

Challenges of the Physical



Jon Dron, September 2021





Imagine that the pandemic had always been with us.

Imagine that formal education had never evolved in-person.

Imagine that we had *always* been online.



textbooks
coursework
homework
programs
academic timetables
lectures
faculties
universities
courses
schools
classrooms
essay mills
academic gowns
plagiarism in coursework
terms
faculties

**Think of all the things that *might*
never have been invented...**

degrees
campuses
lecterns
seminars
classes
deans
semesters
graduation ceremonies
proctored exams
tutorials
lecture theatres
professors
cheating in tests
most pedagogies

**Imagine what *might*
have been possible**

Imagine what *is* possible


**Let's go on a journey into a
wondrous land whose boundaries
are that of imagination...**

Your next stop:





I have an idea...

A dark, blue-toned landscape at dusk or dawn. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds, and a faint glow of light is visible near the horizon. In the foreground, the silhouettes of trees and a house are visible against the dark background.

I call it 'in-person
learning'

A dark, atmospheric landscape at dusk or dawn. The sky is a deep blue with wispy clouds. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a house with a few lights on. The overall mood is quiet and mysterious.

Here is how it works

First, you get a bunch of people
together in one place at the
same time.



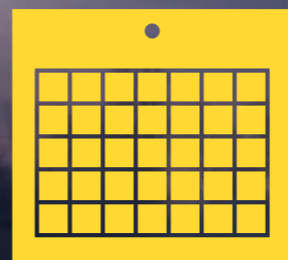
Then you tell them stuff.
Sometimes you tell them to do
stuff. Sometimes you let them talk.



A dark, atmospheric landscape at dusk or dawn. The sky is a deep, dark blue with wispy clouds. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a house. The house has a few lights on, and there are some small lights in the distance. The overall mood is quiet and serene.

That's pretty much it

It would need some
scheduling



There would have to be
a few rules.



So of course the teacher would have to be in control of every second of it.



Every *single* second



I know what you are
thinking...

That's a *ridiculous* idea!

Jon, you are absolutely crazy!

It would never work!

I mean....

What kind of idiot would
try to teach everyone the
same thing at the same
time?



And

What student in their right mind would give away all their autonomy to sit in a room being told what to think and what to do by a stranger?



And

What kind of impoverished learning would take place when you make people learn stuff when they don't need to learn it and they can't use it for anything they care about?



And

Why waste of so much of a learner's day to make them travel to and from this teaching-place?

What about the environmental impact?
The traffic? The inevitable accidents?



And

How much does it cost to run a place like this? You would need a *huge* building! Think of the staffing just to keep it clean!

Where does the money come from?

Where are you going to get the land?



And

What else could you do with that land?

What are you going to do with it when you are not using it for teaching?



And

How are you going to get
teachers to come to one
place?

Why would they bother?



And

You could only teach a few hundred people at a time, at most.



And

There'd be no record. You'd
have to keep repeating it
over and over!



And

What about the
diseases?



And

Why would you bother when people can learn everything they need to learn online and in the places that they live, play, and work?



You have a point.

But hear me out...

A lot of learning already happens in-person.

Why not all of it?



People like to do things
with other people



**We could make
campuses fun!**



We could share
expensive things



**We could provide
libraries***

** places to keep paper books.*

Paper books? Huh?



Paper books



They smell *great!*

Some things would be
easier to teach



Everyone would be learning the same things, so we could test whether they have learned what we taught.



It could be done quite
efficiently



**Pretty soon it would all
seem normal**



A photograph of a sunset or sunrise over a field. The sky is a mix of blue, purple, and orange. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a house. The text is overlaid in the center in a bright yellow color.

People might even start thinking
that it's the only way to learn

A dark, moody landscape at dusk or dawn. The sky is a deep blue with wispy clouds, and a faint orange glow is visible near the horizon. In the foreground, the silhouettes of trees and a house are visible against the dark background.

People can get used to
anything.

A dark, moody landscape at dusk or dawn. The sky is a deep blue with some lighter, wispy clouds. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a house with a few lights on. The overall atmosphere is quiet and contemplative.

**You're probably wondering
about motivation, though.**



I have an idea...

