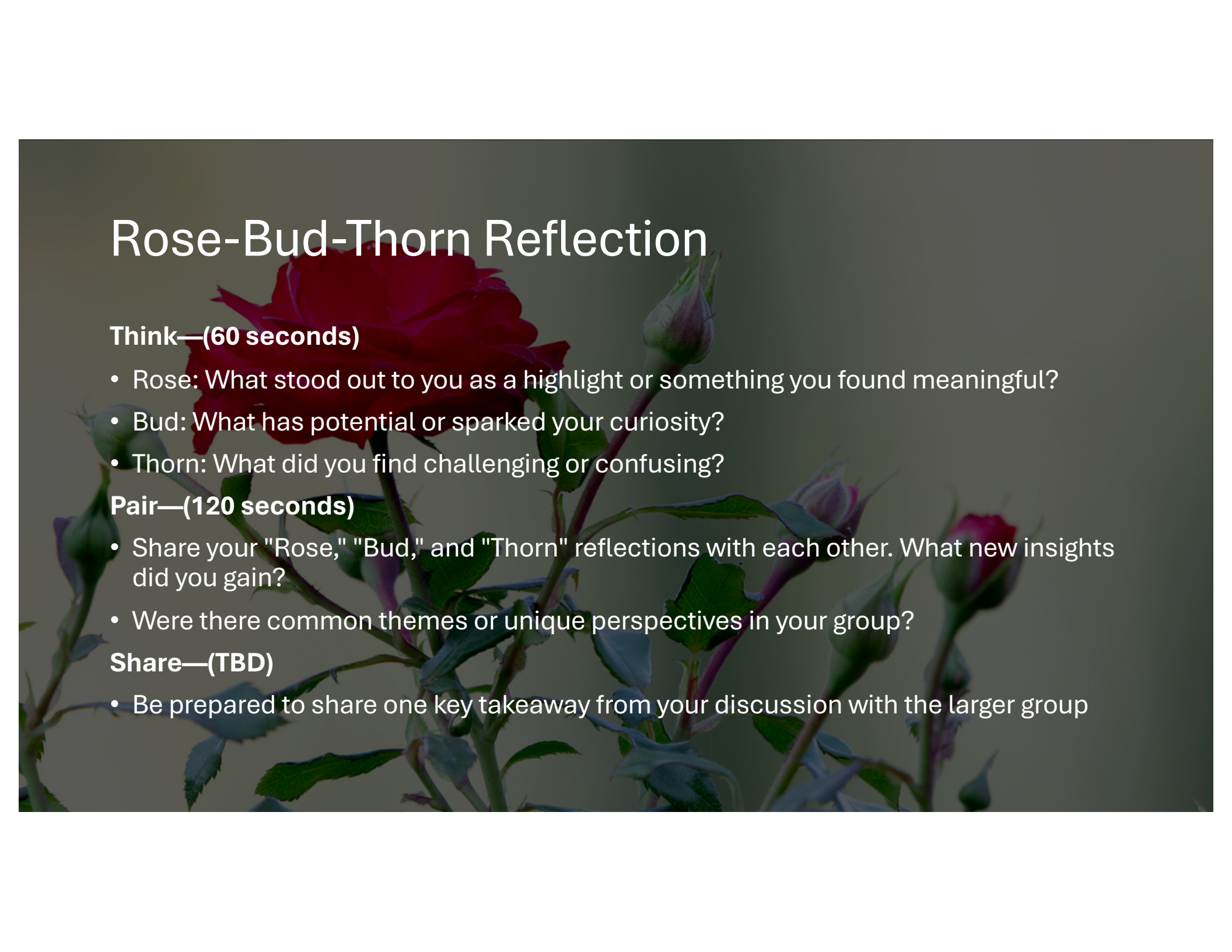


Outcome/Mastery-Based Systems

- Definition: Students demonstrate mastery of defined outcomes; no averaging.
- Weaknesses: Requires redesign at the course level; training for teachers and students
- Strengths:
 - High alignment with learning; strong research support; fair.
 - Can directly aligns with ACTFL can-do statements
 - Can reward failure
 - Can be adapted to an institution's traditional grading framework

On Polyglots in Adam Grant's book *Hidden Potential*

- The people he references in the book
 - weren't exceptional students in school,
 - nor did they possess exceptionally high IQs.
- Their secret?
 - They sought discomfort.
- The more uncomfortable they were when learning a new language, the more they were learning.
- More discomfort = more mistakes.
- More mistakes equal = learning opportunities and less chance of repeating them.

A background image of a rose bush. A large, vibrant red rose is in full bloom, positioned slightly to the left of the center. Several green rose buds are visible at various stages of development, some showing hints of pink. The leaves are dark green and serrated. The entire image has a semi-transparent dark grey overlay to make the white text stand out.

