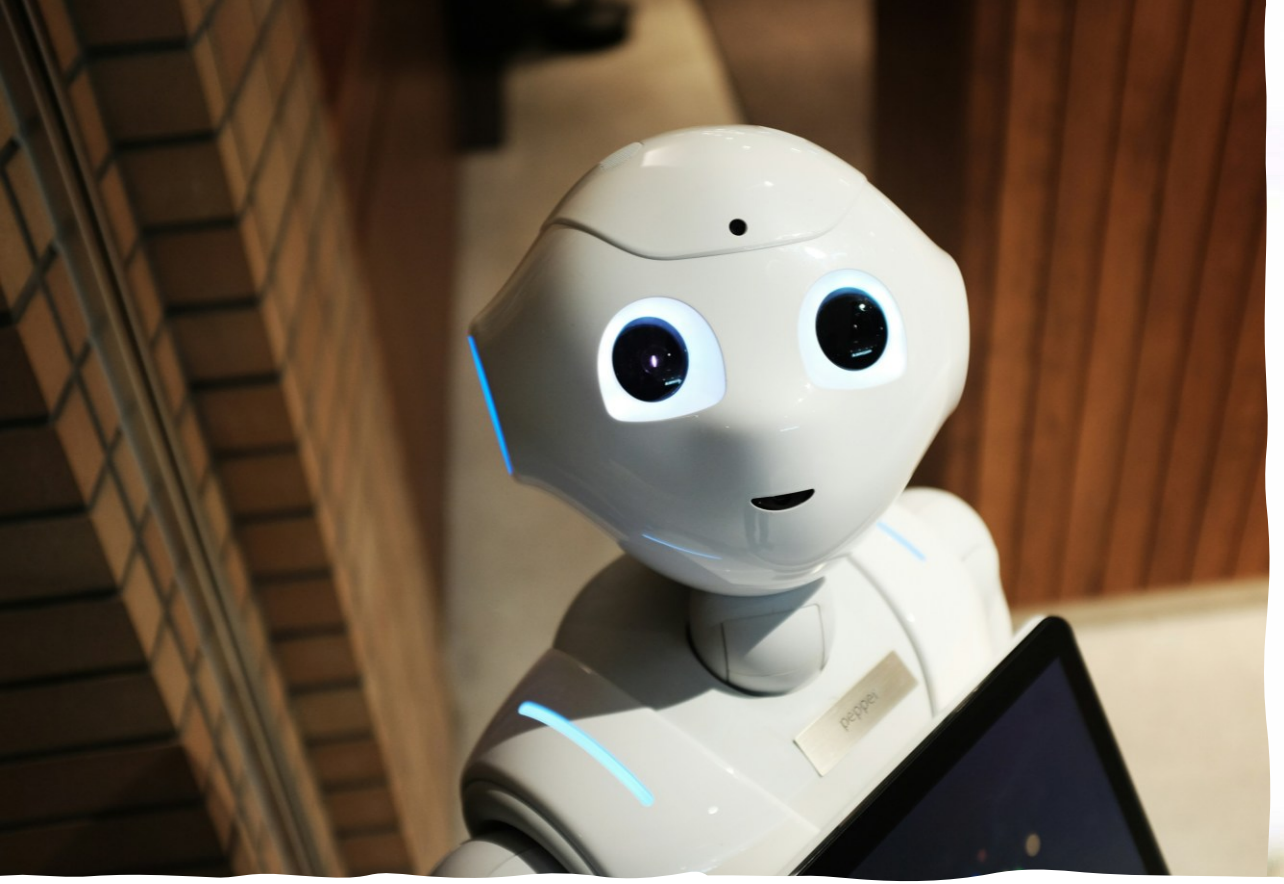
Engaging hearts and minds in language learning

Sarah Mercer

Reggio Calabria, Nov 2025

All images from Unsplash unless otherwise stated



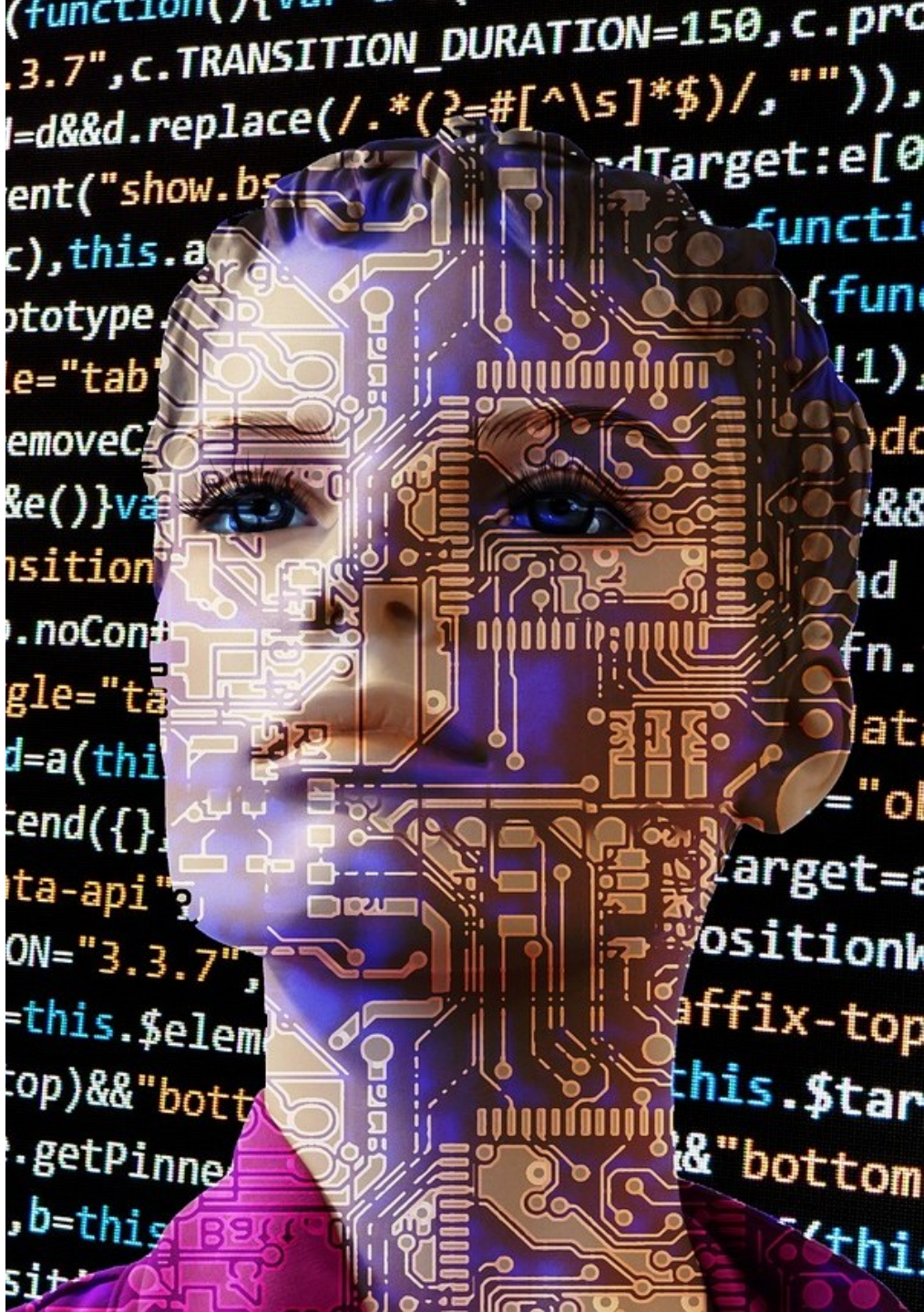
Ask yourself who you would prefer to teach…

And why?

