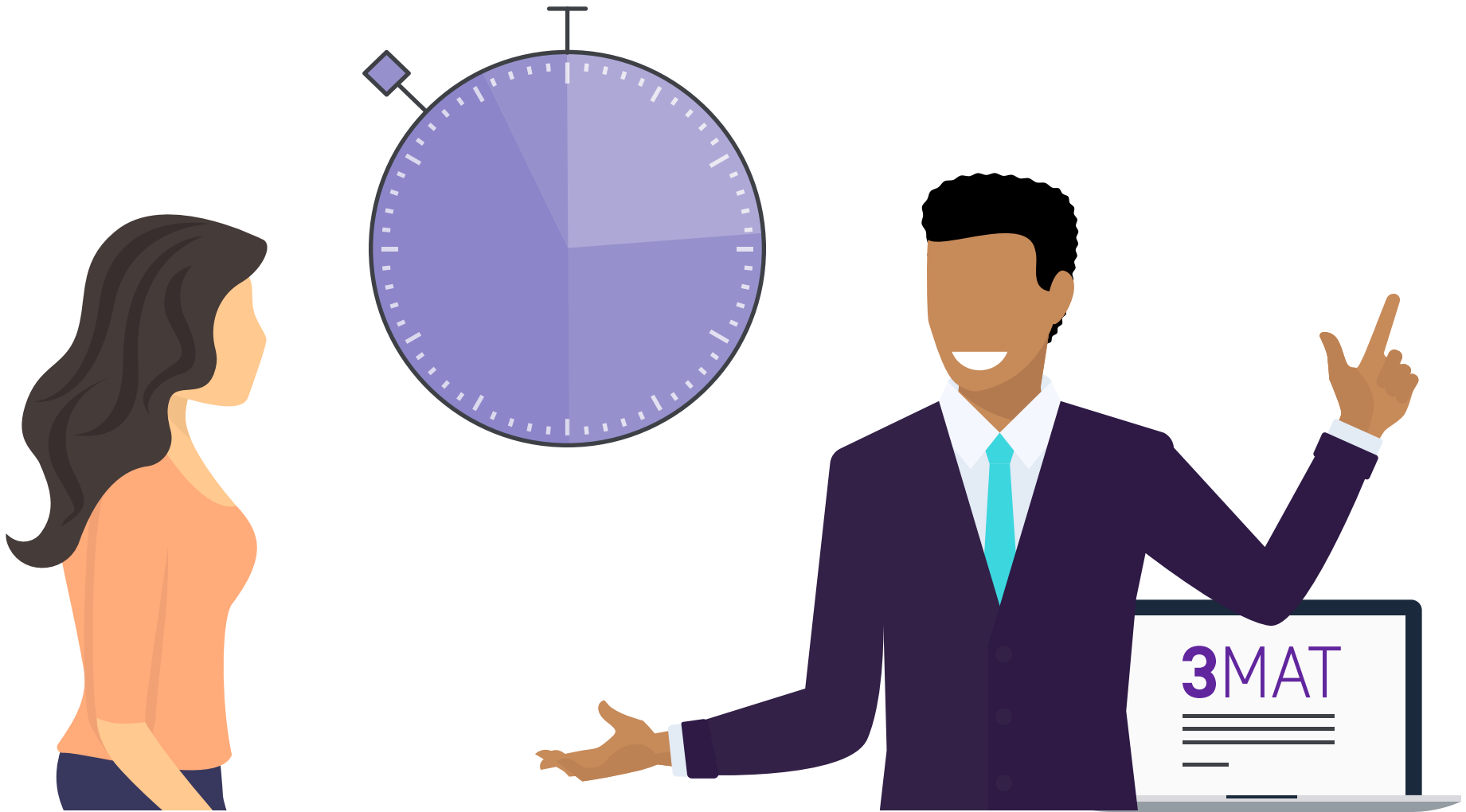# 3-Minute Assessment Talk

The Differences Between Course Grades and Learning Outcomes Assessment

BY MATTHEW GULLIFORD

Introducing the 3 Minute Assessment Talk

Are you able to explain an assessment topic and engage an audience with limited knowledge or experience in under 3 minutes? *Pardon, me?!*

Yes, 3 minutes is kind of a big deal in Australia. Originating at the University of Queensland, the **Three Minute Thesis (3MT)** is an annual competition (now held in over 350 institutions worldwide) for PhD students from any discipline. The rules: participants must explain their research in under 3 minutes to an audience presumed to have no background or expertise in their field of study. Being able to explain a complex topic both succinctly and persuasively to an audience with limited time, knowledge, or even interest, is a tremendous skill to have at your disposal.

