This provocation is a personal essay of creative nonfiction. Playing with form, the piece offers three scenes separated by a series of multiple-choice questions; readers must use this standardized-test format to create meaning and understand the text itself, the nature of today’s high-stakes tests, the story’s characters, and the essence of teaching. While the names of the students and one staff member have been changed to protect their privacy, the events are true to the author’s experience.

**DIRECTIONS:** Read the following three passages from “Teaching Story.” After carefully reading each passage, select the best answer for each multiple-choice item. You have 15 minutes to complete the test. Your performance will assess your understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

**Passage I**

Charlie. Such a happy-sad kid. He came for the first three days of school, but this is the first time I’ve seen him in two weeks. He’s escorted by a security guard, 15 minutes late. Opening the door, I say, “Hey, hey Charlie! Glad to see you back.”

He turns to look at me, his eyebrows raised in surprise or confrontation—I’ve only seen him a few times, so I’m unsure. My gut, though, suggests he’s astonished that I’m greeting him, that I’m happy to see him, that I don’t

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*The term *provocateur* has its origin in then-NCTE President Sandy Hayes’s welcome to the CEE 2013 Summer Conference, during which she shared her wish that she could swap the “troublemaker” label she had been given for her name badge at the International Society for Technology in Education conference the month before with then-NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson’s, who was fittingly labeled “provocateur.” We can think of no better inspiration than Kent for this section.*

*English Education, October 2016*

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immediately harass him for arriving tardy or missing class. I grin and earn a slight smile back that fails to reach his eyes and, in that moment, while I’m sidestepping to let him pass, take in the fact that his honeyed eyes swim in a tide of bloodshot white. He shuffles over to his seat and pops in his earbuds beneath an over-sized, red hoodie. Tuned in? Tuned out? I don’t know.

It’s been just a few moments, but it’s been enough: One student has climbed onto the table in the center of the room. He reclines inappropriately on his side like a lingerie model and twirls an eyelash curler around an index finger, blinking at me slowly. Deliberately. As most of the rest of the class hoots and takes pictures, placing bets on my response, I appreciate that today a flowered headband festoons his hair. I’ve watched him cut, pin, comb, curl, dye, and cry over that hair. His attempts to control it always fail. It will be what it is. I watch one more bleached-out tendril of frizz escape its plastic, half-moon prison and, without missing a beat, I open my book and say, “Oh, Jon, get down before you hurt yourself.”

“Awww!” responds most of the class, hoping for a larger reaction.

“Incidentally, your eyes really POP today.”

And they do. That eyelash curler has worked wonders.

And that did it. The class starts to really lose it.

I’m certain Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook, and whatever other media students access on their handheld space machines crash under the tsunami of posts.

Jon bows and, singing all the s’s together fluidly in “Thanksss Mssss. LeSssssage,” he leaps off the table. Off the stage. He gifts his headband for a handshake, his eyelash curler for a hug, and his throne on the table for a seat in his desk. Jon shines. He is Sally Fields and the class likes him. They really like him. Their deluge of applause and laughter crescendos and crests.

As I try to call the students’ attention back together for a discussion about our whole-class book, I see Charlie put his head down. Now I also see that he doesn’t have the backpack I got him, or any of the other supplies a fellow teacher and I scrounged around for.

1. The point of view from which this passage is told is best described as that of
   a. an uncaring, unreflective, lazy union thug.
   b. a student teacher describing a mentor teacher who “succeeds” with “at risk” kids.
   c. a teacher reflecting on the challenges of helping a student she barely knows.
   d. an expert, tenured teacher looking back at just a few reasons why she’s feeling an overwhelming sense of failure in the teaching profession.
2. The most reasonable conclusion to make from the fact that Charlie’s “honeyed eyes swim in a tide of bloodshot white” is that he
   a. is high.
   b. didn’t get enough sleep last night.
   c. suffers from allergies.
   d. was crying.

5. It can be reasonably inferred that which of the following steps should next be taken?
   a. Ignore Charlie and continue on with the class.
   b. Check in to see if Charlie needs to go to the nurse and tell him you’re glad to see him again.
   c. Ask Charlie what happened to the stuff you got him.
   d. Call Security.

4. The anecdote about Jon serves to
   a. give an example of how every student is unique and there is no “one size fits all” corrective behavior intervention.
   b. show the likely effect of poor classroom management.
   c. illustrate the complexities involved in creating a community that reaches all students.
   d. establish that kids will test limits in different ways.

5. The passage as a whole suggests that Charlie is
   a. a terrible student.
   b. a distraction to those students who want to learn.
   c. misunderstood.
   d. a flat, static character.

**Passage II**

“Family, Honor, Moments” blankets the top quarter of Charlie’s personal narrative in bold, size 24 script font. He’d turned in a hard copy a day early and shared a copy with me online. A colleague who works with him in a support class reiterates this—what I already know—exclaiming, “I can’t believe he did it.”

I can.
I believe.

My colleague is an expert at being shocked by her students.