AIs not socially or emotionally intelligent (*at present*)

- “despite excitement and investment in creating AI-driven virtual companions, psychiatrists, or teachers, few people report feeling the same emotional connection or ease with those AIs as they do with their human counterparts”

  (Borg et al., 2024, p. 25)

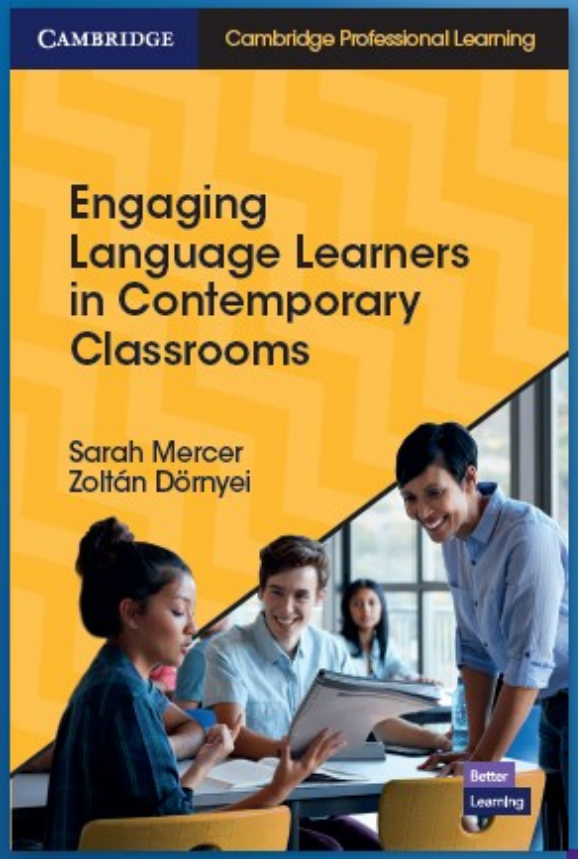


I teach people - I teach language

Outline for today

- What is engagement?
- What facilitates learner engagement?
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging
- Caveat – Teacher self-compassion
- Key takeaways

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS



ISBN: 9781108445924

Better Learning

Engaging Language Learners in Contemporary Classrooms

SARAH MERCER & ZOLTÁN DÖRNYEI

This accessible book offers a fresh perspective on engagement, with an emphasis on how teachers can create the conditions for active engagement and the role learners can play in shaping the way they learn. Drawing on extensive theoretical knowledge, the book takes an applied approach, providing clear principles and practical strategies for teachers.

View the full range of Cambridge Professional Learning and Development books at

cambridge.org/ctd

Professional Learning and Development

What is learner engagement?

- Engagement is active participation and involvement
- Has affective, cognitive, and behavioural components
- It is considered the key to successful learning – ‘the holy grail’ (Sinatra et al., 2015)

Beware fake engagement (Mercer et al., 2020)

Difference between deep and surface engagement

- Difference between ‘substantive’ and ‘procedural’ engagement (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991)

- Beware compliance!

Three-part model of engagement

(Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020)

Willingness to engage

Trigger engagement

Maintain engagement

Characteristics of engaging approaches

- CLARA (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020)
  - Challenging
  - Learner-centred
  - Active
  - Relevant
  - Autonomy-rich

What approaches do you know that are CLARA?

- Task-based learning
- Problem-based learning
- Project-based learning
- Inquiry-based learning

CLARA can be used to evaluate any task or lesson

- **C**hallenging
- **L**earner-centred
- **A**ctive
- **R**elevant
- **A**utonomy-rich

<u>Before</u> task design - Willingness to engage

(Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Wang & Mercer, 2021)

Outline for today

- What is engagement?
- What facilitates learner engagement?
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging
- Caveat – Teacher self-compassion
- Key takeaways

Citrus bergamia – Parallels to language learners?

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2001)

- Basic needs satisfaction for higher wellbeing and greater engagement (learners AND teachers)
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging

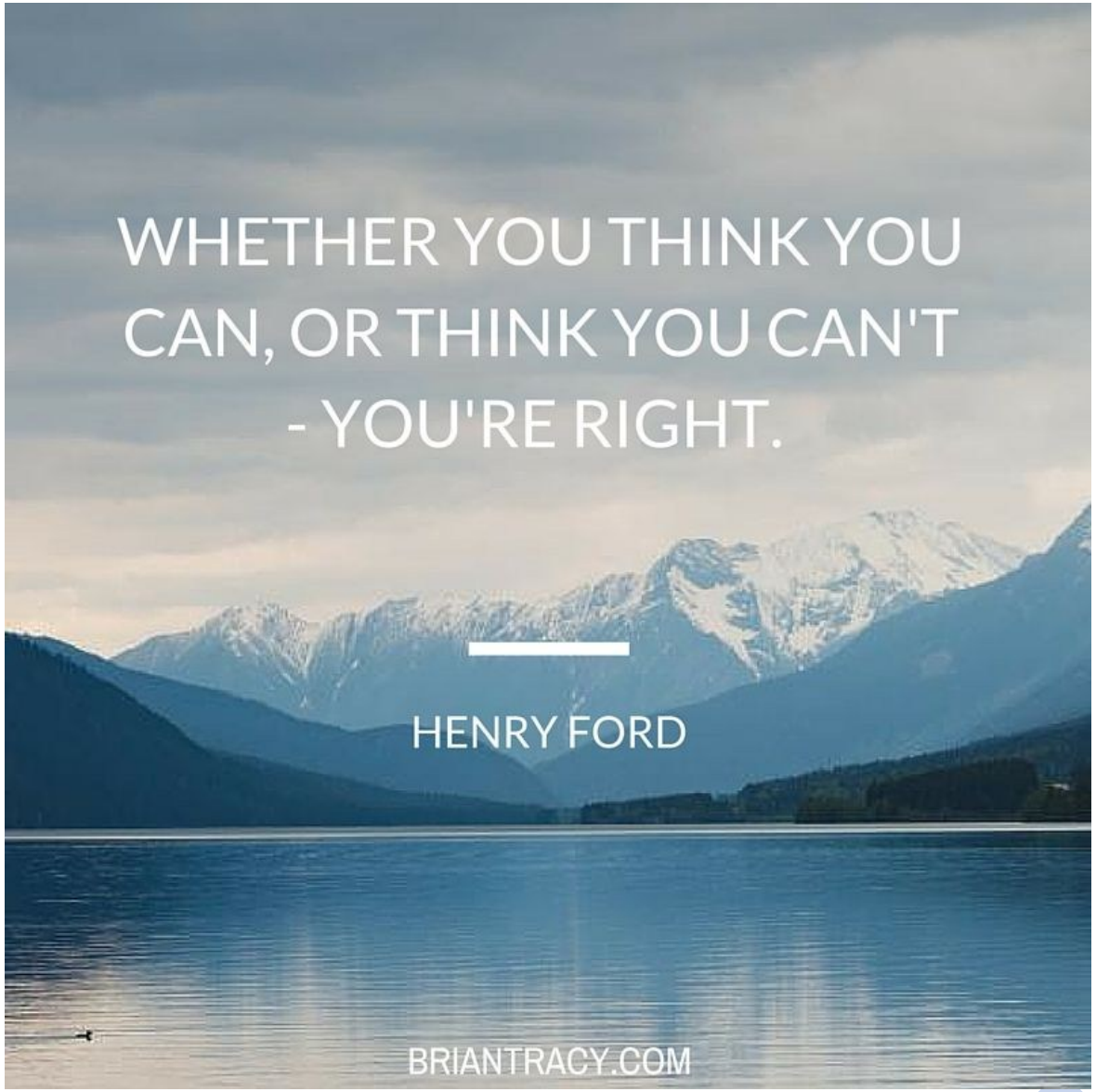
Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2001)

