How Can the Historic Sense of an Agora Be Captured in Virtual Learning Spaces?

At the turn of the 21st Century, the metaphorical "Agora" evoked the open and informal places where people gathered on campus—community places where discussions and learning took place outside of formal classrooms and labs. Such informal spaces are critical to creating a community of learners, even in virtual learning spaces.

Defining the Agora

The physical Agora has existed since ancient times, and has adapted in form and scale. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a university campus without such spaces: student unions and campus quads that address real cultural and personal human needs for welcoming, inclusive social spaces.

The classical Agora is a void space (plaza) defined by its surrounding elements. An Agora is public and open, democratic and inclusive—it is a space you can enter and leave at any time:

> "The Agora, literally meaning 'gathering place' or 'assembly,' was the center of the athletic, artistic, spiritual and political life in the city" (Wikipedia, accessed October 2020).

> "The name [Agora], first found in the works of Homer, connotes both the assembly of the people as well as the physical setting" (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Much like the classical Agora, the physical experience of the Agora on campus is a sense of community and place (or places) that accommodates multiple users and needs in an open and serendipitous fashion, especially when compared to other modalities, such as a traditional didactic lecture or independent study tutorial.

How to recapture a sense of an Agora as a space for learning?

— LSC Zoom Roundtable Discussion May 2020

Such open and serendipitous experiences can be found in campus spaces like:

- the academic or residential or campus quad,
- the surrounding common areas, including the library, the student center, the food court, and the coffee shop,
- the synchronous/frictionless shared spaces, including student clubs, tours/recruiting fair venues, and debate and seminar spaces,
- the asynchronous shared spaces, like walls with posted flyers, or sidewalks with chalk markings, and
- permeable spaces across campus, and the ability of the campus community to identify with and navigate these spaces based as needed.

The contemporary Agora is the epitome of the campus experience, the collective third place that is harder to create during times of social distancing and virtual learning.

The Role of the Virtual in the Modern Agora

We can start with describing what a virtual Agora is not. It is not a substitution of the physical environment with a direct technological replacement. It is not one virtual space or solution, nor is it a classical classroom setting supported online. Finally, it is neither a scripted area with scheduled meeting times nor an "open" Zoom environment.

Thus, it is not a virtual copy of the physical and it does not replace the physical. It is not a separate entity but exists additionally, supplementing the physical providing a sense of permeability between the physical and virtual.

KEY QUESTION
How does the sense of "place" or "space" translate to the virtual?
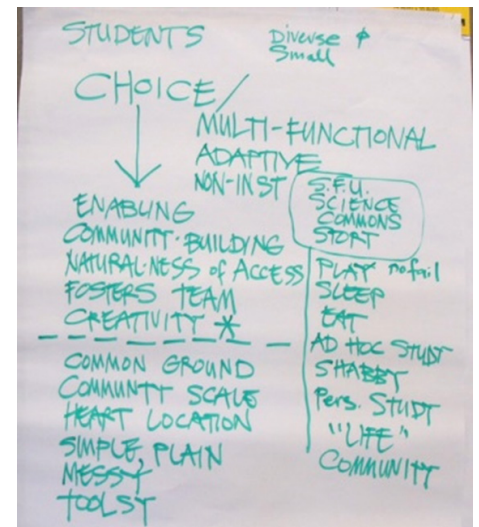
KEY QUESTION
Can we create this sense of place within the virtual Agora, and what would the experience of the students and faculty be like?

To define what the virtual Agora might look and feel like, and how it could function, we need to start by setting out a framework. We suggest reframing "space" as "platform" when used in the virtual sense. The idea is to use the experience

of a place of community exchange virtually, and to develop the virtual Agora in novel and beneficial ways that may not be available in a physical space.

Key aspects of the virtual Agora include:

- social interaction,
- a variety of adjacent spaces,
- inclusivity / permeability, and
- flexibility / scale of experience from public events to private studying— different places and services that cater to an individual's mood, taste, likes, and desires.

KEY QUESTION
Where can early evidence (of the role of virtual learning in the Agora) forecast future opportunities and pitfalls?

Some current examples (from across the spectrum of virtual and physical) include:

- Web-conferencing Platforms: Zoom, GoToMeeting, MS Teams, etc., and virtual collaboration tools (such as Teams, Blackboard, Mural, Stormboard, etc. While many of these tools have been pressed into service as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were originally designed for professional meetings.


These tools support a physical-like face-to-face interaction through remote connections, but lack the direct human interaction found in physical "third places." Many virtual collaboration tools also allow for team collaboration asynchronously, allowing notes and ideas to be built gradually over time with and without face-to-face interaction.

