

# Curriculum

**ATHENA VERSUS THE MACHINE**

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# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	iii
Introduction: The Athena School .....	1
<b>Part I: The Machine .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1 The Knowledge-Rich Curriculum .....	7
2 Social Mobility .....	17
3 The Single Vision .....	23
4 The Singularity .....	29
5 Input–Output .....	41
6 The Teacher .....	49
7 Performance Management .....	57
8 Science and Scientism .....	63
<b>Part II: Athena .....</b>	<b>73</b>
9 Bringing the Human Back In .....	75
10 Knowledge and Understanding .....	85
11 What Is a School For? .....	93
12 Educating for Freedom .....	103
13 To the Things Themselves! .....	117
14 The Phenomenological Curriculum .....	133
15 Making Meaning .....	163
Epilogue .....	169
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	171
<i>Index</i> .....	179

Introduction:

# The Athena School

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A god in the sense I'm using the word is the name of a great narrative, one that has sufficient credibility, complexity and symbolic power so that it is possible to organise one's life and one's learning around it. Without such a transcendent narrative, life has no meaning; without meaning, learning has no purpose.

Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (1996)

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The 'great narrative' of too many of our schools is mundane, with the merely measurable as the pinnacle of meaning. Counting them in, counting them out; these schools employ mechanical metaphors. Each child is set on a 'flight path', and data and targets are worshipped rather than the symbolic, spiritual power of a god. Perhaps this is inevitable in a secular world, but is it wise? These schools bypass the quality of knowing something and replace it with destination data – knowledge is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The focus is on the grade and not on the knowing.

Knowing is essential, it is the stuff of education, but what to know, why to know it and how to know it are not only essential questions, they are also impossible to answer fully with any degree of certainty. Yet there are those who search for objective answers to these questions by allying education to the instrumentalism that is extant in large numbers of schools.

Some of these instrumentalist aims take the form of justifying certain content by suggesting that it is essential for social mobility and/or social justice. Others insist on a pragmatic approach that *might* provide a march up the school exam league tables. And others see success in counting the number of pupils who leave the school to enter a 'top' university. In many schools, pupils have gone from being potential citizens to customers of an

educational product, and now find themselves reduced to data points with a need to perform beyond expectations for their ‘type’. Is this a meaningful pursuit? Whichever method is used to justify the content of a curriculum, can utilitarian/utopian aims (or their proxies) justify 13 years or so of full-time education?

This book argues for the study of knowledge for its own sake, but also that knowledge, alone, is not enough. Schools need to set up their pupils for the individual and communal pursuit of wisdom. This pursuit is animated by a god, Athena, while the overtly instrumentalist approach is represented by the Machine. While it is essential to provide a knowledge-rich curriculum, it is the quality of the knowledge that matters, and therefore it is within this subjective realm – where individual taste and thought is understood and nurtured, and the way we make meaning in the world matters – that the arguments in this book will be made. The qualitative approach will be set in direct opposition to the purely quantitative.

How does Athena help to provide us with the wherewithal to deliver a curriculum centred around the pursuit of wisdom?

## Athena

Hephaestus wielded a giant axe and in one swift swing cut Zeus’ head clean in two. Then, as Stephen Fry explains in *Mythos* (2018: 84–85), out stepped a female: ‘Equipped with plated armour, shield, spear and plumed helmet, she gazed at her father with eyes of a matchless and wonderful grey. A grey that seemed to radiate one quality above all others – infinite wisdom.’ Zeus’ head repairs itself, and all who witness the birth of Athena realise that she has power beyond all other immortals.

Nietzsche (1969 [1883–1891]) pronounced that ‘God is dead’ and fore-saw our struggles to create meaning. Without meaning, the school – the very place in which we should aspire to learn about the greatest thoughts and ideas – becomes the place where purpose is reduced to a list of target grades and performance measures that offer little in the way of true inspiration: the transcendent.

Athena has inspired many people across continents and civilisations, and now, most importantly, she can inspire us. Instead of asking what do the exam boards want, what does government want, what does the customer want, what does the market want, what do inspectors want, what does the data demand, we can aim higher: what does Athena want? What can Athena bring to our schools?

Athena is the goddess of philosophy, courage and inspiration. She is concerned with promoting civilisation and encourages strength and prowess. She brings order but can also rustle up a storm. She is the goddess of mathematics, strategy, the arts, crafts, knowledge and skills. She is the goddess of agriculture, purity, learning, justice, intelligence, humility, consciousness, cosmic knowledge, creativity, education, enlightenment, eloquence, power, industry and inventions – scientific, industrial and artistic. She is the patron of potters, metalworkers, horsemanship, women’s work, health, music, navigation and shipbuilding. She is virginal but imbued with maternal cunning. She possesses magical powers. She is the protector of the state and social institutions. She is a teacher of many things, including working with wool. She is the goddess of law and just warfare. She is not afraid of a fight (she flayed the skin of Pallas and used it to make a shield) and can inspire others into battle. But she is able to put down her weapons when necessary because she is not driven by war. Athena is the goddess of wisdom.

