Possibility, not Prediction

An interview with Robbie McClintock about his forthcoming book—*Enough: A Pedagogic Speculation*—to be published in March 2012.

Education is a hot topic with controversy over costs, charters and school reform, No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top, college costs and admissions, teaching to the test, equity, and much more on the docket. How do you speak to all that through *Enough*?

What do I say to all that?—"Enough, already!" I've had a long career. Right after I entered college, the Russians launched Sputnik and perennial worry about the quality of schooling intensified, and it really hasn't yet abated. As I entered graduate school, Conant's *Slums and Suburbs* was a best seller. For decades schools have been in a state of serial reform. And the inequities and problems that all decried are still here. You get the picture. It's been like the film *Groundhog Day*—the same thing over and over. Important stuff, don't get me wrong, but a churn, nonetheless. Education as a hot topic has simmered and burned since World War II, with essentially the same worries, the same alignments of opinion, and little real change. Throughout, the issues have been important, but we need new ways to think about it all, to break the persisting limits. That's what I try to do in the book.

Through *Enough*, I want to change the terms of pedagogical discussion. We need to do so to renew the capacity for historic development in education. And to get that renewal in education, we need to go far beyond education, which is not, after all, a separate sector of life, but an important element in the strategy of modernity pursued over the past 500 years. Modern schooling, K-16, even K-24, is a mature, global system, highly optimized, despite the cant of critics, and it has been beating up against systemic limits. We need a new system—here, there, everywhere.

So that's why you set the book as if it was written 150 years from now, looking back from a future in which the dominant values, then, are very different from those now in force.

Yes, I try to be suggestive about a possible future to arouse the reader's imagination. It is hard to see ourselves and sense the limits inherent in how we do things without imagining the actuality of alternative ways of doing them. Utopianism has had a bad rap, to the detriment of us all. So I have my future authors give clues about their world in passing comments as they describe and analyze developments in our world.

Science fiction and popular culture put innumerable futures before us, most of them dystopian. How did you decide on what life would be like in 2162?

For me, that's the fun part, the easy part. The future I depict in *Enough* is not a predicted future. It is an imagined future, constructed in a simple, self-gratifying way. As a cultural historian, I'm startled by how interpreters now assess who-was-who and what-was-what in ways that differ sharply from the assessments current in a prior time. In my work as an educational critic and innovator, I've felt distinctly marginal. Very few take my ideas seriously, and many would hold them neither relevant nor practicable. I'm not mainstream. To depict an imaginary future, I indulge in some wish-fulfillment. I simply sketch a future in which cultural historians look from their vantage point at our time, and find ideas like mine, despite their current marginality, to have been of central significance to the emergence of their world.

In what sort of world would people with my ideas and values feel snugly at home? That's the easy question. It leads to more difficult ones. First, how do the current principles, whose operations have generated the present-day world, differ from those that would generate the postulated alternative? And then, can one imagine those alternative principles displacing the ones currently at work through some possible historical path? SHIT HAPPENS—the book by the future historians within *Enough*, my book—addresses these questions by examining, in 2162, a dissenter's educational reflections, circa 2010–2012.

Let's stick with this futuristic part. You give it a surprising title—SHIT HAPPENS. Why?

The phrase comes from a late-twentieth-century bumper-sticker and implies that much is neither predictable nor explainable. When shit happens, people are not powerless, but their power turns on their ability to cope, ad hoc, acting intelligently on what is taking place. My future historians think this prudent and commonsensical, and hence they use it as the title of their work. I hope their analysis will give a sophisticated, well-reasoned understanding of how people can better cope with circumstances in the heat of the moment.

You start by introducing your future historians and their present-day subject, Rob Carlyle, who had been born, I infer, in 1938, in eastern Pennsylvania, and who had died around 2035 in Buenos Aires, having emigrated there from New York City a few years earlier. In calling the first section, "Situating the Question," what do you take the question to be?

Don't forget the chapter involves both *situating* and *the question*. It *situates* readers relative to the future and to the historians. Their world is different, one in which people prize *stability* relative to *change*, the *commons* relative to the *market*, and *enough*—neither too little nor too much—relative to *more*. And the chapter situates readers and the future historians both to Rob Carlyle, the representative of presently marginal thinking that is destined to become mainstream, and to present-day mainstream thought that will become marginal in the imaginary, twenty-second-century. *The question* emerges as the historians begin examining Carlyle's ideas. He rails about the way most discussions in his experience equate education with the work of schools, colleges, and other instructional agencies and ignore how actual persons experience their lived education through the whole of their lives. The future historians wonder why Carlyle had trouble criticizing the conflation of education with schooling, for they commonsensically differentiate the two. They end the chapter, stating the question, "Why did people think it plausible to equate education with the work of schools?"

