The Optimist as Scholar and Teacher: An Appreciation of Robbie McClintock

Introduction to the *Festschrift* in *Educational Theory*

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In September of 2003, I began my first semester as a doctoral student in the Philosophy and Education program at Columbia University's Teachers College. As I was creating my course schedule, my advisor informed me that I would need a few electives from another department. Fortunately, there would be a course of interest, a semester-long study of Immanuel Kant, offered in the Department of Communication, Computing, and Technology in Education. As a humanities student, I would never have thought to look for courses in a department with "technology" in the title. Yet I learned that there were indeed humanities courses on offer there by someone who was trained as a historian and was equally well-versed in philosophy, Professor Robert O. McClintock. I signed up for his Kant course, and it was precisely the kind of experience I sought — a reckoning with the educational ideals in and educational implications of Kant's work. I took his seminar on G. W. F. Hegel during the next semester, and that was in turn followed by a seminar on Max Weber. In rather quick order, Robbie — as he preferred students to call him, rather than Professor McClintock — became a person to whom I turned regularly for both guidance on my scholarship and wisdom about the ways of academia. After I left Teachers College, he remained one of my most important scholarly interlocutors, always enthusiastic about and generously critical of the manuscripts that I have never ceased sending him.

As the editor of a *Festschrift* for Robbie, I have had the opportunity not only to revisit his scholarship, but also to be in touch with many people who admire Robbie as a scholar and a friend. Indeed, several of the contributors to this *Festschrift* — Ellen Lagemann, David Mathews, and Grace Roosevelt — describe their enduring relationships with Robbie, relationships based on robust and energetic exchanges of ideas as well as the evident care and kindness Robbie exudes. Two other contributors to the *Festschrift* — Walter Feinberg and Chip Bruce — do not have a personal connection with Robbie but offer a critical engagement with his ideas. Each has written an essay on one of Robbie's recent books: Feinberg discusses *Homeless in the House of Intellect* and Bruce discusses *Enough: A Pedagogic Speculation.*[1] In both of those books, Robbie focuses on formative justice, a concept that he argues ought to be central to our understanding of society's obligation to recognize a person's need to take control over his or her own formation. Roosevelt discusses Robbie's most recent work on formative justice alongside her personal reflections about him in the final paper collected here. Thus, overall, the first two essays present more personal reflections on Robbie, the third and the fourth papers focus on Robbie's work, and the fifth paper offers both. In these introductory remarks, I offer some reflections on Robbie as scholar and teacher. In both capacities, Robbie's remarkable efforts reflect an unwavering optimism about the potential for people both to control their development and to improve the world.

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[1] Robbie McClintock, *Homeless in the House of Intellect: Formative Justice and Education as an Academic Study* (New York: Laboratory for Liberal Learning, 2005); and Robbie McClintock, *Enough: A Pedagogic Speculation* (New York: Collaboratory for Liberal Learning, 2012).

Robbie as Scholar

When I met Robbie, he was in the midst of a second transitional moment in his career, a transition that accounts for how one would find the "Weinberg Chair of the Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education" in the Department of Communication, Computing, and Technology in Education. Early in his career (1961 through the early 1980s), Robbie was the consummate humanist. He studied the great works of philosophy and history and wrote a dissertation on José Ortega y Gasset that was later published by Teachers College Press.[2] After this period of teaching and writing as a historian of education, Robbie became interested in technology. He not only wrote about technology, but also designed educational technology, implemented it, and raised funds to support it (1980s to early 2000s).[3] After that, in the early 2000s, he returned to educational history and philosophy, teaching the sort of courses I took with him and writing about formative justice and higher education, among other things.

When considering his scholarship and professional activities over his career,[4] one does see some clear demarcations of the three phases in his work; there is indeed a significant amount of focus on technology in what we might now call Robbie's middle period. But, there are a couple of themes that, with the gift of hindsight, run through the corpus, and therefore serve as useful threads for a discussion of his work: (1) the distinction between education and schooling, and (2) "progressivism."

Education versus Schooling

For those familiar with the work of the great twentieth-century historian of education Lawrence A. Cremin, the idea that education and schooling are distinct will be familiar. Cremin emphasized that people are educated through a vast array of cultural institutions — not only the school but also, for example, the church and the press. Cremin was Robbie's dissertation advisor at Columbia and Robbie embraced this interpretive principle for studying the history of education. The subtitle of *Man and His Circumstances* is *Ortega as Educator.* Robbie writes not about Oretga as seminar teacher but rather about Oretga as "civic pedagogue." Robbie understands the public intellectual to be a public educator; he is interested in the way that Ortega enlightened people, how Ortega's public speeches, his politicking, and his journalism shaped public opinion.