Rose-Bud-Thorn Reflection

Think—(60 seconds)

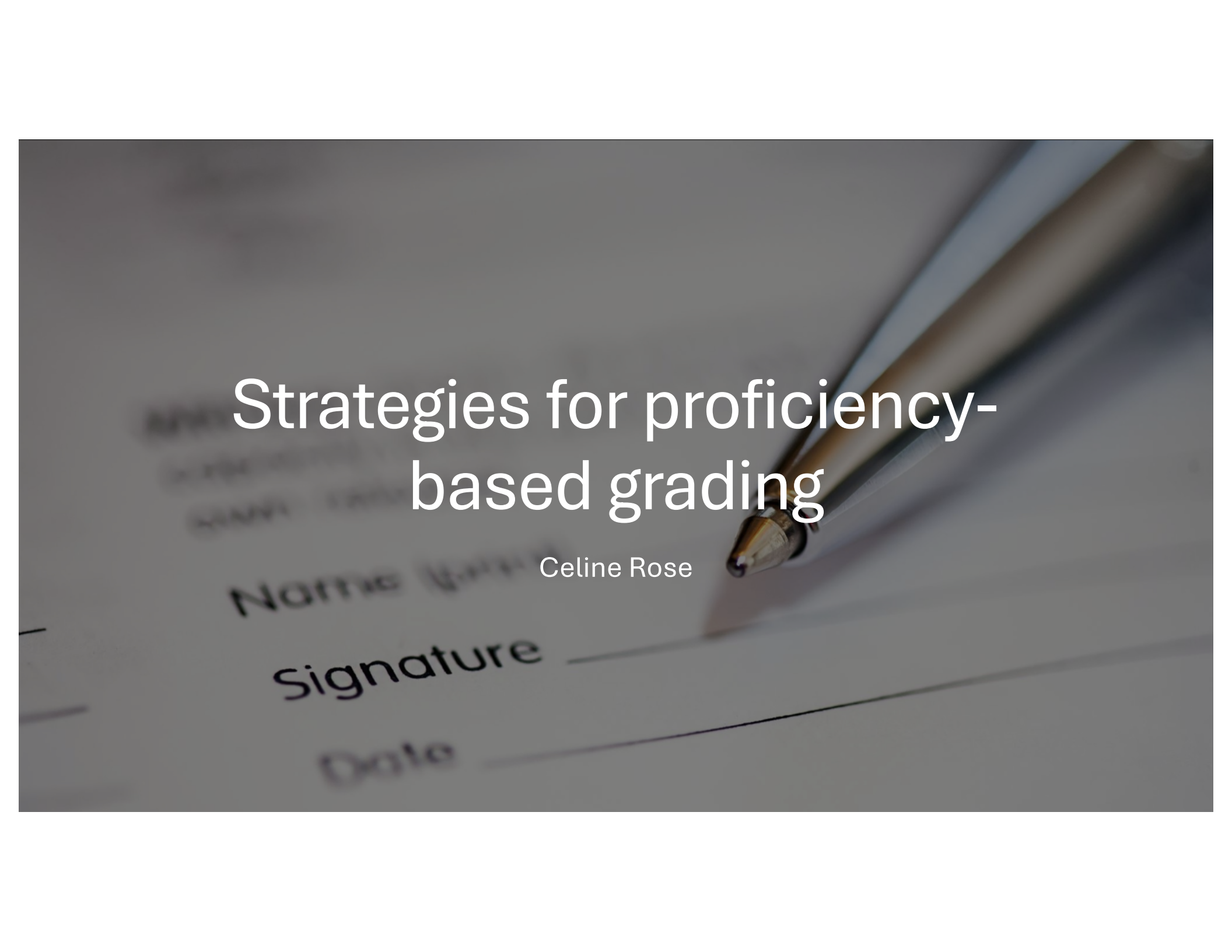
- Rose: What stood out to you as a highlight or something you found meaningful?
- Bud: What has potential or sparked your curiosity?
- Thorn: What did you find challenging or confusing?

Pair—(120 seconds)

- Share your "Rose," "Bud," and "Thorn" reflections with each other. What new insights did you gain?
- Were there common themes or unique perspectives in your group?

