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A Pedagogy of Charity: Donald Davidson and the Student-Negotiated Composition Classroom

Drawing on classroom experiences, the author suggests that philosopher Donald Davidson's interpretive principle of charity can help explain why communication is impoverished or even impossible in classrooms governed by traditional, authoritarian practices that form a "pedagogy of severity." If the classroom is to be a place of dialogue, learning, and mutual transformation, teachers should promote a "pedagogy of charity," which assumes that students are rational beings with mostly true and coherent beliefs.

[R]eading and writing are the products of a lengthy historical labor, undertaken and sustained at an enormous human cost. No sooner do we permit ourselves to witness this costly struggle, relived in our own classrooms day after day, than we remember the violence required to create readers of generations past and to make us the "readers" we have become.

Kurt Spellmeyer

When the test was handed to me, that nervous, curious feeling turned to frustration and disappointment when I saw a D on the top of my paper and "poor study" written in big, red print across the middle; I was so insulted to have been told that I did a bad job studying because I had worked hard to prepare for that test and was used to getting good grades. As we went over the test in class, I did not want to find out which questions I got wrong or listen to the teacher lecture on study skills; I just wanted to quit.

Excerpt from Maggie's draft

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Having received identical—and worse—grades and similar comments on assignments, I find it uncomfortably easy as I read the above excerpt from Maggie’s paper to imagine her reaction as her high school teacher returned the combination multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank American history exam to her. How the grade and the “comment” must have jumped off the paper! Frustrated and angered by the teacher’s arbitrary authority to define reality—specifically, the quality of Maggie’s study habits—based only on the results of the test, Maggie withdrew from the class that day. For her, even if not for the teacher (who, after all, attempted to review the correct answers and to suggest study techniques), the assignment seemed to be a dead-end from which she would not learn anything productive. Maggie’s experience breathes life into Kurt Spellmeyer’s chilly theoretical abstraction of the “enormous human cost” of education; and my reading of both Spellmeyer and Maggie is animated by my own experiences as a reader, writer, student.

And teacher. For we as educators cannot stop the analysis by merely considering Maggie’s experience as yet another regrettable instance of a student harmed by an instructor’s reprehensible comment. It is too easy, like Maggie at the time she received the exam, to react with our emotions and demonize her teacher, ending a possible dialogue rather than advancing it. And it would be a mistake to think that such comments occur only in response to restricted, multiple-choice tests, as opposed to more open-ended tasks assigned in composition classrooms. I want to know what motivated the flatness and severity of the teacher’s comment. Was he angry, irritated, or even surprised by Maggie’s poor performance? Was he underpaid and overworked, too busy and too tired to be more constructive? Did he think that his terse assessment was ordinary, expected, professional? What did he hope to gain by that comment, and why? We must also keep in mind that Maggie’s teacher was a student once, perhaps a student who received the occasional D on an assignment.¹ Had the teacher forgotten the pain such grades and comments can cause, or had he remembered all too well?

Notice that by trying to attribute various motives to the teacher’s comment, I continue interpreting that comment and thereby interact, albeit in quite a limited and distant way, with the person who wrote it. To refuse this act of interpretation—to refuse to enter into a kind of dialogue with the teacher and his writing—is to enact the same logic, the same closure of communication apparently enacted by the teacher himself. But from my distanced perspective, there are too few clues to generate many readings (this is one reason why such

terse comments are often of little value), and at some point, I must evaluate this pedagogical strategy. It is a failure, not because the grade and comment may be inaccurate—I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of the grade in relation to the percentage of questions Maggie answered correctly,² and she may not have prepared very well for the exam—but because it effectively shuts down further dialogue between teacher and student. For example, Maggie could blame the “insensitive,” even “cruel,” teacher for her own mistakes and absolve herself from any effort to learn new strategies for studying, and the teacher could simply label Maggie as a “problem student” with a bad attitude who ignores his efforts to teach. Such a comment could lead, I suggest, to a situation in which a student refuses to learn and a teacher refuses to teach.³

Were this an isolated moment, a unique termination of dialogue between a particular teacher and a particular student, it would be disappointing, but not too worrisome. However, this is not an isolated moment, but one of countless instances of failures to continue communication. Unfortunately, the shutting down of dialogic possibilities, assigning labels and making corrections instead of asking questions and searching for new answers, are actions frequently⁴ performed in educational institutions that form what I term a *pedagogy of severity*. These actions lead to the perpetuation of damaging attitudes about what education is, how teachers should respond to students’ work, and how students should respond to their own work as well.

In this article, I (1) illustrate the disconcerting ways in which students in my composition classroom reenacted a pedagogy of severity in their written and verbal responses to an assignment that asked them to “grade” an essay; (2) draw upon analytic philosopher Donald Davidson’s hermeneutic *principle of charity* to explain the dialogic impoverishment of the students’ response in terms of their failure

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to be *charitable* readers; (3) offer as a more constructive alternative, a *pedagogy of charity*, which assumes that students are rational beings with mostly true and coherent beliefs; (4) speculate about some of the implications for this pedagogy, especially for its possibilities in our increasingly multicultural contact-zone classrooms; (5) examine my students’ later attempts

to be more productive, charitable readers of each other’s work; and (6) conclude by describing my own struggles to resist a pedagogy of severity and practice a pedagogy of charity. My central argument is that Davidson’s philosophy of language is quite relevant for composition classrooms and that his concept of charity offers a

valuable conceptual tool for students and teachers as they interact and try to make sense of what each other does, says, and writes.