This got me thinking; what a great tool this would be for assessment coordinators! When I managed the assessment of student learning for a college in NYC, I was frequently asked *"how is assessment different from grading?"* or *"what is the difference between course and program assessment?"* Often, I only had a few minutes to answer such questions and did not always have a fancy powerpoint to save me.

So I decided to create a series of 3 Minute Assessment Talks (3MATs) which will focus on key areas of assessment that can sometimes be challenging to present expeditiously. You only need 3 minutes, I promise!!

The Differences Between Course Grades and Learning Outcomes Assessment

This 3MAT focuses on the differences between course grades and learning outcomes assessment. Grading (individual assignments/final course grades) and learning outcomes assessment (at the course or program level) should always be viewed as complementary activities which work together to support and improve teaching and learning. They both aim to identify what students have learned; they just approach it differently. It's valuable to have specific and quick examples at your disposal on the differences between the two, as this question comes up a lot. Furthermore, this is a great conversation starter for engaging people in assessment and, some may argue, the most important to make clear from the beginning.

The following pages are intended to take no more than 30 seconds to present each, which adds up to 3 minutes total! *Start the clock!*
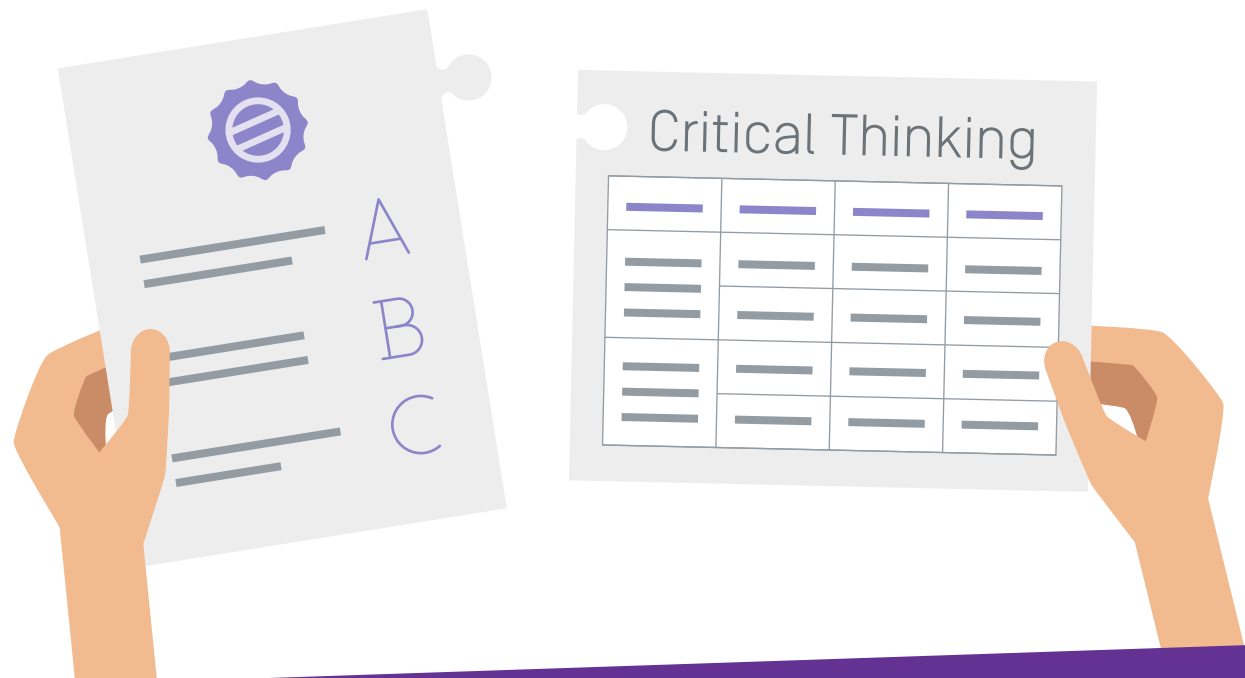
Grading is often formative, providing opportunities for feedback and measuring the performance of individual students as they progress through their course. Learning outcomes assessment is mostly summative, providing opportunities to measure the different levels of student learning for an entire course or program near its completion.