In Robbie's early period, evidence of his interest in education rather than schooling can be found in the range of figures he addressed: Plato, Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Henry Barnard, among others.[5] The work on Barnard, for

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[2] Robert McClintock, *Man and His Circumstances: Ortega as Educator* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971). Almost all of Robbie's works are available online at www.educationalthought.org/files/rom2cu/. Also, many are available in web-readable form (and often with valuable introductory material) at www.robbiemcclintock.com.

[3] In an essay composed around the time of his retirement from Teachers College, Robbie identified these stages as his time as a "humanistic educational theorist" and then as an "educational technologist." "A Look Back and a Look Ahead," in *The Reflective Commons*, paragraph 5; http://robbiemcclintock.com/shelving/A-12-About-RMcC.html, 2004, revised 2007 and 2012.

[4] At least, over his career so far. As I write Robbie has several recent publications and is in the midst of a significant project on the history of educational thought.

[5] Robert O. McClintock, "Foreword," in *R. L. Nettleship's the Theory of Education in the Republic of Plato* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968); Robert O. McClintock, "Diderot," *Teachers College Record* 76, no. 1 (1974): 143–149; Robert McClintock, "Rousseau and the Dilemma of Authority," *History of Education Quarterly* 14, no. 3

example, develops a distinction between school construction and school architecture. The former pertains merely to the creation of a physical structure suitable for schooling, while school architecture "puts building in the service of spirit." Robbie might have called his essay "School Architecture as Educator," for he argues that school architecture had profound implications for "what man can and should become and about the means by which he can be helped to fulfill his destiny."[6]

To many readers today, Robbie's view of Barnard and school architecture might seem grandiose and romantic. A reader in 2018 might think that such a comment about man's destiny is the legacy of a period in American history when people had far broader and greater educational aspirations than we do now. After all, we live in a time when most educational reformers devote their time to debating how to increase math and literacy test scores rather than the purposes of education, let alone what a person or all of humanity "can and should become." But Robbie's belief in the transformative power of education was, in many ways, untimely. At the time Robbie was writing in 1968, many revisionist historians were recasting the school as a fundamentally oppressive — rather than freeing — institution. They saw the school as an instrument of the state that manufactured compliance. In contrast, Robbie was idealistic; indeed, his optimism always emerges in his works.[7] Robbie was, in some ways, like the most enthusiastic of Enlightenment *philosophes*, arguing that education was the key to unshackling and improving humanity.

Yet Robbie shared aspects of the revisionist critique of schooling with his contemporary historians. He criticized schooling, but he remained in contact with the principle that schooling is only part of education. Unlike the historians who came to focus intensely on schooling in their critiques, Robbie remained focused on education, broadly conceived.[8] Robbie, however, took the study of education in a different direction than Cremin. Whereas Cremin studied a range of educative forces that shape an individual, Robbie came to focus on a person's role in education; that is, Robbie saw the most important locus of education as a person's control of his or her self-education, rather than the educational forces that act upon the person.[9]

(1974): 309–333; Robert O. McClintock, "Pestalozzi," *Teachers College Record* 76, no. 2 (1974): 344–348; Robert McClintock and Jean McClintock, "Architecture and Pedagogy," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 2, no. 4 (1968): 59–77; and Robert O. McClintock and Jean McClintock, eds., *Henry Barnard's School Architecture* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1970).

[6] McClintock and McClintock, "Architecture and Pedagogy," 64.

[7] See, for example, Robert O. McClintock, "The End of an Order," *Perspectives on Education* 2, no. 3 (1969): 1–5.

[8] In his essay on Diderot, Robbie defends the Enlightenment project from the charge thatit failed: "Diderot's dream was the liberal dream, and it includes the drive toward universal schooling. But if the near approach of that part of the dream has yielded disappointing results, it does not show that the dream was deceptive, for the part is not the whole. The whole dream was to make the whole culture work for, not against, intellectual and moral autonomy" (McClintock, "Diderot," 148–149).

[9] Perhaps Robbie's most explicit reckoning with Cremin is in "On (Not) Defining Education." Robbie there criticizes, among other things, Cremin's (and other historians') tendency to describe education rather than explain it. The explanatory project, Robbie argues, recognizes the person as central (the contrast I emphasize here): "education is not a topic to be defined; it is a constituent element of all human life as each lives it. Educators must attend to people educating themselves, respecting the autonomy and integrity of each." Robbie McClintock, "On (Not) Defining Education: Questions about Historical Life and What Educates Therein," in *Theoretical Perspectives on Comprehensive Education: The Way Forward*, ed. Hervé Varenne and Edmund W. Gordon (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 53. A longer, revised version of the paper is available at http://www.educationalthought.org/files/rom2cu/2007-On-(Not)-Defining-Education-McClintockDefining.pdf.

