# **Curriculum: Athena against the machine**, Martin Robinson, Paperback, 183 pages, Crown House Publishing, 2019, £14.99, 978-178583302-1

Despite the mention of the Greek goddess in the title, this book is not about Classical mythology. Athena, instead, represents wisdom, culture and experience and is set up in opposition to the ‘machine’ which is interested only in data, order and efficiency. Robinson uses these metaphors skilfully throughout his book to explore the tensions which exist in schools around the world in the twenty-first century regarding the purpose of education, the role of knowledge and the importance of curriculum in ensuring optimal learning opportunities for all. These are big issues, but Robinson does an excellent job of leading readers through the key philosophical and educational theories which underpin successful schooling. The influence of philosophers such as Mill, Nietzsche, Arendt, Rousseau, Hegel and Heidegger is explained and exemplified as Robinson tackles problems which lie at the heart of educational disadvantage: social immobility, narrow viewpoints and the disappearance of the arts from the curriculum. For example, he asks early in chapter one whether a young person should study *Antigone* or *We Will Rock You.*

‘…without a doubt the curriculum should include *Antigone* and not *We Will Rock You*. Athena can help us realise that it is the quality inherent in what-is-to-be-learned that answers our questions about what to include.’ (p.9)

As a Classicist, I was obviously delighted by this conclusion.

In Chapter 11, he asks what a school is for. His answer includes: Art, Beauty, Truth, Power and Perspectivism. I found the arguments for Power and Perspectivism most compelling. I agree with Robinson that

‘a good education doesn’t offer just one lens through which to see ourselves and the world; it offers a wide variety of lenses…the pursuit of wisdom is never served by insisting that one way of seeing the world has dominion over all others’ (p. 100).

Classics has a particularly valuable contribution to make to the curriculum in this regard: a study of characters from Greek and Roman history and literature who paid the price for their singlemindedness and/or showed unwillingness to think critically and reflectively. Rich teaching material indeed.

I found myself nodding in agreement as I read this book. I agree with Robinson’s position that we need to bring the ‘human’ back into education, by focussing less on data drops, monitoring and tracking and instead on providing opportunities for young people to engage in conversation which enriches their worldview. As an academic researcher working on oracy education, I was pleased to see that Robinson concludes his ‘Power’ answer thus ‘It is only by engaging in debate, by testing out ideas and hypotheses, that we can free up individuals to think for themselves, and thus enable them to add to the great conversation in a way which opens and engages minds’ (p. 100).

If this all sounds rather idealistic, be assured that the author provides practical suggestions on how teachers and schools can move towards a curriculum which is driven by Athena e.g. on p. 102 he explains the importance of a school’s extra- (or co-) curricular programme, a House system and the benefits of the International Baccalaureate in combining traditional academic study in a range of curricular areas while developing independent learning, service and intellectual curiosity. Teachers of Classics, and related subjects, as well as those responsible for professional development and teaching and learning will be stimulated by the ideas in this book.

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