

## Robbie McClintock



### ***A Look Back and a Look Ahead***

Born in Manhattan in 1939, I was advantaged by parents who had done well in hard times, depression yuppies. I enjoyed a childhood, perhaps patterned a bit on Rousseau's *Emile*, living and learning on a farm in eastern Pennsylvania. To a child, carpenters and cultivators convey naturally how competence differs from pretense.

When I turned eight, my parents, having long endured an arduous commute to their workplaces in New York, decided that my serious schooling must begin. Their commuting stopped and back we moved to Manhattan, where I attended Buckley, a proper private school for boys. At the ninth grade, boarding school followed, Deerfield Academy, where I got along in both sports and academics, graduating in 1957 with some hortatory dicata impressed upon me by the storied headmaster, Frank Boyden.

My undergraduate studies at Princeton started poorly, owing to overconfidence and a sudden taste for freedom, although on graduation the initial disaster turned out well, for it was the key to my winning the class prize for most improvement. I majored in the undergraduate program of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Affairs and made use of its intellectual flexibilities to ground a life-long interest in European cultural history and its implications for education. Each summer throughout college, I had an enviable job at the American School in Switzerland, tooling about Europe driving a VW bus loaded with kids, ages twelve to fifteen, trying to explain the significance of all that they, and I, were seeing for the first time. That was a real education.

As was the style in 1961, graduate school immediately followed – for me, at Columbia in its history department, where once again I started poorly, owing to a new bout of overconfidence and a dawning taste for radical discourse. Nevertheless, Lawrence Cremin encouraged me to persevere and to engage in the history of education. He and Jacques Barzun helped me concentrate my energies on an ambitious dissertation about the Spanish thinker, José Ortega y Gasset. The academic marketplace was different in the mid '60s – despite growing turbulence, plum jobs were in good supply. As a result, in the spring of 1965, out of the blue, the old-boy network did its stuff: I got a call from the Johns Hopkins University, asking me to interview for an assistant professorship in the history of education. I did and the next fall found myself on the Hopkins faculty, with my doctorate still more than two years in the future.

In the spring of 1967, as I was beginning to feel settled at Hopkins, Lawrence Cremin unexpectedly called, not to speed my work on the dissertation, but to ask me to interview for a new position at Teachers College in the history of Western education. Back I went, and here I have remained. I finally defended my

dissertation the next spring, and officially deposited it in Low Library the day Columbia closed down, the campus radicalized by the clash between the police and striking students.

Looking back, my academic work divided roughly into two periods. In the first, from 1961 to the early '80s, I wrote and taught as a humanistic educational theorist. And in the second, from the early '80s to 2001 or thereabouts, I worked primarily as an educational technologist, still imbued with humanistic concerns, but concerned to shape, as best I could, a powerful material force. And now, looking forward, I have entered a third period, I hope of equal duration, in which I intend to bring my prior interests to a combined fruition.

As my career commenced, I studied what I called humanistic educational thought, with particular attention to the juncture of politics and education as understood by the ancients, the civic humanists, and various European thinkers, Rousseau to the present. My work in this period peaked far too early and then stammered through a decade. 1971 was my big year as I published both a big book, *Man and His Circumstances: Ortega as Educator* [PDF], and a long essay, "Towards a Place for Study in a World of Instruction" [PDF]. In the piece on study, I staked some basic convictions: educators weaken their work by assuming that instruction is the only significant causal agent in education, for they then fail to draw fully on the powers of study that their students command. As a pedagogical agent, I believe, study exerts more creative, compelling force than does instruction. In my book on Ortega, the fruit of sustained labor throughout the '60s, I hoped to speak about contemporary American concerns, both pedagogical and political through a comprehensive intellectual biography of a full and fascinating figure, whose work, I believed, had great significance. I thought a full, sympathetic reading of Ortega would show how public intellectuals could exert humane, leavening influence through a process of "civic pedagogy," clarifying the concepts the public and its leaders used to define possible courses of action.

Professionally, the book on Ortega and the essay on study greatly advanced my career, for tenure came early in 1970 on the imminent prospect of their publication, but personally I paid a price. The piece on study sketched a vision that was daunting to detail in a work of substantial scholarship, and I had put far too much effort into the book on Ortega, which proved to be a *succès d'estime* in a narrow circle, but a work devoid of any influence remotely commensurate with my great expectations for it. A bit exhausted, disillusioned, and depressed, over the next ten years I found it difficult to recover from the silence of a big book, little read; and I produced a lot of tentative essays and not-quite-finished studies, none conducive to a sense of professional fulfillment.

