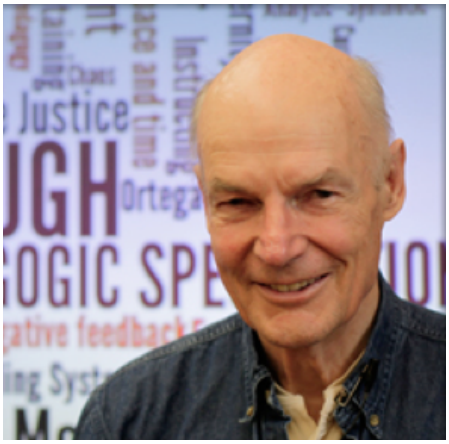
Robbie McClintock



After a long academic career, I live in Princeton to study how education and technology interact and to nurture intelligence, judgment, and care by improving digital tools for personal use.

Born in 1939, I grew up preferring sports to academics, doing just well enough on the scholastic escalator until I formed a sense of purpose as a Princeton undergraduate. Then, I wrote a good senior thesis, aced comprehensives, and in 1961, received my BA, unexpectedly with high honors.

Columbia followed, where I studied history and thrived after a bad start as a somewhat picaresque academic who tilted with the doctoral mill, emerging well-certified yet undisciplined. In those days the old-boy network combined with a great job market to create magical opportunities – a phone call, recruiting me in my 3rd year beyond the BA to be a tenure-track assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins University. Two years later, a similar call initiated my return to Columbia, where I joined the Teachers College faculty in 1967. There I stayed, rising through the ranks – fast, then slow, and fast again – becoming the inaugural holder of the John L. and Sue Ann Weinberg Professor in the Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education in 2002.

Through all my schooling, I was poor at assigned learning, but ardent at independent study. With the bookstore as my curriculum, I studied my way through Princeton, sparked by avid reading in the work of the Spanish thinker, José Ortega y Gasset. As a grad student and young professor, I developed that interest through free-wheeling study of political and educational thinking from Rousseau forward and an exploration of how modes of communication and material life affected personal and collective self-formation. My dissertation sponsors, Jacques Barzun and Lawrence A. Cremin, gave me free rein to go all out on an intellectual biography of Ortega, and for me the dissertation became a sustained intellectual experience of transformative importance.

Defended in the spring of ‘68 in the midst of campus turmoil, my dissertation became a large, well-received first book, Man and His Circumstances: Ortega as Educator, published in 1971. Within the domain of Ortega’s influence, many like Jacques Ellul and Salvador de Madariaga took note of it. Shortly before it’s actual publication, I received tenure, a high-point that I found difficult to move beyond. I drifted, dreaming of life as a public intellectual, uncertain what should come next.

In an education school ethos, many professors and students perceived my thinking to be tangential, too distant from the realities of public schooling. At 33, should I try to move elsewhere? Perhaps, but with tenure among colleagues I liked in a major university in a great city I loved, I stayed put, committed to developing my youthful commitment to study into a full theory and practice of education. In life, a question can become a quest.

> Can each person’s circumstances encompass the resources requisite for universal, comprehensive, life-long, voluntary study? Can each and all have actual opportunity to study in ways prompted by their vital concerns as fully as they would find worthy?

Through the 1970s, I wrote essays to clarify why educators should work to strengthen the cultural power of formative study. I properly published a few, like “Towards a Place for Study in a World of Instruction” (1971). Others, like “Universal Voluntary Study” (1973), “From Problems to Predicaments” (1976), and “The Imperative of Judgment” (1977), I circulated as not quite finished manuscripts. My experience broadened through a year of solitary immersion in the milieu

surrounding Frankfurt's Goethe-Universität (1973-74), and through a wholly different whirlwind as a special assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in Washington (1975-76).

As the decade ended, I felt fully committed to my quest to make universal, voluntary study actually feasible for all, but I had formed deep doubts that I could do much about it as a scholar and critic, doubts I expressed in "The Dynamics of Decline: Why Education Can No Longer Be Liberal" (1979). I had become primed to change the course of my quest significantly. My work on Ortega had drawn me into a many-sided study of Western intellectual history, with intensive engagements in the work of Machiavelli, Montaigne, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Dilthey, and Max Weber. I had made the history of communications media as agents of cultural change an important topic in my teaching. And a few forays into the high-level typing pool at HEW, a cavernous room filled with digital text editors, vintage 1975, had insinuated a recognition that in coming decades computers would do much more than crunch numbers. I became a historical materialist of sorts, bent on making digital technologies serve everyone as an affordable, effective place to study.

In 1983, I became chair of Communication, Computing, and Technology in Education, a department at TC. In that move, I organized the Institute for Learning Technologies (ILT) in 1984, directing it until 2002. I wrote numerous proposals, among them — The Cumulative Curriculum Proposal (1990-91), which spawned two large projects — The Dalton Technology Plan (1991–1996) and The Eiffel Project (1996–2001). We won over $20 million in grant competitions and supplemented that with equivalent matching effort, implementing high visibility projects to prototype advanced resources enabling study by means of the emerging Internet in New York City schools, public and private, and in Columbia University.

Proposals I wrote said little about how cognitive research could enhance instruction and lot about how historical innovation could improve conditions for study. Most innovative projects address small parts embedded in a complex historical process with results that occasionally degrade the whole process or more likely revert to the status quo ante after a short-lived success. I tried to address these uncertainties in the many proposals, reports, talks, and essays while directing ILT, among them, two extended essays, Power and Pedagogy (1992) and The Educators Manifesto (1999), and the pedagogical rationale for a huge public-private collaboration attempted on the eve of the dot-com crash, Smart Cities — New York: Electronic Education for the New Millennium (2000).

Over the past 20 years, I've concentrated on scholarship and technical initiatives "for their own sake." In *Homeless in the House of Intellect* (2005), I explored how the academic study of education might have a place within the ongoing historical transformation of higher education. In *Enough: A Pedagogic Speculation* (2012), I criticized present-day thinking about education and public life from an imagined perspective, far in the future, when *enough* — neither *too much nor too little* — would have supplanted the acquisitive drive for *more* as the basis for exercising judgment and legitimating authority. Subsequently, I published an extended essay — *Formative Justice* (2017) — that brings the speculations put forward in *Enough* more concretely into the contemporary context.

I'm depressed by the anger that has built up in us all. The public sphere has ceased to work, enabling a few to arrogate wealth and power that egregiously exceeds what they can use with wisdom, compassion, or worth. The public sphere has become a white noise of what other persons want, opine, and scheme. In the personal sphere, let's construct a place to study where we can use our intelligence, judgment, and care in our circumstances, in the actualities of the life each lives.

Still so much to do. Here's to the future!