

I.C.C.P: A Story of Rubrics

Imagination

The library air seems to be permeated by something: fine dust from deep between the pages of the few books that are left. But goopy, as though the film left behind by students' fingers on touch-phones and tablet screens is evaporating into the atmosphere. Or it could be more of an electrical substance: crackly microelectronic charges from the fluorescent lights high in the asbestos-lined ceiling doing a charged dance through the air, intermingling with wifi waves like boys and girls at a roller-skating rink. Arnold imagines electronic debris working its way through his clothes and skin and glomming onto the cells and platelets and whatever other fragile, organic material makes up the inside of his body. He pictures the deformation of his DNA as a ghastly game of Marco Polo: hordes of nimble, mutant, teenage particles taunting his degenerated middle-aged cells.

Behind Jim a powerpoint slide displays a clip-art funnel. "These are the ideas you folks came up with the last time." Jumbled words like language soup tilt into the funnel and Jim's rendering of the work they did at last month's faculty meeting are arranged neatly into catch phrases and slogans along the bottom. "Creativity" means "inhabiting an old idea, making it new." "Coming up with solutions." "Thinking outside the box." "Taking a risk with technology." He is magnanimous with the credit

he gives his staff: “You folks took this initiative and really just ran with it. You came up with all this great language. These are your ideas, your words. I just put it together and sorted it.”

Arnold pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and holds it to his face, breathing in the smell of Tide laundry detergent.

The slide changes and now displays at least fifteen bullet points in 10-point font about the new mandates requiring students to be assessed in the holistic yet marketable skills of Imagination, Creativity, Collaboration, and Problem-solving. Arnold misses Jean—if she were here, she’d have made up new names for the *initiative*: Idiocy, Carelessness, Cut-n-paste, Plagiarism. He looks forward to telling her about it all when he travels to Michigan for Christmas, just five weeks and three days away.

On each table is a large white sheet of paper and four magic markers in different colors. Arnold is sitting with Andrea Shea, from science, Pat Purcell and Dave Dean from math, Lindsey Ananian from English and the new guidance counselor. Stephanie or Sarah, he can’t remember her name. They twiddle the markers. Pat folds a tiny corner of the butcher paper up into his fingernail. When Jim finally stops talking, they look at each other, pressing their lips into small smiles and shrugging.

“So what are we supposed to do?” Dave says.

“Brainstorm,” Lindsey replies.

“Who’s got the best writing?” Andrea asks. “Lindsey? You want to do the honors?”

Lindsey smiles: humble, capable. They roll their colors over to her. She starts with orange. “Imagination” she writes in big letters at the top of the sheet. “Okay?” They nod. Arnold coughs into his handkerchief before leaning over onto one haunch to stuff it back into his pocket. “How is imagination different from creativity? Is that what we’re supposed to be discussing?”

The new guidance counselor answers, “Well, I think we’re just supposed to discuss what imagination *means* to us, so that we can have a quantifiable way to *measure* it on the new rubric.”

“I don’t see a whole lot of difference between creativity and imagination,” Pat says. “Can’t it just be part of the same rubric?”

“We want to be able to explain to the students what the *difference* is.” This from Lindsey. She continues, “I guess it’s all about choosing the *language* to express what we want to express.” They hack up phrases and spit them onto the table, where Lindsey, with her florid handwriting, transforms them into something that looks both corporate and infantile.

When it comes time to share at the end of the meeting, the new guidance counselor—it’s Stephanie, not Sarah—stands up and explains the work their group has done: “We talked about the differences between creativity and imagination, and how all of the different categories—collaboration and problem-solving too—how they kind of overlap but also have their own characteristics. We thought imagination was really something that needs to be organic.” She’s pointing at the big paper with Lindsey’s writing in different colors. “And we thought it came from inside you, as

opposed to something that you do that involves using old ideas and making them new, these are really just dreaming up *new* ideas.”