3:00

Course grades tend to focus on individual students and what they have learned in a particular class, while learning outcomes assessment focuses on cohorts of students and what they have collectively learned – either for an individual course, across multiple courses, or for an entire program.

2:30

2:00
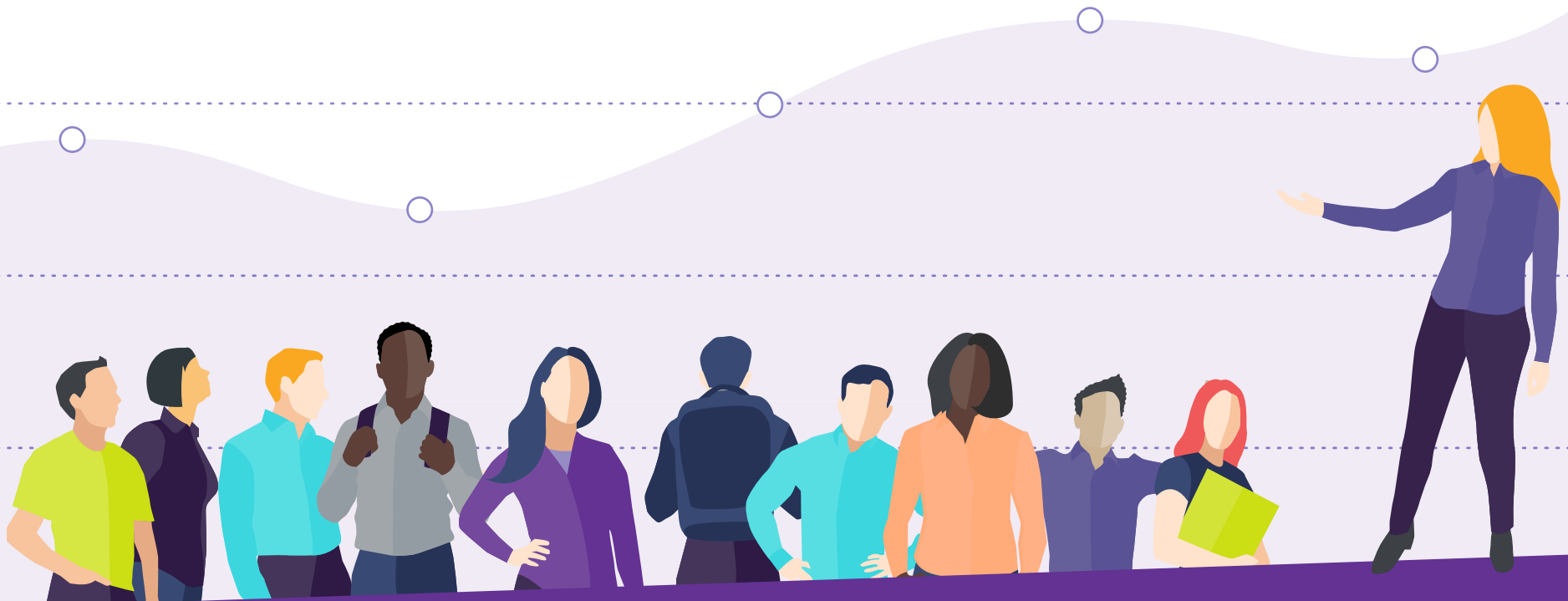
In most cases, grades are not diagnostic - they do not focus exclusively on specific learning outcomes, therefore they do not provide faculty with enough aggregated data to determine the level of learning achieved on a particular competency or skill (e.g. written communication, critical thinking).