Rewards and punishments



They won't *want* to learn,
but we can *make* them learn!



**And here's the really
cool thing...**

**Credentials work for that
too!**



I know what you're
thinking...

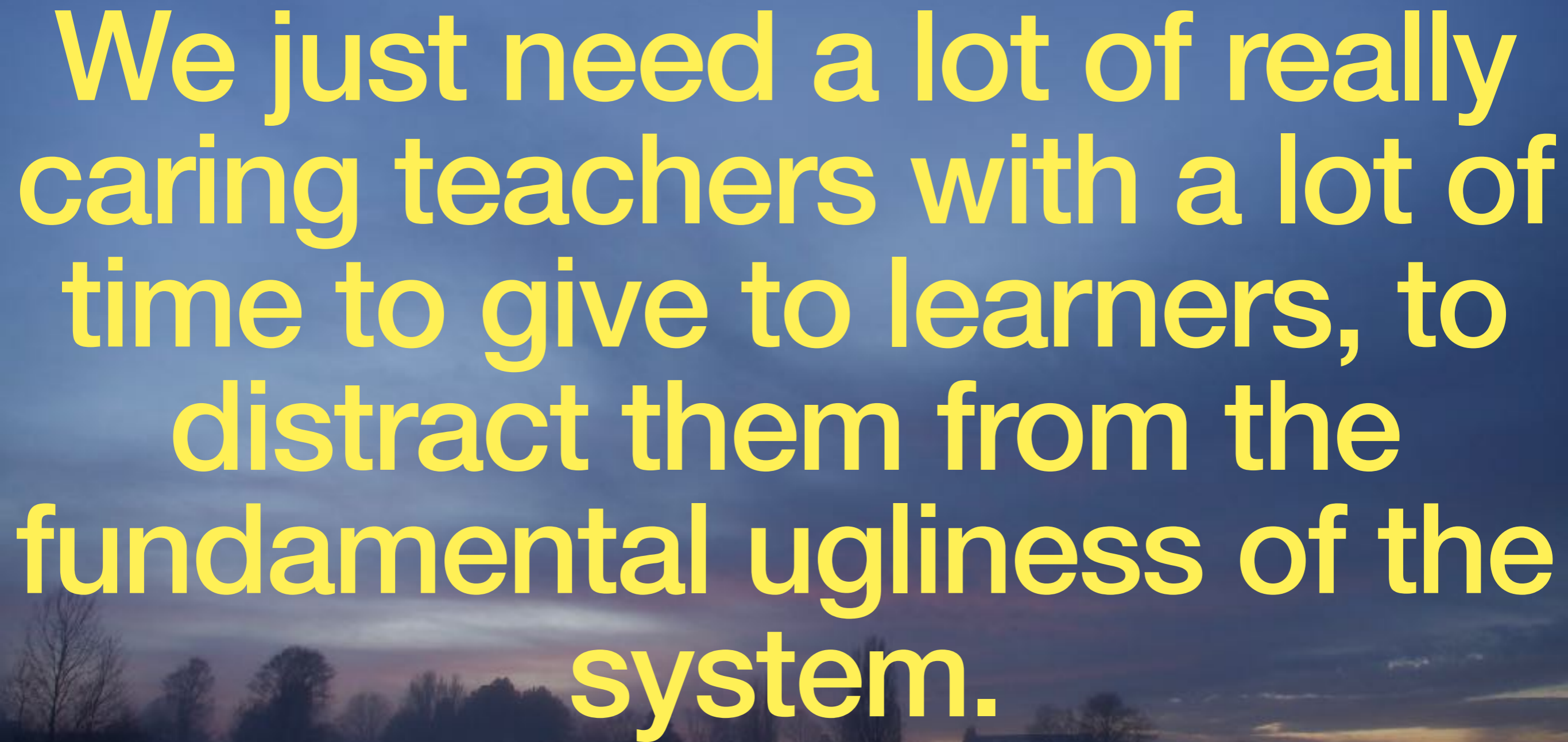
**Jon, this is
immoral,
impractical,
and inhuman!**



Hmmm...

You have a point

But, maybe....

A background image showing a sunset or sunrise over a landscape. The sky is a mix of blue, purple, and orange. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a house with a few lights on. The text is overlaid on this image.