Jim is nodding furiously. Arnold notices that his bald patch has gotten bigger. It looks like a map of Australia and the matte fluorescent light reflects off of it as he nods. “Okay, so it’s more organic.” Jim does what Jim does: he take the ideas of his *wonderfully talented* staff and puts them together, sorts them out and organizes them. He is, he always tells them, there to support *them* and *their* work.

When the meeting finally ends, after Jim’s *summarizer* and the teachers’ completion of their “ticket to leave” feedback slips, which Jim appreciates them doing so he can continue to make their meetings as *relevant* and *useful* as possible, because, he assures them once more as chairs scrape back, water bottles are re-capped, coats zipped and briefcase flaps patted down, his job is really “to support all of you, because you’re on the front lines, and I’m the General, and we’re doing it for the kids. They’re our number one priority.” Arnold tucks his coat into his armpit and heads to the parking lot.

In his car, outside the three-family where he has an apartment on the top floor, he squints at a wobbly drop of water that has fallen from the sky and is clinging to the windshield. He presses his finger to the thick glass, and as if the drop had gotten his permission to *let go*, it slides like a tear. It doesn’t contain much water and by the time it has reached the gully at the top of the hood, it is flat and scarce. But soon a few more drops fall, and then a few more, as though small groups had made pacts to jump from the greying sky together. He grabs his coat and briefcase

from the passenger seat and dashes up onto the porch and into the vestibule. Just in time before the rain starts pelting.

Creativity

It is January. Arnold spent Christmas in Ann Arbor with Jean and the boys. They're still friends, he and Jean. Not the best of friends, but he has no other family and she invited him and he went. He has nowhere else. Today, Lindsey, from English, reminds him a little of Jean: the dip in the middle of her collarbone. They're both thin and the muscles at the base of their necks suck in and out when they speak. He hadn't noticed it before, but now that he sees it, it reminds him of the way he used to put his nose right in there, with Jean, like they'd been cut apart far back in time by some master jigsaw maker: his nose and the dip at the base of her throat.

He lets his lids droop as he remembers Jean's naked body and allows himself to relax, enjoys the tingling sensation that warms his inner thighs. "So, it's like, like we said before, about imagination. It's a matter of. A matter of..." Lindsey is blushing and starts to wiggle like there is sand in the waistband of her navy skirt. She makes room for air at the neck of her blouse and pulls the sides of her blazer together. Pat Purcell, from math, drops his hand from the table and gives Arnold's sleeve a little tug on the way. Arnold, receiving the message, lets his eyes drift toward the ceiling, where several pencils dangle from their tips like spears in the underside of an expansive Moby Dick. Lindsey gets her thought out and they start to throw ideas at

her. She writes down the detritus of their brainstorming, her confidence growing with each flowery letter.

Jim makes the rounds, stopping and nodding at each group's work as though he could lasso their ideas with an invisible rope attached to the tip of his nose. Lindsey smiles up at him, the marker suspended. They exchange words and she sounds both intellectual and flirty. Arnold sucks on a blue plastic pen cover. He is in awe of the students who were able to launch pencils with such acumen into the high ceiling and not get caught. If they were mature, if they knew about the asbestos lurking up there, they might have thought twice.

Jean had greeted him at the door. He'd taken a cab from the airport. He'd insisted, even though she'd offered to pick him up. Seth was stretched out of the sofa and he got up languidly, reaching for Arnold's hand as though he had to wade over to him through waist-deep water. "Yo dad, what's up?" Arnold stood with his hat in both of his hands, his rolling suitcase next to him with his overcoat draped over the extended handle. At first, for a dizzying moment, he wasn't sure if it was Seth or Mac, but noticed the crimping at the outer edge of his ear—some recessive gene from him or Jean, they didn't know which—that confirmed this was Seth, his oldest.

The room smelled like brownies and chemical strawberry air freshener.

"Seth, help your father with his things." Jean was wearing an apron.

"Nice tree," Arnold said. "I've got it." He lifted the case up the stairs to the guest bedroom and went back down to help Jean in the kitchen. Seth was still on the couch.

“How are your students this year?” Jean was tying the legs of a small turkey together. It was the size of a baby.