Grading criteria differ across faculty and often include other measures that may not be related to learning (e.g. attendance, class participation, submission deadlines). Likewise, faculty grading standards vary across courses and include different syllabi and assignments.
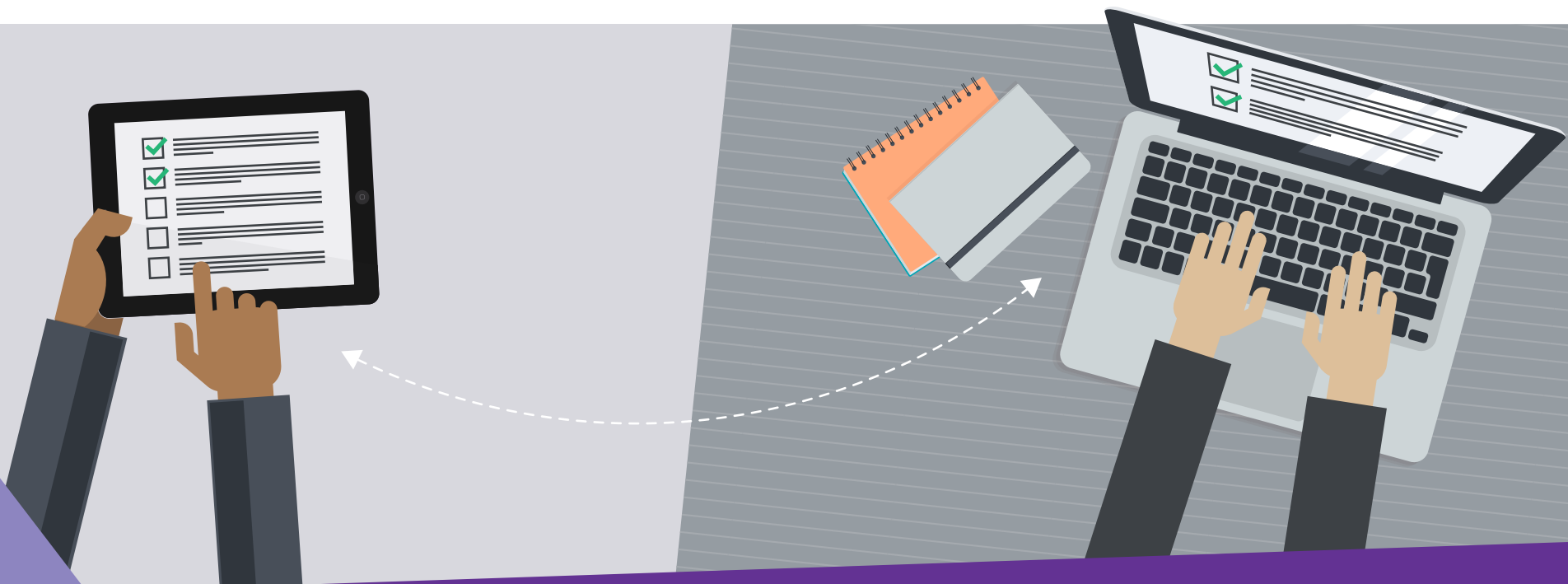
Learning outcomes assessment focuses on direct student evidence (e.g. artifacts, capstone projects, presentations) and typically measures student learning by using common and agreed upon scoring rubrics which are aligned to specific learning outcomes for a course or program.

1:30

Critical Thinking
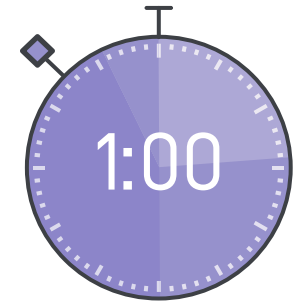
Course grades are typically assigned by the instructor teaching the class. In many cases, learning outcomes assessment involves two or more faculty members evaluating student work which has been anonymized and collected from courses they have not taught.

Learning outcomes assessment results are usually shared widely across the department, school, college, and institution. Generally these results are made available to all stake-holders (students, faculty, staff, administrators, and external audiences). Course grades tend to be shared with individual students and administrative offices only.

