

What's there to know about our school? How does it work? What's so different about it compared to a traditional school?

The role of the teacher

There are two ways to learn something:

- You tell your pupils why something is meaningful
- You let pupils decide what is actually meaningful

What we do today is telling the pupils what they should learn. Pupils have to be quiet, sit still and shut down their brain, and once that is done, the teacher can finally start.

This means that there's only one person in the entire classroom with serious brain activity: the teacher.

Really, shouldn't we try to organize things a bit differently?

1. Pupil coaches

At Agora, teachers don't get to be "teachers". Teachers are pupil coaches in charge of their family like mothers and fathers do.

Coach groups don't exceed 17 students. They guide students from the age of 12 to 18.

So, the students have a heterogeneous age and a heterogeneous cognition level. This coach group is their responsibility for the complete school year.

This also means that the workload of this pupil coach concerning stress is zero. So why is this not the standard in every school?

2. Prefrontal cortex replacement

One of the qualities of a good teacher is to invest in a trustworthy relationship with the student.

As pupils have a certain age (which is way younger than a teacher), they lack analytical skills.

Their "prefrontal cortex" isn't yet developed enough to take big decisions. And that's where the teacher comes in.

The teachers replace their pupils' prefrontal cortex and guide them in the right direction.

Pupils accept the teacher's help because of their good relationship and confidence.

3. Teacher qualifications

Can you imagine teaching at this school? What does a teacher there look like? What are the requirements?

Teachers at Agora have to make sure pupils love going to school and that they burst of self-confidence.

When this is the case, pupils are ready to learn and reach the attainment levels set by the educational authorities.

Many teachers choose to become a teacher because they can work in a very structured way. But here, you have to be able let things go.

That's what we call "agile teaching and learning". This means you have to adapt your teaching views from day to day.

You can never tell how far you will get tomorrow or in a few months, because learning is a continuous motion: sometimes it goes fast, then slow.

The teacher has to be able to adapt to the pupils' learning processes.

4. The role of the pupil

At Agora, pupils have to set their own challenges. They decide what they learn during the whole year.

A lot of students find out themselves that if they don't do anything, they won't succeed. It takes insight to get there at the end of the year.

The pupils take the steering wheel into their own hands. They have to steer the car in the right direction, and the teacher is just their driving instructor.

Spark their curiosity, and they will find what they need to succeed. Don't put roadblocks when you want them to go the other way; let them discover this by themselves.

Students can build wings on their car to fly over those roadblocks. They'll get there... and you have to let them get there.

How Agora works

As you probably get by now, the Agora school in Leuven isn't just an ordinary school:

it has no rigid goals, no ordinary classes, no classical tests, no useless homework and no grades.

So you must be wondering how Agora works:

1. Possible detox

Many pupils have lost their motivation to learn anything at school. Some of them even think they are too dumb to succeed in anything. Others face psychological and emotional problem because many traditional schools teach them to excel and to perform, already at a young age.

These students need to be detoxed. We bring them in a situation where they feel confident and let them believe they can manage things. As soon as they realize they can really accomplish something, they arrive in a phase that they also want to learn new things.

They'll start setting new goals and new challenges from intrinsic motivation. And that's the most important motivation there is.

The detox program also teaches them the importance of focus when setting their own goals and when learning.

The program starts at the beginning of their school career at Agora and ends approx. 7 weeks later.

In these 7 weeks, pupils discover what they want to become. Even if the chances of their dream job are so rare, at least, they have focus now.

They have a goal. And it doesn't matter if something crosses their path that changes their focus, as long as they replace it with a new focus.

2. Challenges

So, what exactly are these challenges that pupils choose? Well, a challenge can be anything! Something students find interesting to do research about.

Starting from there, Agora uses the pupils' interests and motivation to encourage them to look further. What do they want to become? What do they have to learn to become that?

Through their passion and interests, pupils also learn how to learn. That's why they can finish these challenges all by themselves.

Since there are no goals set by the teachers, how is it possible for students to know when the challenge is finished? Well, there are a few things to consider here.

First of all, pupils have to appoint the "why" of every challenge. "Why do I want to do this challenge?", "Why do I want to learn this?"

Initially, pupils will say "I would like to learn about horses, because I like them." This is the simplest explanation of a challenge. But after a while, that student will start saying "I want to learn about horses, because I want to start my own riding school".

Here, the student is delving into the challenge much more than before.

Working with challenges opens up the possibility to work with individual learning paths for every student. No more methodology for one complete average group, because average pupils don't exist.

For every challenge, pupils formulate the definition of "done". When is their challenge finished? They also define their challenges with a learning question and sub questions.

Most of the time, those learning questions lead to new topics they want to investigate and this way, new challenges. Via technology, the coaches can follow up their pupils, witness their progress and give advice.