“Getting dumber all the time,” he said.

“That’s strange. We’re supposed to be the ones who are getting dumb.”

“Ah, you know, the more technology they have, the stupider they seem to get. They’re all medicated. You remember.” Jean smiled and her skin seemed papery where it crinkled up in front of her ears. “How are things with your job?”

She shrugged. “I’m off for the next 5 days.”

“I could have stayed longer,” he started to say. “I could change my ticket.” She shook her head. She had plans. He waited for her to tell him what they were, but she didn’t have to. “Mac?” he asked, swiping sticky bits of garlic from the side of the knife.

“He’ll be here in the morning.”

Arnold woke up first and went downstairs with the gifts he’d brought: An e-book reader for Seth (hopefully he didn’t have one already; hopefully he’d use it—he preferred television to reading), a vase for Jean (hopefully he hadn’t gotten her one last year—he couldn’t remember), and for Mac a gift card to Marathon sports (he’d asked in Cambridge and they’d assured him that there was at least one in Michigan, and anyway, he could use it for online purchases). He put on the coffee.

Half of the colored lights blinked, the other half didn’t. Arnold went to the tree and tried to get either all of them to blink or all of them to not blink. He pulled out what he thought was one of the controlling lights from the green rubbery wire,

but they all went dark. He tried to push the bulb back in, but couldn't. He tried to screw it in, tried to line up the shapes and push, but the glass snapped off at the base. He sat on the floor, the broken bulb in his palm, blood beginning to seep from a cut in his thumb.

Wheels crunched over gravel in the driveway and simultaneously there was a creak on the stairs. Jean padded to the front door in her bathrobe. As soon as she opened the door, Mac enveloped her in a bear hug that hollowed Arnold out. He watched them come back inside arm in arm, Jean helping him off with his coat. Mac was handsome, clean cut, smiling. As a kid, he hadn't been very good a student and Arnold used to feel disappointed by him. Seth had been talented at school and Arnold had loved him best. But Seth had become lazy, hadn't finished college, drove a taxi, still lived with his mother. Mac, on the other hand, worked with disadvantaged kids in Detroit, for god's sake. The two of them, Mac and Jean, went straight to the kitchen, without noticing Arnold on the floor, his thumb bleeding.

Collaboration

By March, Jim has funneled their creativity- and imagination-measurement criteria into two separate rubrics. Now the teachers are charged with flying the new rubrics from the tails of prettily decorated aircraft across their classrooms while fireworks and bugles herald the rise of the new *initiative*. When Arnold tries cheerleading, however, he can't incite any enthusiasm.

“So if I’m not creative, then my grade goes down?” A student asks.

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s just that we want to emphasize *skills*, rather than *knowledge*.” He paces in front of them. They are quiet, which is unusual. He has their attention, which is unusual. The circuitry in his brain won’t move quickly enough for him to be able to verbalize something important, now that he has this window through which he might be able to reach them, and instead, he says, “These things are important, and you’re doing them anyway; the administration just wants us... us, teachers, and you students, to *name* them.”

That’s it; he’s lost them. Annie G. turns around, her phone like a homing beacon in her two hands, and starts whispering to Jen. Annie V. re-braids her hair. Bart slides down in his desk and leans his head toward Tom who sits behind him. Tom bats the rim of Bart’s cap with one hand while diddling the screen of his ipad with the other. Eddy falls asleep with his head on his arm. Marie gets to work with her ballpoint pen on the swirly design she’s been covering her palm with, and Gianni takes a tissue and a blob of hand sanitizer from the front of the room and starts polishing the rubber sole of his sneaker with it. It feels like chaos, even though Arnold is used to it and knows that his greatest gift as an educator is not taking the mayhem personally and not letting it unnerve him. He’s seen colleagues come and go. Sometimes teachers retire or move, but usually they just become too demoralized and slink away, leaving a temporary ripple of jabbering gossip, pity, and a hard old substitute who teaches the students absolutely nothing for months, until a new teacher can be found.