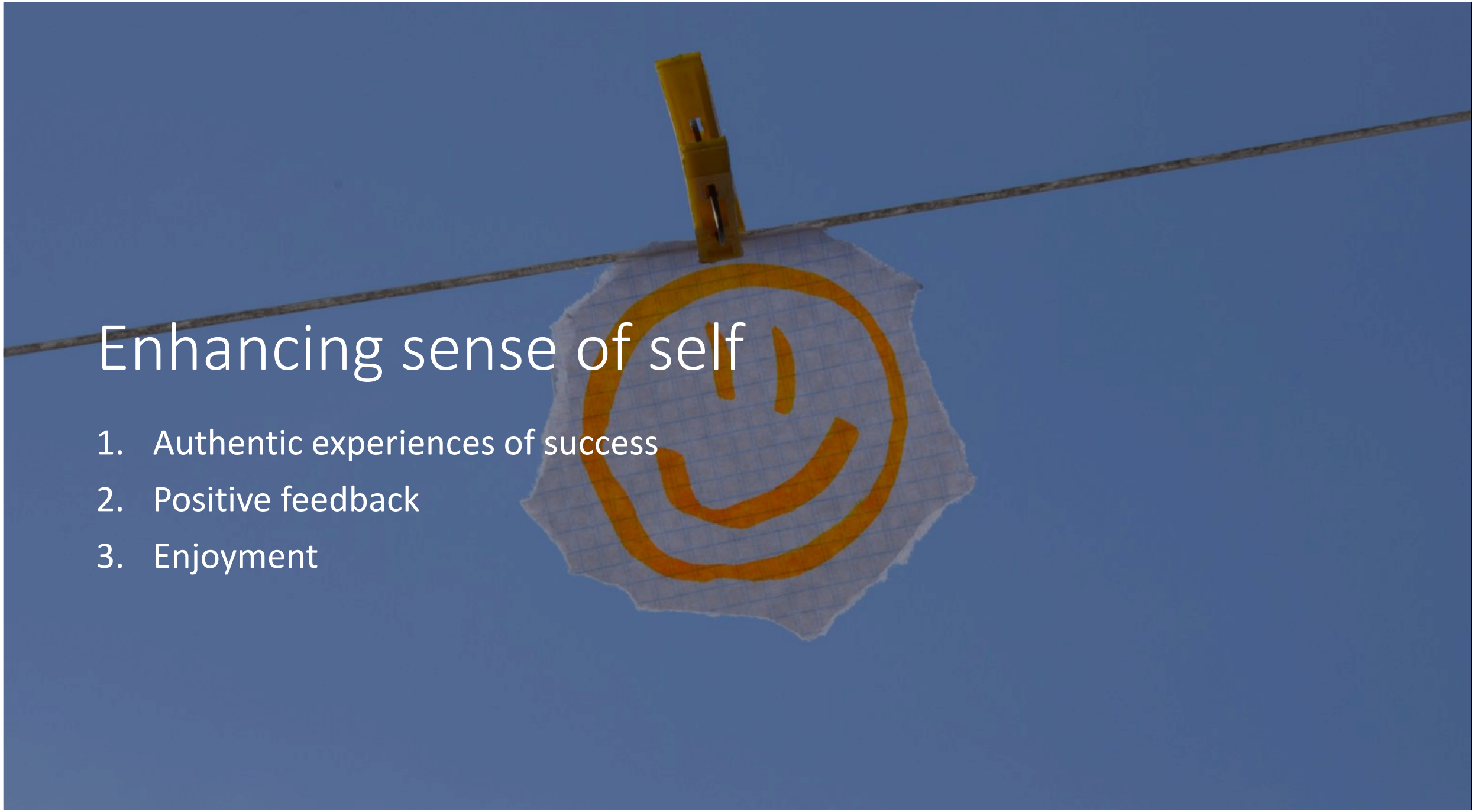
- Basic needs satisfaction for higher wellbeing and greater engagement (learners AND teachers)
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging

