

# Learning by making

Meet the school with no classes, no classrooms and no curriculum

[Andrew Webb](#)

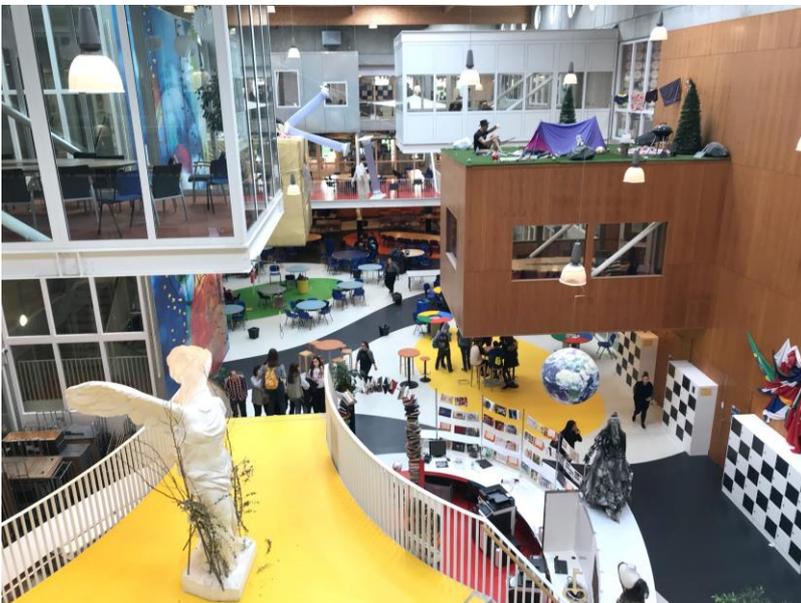
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“We get around 70 requests a week from all over the world from people wanting to come and see what we do here” says Rob Houben, manager of the [Agora school in Roermond](#), Netherlands, and the closest thing school has to a principal or headteacher. “And I turn most of them down, I just don’t have the time to do all that!”

It’s clear such interest is a testament to Agora’s unconventional approach, which is why I’m glad to be here. I first met Rob at [Bett 2019](#), when he wandered onto [pi-top](#)’s stand, and we quickly struck up a rapport. If pi-top designed a school, it would be this. It’s amazing not because it’s awash with cash and has state of the art facilities, but because their entire approach is centred around projects. This is a school focused on learning, not teaching.

“We give children the opportunity to play, because when children are playing with something they get interested. And then you don’t have to teach, and you don’t have to police them either” says Rob.



## No year groups

Students at Agora range from 12 to 18 (though there are no year groups) and each of them is given control over their own educational journey. They are able to explore and learn about topics and things which interest them.

I met students exploring subjects as diverse as German mountain guides, Mongolian horses, blacksmithing, Harry Potter patronuses, tables and skateboards. It is the job of the teacher – who here is called a coach – to challenge and guide that exploration process.

The staff, who are responsible for around 17 students each, also have to ensure there are tangible results and genuine development, as well as work with each student on ways to continue developing the learning journey. Though brilliant for kids you can see why one of the biggest issues facing Rob has been finding the right sort of teacher, at ease with a ‘guide on the side’ approach rather than barking at a class of 30 kids.



Rob describes Agora as a blend of a university (where you have knowledge), a Buddhist monastery (where you can think), a theme park (where you can play) and a communal marketplace (where you can trade and swap things). And it's this last one, Agora, and borrowed from Ancient Greek, that gives the school its name. Each day starts with *dagstart*, where students spend a few minutes outlining their challenges for the day, what they hope to achieve and what help they might need. It's also a chance for other students to suggest things, offer advice or join in.

You could describe the space where this happens as full of happy clutter. There's objects, books, posters, figures, half-finished projects, bits and bobs. In short, lots and lots of detritus for playing with.

### Custom desks

Each student has a desk, which they are encouraged to customise. One has the front of a car attached to it, which was built with the help of a local scrapyard. "The first one they made didn't fit in the lift!" Says Rob, meaning the students then learned how to calculate the volume of a cuboid (the lift) and adjust their design so as to get it in. Another displays some amazing ivy like tendrils CNC'd out of wood.