After the campus turmoil of '68 and '70, serious academic contraction set in. A careful civility carried appearances along, my work with it. The sense of possibility narrowed. Taking risks seems riskier. Wealth and power gained clout. Promotion slowed; tenure became a higher hurdle; young academics wrote and spoke more defensively. We had chosen academe, rejecting the *organization man*, but increasingly he became the emerging norm. I began to hear inner voices, perhaps

depressive, perhaps penetrating, insinuating an incessant doubt: was it possible to act effectively as a humanistic educational thinker when altruistic aspirations of the culture were giving way to manias of more, those all-too-common greeds for wealth, power, and status?

Increasingly, I feared my concerns were esoteric relative to the activities of educational practitioners. I began feeling like a parasitic irrelevance within a professional school stressed by growing budgetary shortfalls. Trying this and that, I spent a year in Germany, undergoing a second adolescence, another year in Washington as a special assistant to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and yet another writing a prudent report on the long-term problems of the Teachers College budget, all the while searching for a new way out of a situation where the familiar academic work seemed publicly irrelevant. I had long been interested in how communications media interact with educational practices and had once dreamed of scripting a documentary, "Schools of Stone," exploring the pedagogy of medieval cathedrals. In my time of doubt, as someone who happened to be both curious and adept with technologies, I started dabbling with the digital. As I did, I naturally began to muse whether emerging information technologies might serve as historically effective tools for humanistic education.

Hence, my second period of work began sportfully in the late '70s – the accidental technologist. In the '80s, it turned serious. I grasped an opportunity to reorient my career into technology and education, just as the trajectory of innovation was opening the era of personal computers and digital networks. I became chair of the Department of Communication, Computing, and Technology in Education, and with generous support from Ben D. Wood, I started the Institute for Learning Technologies ([www.ilt.columbia.edu](http://www.ilt.columbia.edu)), which I directed until 2002. Through ILT, throughout the 90s, I developed a series of projects to create an emergent place for study, primarily by using networked multimedia to empower the work of students in elementary, secondary, and higher education. Here, I thought, was a historical process that might transform the familiar sequential curriculum, with its scope of subjects and sequence of grades, into a "cumulative curriculum," one with which students study as their interests direct with all the resources of the culture available to each student all of the time. The material constraints on education are changing fundamentally: new problems; new possibilities. I believe these historic changes will enable students to form a cumulative command of the whole culture as each chooses a unique path through its comprehensive resources, continuously following personal interests informed by meaningful feedback embedded in the processes of study. Such changes are unfolding. But in lived time, so very, very slowly. . . .

Slowly, in fits and starts, people are altering how they organize educational activity in time and space. Slowly, in fits and starts, they are finding better ways to motivate students to exert educational effort. Slowly, in fits and starts, they are restructuring culture and knowledge to make them more leavening to students studying, potently fueling the work of education. In due course, when conditions for a cumulative curriculum have become ubiquitous, its powers will become evident. Then, people will be able to turn from the sophistic to the Socratic, ceasing to

disburse planned lessons to receptive pupils, concentrating instead on putting powerful questions to autonomous students. In due course, real cultural democracy will become possible. If people can actualize the possibility, participation in educational activity will become the primary public good, not a means to other ends, but the principal purpose of the polity and each person within it. Achieving what emerging material conditions make possible, however, will be highly contingent on steadfast effort.

As an accidental technologist, I have advanced ideas about this historical process in diverse essays and proposals, mostly online, the fullest of which were *Power and Pedagogy* (1992) [PDF] and *The Educators Manifesto* (1999) [PDF]. Additionally, with colleagues I have tried to act on these ideas by proposing and implementing activities like "The Cumulative Curriculum Project," [PDF] which became the Dalton Technology Plan (1991-1996), and "The Eiffel Project" (1996-2001) [PDF]. In all, I helped to mobilize well over \$20 million in gifts and grants to support prototypical places for study that we designed and managed during the 90s. The effort has had enduring effects through the Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning ([ccnmtl.columbia.edu](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu)) and in some schools, and the effort goes on, but in lived time, so very, very slowly. . . .