Jean had left such an eddy when she'd departed, and Arnold had weathered the shushing whispers, pitying looks, giggles, and a subdued batch of students who behaved themselves for a couple of months—until the hubbub had died down and the gossip had been forgotten. Things went back to normal.

It had been impossible to keep their troubles a secret—not when they worked in the same building and she would have mornings where his emotional withdrawal would have nudged her into some kind of psychosis and she'd have to visit his classroom before the morning bell—a couple of students might be there already, sleepily reading through notes or spacing out or texting, and she'd squeeze her voice down to what you might call a whisper, but it launched from her throat in a narrow geyser of glistening steel and the students would huddle over their desks, eyeing each other with nervous smirks as he ushered her into the hallway and out the side door of the building where they imagined the students and other teachers couldn't hear them.

And then, just like that, one day, she pulled herself together; with the help of some guy she met on the Internet, she got over Arnold. So it was really *Jean* who made the decisive break. He wouldn't grovel, wouldn't go to her department and demand answers the way she had. He even convinced himself that he was *happy* for her. And then she moved with the kids back to Michigan to be closer to her parents and he received the fruit of the seeds that he'd planted: Freedom. A.K.A. Loneliness.

He narrows his eyes. Outside the window, a ropey line of geese honks by. The bell hasn't rung yet but students are zipping backpacks and clutching their phones like an external organ—a metal kidney that keeps them alive—the glow of instant

messages reflected in their eyeballs. When the bell rings, a few remember that Arnold is there and say goodbye. He shuffles the rubrics into his briefcase and heads to the library.

The collaboration rubric is printed on purple Necco-wafer paper; there are copies on each table. Grades are due tomorrow, and the teachers are irritable because Jim is constitutionally incapable of going off-script and letting them go early from their meeting, or even letting them talk about things that matter: Pequot High School is stoned. Informal anecdotes about kids eating pot brownies during class and vaping in the bathrooms are rampant. They are also getting stupider—despite all the technology the parent groups have raised money for—and they can't put away their cell phones. They have ever more complex and sophisticated ways of cheating. These realities connect the psyches of the teachers together into a vast webbing. Not an elephant exactly, nor in the corner, but unspoken, felt.

Lindsey is taking charge at the table, keeping them on track. She is an *ambitious* teacher—the kind you know will one day end up as a superintendent somewhere. Young. Professional. Not like some of the crankier older teachers who still revel in the fact they can wear jeans and Birkenstocks to work and get away with it.

“Why do we have to grade them on collaboration?” Arnold says. “Some kids are shy and others aren't and how are we going to tell who's collaborating and who's not?”

Lindsey responds in a tone that makes him the little boy and her the sage parent, even though he has at least twenty years on her. “The separate rubric is to help them *develop* collaboration as a *creative skill*.”

Arnold squints at the rubric until the type melts into Rorschach splotches. An ear, a rifle, a capital K.

Jean should have stayed at the private school in Cambridge. They should never have started working in the same place. Catching each other’s eye at faculty meetings, sneaking kisses in the computer lab when no one was watching. It was too much time together, too much intensity. Soon Arnold started to feel trapped and restless. And then the boys came and Jean took her maternity leave—never enough—and the bickering got more and more icy: who would pick them up from daycare, preschool, elementary school; who would go home when the rest of the faculty went for pints at a local Irish bar once a month; who would go shopping, buy food, buy new clothes, buy lunch meats. It was usually Jean and she resented it and he resented her. He thought about the condom he should have insisted on wearing—twice—even though she said it would be fine, she was safe, it was a safe time.

Regret would be too strong a word. He loved his boys. But he never quite felt that they were his responsibility.

Arnold points out a misplaced apostrophe. Lindsey, the English teacher, had missed it. This satisfies and dismays him in equal parts. He keeps his comments grammatical until they are allowed to leave. Grades are due. He fudges an entire set of quizzes, turns off the light and goes home early.