We just need a lot of really caring teachers with a lot of time to give to learners, to distract them from the fundamental ugliness of the system.

People who would devote their lives to making the system work



A dark, moody landscape at dusk or dawn. The sky is a deep blue with wispy clouds, and a faint orange glow is visible near the horizon. In the foreground, the silhouettes of trees and a house are visible against the dark background.

**I know what you're
thinking...**

A photograph of a sunset or sunrise over a landscape. The sky is a mix of blue, purple, and orange. In the foreground, there are silhouettes of trees and a house with a few lights on. The text is overlaid on the sky.

Where are we going to find
such remarkable people?

How could we afford to pay
them what they are worth?

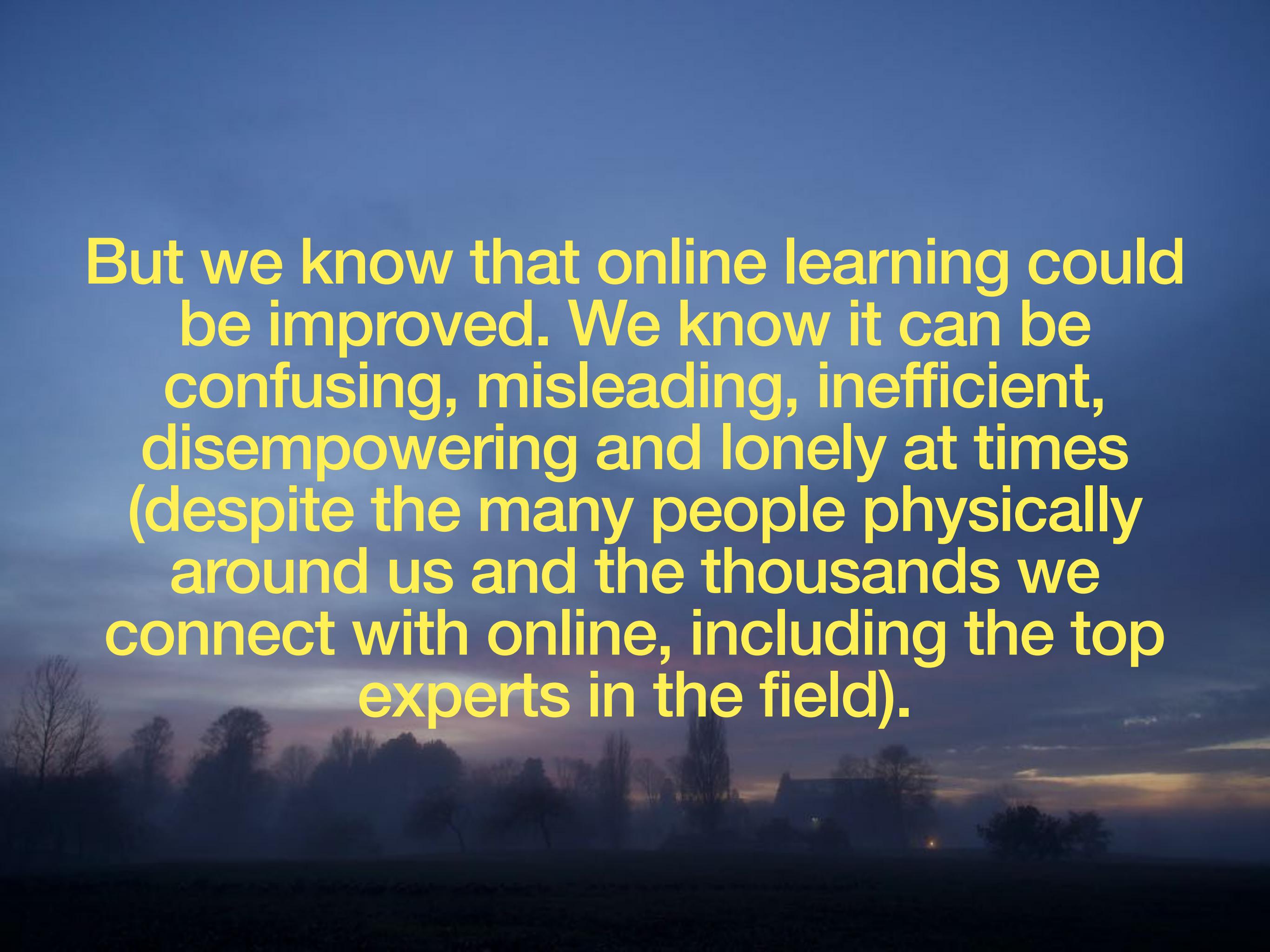


I have an idea...