When Charlie is on, he’s on. I’ve witnessed his participating in discussion, organizing his binder, being present. In fact, he’s the only student I’ve had in nearly 10 years to take voluntary notes and ask about homework on the first day of school. It’s the other days, the days that seem to be increasing, when he’s absent, or when he’s present but still . . . gone—those days worry me.

In fact, a week elapsed, which gave me time to read his essay before I saw him again.
To say Charlie’s work meets the “standard” of writing a ninth grader should demonstrate is false. With its saturation of surface-level errors from start to finish, its underdevelopment, and its lack of organization, the narrative demands serious revision and editing. Through the thicket of mistakes, however, I see how much his family means to him. I can see what really matters: his adoration for his mom and their shared adventures at the dollar store, his admiration for the singular humor of his grandma, even his tragic-comic love for Orange Crush. He writes, “Family means a lot.”

Of course, it’s with a terrible degree of irony that I just learned from a court official, who comes to check on Charlie during our class, that he’s been in and out of foster homes since last school year. Or has it, as a colleague tells me, been since sixth grade? And because he’s absent again, he’s up for another truancy hearing.

Just moments after his truancy supervisor leaves, Charlie arrives. A half step quicker and they would have met. “Charlie, hi! Hang on, someone was just here for you.” I dash in to the hallway and see only other late students, but I make a mental note to try to find the Multicultural Services Coordinator, Doug Smith, who had also stopped by looking for Charlie.

“Well, never mind. We’re just talking about revising our narratives. You’ve got a great story started, and I can’t wait to see where it goes—”

“I don’t have my book anymore. Or my backpack. The cops took it again. Who was looking for me?” He’s angry. I hear him crumpling his Hot Cheetos bag over the din of the other students.

“Mr. Smith stopped by with someone to check in with you, but I’m not sure what about.” And I’m not, not entirely, anyway. “I’ll let them know they just missed you, though. And I’m sorry about your stuff, man, but no problem, we’ll get you new stuff tomorrow. In the meantime, here, take this paper and my pen, and here’s a copy of your story.”

He walks to his desk, circumnavigating all the small groups that have materialized to talk about stories, what to improve or what to keep doing, and he nods at Sara who waves her fingertips in response. I can’t help but grimace at the thought of the two of them being friends; neither one seems to make the best decisions when in groups, and their friendship screams toxicity. The greeting goes no further, though, and Charlie’s odyssey around the classroom ends when he sits down, pulls his hood up, and puts his head on the desktop. He doesn’t move for the rest of class, even when I ask if he needs to go to the nurse or if he wants to take a break. Only when the bell rings does he stir, get up, leave his stuff on the desk, and walk out, at the tail end of the group.
I shout something along the lines of “See you all tomorrow!” as I sprint out of class to find Doug and explain that Charlie was in class. I don’t know if it will matter to the court or to Doug, but I believe it matters to Charlie. “Mr. Smith!” I catch him just as he’s about to enter a study hall. He lets go of the door, stifling most of the noise from the 70ish students inside. “How’s it going, Ms. LeSage?” “I’m fine, thanks. You?” I step to the side to let a group of late kids pass by. “Can’t complain. How can I help?” Doug always asks how he can help. He’s an expert at offering to help. “I just wanted to let you know that Charlie did show up. You guys just missed him.” Doug shakes his head. “That kid. I don’t think he’s going to be here long—” “Wait, what? Why not? He’s a good kid. I know it. I’d hate to see him go.” He just stares at me for what feels like a minute, then replies, “He’s making some bad decisions. He’s in a rough place, and I don’t think this school is going to work out for him . . .” Doug is also an expert at not actually helping. I don’t have a clue how to respond, so I just repeat, “He’s a good kid” and walk back to our department office.

A week later, Charlie has stopped coming again. But: he revised his paper online and re-sent it to me. He writes, “I want to earn a B.”

6. This passage is mainly about the relationship between
   a. Charlie and Ms. LeSage.
   b. Ms. LeSage and Mr. Smith.
   c. Charlie and the court system.
   d. Ms. LeSage and the current public education system.

7. When Mr. Smith states that Charlie is “making some bad decisions,” he
   a. fails to realize that some choices may be out of Charlie’s control.
   b. provides an example of why the school should give up on Charlie.
   c. doesn’t recognize that educators can positively affect attendance and decision making.
   d. struggles to defend exclusionary disciplinary policies.

8. Ms. LeSage’s claim, “He’s a good kid,” illustrates her
   a. willful acquiescence to Charlie’s “bad” behavior.
   b. belief that Charlie really is good.
   c. feeling of helplessness in the face of bureaucracy that punishes a “chronically absent” student by removing him from school.
   d. need to convince Mr. Smith that Charlie deserves another chance.
9. Repeatedly characterizing her colleagues as “experts” is an example of the author’s rhetorical technique of
a. using sarcasm to cope with difficult situations.
b. projecting her own insecurities.
c. weaving lightheartedness into a sad story.
d. integrating a more explicitly confrontational tone.