Far too slowly! Being optimistic – perhaps even quixotic – through much of this period I thought I had a chance, just possibly, to be an effective agent of interesting historical change. To be sure, I held that digital technologies were massive, slow-moving historical forces, the effects of which would unfold over many decades. Nevertheless, I thought it important to try to act in an effort to shape this process of historical change. People may or may not initiate numerous actions. But once they initiated some actions, those actions are irrevocable, like swallowing a sip of coffee. Once initiated, such actions have been caused. They carry forward an unfolding course in time, sometimes a course of great duration, that inhered irrevocably in the initiation of them. Then what is left is some modulation of the results. This modulation has great importance, however, for it can often determine the meaning of the action for us as caring humans. Developing technologies have initiated fundamental changes in culture and education. These changes are irrevocable and slow acting. Given them, we face the challenge to modulate the course of change so that we effectively express our deepest cultural values while caught in its inexorable transformations. How?

From my perspective, during the years commencing the new millennium, much happened, stalling opportunities to express important values. I awoke with the recognition that long-term action is a prerogative of youth, alas, a category to which, progressively, I cease to belong. Thus my third period of work began. As I see my own run getting ever shorter, I want to concentrate my energies in acting as critic and scholar. Opportunely, Teachers College appointed me as the John L. and Sue Ann Weinberg Professor in the Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education, a new chair, the character of which I am eager to define. With art long and life short, there is time neither for writer's block nor for grandiose schemes of action. Some problems animate my concerns; enough problems to keep me busy critiquing

and reflecting for as long as I can sustain the effort. I can explain these by indicating how I want to link my technological experience with my historical interests, touching then on three problems of particular concern to me in this emergent context of work.

Digital technologies are disruptive historical forces, providing important challenges and opportunities in the intellectual sphere. Print is not serving the work of intellect well. Books have become prodigal, especially publications of thought and scholarship. Professors are legion. We write too much. Winoing winds are weak. Work heaps higher, heaved into great bibliographic silos. A few minds gain notoriety; none real influence. As the possessive individualism of academic authorship slides down the digital slope, along which the costs of reproduction plummet, intellect bursts into a babel of profession devoid of audition. We stand at a historic juncture with a duty to find more powerful means to bar trivial publication. We have the task of enabling scholarly voices to concert so that together they can gain a meaningful hearing above the chatter.

Social software, enabling sustained, spontaneous collaboration, has promise as such a means to address this historical task. Suddenly, unexpectedly, Wikipedia revealed its potential power to expand the scope, lower the cost, improve the usefulness, even the authority, of reference works. But Wikipedia augurs no easy next step, for the organization supporting scholarly publication is far more complicated than that enabling publication of general encyclopedias. The emergence of alternatives displacing existing means and incentives to scholarly publication will be slower and more contingent. The whole system of recruitment, promotion, and tenure in the academic world reinforces the present prodigality of print. It should, however, prove adaptable, transformable. Few academics have direct incentives to maintain it, for few gain much from its system of copyright and associated royalties. But means to identify intellectual promise, achievement, and excellence within a community of spontaneous collaboration need to be developed. To find those, we must tinker and invent.

To tinker and invent, I want to join with others to create and publish work through [www.studyplace.org](http://www.studyplace.org) as an essay in action for concerting reflective scholarship about education. Most of the how, the who, the when, the where, and the why associated with such a collaborative effort must unfold, not as a plan, but as the emerging fruit of spontaneous commitments. Even determining the topics and scope of collaboration itself will largely emerge from the interaction of various initiatives, some of which may thrive while others will wither. Such contingencies are in the nature of the process. Spontaneous commitments arise as individuals identify problems on which they will start working in a context where others can converge with their independent efforts. Through StudyPlace, I intend to take some sustained initiative on three problems that strike me as important and difficult.

First, let's exert some initiative on the problem of educational scholarship. It is weak. It is poorly institutionalized. It pursues a causal rigor that wildly exceeds the capacity to control the relevant variables. Let's use StudyPlace to ask a host of naive questions in an effort to achieve a new beginning. For sustained periods in life, each

and every person engages continuously in their education. Creative spirits, reflecting on this experience, have made education one of the great themes in all cultural traditions. Yet our universities encapsulate the study of education in professional schools, as if only prospective teachers and other practitioners need ever think about it deeply. For most human activities, universities support disinterested inquiry in the arts and sciences and preparation of practitioners in professional schools, e.g., an economics department and a business school. Not so with education, where the professional school normally stands without a departmental complement in the arts and sciences. Yet, as I argue in a brief book, *Homeless in the House of Intellect* [[PDF](#)], education merits inclusion in the arts and sciences, not as a pre-professional program, but as a matter worthy of disinterested study.