This first chapter also establishes unusual stylistic ploys. As author, you take on the guise of several imagined contributors—Commoner, Digger, and Sojourner. And they write about Rob Carlyle's thought and work, which you have imagined as well.

Yes, ideally the reader needs to pay some attention to who is saying what. Commoner is the primary spokesperson for the future. Digger is her occasionally impertinent apprentice, ironic but industrious and smart. Sojourner is the common reader of the future, now and then interjecting naive but important questions and views. Carlyle and his ideas, of course, carry the whole work, and he is imaginary, but perhaps less so than the others, for he is basically my alter ego, a "maxi-me," to invert an Austin Powers conceit.

You have your future contributors interject lots of extended footnotes, a running commentary on their text. Why?

Many long footnotes may turn some readers off, but I want to slow readers down. Speed-reading is fine for some things, slurping information up, but no good for sustaining a thoughtful exchange about difficult ideas. I would rather have the full attention of fewer patient readers than passing attention from many. I find philosophical prose that has been wonderfully smoothed and polished —the work of George Santayana or Henri Bergson comes to mind— hard to read thoughtfully. In *Enough*, I hope the footnotes convert the text into a kind of dialogue and make readers recurrently reassess what the whole argument has said in order to keep track of where they are in a complicated discussion. A hurried reader can always skip the notes and skim the rest.

I find it hard to query you about the seven following chapters in SHIT HAPPENS, one after the other, for they do not seem exactly to fit together in a linear sequence.

Excellent observation! In writing *Enough* I want to show that education, and much else of importance in life, does not result from a temporal sequence of discreet causes acting on the learner in linear time, one after another. Rather it emerges from reciprocal interactions taking place between the learner and the totality of co-existing circumstances in the immediacy of living experience. Each chapter explores in distinctive ways this contrast between sequential, causal action and simultaneous, reciprocal interaction. All of them together disclose, not a conclusive progression, but a cumulative understanding of emergent experience.

But in calling the book *Enough*, you seem to be making an argument, trying to persuade readers to conclude in favor of a change in values, to pursue enough, not more.

Perhaps. I would prefer stating it more circumspectly. I hope readers will come to understand that a change of values can and should take place. I doubt that a writer can persuade readers, as individual persons or as members of groups, to change their values. People don't choose their values consciously as a passive consequence of this or that consideration, not even as a response to some powerful, palpable carrot or stick. Shit happens—we cannot implement it; we can't implement what comes about through the flux of reciprocal interactions between an active self and the world. Trying to cause a change in values as a sequential consequence of our actions mainly produces counter-productive ironies.

So the sections in SHIT HAPPENS are variations on a single theme. Might we state that theme to be grasping how education, and other aspects of life, do not result from sequential causes, but take place through the simultaneous, reciprocal interactions that constitute the immediacy of life?

That puts it well enough, although the statement will not cause a reader to understand the idea, for understanding is one of those things that take place; understanding happens, or doesn't, as we reflect upon the phrase. These sections move from one to the next, as the point of view on the theme shifts, starting with primary attention to causality and ending with reciprocity as the foremost concern.

We have talked about how Chapter 1 situates the question. That question is not whether people were right or wrong to conflate education with the work of schools, but why they thought it plausible to think that. How do you account for their thinking?

Such thinking did not apply only to education. Chapter 2, "Schooling in an Era of Enclosure," shows how ideas conflating education with schooling make education appear to be a matter of causal actions on pupils and students occurring inside enclosed places and times. Enclosure projects boundaries around selected objects in order to structure the causal action taking place within those boundaries. Enclosure has been the primary principle of thought and action in the modern era, roughly from 1500 to 2000, not only in schooling, but in most aspects of public life—politics, economics, society, and culture. Practices of enclosure have been immensely productive, but they are contingent, historical constructions that may be exhausting their creative potentialities.

Are there any ways to explain what happens in historical experience other than a causal account of the relevant actions?