By 1971, he developed a robust critique of the way that schooling had come to hinder education. Schools focused on teaching and learning. What was most educationally significant and formative, however, was "study," the process whereby one took control over one's own education, over one's formation. Until the modern era, teaching and learning occupied only a minor space in one's education — school was where a person came into contact with exercises in grammar, logic, and rhetoric. One can mark the loss by how people now typically understand learning: "once it described what a man acquired as a result of serious study, but now it signifies what one receives as a result of good teaching."[10] Robbie continued to press this point throughout his career, arguing forcefully that schooling is not the same as education, and education ought to be our primary concern.

In his middle period, Robbie recognized the potential for educational technology to create opportunities for study — rather than instruction — in schools. In the 1980s, Robbie's work drew the attention of IBM, which sought to support efforts that explored how computing would and could impact culture and learning. In 1986, Robbie was the founding director of the Institute of Learning Technologies (ILT) at Teachers College. ILT explored the ways that new advances in technology and multimedia could positively impact learning. A few years later, Robbie embarked on a four-year project creating a curriculum with integrated internet resources.

ILT collaborated with the Dalton School, a private school in New York City, on "The Cumulative Curriculum Project." A "Cumulative Curriculum" was to be a new approach; instead of the sequenced lessons and materials that had emerged from education centered on the printed word, networked multimedia technologies could offer students the ability to navigate a cumulative curriculum driven by their interests. It would eliminate rigid distinctions between subject areas and obviate the need to adapt specific curricular content norms for each grade level. From 1996 to 2001, McClintock worked further on designing and implementing a cumulative curriculum in "The Eiffel Project," a collaboration with New York's Public School Board and serving New York's public school students.

Robbie's innovations, his energy, and his passion for exploring new possibilities opened up by the technology led various foundations and individuals to fund his work. By the end of his middle period, he had marshalled over twenty million dollars in funding for his various projects. In the twenty-first century, he continues to experiment with means to harness technology for educational ends. He incorporated web-based, publicly accessible student work into his courses. He designed websites such as *The Studyplace, The Reflective Commons*, and *Educational Thought.* Indeed, as Robbie's essay in the *Festschrift* demonstrates, he continues to work on websites that might serve to advance the study of education. These public projects are not new. They are part of Robbie's sustained effort create opportunities for collaboration beyond the constraints of academia. Already in 1984, Robbie created a "Laboratory of Liberal Learning" which would come to be a website that, among other things, hosted free translations of classic works including Rousseau's *Emile* and Dewey's *Democracy and Education*.[11]

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[10] Robert McClintock, "Toward a Place for Study in a World of Instruction," *Teachers College Record* 73, no. 2 (1971): 179.
[11] Grace Roosevelt heavily revised Barbara Foxley's translation of *Emile* for the website. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or Education* (1762), trans. Barbara Foxley (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1921).

In his late period, while still optimistic about the ability of technology to be educational,[12] Robbie continued to see the conflation of schooling and education as an unfortunate limit both to theorizing about education and to students' development. While several later works address this idea,[13] his 2012 book *Enough: A Pedagogic Speculation* offers a pointed critique of the conflation of education and schooling in the book's first chapter and a discussion of the centrality of study in its sixth. Furthermore, all of his late-period work on formative justice centers on a person's ability to control his or her self-formation. Others have a role to play by marshalling resources to support that effort, but those resources are to promote education, and education may or may not occur inside of a school.

Educational "Progressivism"

Robbie's interest in promoting a kind of education in which students have more control, in which they are more engaged, and that is no longer based on a lockstep curriculum reads, in many ways, as straightforwardly progressive in the Deweyan tradition that took root at Teachers College — the very place that Robbie spent most of his career. Indeed, Robbie believed that technology could finally help realize some of the ambitions of progressive educational reformers. In *Power and Pedagogy,* he writes of technology freeing students from static, linear printed books. Instead, the "project method" of teaching (that Teachers College professor William Heard Kilpatrick had popularized at the end of the First World War) could prosper as students, following their own intellectual interests on the internet, would have access to precisely the information they needed.[14]

If this sounds utopian, that is due to Robbie's relentless energy and enthusiasm. He saw in networked computing an innovation that would change schooling as much as the printing press did in the fifteenth century. Indeed, he discussed the analogy at length in *Power and Pedagogy* and *The Educator's Manifesto.*[15] Just as the printing press reoriented education — "the problem of education ceased to be one of learning to write down the spoken text and became one of learning to read the printed text"[16] — computing would now reorient learning from students following a sequenced set of texts to students' exerting control over the sequence.