What matters is how you see yourself…

Self beliefs

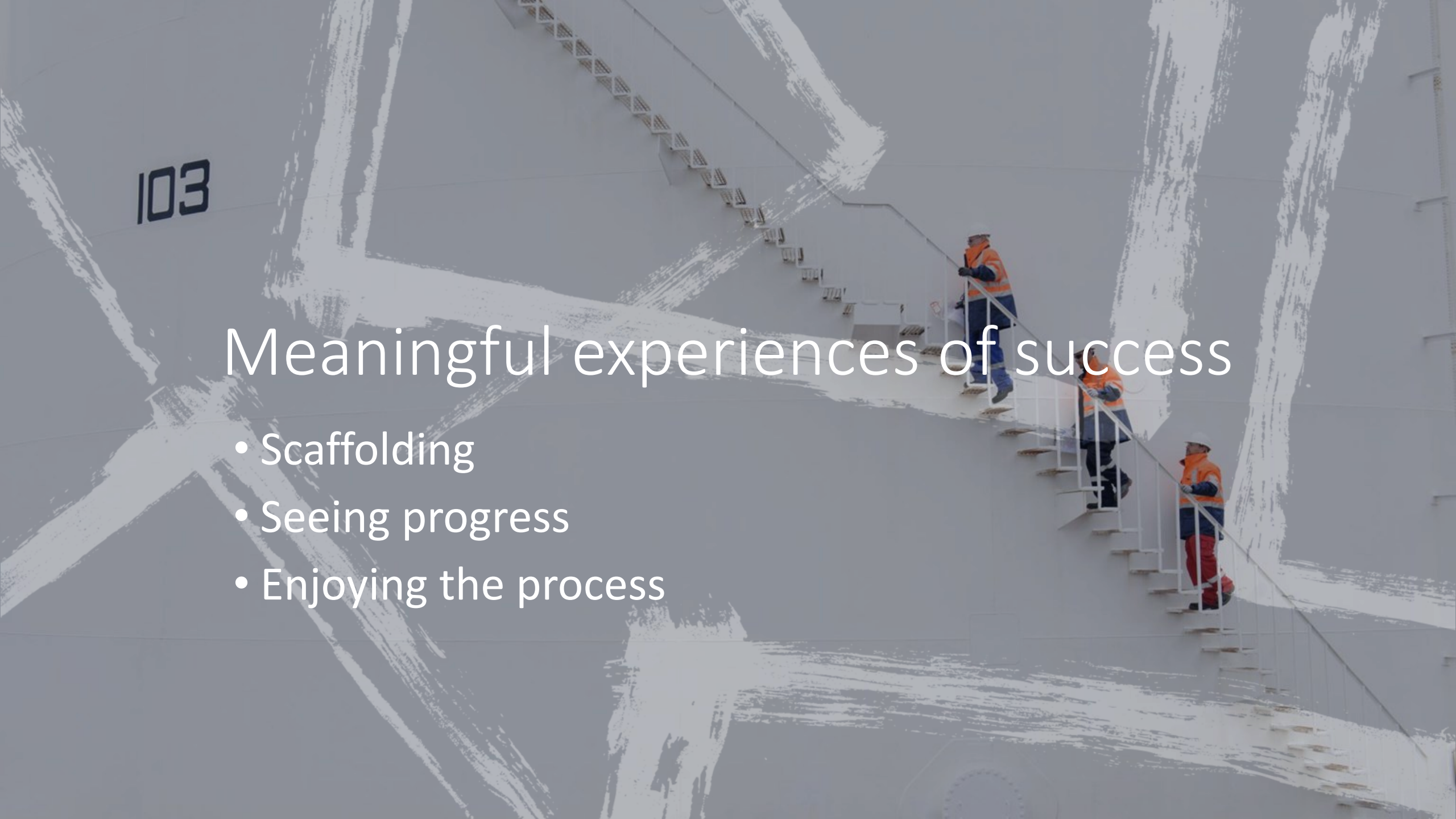
- May not always be true… we may underestimate and overestimate our abilities! ☺
- Not about facts… it is the ‘picture we have of ourselves’ (Hamlyn, 1983)
- It is our ‘lens’ for viewing the world


WHETHER YOU THINK YOU CAN, OR THINK YOU CAN'T - YOU'RE RIGHT.
HENRY FORD
BRIANTRACY.COM



Enhancing sense of self

1. Authentic experiences of success
2. Positive feedback
3. Enjoyment



Meaningful experiences of success

- Scaffolding
- Seeing progress
- Enjoying the process

See the progress

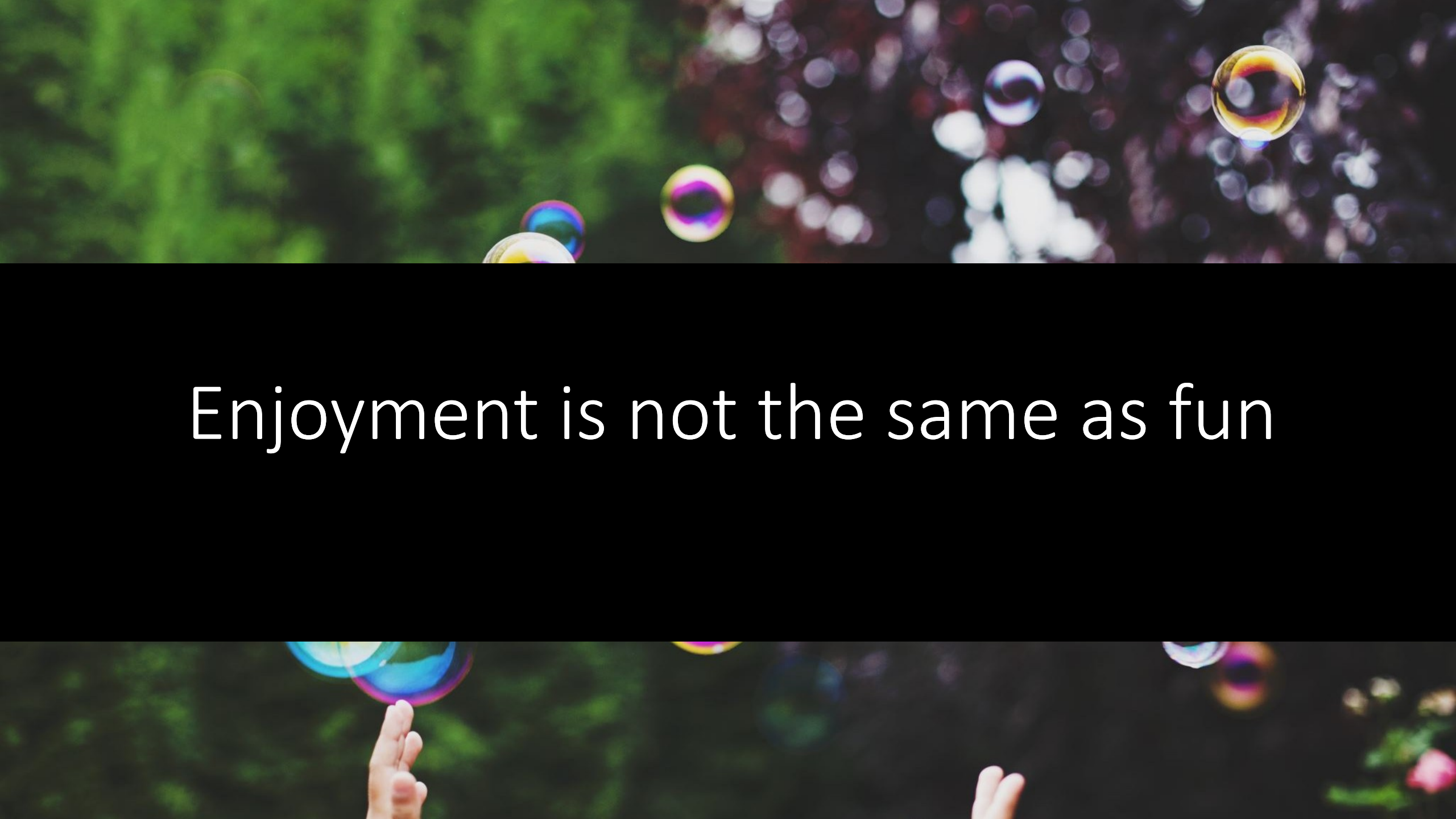
- Progress lines, pie charts, collect the badges etc.
- Reflective journals or progress diaries
- Portfolios (multimedia)
- Exit tickets
- Can do statements
- SMART goals

Strengths-based pedagogy
Appreciative Inquiry

Positive feedback

- Encouragement, rather than praise
- Constructive positive feedback
- Most effective when specific
- Focus on process, not product
- Non-comparative for whole group

- What is going well and how can we learn from that and transfer to other settings?



Enjoyment is not the same as fun

‘Desirable difficulty’ (Leslie, 2014)

- Problem-based learning (see also TBLT)
- Inductive approaches to grammar
- Dual-approach: Language + transversal skill (e.g., critical thinking, creativity, wellbeing literacy etc.)

Brain breaks and energisers

- Three caveats

Stand and breathe!