Yes, and one of them is gaining substantial historical significance. Chapter 3, "Taking Place," uses Immanuel Kant's "Analogies of Experience" to explore the difference between causal action of one thing on another in sequential time and reciprocal interactions among things that coexist in time and space. Lived, existential experience in the historical present comprises all sorts of simultaneous interactions taking place without a manifest cause unequivocally determining them. As these interactions take place, they define networks, which are dynamic and unbounded. Someone contemplating the simultaneous interactions of co-existing things cannot successfully impose enclosure, projecting boundaries on the network of coexistence, abstracting this out as cause and that out as effect. Kant's second analogy, about causal connections in sequential time, did a great deal to strengthen the causal reasoning dominant throughout the modern era, with its reliance on enclosure in practical thought. But Kant's third analogy, about reciprocal interactions taking place between things that coexist in time and space, is becoming massively pertinent and practical to all the networking activities taking place in our time.

OK, but how far will that take us? Look at all the structures of causal power in our world.

Chapter 4, "Skepticism and Reasonable Faith," rejects efforts to predict what will and won't happen and commends an openness to possibilities. Long-term, the historical record documents many basic changes in how people have thought about their lives. These changes took place and we cannot conclusively explain what caused them, even with benefit of hindsight. Even less can we predict how and why a change might take place in the future. But such change is entirely possible, and that possibility includes the possibility that people could come to think of their experience taking place on a global network of urban places and an inclusive, shared commons, rather than in contiguous, bounded nation-states and through market exchanges of privately enclosed properties and goods. Upwellings such as the Velvet Revolution or the Arab Spring surprise nearly everyone, including astute commentators, because they take place through an emergence from complexity, with respect to which prediction—the extrapolation of causal action—is irrelevant.

Where do you go from there? That significant change is possible seems like a "still not" that the Marxist Utopian, Ernst Bloch, would contemplate. Do we twiddle our thumbs in anticipation?

No—use it or lose it. Dead, material stuff is subject to prediction; autonomous, vital selves form purposes and seek to control what takes place in order to fulfill possibilities. Chapter 5, "Educational Emergence," describes *the form of life* as reciprocal interactions sustained by a living locus of control with its circumstances, an *Umwelt*, an ambient world with which the locus of control coexists. This description culminates by situating education in complex, emergent experience. Students—many-sided, autonomous agents— form themselves by trying to control what is taking place on diverse, inner-outer networks, inwardly neural and outwardly cultural. My understanding of this self-realization draws heavily on an early twentieth-century German biologist,

Jakob von Uexküll, whose influence has been widening. Recognizing the locus of education as educational emergence, will not change the causal results of policies and programs. It may, however, encourage persons and publics to conduct themselves, both resolutely and expansively, as autonomous agents in the face of deterministic pressures.

You then write about a place for study. How does that differ from schools and other instructional agencies?

Well, a *place* for study derives its import from all that has been said about the difference between enclosures and what takes place in living life—*life*, not an enclosure, is the place for study. Chapter 6, "A Place for Study," returns to the relation of education and schooling. The constraints of schools often work against the interactive dynamics of self-formation in the fullness of life. Efforts effectively supporting educational interactions by students will provide ample access, day-in and day-out, everywhere, to cultural resources, informing their self-control with many-sided, immediate feedback as they interact with their circumstances. Through education, a student, qua person, senses how to control innumerable capacities, each described by a verb of human agency. Our efforts to control what takes place are contingent, often inadequate, but however contingent and ultimately mortal, they are the vital actuality of our lives. Each asserts the dignity and prerogatives of life through the inalienable autonomy of self-formation.

That's stirring, but does it give a sense of direction? Isn't "the inalienable autonomy of self-formation" really relativistic?

Perhaps—if you believe that purpose and value must come from some source outside of us, one that transcends the domain of mere mortal life. But to live is to suffer the consequences. Autonomy is not relativistic in the sense that nothing makes a difference. What is better and what is worse in the conduct of life is crucial to autonomous agents. Hence Chapter 7, "Formative Justice," queries how a person should manage her emergent education as it takes place in interaction with the cultural and human resources of her world. Plato, especially the *Republic*, advanced a profound understanding of formative justice as an inner sense that each person possessed with which she could assess and guide her appetitive drives through pride and honor, forms of positive feedback, and critical reasoning, forms of negative feedback. Through formative justice, Plato advanced, not a collective plan for a political regime, but an internal commitment to a pedagogic regimen of self-control.

But how does a regimen of self-control gain a sense of purpose?