Looking around at what some of our schools have become, we can see that wisdom has been sidelined. When the importance of knowledge is reduced by becoming part of an input–output model of measurable ‘success’, there is a need to move from the mechanistic systems that have caused this decline in value and to bring the human back in. Our attitudes and perspectives towards knowledge matter. The meaning we give to it matters – and the meaning it gives to us. If we think of curriculum as narrative, and realise that our stories are understood in many different ways, we begin to understand that being knowledge-rich is also about the many ways that knowledge is understood. These understandings are tied into value systems and the ways in which each of us makes meaning and that meaning is revealed to us. Curriculum, at its heart, can challenge us to reassess our values and understand meanings anew.

A curriculum that serves Athena is a very different beast to one that serves the Machine. An Athena approach to curriculum is an education that unashamedly pursues wisdom and extols the virtues of why to study. It asks, 'Children, do you want to be mind-full or mind-less? A free person or a slave?' Some might choose mindlessness – the easy, cynical way – but if we are to make a real difference to human lives then we should be offering more. Education can help to free us, and this freedom is first and foremost a freedom of thought.

The Greek creation myth involves Prometheus making human beings by shaping them from small lumps of clay. Athena breathed life into these figures – giving them their potential for wisdom and feeding their souls. A mechanical education works against freedom of thought, while Athena positively nurtures it. This is the joy of a liberal education.

A liberal education is shaped by its pursuit of wisdom, whereby the teaching and learning of knowledge are joined by the nurturing of experience and judgement. For the philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1989 [1975]: 22), 'Liberal learning is learning to respond to the invitations of the great intellectual adventures in which human beings have come to display their various understandings of the world and themselves.' It is, above all, an invitation to join in with the conversations that began at the beginning of time and that will continue long after our individual lives have ended. This is where the pursuit of individual wisdom interacts with and becomes enlivened by our communal, continual pursuit of wisdom.

If we decide to make this pursuit our central mission, how would it change our schools?

Part I

# The Machine



## Chapter 1

# The Knowledge-Rich Curriculum

‘We all teach knowledge’ is one of the phrases used to argue against knowledge-rich approaches. It is easy to see how a problem might arise – indeed, we do all teach knowledge.

In many people’s pockets and on many people’s desks, a knowledge-rich environment is but a tap or a click away. There is a lot of knowledge out there on the internet and in the library; there is more easily accessible knowledge than anyone could learn in a lifetime. Knowledge is everywhere.

If by knowledge-rich we mean ‘a lot of knowledge’, it can easily be argued that each child could google to their heart’s (and mind’s) content every day, make changes to their long-term memories and tick the knowledge-rich box. But this would be facetious. A disorganised romp through ‘facts’ of varying degrees of veracity thrown up by a search engine is not a curriculum.

What makes knowledge rich is how it is organised. Knowledge is organised into subjects and disciplines which have their own ways of interrogating the world. It is organised by values – how we feel about the world and what is important to us. It is organised by narratives within and across subjects and disciplines which can open up arguments, clashes and disagreements on which people often pitch their identities. Knowledge is the stuff we marshal to help us find a place in this world; hence why the potential answers to ‘what knowledge?’ are so keenly felt.

Which is why knowledge on its own is not enough. Curriculum is the organisation of knowledge. It should help children to understand different ways of making meaning and how values enable us to respond to the world. Knowledge-rich is not rich at all if it fails to demonstrate the importance of the great controversies that allow human beings to argue about how we live and how we might live.

Educational approaches that use (so-called) purely objective data to justify the type of education a child receives falter because the very ground on which they stand tends not towards wisdom but the easily measurable. Whether these quantifiable measures are test scores, destination outcomes, average wage achieved or IQ, they will struggle to explain why a young person should study *Antigone* rather than *We Will Rock You*, other than implying that *Antigone* is somehow more 'acceptable' because we might find it referred to in a broadsheet newspaper. But *We Will Rock You* might be found there too, so this doesn't get us very far.

Some of the more astute among you might be shouting, 'We should study the things that engage our kids and are meaningful to their lives,' and that might be true, but what these things might be is not immediately apparent to any of us. What is 'meaningful' and, thereby 'truly engaging' to a life is not revealed instantly. It can take a lifetime of searching to find out that something we thought we knew can speak to us in an entirely new and enlightening way.