After *dagstart*, students move on to project time, which could be at their desks or in any of the facilities such as the wood workshop, metal workshop, textiles room, kitchen or computer room. There's lunch, followed by quiet time, where students are encouraged to read or think. Then it's more project or group work until the end of the day. As they get older, students can choose flexible start and end times, signing in and out to better suit their diaries and what they are doing.

In speaking to Agora students time and time again they said what they enjoy most about the school is the freedom to explore and learn whatever they want. "People look strange at us. They think because of their school experience you have to have things like four mathematics lesson a week, but in the Netherlands, that isn't the case. The Government only asks you to bring students to a certain level within a certain time period" says Rob.

The magic in all this is in having coaches guide that apparent freedom so as to naturally include the things students need to know by law. So for example, all students must know Pythagoras' theorem by a certain age, but that doesn't have to happen in a mathematics lesson, it could be while exploring a geography problem, or building a table, that then leads the student to find out more.



### **Ubiquitous mobile phone use**

Perhaps most shocking for UK secondary school teachers to hear is that at Agora, there is ubiquitous mobile phone and internet use. "All our children have Chromebooks for free, so they have access to the internet all day. We allow them to use their phones, all day, because you need to learn how not to use your phone in certain moments. And you don't learn that when you put your phone in a locker or container because then you have to have a container your whole life"

Consequently, the school uses WhatsApp to manage messaging students. Parents are encouraged to get involved too, with tear strip flyers advertising their skills. So if you need carpentry advice, you contact the student whose parent knows about woodwork and approach them.



The school can afford free Chromebooks for each child because they don't spend a lot on books. "Even when they are studying for an exam, it's not like a normal school where we have to spend money on 50 maths books. If you want to study maths you have to tell me how you're going to do that and which book or digital content you want to use. And if a student can do that and explain why they need that book we will buy it for them. But that doesn't mean the person next to them gets one".