That's a great question, often asked! And answers to it turn out poorly because the real answers are existential, not discursive, but recursive. Self-control directs, as best it can, the regimen of self-control. Chapter 8, "Fulfillment" elaborates on that recursion a bit and culminates the effort throughout the book at concept formation, clearly differentiating between the pedagogic role of prediction and possibility. Predictions inhibit and distort a student's emergent educative work, for by themselves, they do not take into account the inner sensibility that allows a living being to turn determinative forces against themselves, negating the predictable result. Vital capabilities emerge into a person's life experience as she grasps the possibility of exercising autonomous control within the interactions taking place in her life. We judge with an inner sense, akin to the sense of balance, what will thwart control and what may counter its loss, teetering onward through life. Each of us is mortal and our struggle for self-maintenance is contingent. Fulfillment comes, not through some absolute success, but through our judging, realizing, and exercising our capacities fully to the limits of our potentials.

Let me see if I've grasped your central ideas. All the parts of SHIT HAPPENS contrast principles of causality and reciprocity. In our contemporary world, efforts at causal action dominate what we do, not only in education, but in economics, politics, and the major professions. In another world, perhaps a possible one, people will attend, in the conduct of their lives, primarily to on-going reciprocal interactions taking place on a network of vital circumstances. In a world of reciprocal interaction, the dynamics of self-maintenance and self-control take on great personal and public significance. We should think of these as both the locus and means through which autonomous persons form themselves.

You've got it. Throughout *Enough*, I call for a renewed vision—personal, formative, almost anarchic, but in a constructive way. I won't recapitulate it here—that's the purpose of *Enough* itself.

You heavily trust spontaneous emergence. Will it really help?

I'd prefer to say *autonomous* emergence. And I believe everyone takes part in it, an autonomous part. I doubt whether contemporary elites combine sufficient coherence and fortitude to generate a sense of vision for massive collectivities. But why should we want them to do it for us? We ask too little of ourselves as potential actors in the world, ignoring the possible in pursuit of the predictable. It's contemptible. What does all the sound and fury about schooling, with its talk of higher standards and accountability leading to better jobs and a more competitive economy, come down to? "Plastics," as the telling exchange in *The Graduate* put it. The young are still staring at predicted futures with Dustin Hoffman's expression of bewildered ennui—a vacant look of "Really? . . . Oh, whatever."

Educators need to inspire the young with a vision that is really difficult, a challenging possibility, improbable and unpredictable, perhaps a radical, twenty-first century universal urbanism, a call to supplant the market with the commons, the nation-state with a global city-state. And who are these educators? The young themselves. Occupy Wall Street is reawakening a sense of possibility. It exemplifies the unexpected power of autonomous emergence. Look at the sources of historical change— Tiananmen Square, the Velvet Revolution, the Arab Spring, OWS. The canard that the occupiers have no program precisely misses the point! They break open predictable worlds with a sudden sense of possibility, to which the conventional discourse of program and policy does not pertain.

Will it really help? Not in a policy sense—but that may be the historical power of spontaneous emergence. Improbable possibilities move us; predictabilities leave us cold.

In several ways, *Enough* strikes me, itself, as a most improbable book. For one, it is unusual in the way it integrates discussion of education with that of politics, economics, geography, society, communication, and technology.

Improbable indeed. I didn't intend to write it—it just happened as I tried to do something else, to draft a relatively short review. The different matters integrated in it came together because they are just different names for significant aspects of historical experience, lived as a complex whole. We test whether we are making sense of any one of them by seeing whether our understanding for one makes sense of the others. The multiple truths of post-modernism are fine, for there are certainly many, many ways to think about human experience. But each of those multiple truths should take the measure, not only of some part, but of the whole as well.

How did you do your research for this book?

Research?—one doesn't research a book that just happens.

True, but you draw on a wide range of resources, often in considerable depth.

Exactly. It does draw on a lifetime of serious study. I've tried to draw on it in ways that readers will find accessible and illuminating.

I'm glad you've given it a try, but it will be interesting to see how readers receive the work. Few people, I suspect, even few biologists, would have ever heard of Jakob von Uexküll, yet you give him an important place in SHIT HAPPENS. Might you risk seeming eccentric?