*We won't pay them very
much!*



Maybe it's a bad idea



But we know that online learning could be improved. We know it can be confusing, misleading, inefficient, disempowering and lonely at times (despite the many people physically around us and the thousands we connect with online, including the top experts in the field).

Maybe competition like this could be just what's needed to think more deeply about how we learn online and why it is a good idea.

Maybe.

**But back to the real
world...**

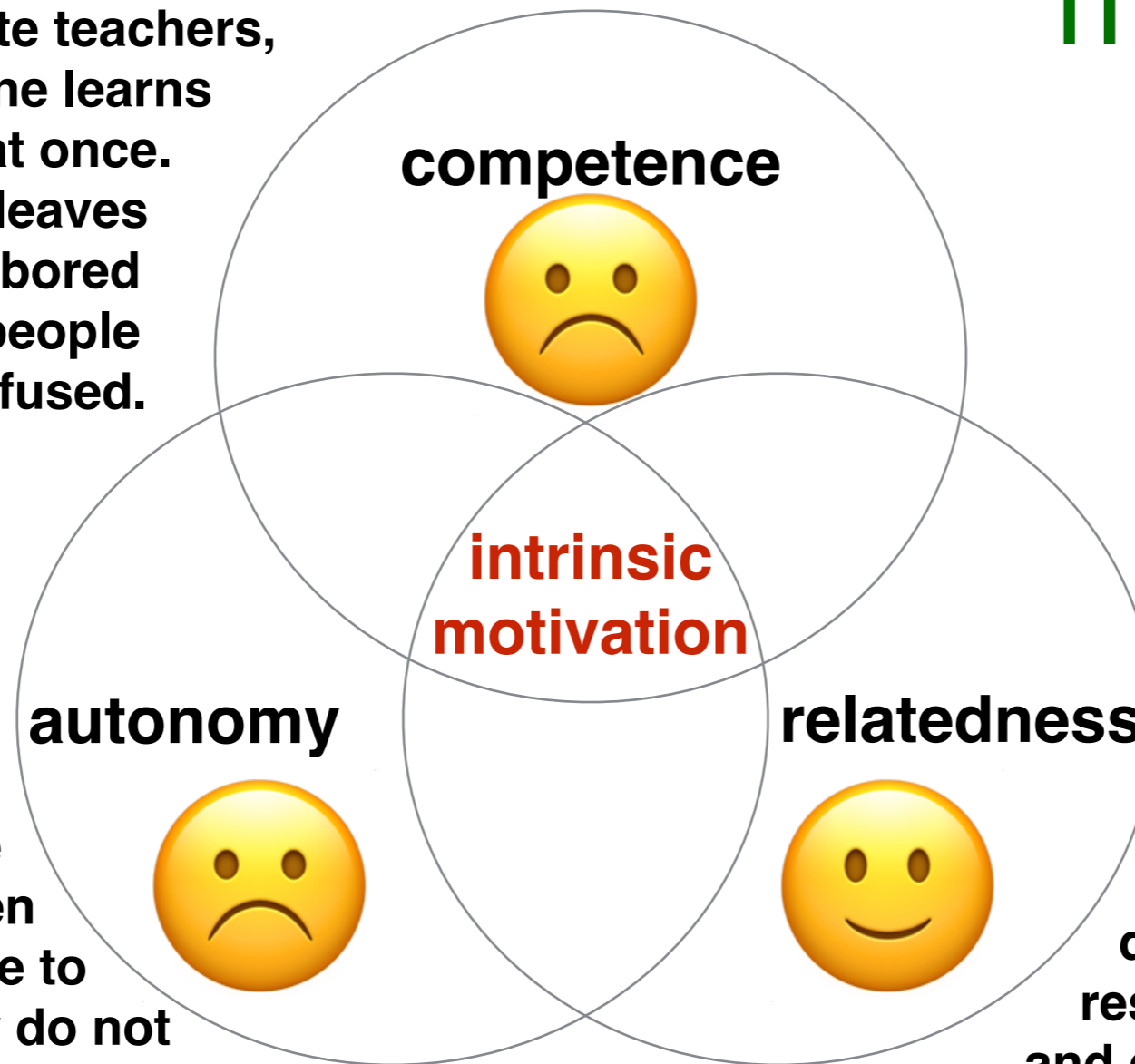


**Pedagogical methods
are *situated* solutions to
problems of learning.**

The default in-person situation