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2001)

- Basic needs satisfaction for higher wellbeing and greater engagement (learners AND teachers)
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging

Sense of autonomy

1. Locus of control
2. Mindsets
3. Choice and voice

Your learners

How do they explain their successes and failures?

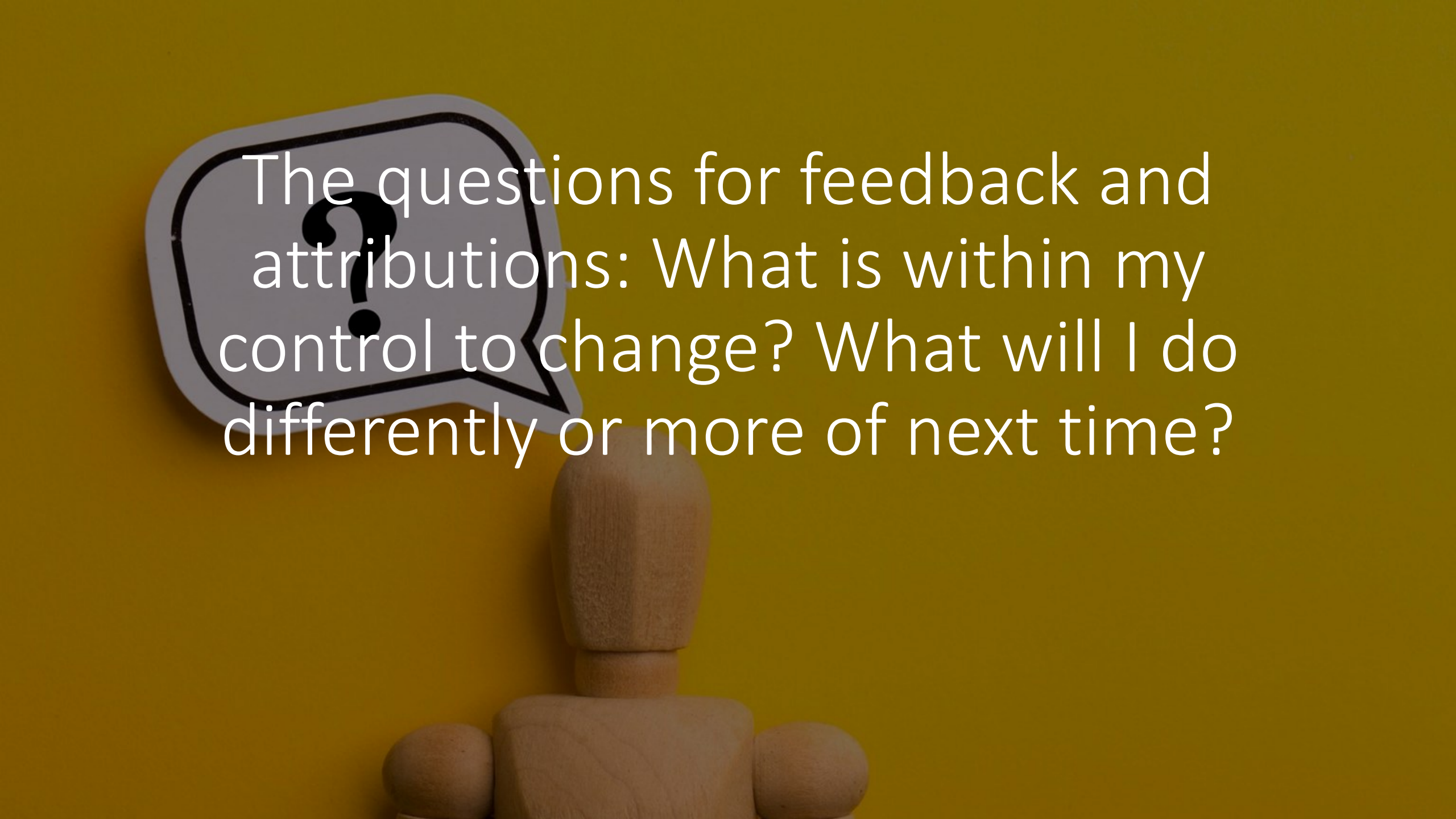
Locus of control

- Attributions – Perceptions of reasons for success and failure (Weiner, 1985)
  - Is it internal or external?
  - Is it stable or unstable?
  - Is it within my control or not?

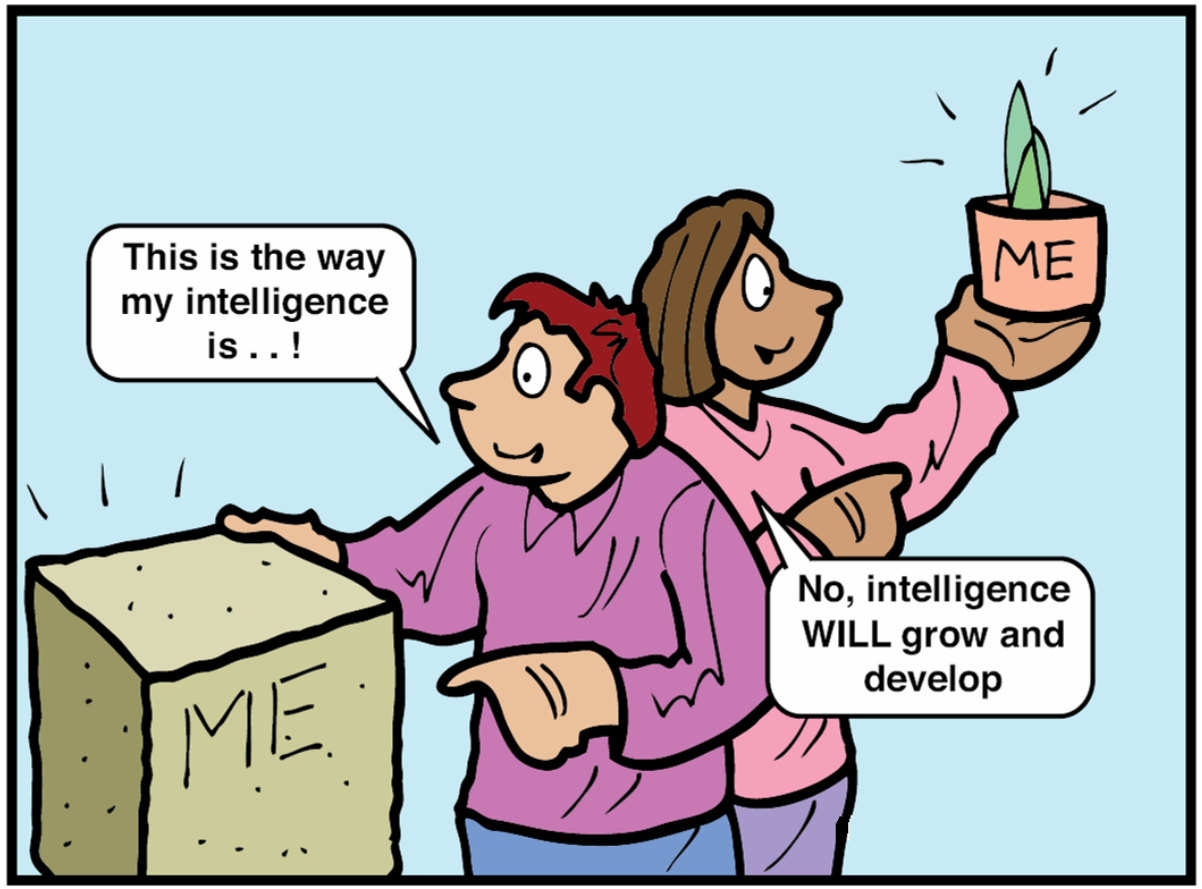
Aim for attributions:

- Internal
- Unstable
- Within locus of control

- E.g., effort, use of strategies, time invested, method etc.
- Focus on process, not product
- On specifics, not person generic


The questions for feedback and attributions: What is within my control to change? What will I do differently or more of next time?