Uexküll is for real, and so is the risk of appearing eccentric. Uexküll had considerable influence on important twentieth-century European thinkers, most recently Gilles Deleuze, but before that Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger, José Ortega y Gasset, and others. In 2008, SUNY Press published a study of his influence, and in 2010 the University of Minnesota Press has put out one of Uexküll's books, newly translated. Further, he has begun to influence current neuroscience and robotics. And I've already experienced the danger of seeming eccentric when I first encountered Uexküll many years ago, in the mid 1960s, as I began research for my dissertation on Ortega. In one of the last courses I took, I submitted a good essay, pointing out how Uexküll anticipated much cybernetic theory advanced by people like Norbert Weiner and Warren S. McCulloch. The professor, a specialist in modern European intellectual history, refused to accept my essay because he had never heard of Uexküll and couldn't assess my claims, perhaps thinking I'd made him up. Of course, I was pissed, but had the last laugh. I sent it off, a stab in the dark, to *The American Scholar*, a prominent journal, which turned out to have a special issue on the electronic revolution in the works. There was my first publication, in 1966, well-placed along with essays by Marshall McLuhan, Lynn White, Jr., Jacob Bronowski, Herbert A. Simon, Richard Hoggart, and many other luminaries. Eccentric to some—timely to others!

What about your discussions of Kant? They go far beyond passing references. Will these narrow your audience?

As a historian of education thought, I've found a variety of major works in philosophy essential to understanding educational ideas in key periods. For instance, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is itself a very difficult, very illuminating history of the self-education of the human capacity for cultural activity. So too, Kant's three *Critiques* importantly grasp the constructive capacity of human thought. Early on, I studied Kant pretty closely while working on Ortega and other twentieth-century thinkers—they all came out of a neo-Kantian background. Since then, every so often I've offered a year-long seminar on Kant and Hegel for advanced graduate students—close readings of Kant's *Critiques* in the fall and Hegel's *Phenomenology* in the spring. So as *Enough* happened, Kant was ready at hand. His thought really is central to what I discuss, and I work hard to present his ideas in a sound, comprehensible way. I think too many writers finesse too much, not wanting to discourage potential readers. It's a cop out, really. Good readers will be happy with difficult material if an author makes its relevance clear and its expression lucid.

OK. But you seem to draw together many other ideas in ways that would not occur to most people—emergence and network theory, different forms of mapping and urban theory, strands of economic and social thought, and some distinctive ideas about Plato and what you call formative justice.

Don't forget I'm no longer a young man. I've been fortuitously privileged, able to pursue diverse intellectual interests pretty much all out for over 50 years. And I have a good memory, at least for all that. Although an improbable book, *Enough* draws on many years of my intellectual experience, and in that sense it is something of an intellectual autobiography, an incomplete and unpremeditated one.

But does the combined breadth and depth in *Enough* make it too difficult? Readers may put it down, exclaiming "Too much!" Who do you think your readers will be?

That's a challenging question. I can answer directly, saying that I expect my readers will be people who want to think in a serious and far-reaching way about education and historical life. But you are really asking whether such potential readers exist, and whether I can possibly reach them. I don't know. Frankly, I had little success getting prominent publishers, either academic or trade, interested in my proposal of the book. Judgments of predictability weigh heavily on publishers these days, with money scarce and creative destruction threatening from the digital periphery. As counterbalance, little now impedes an author who wants to take his work directly into the marketplace. Self-publication has become easy. But getting work reviewed and discussed without the imprimatur of a prestigious publisher is challenging. If a book says something both original and important, and backs it with substance, and does it with style, I think it possible to cross over the threshold of public attention.

Enough can do that. Many people are eager to engage in sustained reflection about basic principles in the conduct of life. Will *Enough* reach such an audience? I cannot predict it, but I am ready to probe for an answer, open to surprise by the unexpected. In the face of uncertainty, we should especially prize the possible, not the predictable. I fear too many writers end up not saying what they think because they feel it imperative to produce a predictable success. Someone my age begins to realize that "publish or perish" points to deeper realities than hackneyed prudence for young academics. A serious writer, as a person, embodies beliefs and values, and wants to give these a cultural vitality reaching beyond the writer's immediate influence, further in both space and time. The ethos of academic and commercial publishing favors those who can predictably reach a specialized niche now, but that ethos is fast going into flux. Predictions falter. I'm ready to test the possible.

Fair enough. Thanks!

Robbie McClintock graduated from Princeton University with high honors in 1961 and received his Ph.D. from Columbia in 1968. He was an assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins University from 1965 to 1967 and a member of the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University from 1967 until 2011. Currently he is forming the Collaboratory for Liberal Learning, a cooperative consulting service for the advancement of scholarship and criticism in education, communication, and culture.

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