They encourage pupils to make mistakes, because that's the best way to learn. Copying is also an effective way to learn. Look at how another people do something.

3. Master classes

You could say it's not easy for pupils to find that one particular thing they're passionate about. At Agora, pupils can participate in master classes, completely voluntarily.

So, when there's a masterclass about Johann Sebastian Bach, everyone who likes to go, goes, and others don't. This is the right way to encourage students to learn. Coaches will track the number of attended master classes and motivate pupils to attend a minimum number of master classes per year.

Everything you enforce, leads to demotivation. Focusing on knowledge, leads to demotivation but focusing on motivation, leads to knowledge. By the way, as you may have learned: by learning and thanks to the guidance of the teachers, pupils won't even notice they acquire more than the minimum goals set out in the curriculum and reach the government attainment levels easily.

4. Technology

Technology is a very important component at our school. Because of technology, it's possible for every school to offer hundreds of different learning paths.

That's why Agora is a one-to-one school, and that's why it offers every pupil a device for free. Financially, this is a big cost to carry.

But ethically, it shouldn't matter in education whether you're poor or rich: every pupil should have the same opportunities.

Agora gets the same money as any other school. Only, they spend it on technology, instead of traditional school books. The things you can do with technology are unimaginable, and every school should embrace it.

5. Learning 0.0

We're all conditioned by our "old" education system, prohibiting us to think differently. The educational model is over 100 years old. Sure, it was effective ... in that time.

Now, there's truly nothing you can't learn. Students can tap into the collective brain lobe of humanity using their smartphone for free. So, why do other schools forbid this small device?

That's why the Agora school started "Learning 0.0". You have to bring back students and teachers back to the basics of teaching and rid them from all the institutional nonsense that crawled into our educational system many years ago.

So, ask yourself: why are teachers the boss? Why do students sit in classrooms? Why do students have to listen to teachers, and not the other way around? Why do we have courses and fixed time tables? Why do we have tests and homework? We re-educate pupils and parents to think differently. Learning means taking initiative as well as developing and using creativity.

Every good teacher knows, even without testing their pupils every pupil's capabilities, strengths and weaknesses. So, why should you grade or mark pupils and do hours of grading work, when you know what the result will be?

Teachers are the victims of this system. They are immensely conditioned and create a false safety by giving grades. Does a grade really tell you when pupils meet the benchmarks?

But knowledge isn't the key here. The key is that students are progressing. In old terminology: if a pupil first got a four, and later (s)he gets an eight out of ten, that's much better than a pupil who gets a six all the time. A pupil with an average of 8.5 but zero social skills is considered ready to go and study medicine at university, while a student with an average of 6.5 and a lot of social skills isn't. This is a waste of human capital, and it has to stop.

6. Formative assessment

So, Agora doesn't test, nor grade. But that doesn't mean students are completely left alone.

They're practically haunted by their coach and get feedback continuously.

A student can always take the initiative to make diagnostic tests, with the emphasis on "initiative": the student has to ask for it and has to want it.

A day at Agora

Teachers arrive at school at 8 am and have a team meeting. Students arrive at 9am, which is neurological much better than starting earlier. Then, students start with a "dialogue" in their own "coach group", where they debate and talk about certain topics, e.g. recent news items.

At 9:30 am, students start working on their own personal challenges, or they choose to attend masterclasses (often taught by parents). Master classes can be about numerous topics, ranging from astrology to martial arts.

Pupils have three hours of sports per week, and after the lunch break they have 30 minutes of "silence". During these 30 minutes, we expect everyone to be quiet. No mobile devices, no talking. Pupils can take a power nap, read a book, listen to their breathing and meditate. 99% of the students choose to read.

After the silent break, students go on with masterclasses or challenges. At 4:00 pm, students may go home without any homework. You often see that students find the motivation to go on with their challenges at home, without being forced to do this.

Between 4:00 pm and 4:30 pm, the coaches or teachers consult with each other about the pupils and their progress, learning paths, etc.

Not a school

As the first paragraph already gave away, this school isn't an ordinary school: indeed, it's an *extraordinary* learning community. Agora doesn't have traditionally organized class rooms with ordinary school furniture. It's something you've never seen before.

In the 21st century, the number one skill everybody should have is creativity. This school is designed to stimulate pupils to be creative: students get to create their own comfortable (or not so comfortable) workspaces; they use their creativity to design amazing desks.

The school has all the tools and workplaces available to spark creativity. Agora also lets pupils create their personal workspaces because it wants to take away boundaries: boundaries between home, street, school and virtual environments. Pupils need to feel at home in their learning environment.

Agora listens to the science and psychology of the pupil. Only those aspects of education that listen to the psychology of the pupil survive.

Don't try to renovate education. Reinvent it. Renovation is like changing wooden wheels to rubber wheels. Reinvention is creating flying cars. And that's what Agora wants to do.

Adapted from Lucie Renard's article