Share—(TBD)

- Be prepared to share one key takeaway from your discussion with the larger group



Strategies for proficiency-based grading

Celine Rose

Homework: graded on completion

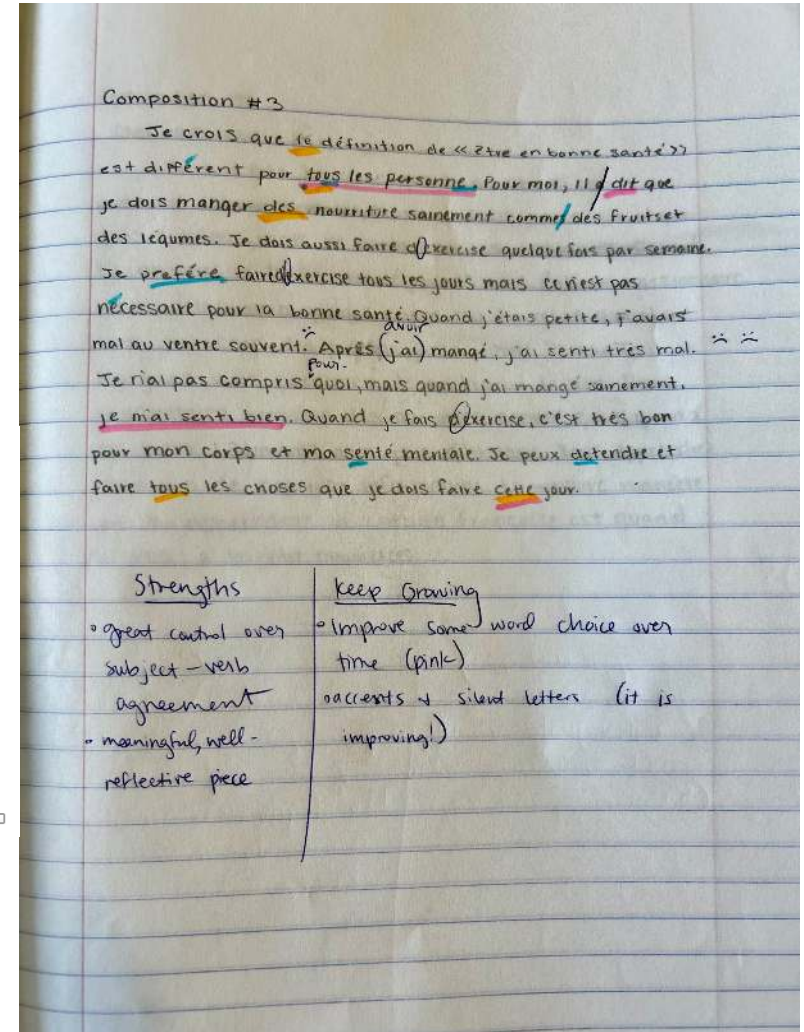
- “I like that the homework is based on completion because I am more willing to try different ways to answer a question and take the risk that it will be wrong, rather than trying to find the single correct answer the textbook is looking for.” - French 101 student
- "I think that they are way more likely to ask questions about the homework in front of peers now, or so I've noticed, because there isn't the expectation that they get it perfect by themselves each time." French 101 instructor
- "I do think it's important that the 50% late cap is still there because this way students are still motivated to complete it." French 101 instructor

In-class compositions

- In a bluebook
- 2 days before the test opens
- Individually or with a partner

Composition Review: Color Codes

GREEN	Subject-verb agreement mistake
YELLOW	Noun-adjective agreement mistake
BLUE	Spelling mistake
PINK	Vocabulary issue: wrong word, repetition, unclear.
ORANGE	Article mistake
<u>Straight underline</u>	Tense/mood mistake
<u>Squiggly underline</u>	Syntax: word order/sentence structure
Circle or <u>other</u> indicator	Missing word



French 101 student comments



- I am a bad test-taker, and the compositions allow me to already be in a safe space in the classroom where I can show what i can actually do without the feeling of nerves dragging down my ability.”
 - “I enjoy writing the compositions and find them one of the most valuable tools for preparing for the exam because it shows me what I don’t remember. Then, it’s easier to study because I can target the things I am weakest at.”
 - “It helps us to prepare for the exams because the structures we use are all brought back to our memory.”
- 

Quizzes

- “Students definitely take advantage of it. I have some that even if they miss half a point, they will correct. I also had a student who completed a section perfectly on the last exam and said that it was thanks to getting it wrong on a quiz and being able to do the quiz corrections.”

- French 101 instructor

Quiz Corrections Form

We want quizzes to be a formative (forming learning) rather than summative (concluding learning) type of assessment. For full credit, **correct each error** found in your quiz. By filling out this form intentionally and demonstrate adequate understanding, you can receive a 100% to replace your quiz grade **if you submit this form by the last day of the chapter or within 2 days of having received the graded quiz**. You will submit this form as a Word document under your quiz grade on Learning Suite.

Please copy and paste the quiz correction questions as many times as you need to correct all errors.

1. Question to be corrected (number or context):

- Answer given:
- Correct answer:
- What differences are there between your given answer and the correct answer?
- In your own words, briefly explain how to get the right answer:
- Page number where this rule is found:

2. Question to be corrected (number or context):

- Answer given:
- Correct answer:
- What differences are there between your given answer and the correct answer?
- In your own words, briefly explain how to get the right answer:
- Page number where this rule is found:

Group Discussion:
What are your thoughts on these strategies?
What other ones do you use?



Thank you!