Importance of action!
Next steps?



Two mindsets

Graphic from: http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk

Strategies for growth mindset

- Discuss mindsets explicitly
- Mindset scavenger hunt
- Teach how brain behaves like a muscle
- Create culture – “Mistakes most welcome”
- Promote the power of yet (Dweck, 2014)
- Teach strategies of how to learn

Choice and voice
(Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020)

- The **how** we learn – Shared goals but differentiate by task, output, time, (topic) etc.

- The **what** we learn – Learner interests - project-based learning – See Genius Hour

Choice and voice

- Choice boards and learning menus
- The best way to learn is to teach
- Personalisation
- Variety – topic, task, format, partner, pace etc.

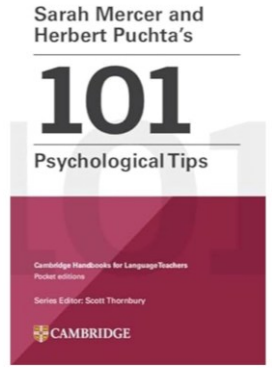
Can be small things…

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2001)

- Basic needs satisfaction for higher wellbeing and greater engagement (learners AND teachers)
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging

Relationships

- Between teacher and learners - Rapport
- Among learners



Approaches to positive relationships

1. Socio-emotional competences (Goleman, 2006)

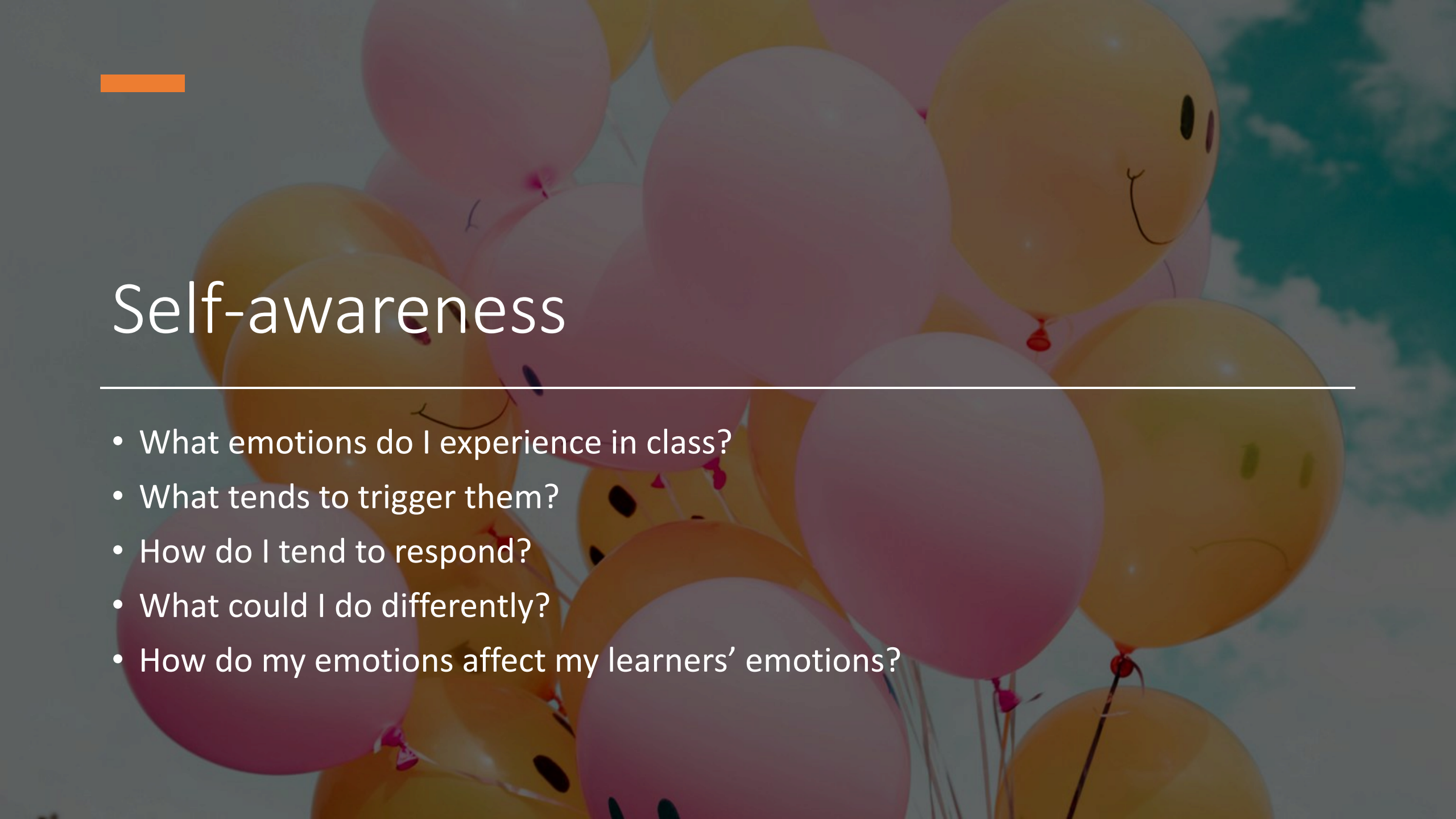
2. Psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019)

3. Pedagogical caring (Wentzel, 1997)

Socio-emotional competences

- **EI** "*the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships*" (Goleman, 1998, p. 317)

- **SI** "*being intelligent not just about our relationships but also in them*" (Goldman, 2006, p. 11)



Self-awareness

- What emotions do I experience in class?
- What tends to trigger them?
- How do I tend to respond?
- What could I do differently?
- How do my emotions affect my learners' emotions?

Emotional labour

Ways to work on EI/SI

- **Starts with self-awareness** (Humphrey, 2013)
  - Keep emotion log
  - Learn to respond, not react... Count to 10 – Take off the heat!
  - Learn to focus on positives - portfolios
  - Work on active, constructive listening skills
  - Develop skills in reading non-verbals
  - Find ways to manage own stress

Empathy as core EI/SI competence (Mercer, 2016)

- Trying to see the world through somebody else's eyes
- Imaging how they feel and their perspectives
- Using that understanding for action

Teachers need empathy but
so do learners as part of communicative competence

What happened just before this picture? And why?

What do you think will happen next? And why?