- Gaming and eSports: Virtual gaming experiences are creating legitimate social bonding and collaboration, and may mirror, virtually, many of the same community social spaces and events that exist on the physical campus. Gaming offers these benefits without requiring the community to assemble together in the same physical space or time. The rise of online gaming also brings new opportunities for learning communities to develop interactive, goal-based learning content.

- Active Learning, Classrooms in the Round and the Shared "Phygital" Experience. The archetypical active learning classroom (with students engaged as peer learning teams moving between facilitated discussions and shared digital work) is well established. A new and compelling interpretation of the Socratic Agora is emerging in institutions like Oregon State University and Washington State University, where the typical lecture-sized course has transformed into learning-in-the-round with sharing of virtual content and "phygital" story-telling between students and instructor.

- Social Media & LMS Interaction: Clear parallels exist between the conversations that occur within active Learning Management Systems (or in social media sources like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) and the more traditional practices of debate and collaboration that happen on a physical campus. While current events clearly capture the interpersonal skill challenges of these new platforms, they underplay the rich opportunities to extend connections beyond the physical campus or a single point in time.

- VR / AR Visualization. VR / AR technologies are often used to create a "third" place, a virtual location to more tangibly experience or perceive the intangible. Even so, while these technologies may work for people

without accessibility issues, they are less suited for people with visual or other impairments; as such, they may not yet be up to the task of creating shared experiences.

Today, the virtual Agora is beginning to take form through the multitude of network-based platforms and forums that create "spaces" for diverse user groups - from social media to multiplayer games. Currently, this virtual ecosystem is dispersed across multiple spaces built for the public or for niche interest groups that, in discourse, constitute a patchwork Agora-like framework.
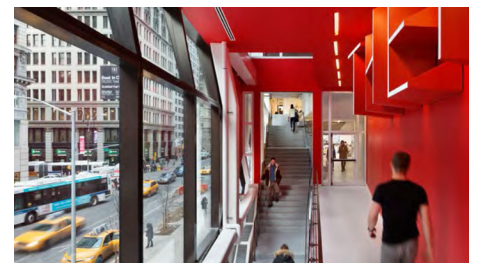
Teaching institutions have used these social platforms to some degree to cross the spatial and temporal boundaries of virtual and remote learning, though a truly experiential virtual university environment does not yet exist. A virtual Agora may never be all that a physical one is, but there is much that can still be done to improve the experience and education of virtual learners.

KEY QUESTIONS
Where are we now, and what have we learned (from COVID-19 or otherwise) that:

1. *Informs the future of the Agora metaphor (What can we learn)?*
2. *Is unique to the disruption of a global pandemic and should either not be considered part of the persistent human experience or couched as "things to put down but remember for the next disruption" (What shouldn't we learn)?*
3. *Is not captured or experienced at this moment (What can't we / are we unable to learn)?*

Designing the Agora of the Future

KEY QUESTION

What should virtual learning bring, and what attributes should it have, to enhance the concept of the Agora?

To be truly inclusive and democratic—to break the campus gates/bring down the walls—the virtual Agora should be like the classical Agora: open to the wider community and to all backgrounds. It should also be highly permeable, allowing users to move freely throughout (and bridge between the physical and digital) to accommodate the wide variety of needs and communities it serves.

FROM THE MACRO PERSPECTIVE. Institutions must understand the role of physical and virtual spaces in accomplishing the learning goals of the institution. Each has limitations and opportunities working in concert to support the learning community. Creating this ideal involves building and doing differently; changing how we plan and fund and design for learning experiences—in both physical and virtual spaces.

FROM THE MICRO (aka USER) PERSPECTIVE.
The virtual experience should be a delightful way to encounter new ideas and seek a community for your needs and interests. From engaging in learning activities through your smartphone to encountering new ideas and places beyond the limitations of space and time, virtual platforms will extend the opportunities to be a part of a (metaphorical if not literal) campus.

KEY QUESTION

The "user" is not a monolith, but a collection of unique memberships (e.g., faculty, students, full-time/part-time, etc.) Who are the users, what are their (differing) needs, and how might they be met differently/best through the physical and virtual Agora?

Instead of either/or, the "virtual learning Agora" will add to the physical experience with new strengths and answers to enhance the total learning experience. To succeed in this new blended reality, with the physical and virtual working in concert as one learning Agora, new approaches to design are required.

Alongside traditional campus facilities' roles, new stakeholders (from Academic Technologists to Zoom Assistants) are needed to capture the full spectrum of experiences, as individuals coming together, of the new learning Agora.

KEY QUESTION

Who are the new stakeholders, and what skills and perspectives must be included into the design of the Agora?