0:30

Okay, now

BREATHE
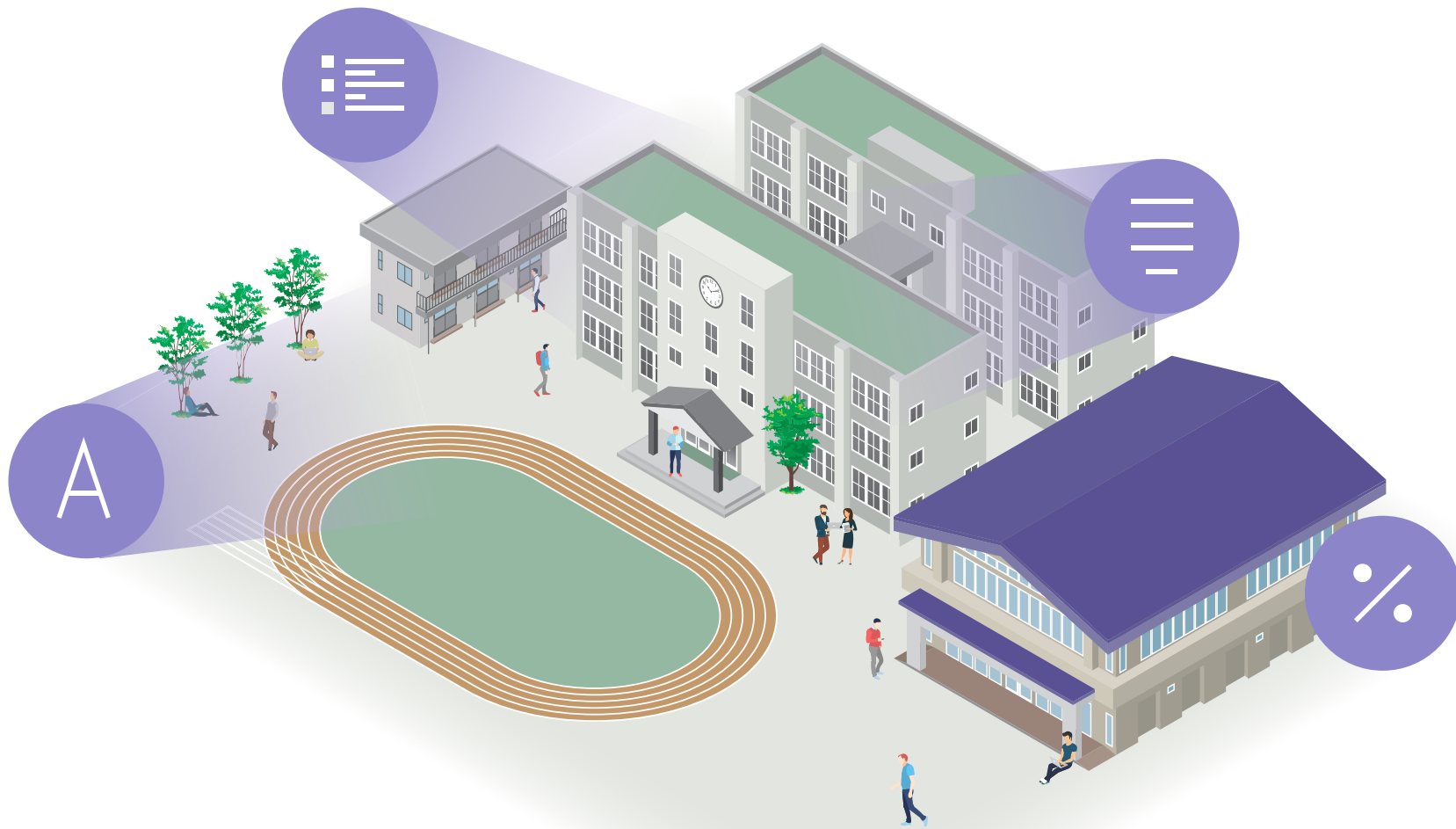
You did it!

As you can see, it is possible to explain the differences between course grades and learning outcomes assessment in under 3 minutes, if you focus on some of the major points. As I said at the beginning, both methods aim to identify what students have learned; they just approach it differently and, most importantly, gather contrasting data.

I hope you found this 3MAT useful and it helps you the next time you are faced with questions like, "why are grades not good enough?" Don't forget to subscribe to the **Watermark blog** for more 3MATs and other resources to help you advance meaningful assessment at your institution.

Meet Matt

Hello there!

Explaining different assessment-related topics to colleagues who may have limited time, knowledge, or even interest, is not a simple task. I decided to create this series of 3 Minute Assessment Talks [3MATs] to support you with key areas of assessment that can sometimes be challenging to present, particularly if you only have a short amount of time to capture your audience.

I would love to hear about your experiences with the 3MATs and any requests for topics you would like future editions to focus on. You can email at **mgulliford@watermarkinsights.com.**

Best,

Matthew Gulliford is part of Watermark's Account Management team and works closely with institutions to understand their assessment needs and goals in order to determine how Watermark can help advance meaningful assessment practices on their campuses. Before joining Watermark in 2015, Matthew worked at Baruch College, City University of New York [CUNY], where he managed the assessment of student learning for the Marxe School of Public and International Affairs and was a member of the CUNY Assessment Council. Matthew is currently pursuing his Doctorate in Education Research, with a specific focus on learning outcomes assessment and supporting technology.

About Watermark™

Watermark's mission is to put better data into the hands of administrators, educators, and learners everywhere in order to empower them to connect information and gain insights into learning that will drive meaningful improvements. Through its innovative educational intelligence platform, Watermark supports institutions in developing an intentional approach to learning and development based on data they can trust.
For more information, visit **www.watermarkinsights.com.**

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