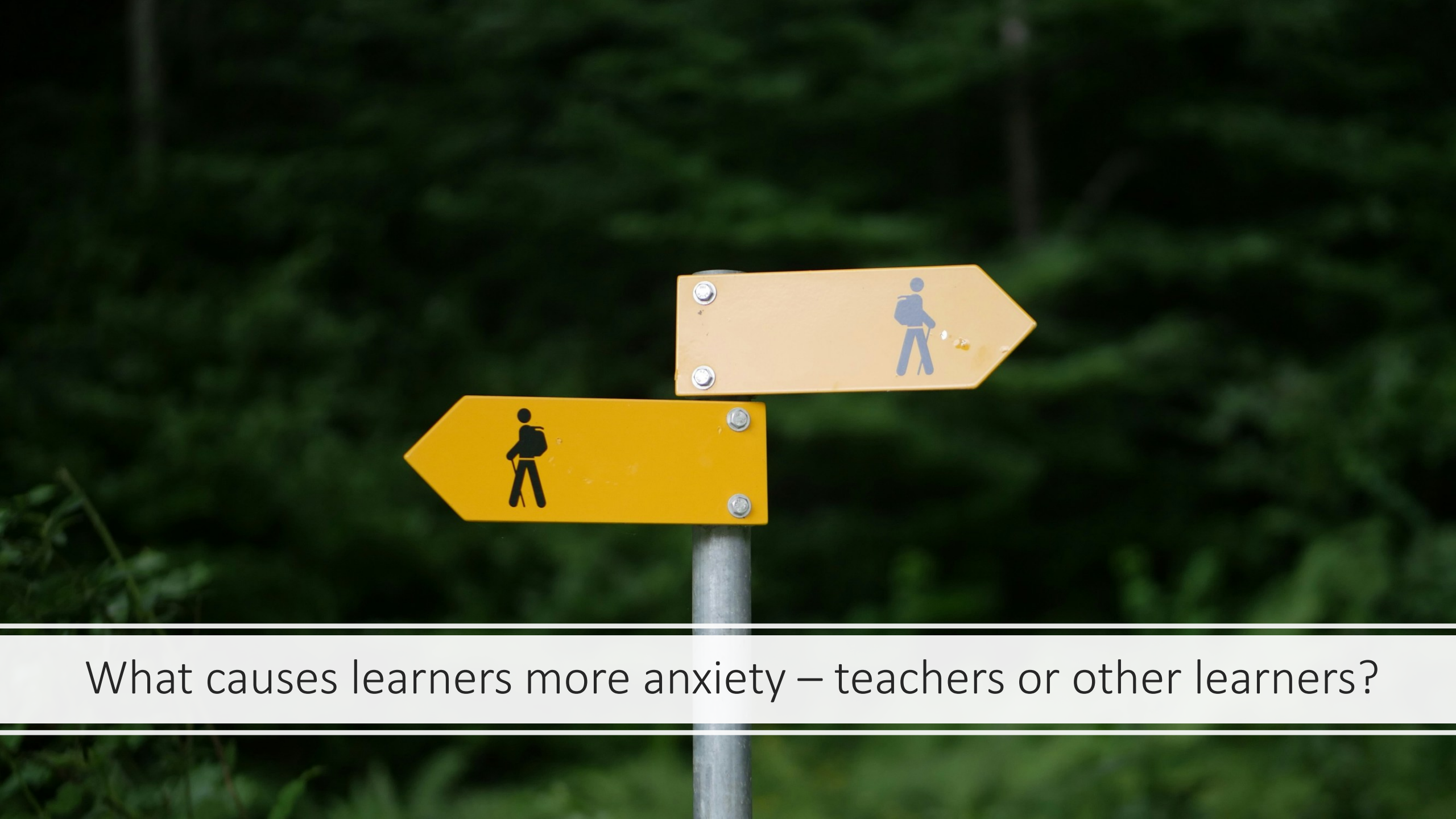
Discuss both ‘rules’

- ‘*The golden rule*’ – Treat others as you would wish to be treated

- ‘*The platinum rule*’ – Treat others as they would want to be treated (Kerpen, 2017)

Diary of ordinary acts of kindness

- What is kindness?
- What acts of kindness did you do?
- What acts of kindness did you witness?



What causes learners more anxiety – teachers or other learners?

Psychological safety (Edmonson, 1999)

Confident to speak up in the group

Willing to make mistakes and be wrong in front of others

Feeling safe and accepted in the group

Positive relationships between learners and the teacher

Psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019)

- **I feel safe to be my authentic self in this group**
  - Ice-breakers… repeatedly
  - Chance for personal exchange
  - Passion projects
  - Have study buddies
  - Zero tolerance for bullying or mockery
  - Teach prosocial behaviours
  - Culture of ‘mistakes welcome’

Pedagogical caring (Wentzel, 1997)

- **Me and my learning matter to the teacher**
  - How we teach and interact
  - Quality of materials
  - Feedback – written and oral
  - Micro-conversations in/out of class
  - Encouragement
  - Keeping track of learners
  - Smiling! ☺

Emotional bank account (Covey, 1992, p. 188)

1. *Understand individuals* – Find out about learners as people
2. *Attend to the little things* - Enact small acts of kindness
3. *Keep commitments* – Act with consistency
4. *Clarify expectations* – Open pathways of communication and sometimes explain the why
5. *Show personal integrity* – Be authentic and kind
6. *Apologise if you make a withdrawal* – Take ownership of mistakes and apologise when required