It is not hard to find proselytizers for educational technology today. Indeed, with schools so eagerly embracing technology, a leviathan of a market has emerged to supply schools with countless products that can help their "digital native" students become "technologically savvy," "innovative learners." Though American school districts are cash-strapped, educational leaders have prioritized the constant acquisition and implementation of new hardware and software. But what makes Robbie different from most of today's technology enthusiasts is his historically and philosophically grounded understanding of technology. Schooling organized around printed texts

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[12] See, for example, McClintock, *Enough: A Pedagogic Speculation*, 154.

[13] McClintock, *Homeless in the House of Intellect*; McClintock, "On (Not) Defining Education"; and Robert McClintock, "Formative Justice: The Regulative Principle of Education," *Teachers College Record* 118, no. 10 (2016): 1–38.

[14] Robbie McClintock, *Power and Pedagogy: Transforming Education through Information Technology* (New York: Institute of Learning Technologies, 1992), section 29.

[15] Robbie McClintock, *The Educators Manifesto: Renewing the Progressive Bond with Posterity through the Social Construction of Digital Learning Communities*, vol. 21 (New York: Institute for Learning Technologies, 1999), 89:142–107:42.

[16] McClintock, *Power and Pedagogy,* chap. 4, section 137.

began in the sixteenth century, but such schooling only became widespread in the twentieth.[17] The transition was slow because educators only gradually — over centuries — began to incorporate more readily the increasingly available printed texts. Robbie was able to take a long view in anticipation of the changes that digitization of texts and networked computing would bring about. Indeed, perhaps impatient to see what such a future would look like, he indulged in some futuristic speculation in both *Power and Pedagogy* and *Enough.* He was confident that the changes would be profound, and he was eager to help people understand that they were being presented with a historic opportunity to rethink how people teach, how schools are organized, and what it means to learn.

Robbie imagined the possibilities of educational technology the same way that Barnard imagined the possibilities of school architecture; our use of technology ought not merely to make more efficient the standard way of teaching and learning. Educational technology ought to enable people to fulfill their personal and collective. Robbie understood education to be shackled only by the limits of human imagination. Educational technology ought to cause us to rethink the main premises of schooling, not to "simply improve education incrementally" but rather to "radically restructure its character and limits."[18]

Dewey too had argued that schooling was serving the needs of earlier historical contexts.[19] Robbie's work shares other similarities with American progressives. The project method approach to curriculum was perhaps the most popular concept associated with American educational progressives and, as we have seen, Robbie understood digital technologies to make the project method genuinely possible:

> In a digital system of education, the teacher needs a different range of skills — to put generative questions, to guide open-ended inquiry, to diagnose the diverse difficulties that may impede their students' efforts, to provide them continuous feedback that deepens and sustains their self-directed work.[20]

The underlying principles supporting that approach — that students would be self-motived and hence "actively" direct their learning rather than "passively" receive instruction — are consistent with much of Robbie's work; he sought to protect students' autonomy by countering "pedagogical paternalism."[21]

But those similarities with American educational progressives might distract one from the actual tradition of educational thought with which Robbie was most seriously engaged. The tradition is not Deweyan but, primarily if not exclusively, German. Throughout his corpus, Robbie draws on the philosophers of *Bildung.* And, as someone who has consistently resisted the equation of education and schooling, it is fitting that he has long been attracted to *Bildung,* which

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[17] Ibid., chap. 4.

[18] Robert McClintock, "Into the Starting Gate: On Computing and the Curriculum," *Teachers College Record* 88, no. 2 (1986): 208.

[19] John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1900), chap. 3.

[20] McClintock, *The Educators Manifesto*, vol. 21, 105:42.

[21] Robert McClintock, "On the Liberality of the Liberal Arts," *Teachers College Record* 72, no. 3 (1971): 411–412.

treats education as formation. He was already making this point early in his career,[22] but in recent years attention to the *Neuhumanismus* figures such as Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottfried Herder, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and G. W. F. Hegel has come to be a foundational idea for his work on formative justice.[23] *Neuhumanismus* was characterized by an emphasis on people's self-determination. This tradition of educational thought resonated with Robbie, whose career was profoundly animated by the belief that humans want to become better, they want to make the world a better place, and — whether young children or adults — they yearn to take control of their formation. Education, in school or outside of it, ought to free people to do so. These principles not only ground his scholarship and his work in technology, they also have shaped Robbie's pedagogy.