What we understand by 'knowledge-rich' and 'broad and balanced' in order to justify what we include – and what we leave out – matters. It matters because this is what helps to engage young people in making meaning in their lives, and this cannot be achieved with shallow, instantly gratifying, isolated chunks of information.

Whose knowledge, what knowledge and why are important issues, not just for theoretical debate, but as urgent questions that demand answers. Arguably, it was Matthew Arnold who set us on this course: he regarded certain knowledge as 'sweetness and light', as opposed to philistinism or barbarism (Arnold, 2009 [1869]). Whether the argument is 'knowledge is power' or 'knowledge is powerful', each agenda tries to justify itself in ways beyond the idea of what knowledge is best to know on its own terms. That those who have been educated about the finest things sometimes commit the grossest acts shows us that not all is sweetness and light in the knowledge stakes.

But if Arnold's approach is mistaken, is the only alternative on offer the philistinism of the marketplace, whether measured by exam scores or five stars on Amazon or Goodreads? A TripAdvisor approach might work for

choosing a hotel for a two-week vacation in sunny Spain, but can we rely on popular choices to discern beauty and truth beyond what is immediately accessible? If we devalue the role of the curator and the connoisseur – and leave curriculum in the hands of populists, the market, exam scores and arguments around accessibility – then teachers really have given up.

What does this mean in practice? It means, without a doubt, that the curriculum should include *Antigone* and not *We Will Rock You*. This decision is shaped by our values, and Athena can help us realise what those values are. It is the quality inherent in what-is-to-be-learned that answers our questions about what to include. And yet, quite rightly, it also opens us up to many arguments. Prejudice, authority, tradition and intuition are very difficult to muster if they are the only ammunition you have on your side. This is again why knowledge alone is not enough. Making a list of things to be learned is a dispiriting task; many a reductive approach to curriculum design starts and ends with these lists. If we can glimpse something beyond the list – the cultural assumptions, arguments and structures of our storytelling – we can begin to understand what a good curriculum might be. This book argues that culture is an essential way that humankind makes sense of and engages with the world, and it is our duty to our young people to help them in this sense-making and engagement.

It might be that teachers can't explore these issues because they are trapped within mechanistic approaches. They might be preoccupied with data and test scores, obsessed with quantitative rather than qualitative measures. They might pay lip-service to quality but find themselves teaching in schools obsessed by systems. These schools, although often called 'factory schools', are more akin to 'office schools' and define themselves through varying degrees of accuracy and efficacy ('look at our score').

Athena cannot necessarily make children wise, but she can set them on the pursuit of wisdom and help them to develop their minds in tandem with the wisdom(s) of the time. Whatever we inherit genetically, it is what we come across culturally and socially that helps us to understand what we are and what we might be.

The mind is not an empty vessel awaiting knowledge: children come to school already equipped with stories and ways of making sense of the

world. Curriculum can only make inroads into pupils' minds if we accept that some of what we teach is highly contested – challengeable as well as challenging. It is only by getting involved in these contestations that we can set our pupils' minds on the path towards wisdom. And we shouldn't just focus on the individual. Instead, we should also look at the community of minds as a whole and pursue wisdom as a collegiate affair.

The pursuit of wisdom is one we hold in common. It is a contract between the living, the dead and the unborn. It is either enhanced or degraded in our culture, institutions, schools and classrooms. Curriculum is not asking how well one child is performing, but how wise our studies are. If our pupils as a whole strike us as culturally impoverished, we have to ensure that our school culture enriches, broadly and deeply. We have to attend to our curriculum: is it rich enough? Is what we teach good enough?

However, the Machine is just a click away. It systematises, rather than humanises, by treating the human being as a measurable memory machine: pupils are reduced to 'programmes on computers made of meat' (Midgley, 1994: 9). They are components of an input–output system which focuses only on the extremely important aspect of memorisation, at the cost of the rather more qualitative 'why' or 'what is important'– on feelings, taste, discrimination, argument, thought, educated opinion and being able to express ourselves. If we simply view learning as being 'brain based', a mechanistic metaphor that leaves out the human being, then our education system will leave young people struggling to make meaning of their lives.

This book is partly a hymn to the teacher; instead of being seen as erstwhile office workers, with 'teaching' entailing delivering on the bottom line, Athena wants to re-energise the teacher as a member of the community of minds from which they emerged and into which they can introduce their progeny. This is why we went into teaching. This is our necessary mission.

But this is not possible if the teacher is caged inside the Machine.