Outline for today

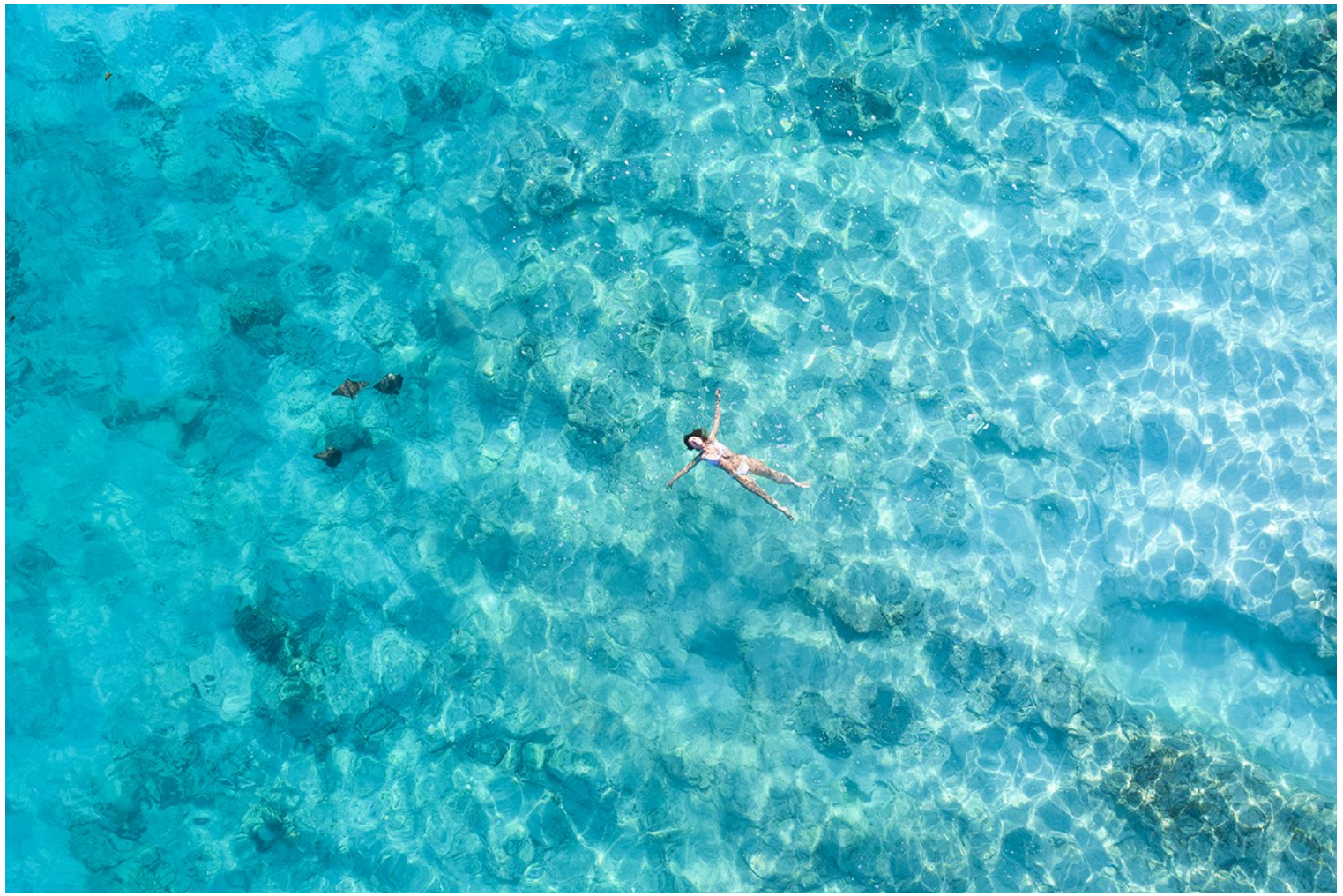
- What is engagement?
- What facilitates learner engagement?
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging
- Caveat – Teacher self-compassion
- Key takeaways

Caveat: Self-compassion

- Self-compassion is about being kind to yourself and treating yourself with as much love and care as you would your dearest friend (Mercer, 2025, p. 3)

- Beware compassion fatigue

What acts of kindness do you do for yourself… and how often?



Examples of self-care strategies

- Gratitude practices
- Savouring
- Mindfulness moments
- Time management and priorities
- Developing and doing hobbies
- Spending time with friends and family
- Disconnecting digitally
- Being in nature

Boundaries

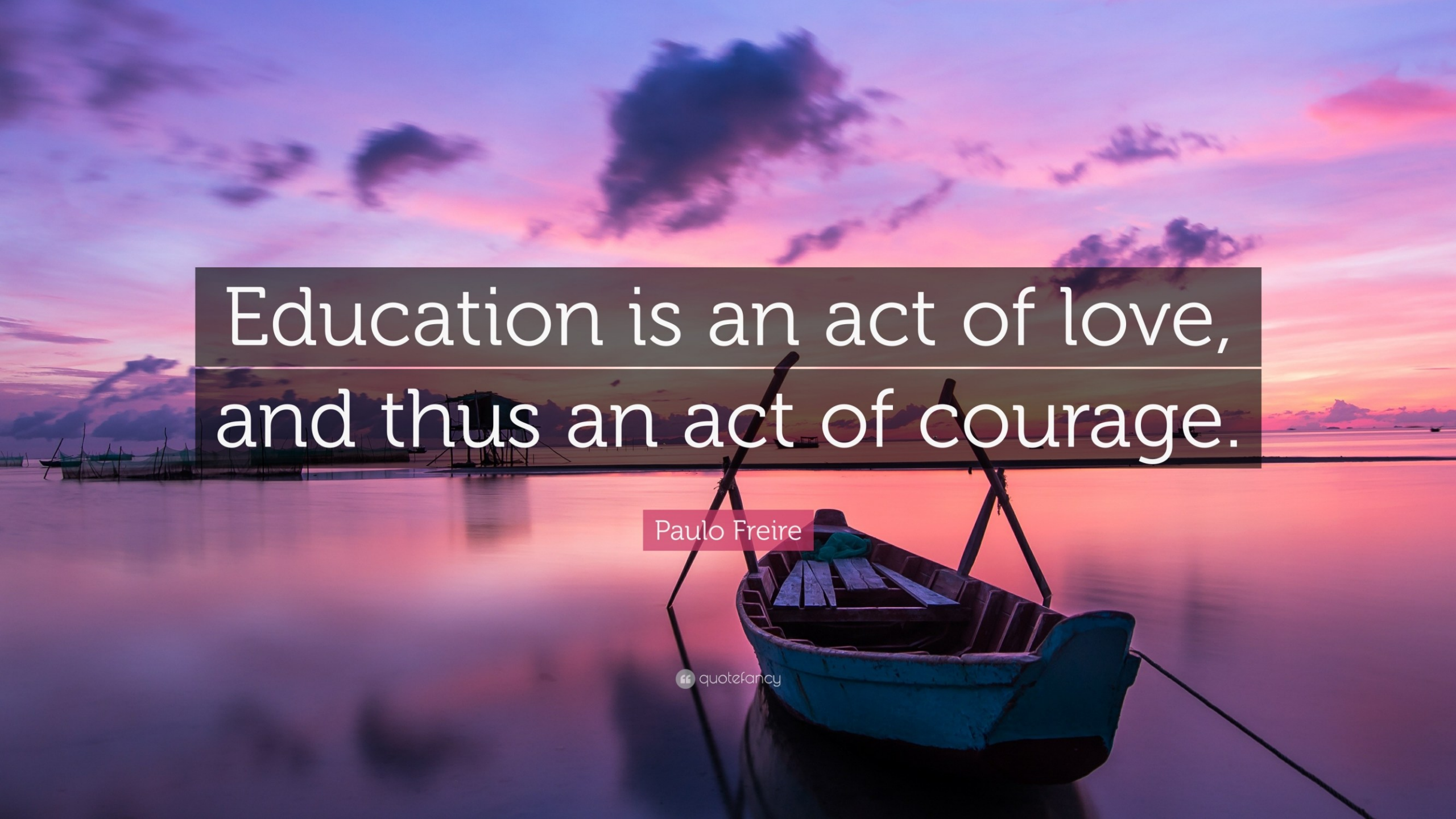
- Temporal / Physical
- Being unavailable

Outline for today

- What is engagement?
- What facilitates learner engagement?
  - Sense of competence
  - Sense of autonomy
  - Sense of belonging
- Caveat – Teacher self-compassion
- Key takeaways

Key takeaways

1. If we want to engage learners, we can think about task design and materials but first we must think about the human connection
2. Learning is social and emotional – we need to attend to both in teaching
3. Successful classrooms depend on teacher rapport AND peer group dynamics
4. Time spent on relationship building will come back 100-fold
5. Beware compassion fatigue – Basis for good socio-emotional practice is self-compassion


Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage.
Paulo Freire
quotefancy

Thank you! Grazie!

- Please get in touch if you have any questions! ☺

sarah.mercer@uni-graz.at