Problem-Solving

June is fast approaching and Arnold isn't sure about his summer plans. He used to make arrangements for Seth and Mac when they came to visit, but now that they're grown, things are much simpler. He'll get consulting or tutoring work, find ways to fill his time. There is curriculum work to do—Jim has tasked him with researching textbooks, and there are the new rubrics to work on as well.

Abby Stillman is taking a test that she missed last week. Arnold remembers that he used to love this time of day: most of the students have gone home, the football players are practicing, getting mucky out on the field. A group of Chinese students sits in the hallway near his classroom, playing guitar and singing pretty folk songs. Something about the emptiness of the classroom, the chalkiness that settles in the silence. Arnold loves to putter around in it, aligning desks, erasing the boards, finalizing tomorrow's plans.

Abby's hair falls in front of her face and she pushes it back, but it slithers from behind her ear again. On the screen in front of him, Arnold is reviewing the final exam for his sophomore honors class. In another window, he checks a couple of websites, looking for some interesting summer work. Maybe he'll do something radical, like bartend or sell hotdogs, rent a summer bungalow near the beach, take up surfing.

Maybe Jean wouldn't mind if he rented a place in Ann Arbor for the summer. He could buy some paints, paint some landscapes. Spend time with his boys. When he was in college, he imagined his future self in the countryside, living near a body of water—a lake or river, or the ocean—and spending long afternoons with a thermos of coffee and an easel. Evenings spent smoking in a bar, drinking scotch. It was a future that belonged in someone else's past: cinematic, imagined. He was embarrassed by it, and hadn't uttered a word of it to anybody—except Jean, one night, drunk and giddy. And then he resented her for knowing how silly a person he actually was, deep down. She loved that he'd opened up to her, until it all backfired. She'd thought she was finally reaching this intensely cerebral, yet generous and funny, man. But she paid for it, in the end.

Abby has a question. She raises her hand, even though she's the only one in the room, doesn't look up, keeping working instead with the pencil in her other hand. "Yes?" Arnold says, his eyes rheumy from the chalk dust and the florescent lights. She still doesn't look at him but points to a problem and asks him about it as though he is looking over her shoulder and can see what she's pointing to. He gets up creakily and goes over to help.

She finishes quietly. Arnold has closed down the window with job listings and is just finishing entering the scores of the test Abby is taking into GradePro. He doesn't hear her come over but looks up, startled, as her test slides across the desk and stops next to the keyboard. She is a mediocre student and is only partly lit up by intelligence or curiosity. He would even go so far as to say that she strikes him as

dull. Her hair is long—as is the fashion—despite the fact that it would be much nicer shorter. It hangs straight and gets thinner at the ends, like teensy elongated icicles.

“Do we really have to use those rubrics next year?” she says. “Are we really going to be graded on that stuff?”

“Well, yes, I suppose you are.”

She shrugs both of her shoulders dramatically, like she’s trying to hide her ears behind them. “That’s dumb.”

Arnold laughs. “Yes, it’s dumb.” Abby laughs too and he can see that he’d misjudged her all year—that she is more clever than he’d given her credit for. He’s embarrassed by the oversight and it reminds him of how he’d also misjudged Mac, who incidentally was just recently given an award by the mayor of Detroit. Arnold had misjudged nearly everybody in his life, when you got down to it: Jean, Seth, even Lindsey from English, he realized, was probably more than he’d thought.

Overwhelmed with a sense of inadequateness; as though he’s always thought he was the one with depth and intelligence, walking through a world full of diaphanous people, shallow, hollow people and now suddenly everything has turned upside down and he is the one who’s lacking any substance. He and Seth—the two people he’d always thought of as somehow superior to the rest of the world. The world had shown him how wrong *that* was.

“Are you okay?” Abby looks concerned, her eyes narrowing at him like they can see to the other side of his scalp.

“Fine, Abby, I’m okay. I was just thinking how right you are, that the new rubrics are dumb.”

She is backing away, as if he'd just told her that he drank human blood in the mornings instead of coffee.

"Maybe you'll tell them not to use them. Next year. Anyway, see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," he says. But she is gone.