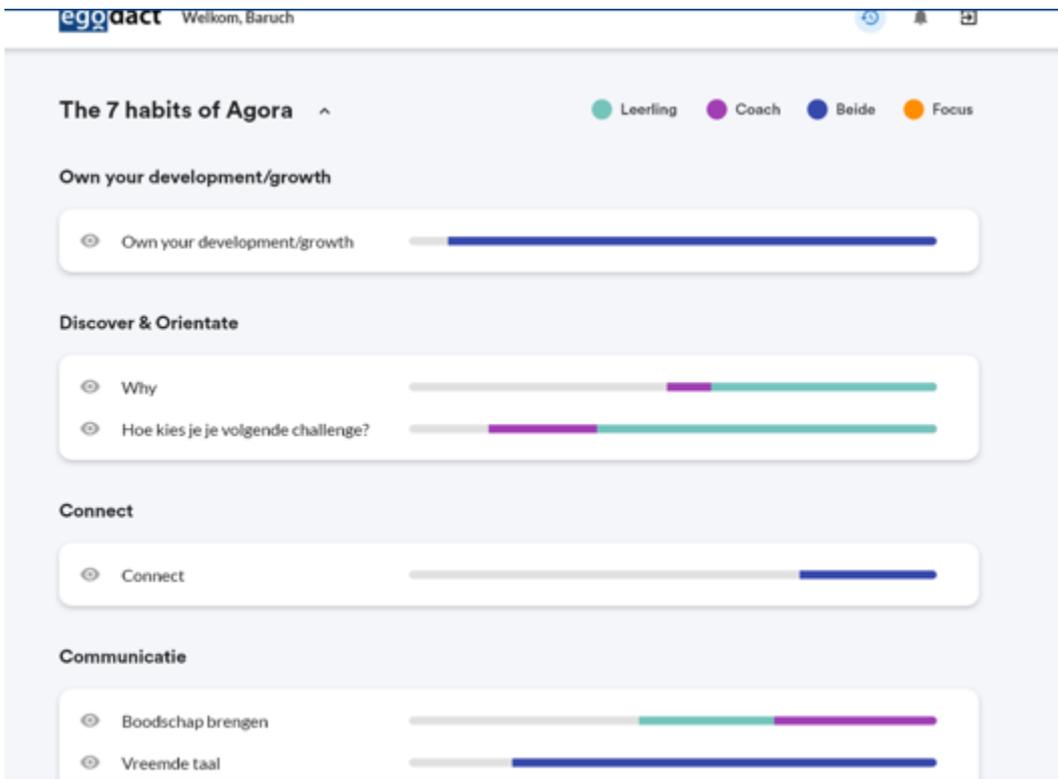


Agora started in 2014 with 30 students as an experiment within another more traditional school, to see if the whole idea of what education is could be designed differently. Crucially, the students, not the teaching staff, were the only ones consulted on what the school should contain, look like and do. The board gave the founding staff members a long leash and let them get on with it. They did. There are now 250 students in the school, with a long waiting list of others wanted to join. "When we opened the government came within a month and said 'we're going to close the school', by the end of the day they said 'ok we're not'.

### **How do you measure progress without tests?**

So if students aren't being tested in specific subjects, but rather working on a huge range of different projects, how are they tracking their progress? It's a good question, and like the design and layout for the building itself, the answer came not from the faculty, but from the students.

[Egodact](#) is a piece of software designed by three Agora students, Rafael, Baruch and Ruben, to track not only a student's challenges but also their progress. It's light, simple and easy to use. Not only that, they have now set up a company to market and sell the software to other changemaker schools. They've written a business plan, designed a product road map, and opened a bank account. Pretty impressive for three 16 year olds who began this at 14.



Of course Agora is still recognisably a school. It has an auditorium space and a canteen, and it's full of children who are messy and noisy like kids everywhere. But it also has meeting rooms the children can book via their phones to work on things or meet people.

And next to the home economics kitchens there's a restaurant, with a bar and beer pump. Rob's plan for the future is to have a restaurant business in here working with students and serving the local community. "Before you know it, the students will own the catering company" he tells me.

He's clearly dreaming big, and so he should, the school is an amazing achievement, but it hasn't always been easy. "It's been a lot of hard work getting to this stage. We had to grow fast because we had a lot of demand, and schooling teachers not to teach is very hard!" And it's going to get harder as Rob develops and expands both the school and teaching faculty.



Finding, training and supporting the right staff with this highly different approach to education takes time. "I tell my staff, 'don't ask me if this is a good idea. Do it for a week and ask the children if it's a good idea. Because what I don't do is manage people, they can do that themselves. Our teachers work five days, four days with kids, and on the fifth day I don't allow them to work with kids, they have to observe other teachers and give them feedback. And if they do that enough I say 'get out of the school', go to a museum, go to a laboratory, go to a business and tell us what you found there. That's what school is for, we have to get kids out there, because we think that the most knowledge is outside the school not inside."

So where does all this lead? Well if you look at the skills employers constantly cry out for: empathy, communication, teamwork, agility, flexibility, and the ability to design and make solutions to multidisciplinary problems, a traditional education barely offers students any of that. Instead, there are lots of dates, facts and formulas to remember. The children at Agora are different, like us adults they have the world's information in their pocket, but crucially, they have the wherewithal to make sense of it, synthesise and use it as and when they need it. And chief among their soft skills is a sense of confidence in their abilities to tackle problems and communicate with adults and each other.

That is what work will be in the future, the human things that machines can't do. Agora and other changemaker schools are giving their students the best possible skills and experience to do that. "I'm not doing this for children in our school, I'm doing it for children everywhere. I want every child to do this. I hate having a waiting list, but to get the staff at the right level, that takes time" says Rob. "But everyone can learn this, anyone can do this."

### **Forget what you know about teaching**

If you'd like to hear more about Rob's vision on what education and learning could be, he very kindly let me video him doing a presentation in his office.

Source:

Webb, A. 2019. Meet the school with no classes, no classrooms and no curriculum. <https://medium.com/pi-top/meet-the-school-with-no-classes-no-classrooms-and-no-curriculum-7cc7be517cef>