10. One of the main ideas established in this section is
a. Charlie doesn’t care about school.
b. Ms. LeSage has nearly exhausted her strategic and emotional resources in helping Charlie.
c. regardless of where people come from, they should be able to succeed if they try hard enough.
d. significant gaps exist in the school’s ability to help Charlie.

Passage III

A colleague who has been out of teaching for the past year to pursue her PhD visits my classroom today. She tells me I’ve given her a gift, that to be in the classroom helping my students feels good and that she “can breathe again.” Significantly, her visit also coincides with Charlie’s return to the classroom after another week-long absence.

He again came without supplies, but now he clutches a phone, which completely enthralls him. I walk over and try to show him how to download books on it, but everything takes forever and another student, Josh, leaps in to save us when he hears my apologies. As Josh reaches over to manipulate the touchscreen, I see Charlie tense, mumbling without looking at Josh, “I know what I’m doing.” Josh, in true form, remains clueless. He presses on and paws at the phone, continuing to try to “help.” When Charlie spits out “Dude,” I quickly intercede and offer to write Charlie a pass to the library for assistance. I fill out the paper knowing full well he’s on the “No Pass List” for the rest of the semester because, as the letter I received alleged, he’s taken advantage of other teachers’ passes.

“I’ll just call down to let them know you’re coming. Okay?”

“Cool.” He walks out, pass and phone in hand.

When I call, I learn the librarian is out for the morning and no one is available to help Charlie. Classic. I wonder how Charlie will react and hope he comes back.

I let out the breath I didn’t know I’d been holding when he does return, of course, within just a few minutes. “She wasn’t there,” he says, tossing the pass back on my desk.

“Well, we tried.” At this point, I realize I have to give up on helping Charlie find a choice book on his phone, so I pass him a stack of books from...
which he may choose something that interests him; the pile includes *Shooter* by Walter Dean Myers—I remember he told me once he’d read *Monster* in eighth grade and had liked it. I have to move on, to begin reading the starts of poems students have been drafting all week. I have to do it now because the feedback needs to happen regularly; the kids need to know that I read their writing; they need time to reflect and improve; and I need to help the other 29 students in the room.

Charlie did write and submit a poem, too, though he wrote it a couple weeks prior to when I gave the actual assignment. Moreover, what he wrote fails to reflect the prompt, and it lacks most of the required elements, but he has some major rhyming skills. I accepted the poem and passed it on to his support teacher so Charlie could work on it with her. Now the problem is that his support teacher lost the only draft. I walk back to his desk near the end of the class and ask him if he could type some of the poem from memory. He responds, “Why should I? You lost it. I did the assignment already.” I could only assure him we’d continue to look, and acknowledge, secretly, his righteous anger.

While I’m responding to different poems and wondering what to do about Charlie’s lost piece, I notice my visiting colleague, Emily, has now made her way over to him. She’s been chatting with each of the students about what they’re reading, talking about the books and through the books with them. She spends about 10 minutes back in his corner, and we discuss him when we meet later. “I don’t know what to do about Charlie’s reading a book anymore. It seems already like all he wants to do is spend time on his phone.”

Very calmly she replies, “Out of the whole class, he was actually the student who was probably most engaged in a literacy activity. He was reading lyrics, thinking about what they meant, trying to memorize them. He told me about some of what he was reading and even asked questions about what I thought they meant . . .”

She’s right, and I hadn’t really given him credit for it. I lost sight of what really matters because he wasn’t being compliant and reading the way I wanted him to read, to read according to the “standard.” I know he, too, felt that I was forgetting who he really was, because the last time he was in class he told me, unsolicited, “I’m going to fail.” When I asked why, he responded, “Just am. I can’t change it.”

That was the last time I saw him. Rumor is that he moved to Ohio. Rumor is he’s supposed to still be living with his sister, here. Rumor is that no one knows where he really is. Truth is I don’t know if anyone else in our school misses him. But I do.
And I want him to know he can pass, and he’s taught me.

11. At the very end of the passage, the narrator’s mood changes from
   a. frustration to hope.
   b. hope to sadness.
   c. sadness to indifference.
   d. indifference to surrender.

12. This passage strongly emphasizes that
   a. teachers make mistakes, too.
   b. a student must adapt to the system in place to succeed.
   c. teachers reach all students, though perhaps in unexpected ways.
   d. students share in the responsibility of teaching.

13. In all three passages, the narrator describes Charlie in a manner that
   a. emphasizes Charlie's changing perception of himself.
   b. illustrates the importance of genuine human relations in education.
   c. highlights how he is primarily responsible for failing.
   d. exaggerates his isolation from peers, adults, and the school.

14. Considering all three passages combined, one can reasonably define teaching as
   a. a routine, eight-hour work day.
   b. a means to question boundaries.
   c. an objective passing on and assessing of knowledge.
   d. an uncertain struggle for balance.

15. Considering all three passages combined, the main point of “Teaching Story” is
   a. knowledge and engagement cannot be accurately and completely measured by a standardized test.
   b. students cannot be assessed according to a pre-scripted, lockstep rubric.
   c. teachers cannot be evaluated on a single, decontextualized moment.
   d. education cannot be standardized and be effective.

END OF TEST

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