Without smart pedagogies and passionate teachers, everyone learns everything at once. Usually that leaves many people bored and many people confused.

The teacher is in control of every moment. Students have no choice when and where to attend. They do not control what or how they learn. They cannot control how long it will take.



With classmates, a teacher, and the surrounding physical spaces, relatedness is well supported. However, it may be divorced from the rest of their social and community lives.

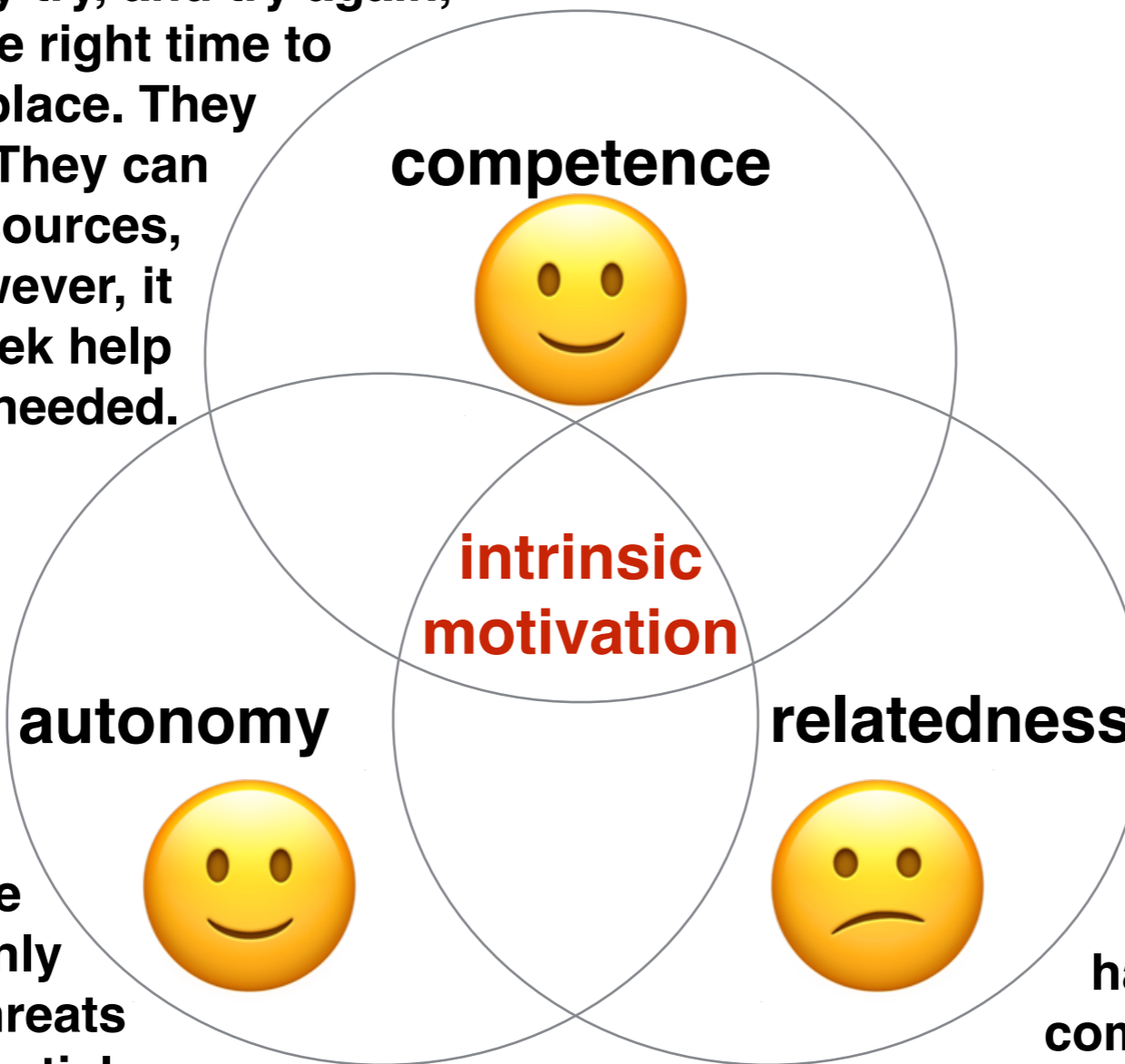
Our most cherished pedagogical methods are, primarily, solutions to these central problems