Robbie as Teacher

My experience in Robbie's class on the first day of the semester in 2003 included receiving what was perhaps the most ambitious list of course readings (and recommended readings) that I had hitherto encountered on a syllabus. That Robbie presented such ambitious reading schedules reflected two things about his approach to teaching. First, he treated students as scholars, assuming that they were eager to take control of their course of study. As a result, Robbie's seminars were authentically egalitarian — not only did he insist on us calling him by his first name, but he also elevated us all to the level of equal participants with him. Second, he seemed to presume that everyone was not only as motivated as he was but also intellectually prepared as well — he exuded a faith that his students were capable of articulating nuanced readings of the most demanding philosophers, for example, Kant and Hegel.

Robbie gave his students a very wide berth to pursue interests of their choosing in their work. He wanted the course readings and seminars to inspire students to refine their thinking about concepts already of interest to them. He lamented that students were so often instructed to write papers on discrete topics narrowly related to the course and the professor's interests. Robbie thought such an approach to coursework was misguided. In contrast, he encouraged his students to rethink how they approach course papers. The ability to compose a paper in response to someone's prompting is certainly a useful skill. But the ability to refine one's thinking through revising one's writing and ideas is perhaps even more important. Robbie invited his students to submit final papers for his course that were products of substantive revision of things students had previously written. In Robbie's classes, the message was clear: the painstaking revisiting, rethinking, and reworking of one's ideas is just as important as taking a good idea and putting it to paper. Though perhaps less glamorous than the initial creative spark of insight that propels a paper forward, revisions — the tightening of arguments, the accumulation of more evidence — are the very life-blood of good scholarship in the humanities. Robbie was committed to creating a forum for such revisions in his courses.

The pedagogical theory underlying such invitations to revise as a course assignment is directly related to Robbie's call for study and his work on formative justice. His course assignments were experiments in which he could observe what happens when students take

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[22] Robbie McClintock, "From the Ought That Is to the Is That Ought to Be: Ortega and Dewey on the Pedagogical Problem" (paper presented in honor of the centennial of José Ortega y Gasset's birth at the City University of New York Graduate Center, Spring 1983).
[23] See, in particular, McClintock, "On (Not) Defining Education."

control over their education. Instead of asking the very people who elected to pursue graduate school to perform a certain task, why not conceive of graduate courses as mere aides in their journeys to study whatever they are passionate about?

In the years after I completed my coursework, Robbie took his commitment to using his courses as opportunities for students' self-formation even further. For example, rather than distribute an ambitious list of readings, as I had received in his classes, he offered no list of readings. He asked his class to co-create the reading schedule as a group, identifying collectively the readings that were important to them. Additionally, rather than having students work independently, he invited them to participate in collaborative writing assignments on course wikis and publicly available websites — laying the groundwork for the very sorts of web-based intellectual communities he hoped to see come together.

To be a student of Robbie's was to reckon with one's educational freedom in a way that could be unsettling — so much of the responsibility for one's learning was in one's own hands. Students in his classes could not help but notice the implications of Robbie's pedagogical choices. They were being encouraged to take the reins of their education. They were treated as intellectuals and scholars capable of making wise choices about how to best produce work of value. They came to see their own interests and passions as central to their education. In short, they were asked to study rather than receive instruction.[24]

In one essay, Robbie wrote that teachers serve as models "by putting questions to themselves and people around them."[25] He certainly did that; it was evident to his students that he was consumed by an intense intellectual curiosity. He was a Socratic teacher, always searching, always questioning, always trying to engage others. I agree that this kind of pedagogical model is important for students. I have tried to be such a model in my own classes. But perhaps the aspect of Robbie as teacher that I have attempted to incorporate most stridently into my teaching is his optimism. Robbie was optimistic about every student's potential. He treated his students' ideas as though they were of great importance and had exciting potential. Sometimes identifying that potential required that he reconstruct a student's idea in a helpful way — something I both witnessed and from which I benefited. He projected a genuine enthusiasm about being in a classroom, studying alongside others.

If every person could have the opportunity to study with someone who is so optimistic about his students' potential, personally and collectively, we might actually move toward the bright future that Robbie always saw, just beyond our reach, on the horizon.

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[24] For more on Robbie's ideas about pedagogy, see "Some Thoughts on Graduate Study" (2003), *The Reflective Commons*, http://robbiemcclintock.com/shelving/E-03a-E-TGS-13.html.

[25] Robbie McClintock, "A Valediction" (2011), http://educationalthought.org/files/rom2cu/2011-A-Valediction-McClintock.pdf.