Form follows function. To change the organization of the university we need to develop stronger scholarship in education. To do so, we need to understand educational experience in its full scope within the life course of persons and groups. Further, we need to show how educational experience works as an important historical determinant, the eventual goal of a StudyPlace discussion, "On (Not) Defining Education" [[HTML](#)]. At any juncture, the capacities and incapacities acquired through educational experience establish and limit the horizon of historical possibility. Consequently, educational choices have important, long-term consequences, ones of great complexity and historical import. Yet we know almost nothing about the process. Let us join on StudyPlace to mount a critique of educational reason to find how it is possible that educational experience takes place in the lives of human beings. With that critique, we can find the limits and principles of educational knowledge and action. Let us join to develop a fuller common sense, a shared understanding, about what educates.

Second, let's exert some initiative on the problem of educational leadership. Educational purposes are narrow and misdirected. Let's use StudyPlace to question them and articulate inclusive alternatives. Americans confuse aspiration with actuality and have complacently assumed that equality is the governing principle of our polity. Hence, we naively believe that public action, ostensibly serving ordinary people, will in fact advance their interests. This view of the American ethos is untenable: we comprise a society riven by inequalities, both enduring and extreme, in which a very small minority of great power and wealth, relative to the rest, has consistently strengthened the dominance of its interests. The power elite – the very, very few who are favorably positioned and most wealthy, along with the web of high offices in government, military, industry, and philanthropy that they control – propound sophisticated educational agendas – an agenda for the education of their own children, an agenda for educating the wannabes of wealth and power, and an agenda for educating all the rest, who are destined to build, to stoke, and to tend the engorging engines of production and consumption.

An expectation of continuous economic growth is a putative good. It yokes all to the economic carriage, which carries the elites happily along, while everyone else strains toward the ever-receding mark of "more." The privileges of ownership ensure that the bulk of the benefits from economic growth accrue to the powerful

and rich. Those possessing wealth enjoy the lion's share of economic growth as a leisured class dedicated to the realization of their human potentials. Those pursuing wealth, something very different from its possession, engage themselves in a narrowing, self-consuming labor, relieved by compulsive consumer entertainments. In this way, the doctrine of growth secures the dominant elites and subordinates the rest to the interests of the few whom they serve. Unending growth is irrational in a finite world and the unquestioned pursuit of it runs counter to the interests of most people. The rational choice for most, encompassing everyone from the very poor to the merely well-to-do, would not be maximum growth, but full employment, understood in comprehensive cultural sense. Let us secure each an adequate economic base, from which to pursue the autonomous development of his or her manifold capacities, interests, and concerns. Many, perhaps most of these concerns are, despite the mania to monetize, external to the economic calculus of growth. All people merit, not mere equity in the race for more, whatever that might mean, but the full exercise of their humane potentialities. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness call for a full realization of humane possibilities which entails far more than a fast-growing GDP. Let us join to uncover the educational meaning of full employment.

Third, let us exert some initiative on the problem of educational aspiration. In contemporary life, adult exchanges with the young are woefully uninspiring, both as education and as politics, serving most effectively to pass on the status and prospects of parents to their children. We need new ideas about the interaction of education and politics in the life experience of persons the world around, ideas that will educe creative effort, ideas that will evoke historical effects as sustained, moving, and pervasive as the effects evoked by ideas about national cultures and nation-states, now worn, which started to work in the West around 1500. Intellectuals need to choose to think about existing problems in new ways, to drop the obvious and to entertain the unexpected.

In the long duration of historical time, nation-states are breaking up into a girdling, global city-state, distributed in the lace-work of intensely interacting persons concentrated in the different cities of the world, all webbed together through binding vectors of communication and transportation. As the global city emerges, an historic transformation is underway, which can revive traditions of civic humanism. Let us join to rediscover the city as educator. In it, let us use the random access of urban spaces, amplified by the random access of cyberspace, to create a global, urban culture. In it, let us respect natural limits and refine humane possibilities. Let us draw vital inspiration from our daily experience of this emerging urban culture, imparting to it a pedagogical authority and a political legitimacy, which national cultures, with their system of bureaucratic schools, and nation-states, with their biased institutions, increasingly lack. In the epoch now ending, people linked education with politics as *nationalists*, so in the epoch now beginning, let us join to unite education and politics as *urbanists*.

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