The default online situation

Learners can easily try, and try again,
can choose the right time to
learn, the right place. They
can fail in private. They can
seek different resources,
other people. However, it
can be harder to seek help
when needed.

The teacher
cannot be in
control and
must let go.

Outside the
classroom, only
grades and threats
of credentials can
coerce learners to conform to
teacher demands.



There are many
more people with
whom to engage,
at any time, but
engagement
tends to be more
instrumental, and
it is sometimes
harder to
communicate tacit
knowledge.

And yet...

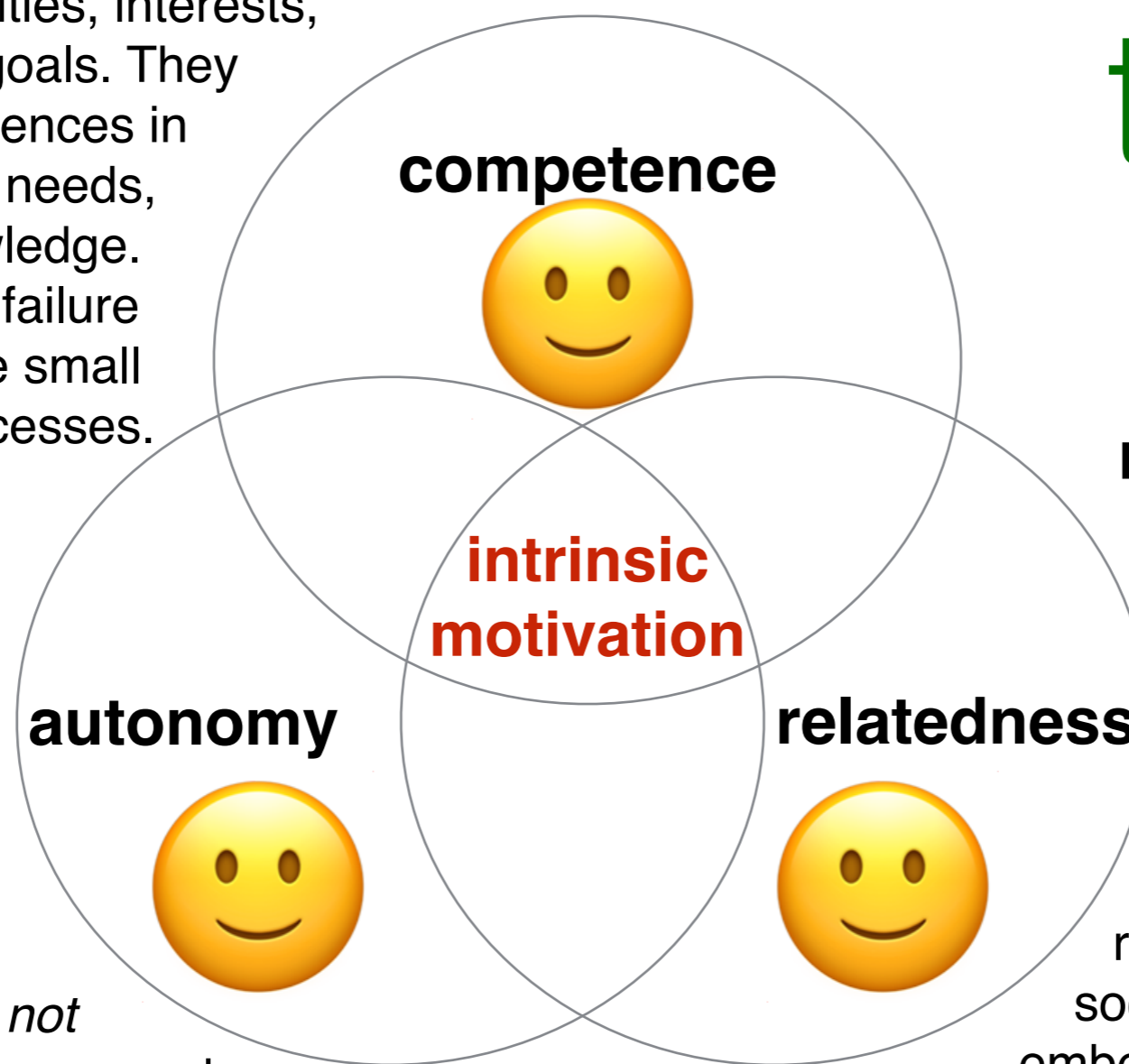


"I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." (Maslow, 1966)

Effective online teaching

Effective pedagogies glorify different capabilities, interests, approaches, goals. They *support* differences in pacing, technical needs, and prior knowledge. They *celebrate* failure and acknowledge small and large successes.

Effective pedagogies give learners *control*, not just choice. They let learners choose whether and when to *not* make choices. They support *personal goals*, are personally relevant, acknowledge existing skills.



Effective pedagogies encourage *sharing*, let teachers show they care, help students to *support one another*, work together, see relevance to their social context, and embed learning in their own communities.

In brief:



Let go, but stay close



Make learning *visible*



Make learning *shared*

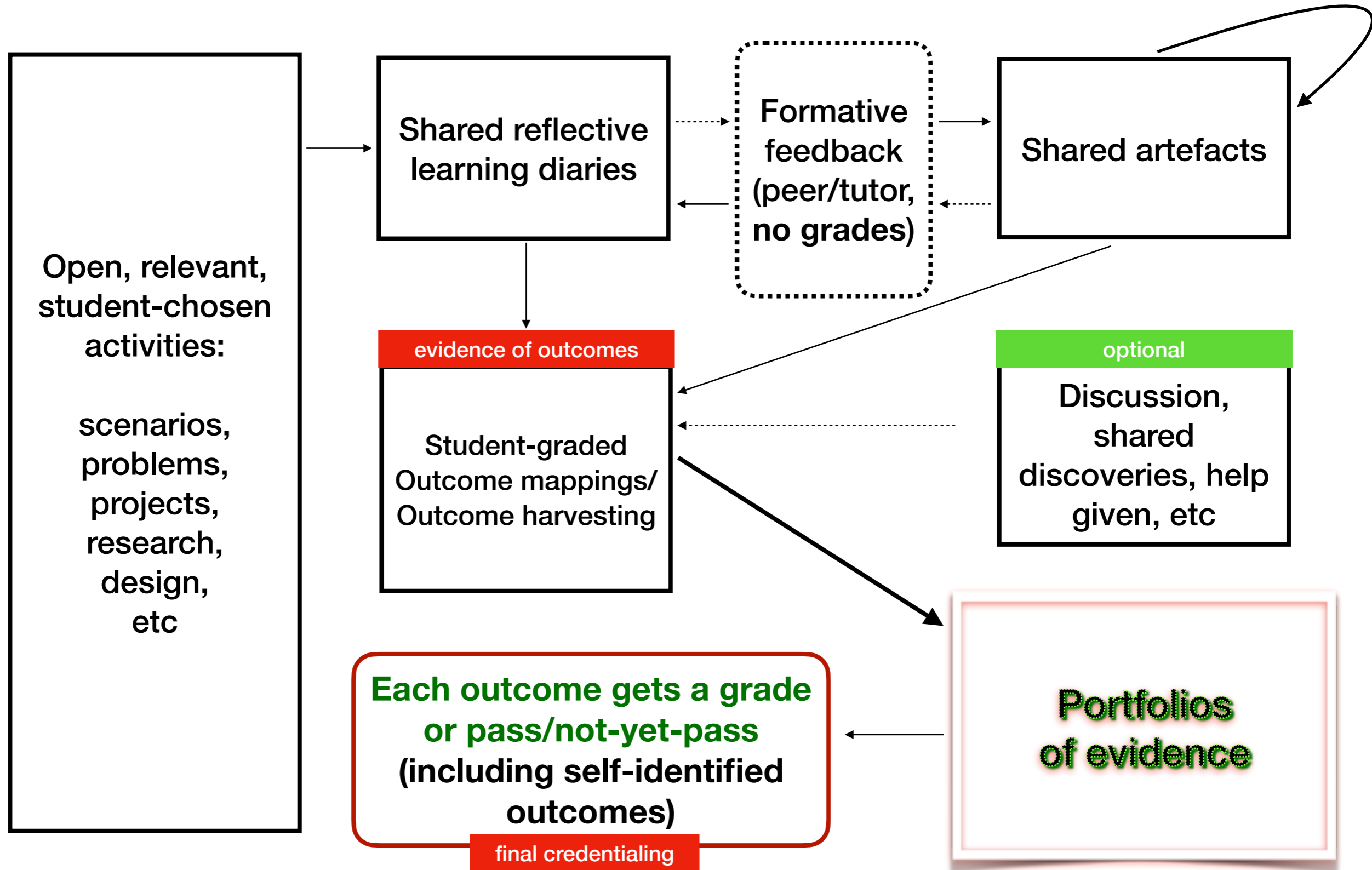


Don't *ever* coerce



Care

How I do it

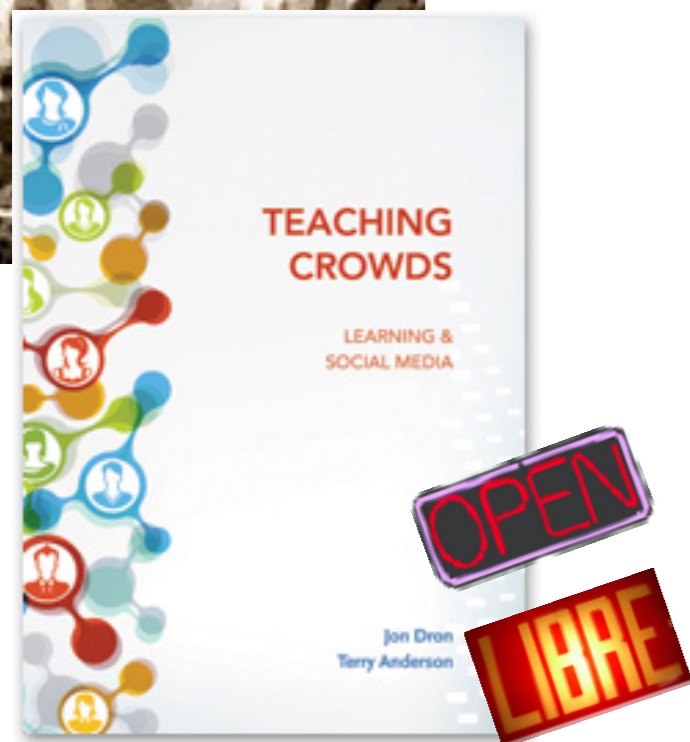
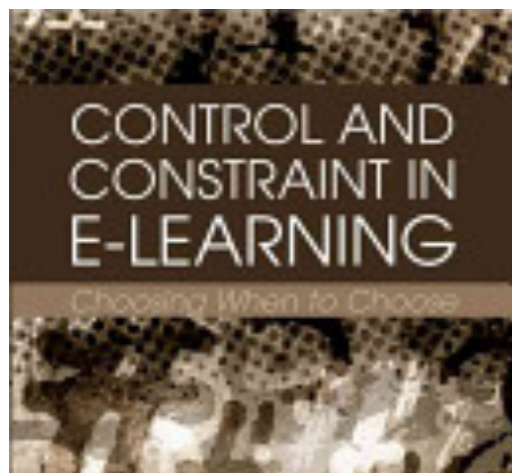


How would *you* design online education if in-person education had never been invented?

Thank you, obrigado

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<https://teachingcrowds.ca>

A few selected readings

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