Reenactments of severity in a composition classroom

Surely Jerome Bruner is correct that the “chief subject matter of school, viewed culturally, is school itself” (28), and through innumerable mundane experiences that subject matter is naturalized until, for example, despite once having been a student, Maggie’s teacher can write, in big red letters, “D” and “poor study.” Unfortunately, that chief subject matter is often expressed through a pedagogy of severity. Like Maggie, the other sixteen students in my 1998 spring semester first-year composition classroom had been marked by this austere curriculum,⁴ and as they labored to respond to each other’s writing, their voices frequently echoed the authoritarian voices of past teachers.⁵ That is the most insidious aspect of a pedagogy of severity: it often transforms students into the kind of harsh, antagonistic reader that they would otherwise resent.

During the fifth week of the semester, my students were drafting personal narratives. They had already received an assignment sheet for the essay, and we had spent several class periods discussing the assignment and trying to apply its criteria to selected essays from our course reader, the second edition of Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz’s *The Presence of Others: Voices That Call for Response*. I observed that when my students would discuss peer drafts, they would plod through workshop discussions that often focused only on the most superficial aspects of a paper’s grammar and mechanics. To expose some of the limiting assumptions about reading and writing built into such an approach and to see how well the students were comprehending the assignment (which would, in turn, affect my pedagogical strategies regarding the essay), I asked them to grade *as if they were an instructor* a sample paper I had written under a pseudonym (Appendix A). The essay was not meant to be an exemplary text to be copied; rather, I wanted to see if the students could discern in what ways the text did not fulfill the assignment. I also hoped to learn about their attitudes toward grading and their assumptions about how it is done. Would they “ventriloquate,” to use Bakhtin’s (*Dialogic*) term, the attitudes and methods of grading of past teachers? How would they assume the “voice” of a composition instructor? Would they be able to “appropriate . . . a specialized discourse . . . easily or comfortably” (Bartholomae 139)? What would their grades and comments reveal about the historical moment of literacy that they—*we*—live in?

During the same class period in which I handed out the grading assignment, I discussed with my students what kind of feedback they wanted from

me on their own drafts. It quickly became clear that the students wanted substantive responses to their ideas more than they wanted sentence-level corrections. It was equally clear they wanted their writing treated respectfully. As a result of this class discussion, I hoped that my students would attempt to provide substantive comments about the content of the sample essay.

When we met the following week, we discussed their evaluations. I asked the class for their responses to the paper; but the students who initially volunteered their opinions, Mark and Anna, started listing problems they saw with the text—disorganization, no explicit thesis statement—and asking questions about the grammaticality of the dashes, parentheses, and contractions. Perhaps

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encouraged by Mark and Anna's contributions, other students joined in with their own criticisms: the "improper" use of the pronouns *we* and *you*, the "inappropriate" use of "difficult" words (e.g., "introspection"), and ineffective transitions. As the discussion continued, I prodded the students toward more substantive issues, such as who they thought the intended audience of the paper was and whether this was a personal narrative. Several students thought the author assumed inaccurately that his or her audience knew a lot about golf because of the lack of definitions for key terms, such as *draw* or *birdie*. Some of the more vocal students, such as Mark and Anna, also argued that the essay was not a personal narrative at all because so much of it discussed people other than the author. I asked whether a personal narrative had to be told exclusively in the first person (i.e., couldn't we learn as much about people from what they say about others as we can from what they say about themselves?), but the class appeared uninterested and said little in response.

When we finally, at my suggestion, started discussing the essay's strengths, Liz said that she thought the essay was funny; George agreed, and he complimented the author's circular conclusion, which referred back to the question asked in the introduction. Other students added that they liked the conversational tone and vivid examples; in contrast to earlier comments, one student liked the transitions linking paragraphs. But fewer students contributed to this part of the discussion; apparently, they weren't inclined to discuss the essay's strengths, or they weren't comfortable doing so. For whatever reason, the discussion was mainly centered around faults and problems—trademarks of a pedagogy of severity.⁶

Their written comments on the essay, which, of course, preceded the class discussion, provide even more insight into the ways my students understood and

reenacted essay grading.⁷ Four large-scale patterns emerged in their marginalia and extended notes. First, most comments were very directive, shutting down interpretation and dialogue instead of opening them up. For example, Jeremy simply drew an arrow from the beginning of the thirteenth paragraph to the end of the twelfth paragraph. Presumably, he is telling the author to incorporate the one-sentence paragraph into the larger paragraph that precedes it. He does not ask the author why he or she wrote a one-sentence paragraph. Second, these directives often are not explained or justified in any way. For example, George underlines the clause “I’m better than you” and its variants throughout the text without explaining why he is underlining them. Is he approving of the repetition, or is he questioning it?⁸ Third, many of the marginal comments dealt with surface-level concerns (e.g., grammar, lexicon), while higher-order concerns (e.g., purpose, audience) were generally discussed in end comments. Finally, the majority of comments were negative (e.g., in response to the use of the word “Ah” to introduce the twelfth paragraph, Mark wrote, “terrible, can’t use that in beginning of [paragraph]”) or constructively critical (e.g., Tracey writes in the left margin alongside the first three paragraphs, “What is the thesis? Intro?”), rather than presuming that the author is in control of the text and chooses certain strategies for certain effects (i.e., what I call a *charitable* reading).⁹

Significantly, these four characteristics found in the students’ written comments are precisely those shown in the “correction charts” that are found in various rhetorics and handbooks (e.g., Carter and Skates; Ebest et al.; Hacker; Rosa and Eschholz). I’ll use Diana Hacker’s chart (232) as an example because I had chosen to use her text, *A Writer’s Reference*, for my class. First, its corrections are, *in all cases*, either explicitly directive (e.g., “use lowercase letter,” “transition needed,” “insert space”) or implicitly directive (e.g., “capital letter [needed? not needed?],” “[correct] error in punctuation,” “[clarify] inexact language”). Second, consider how unhelpful many symbols would be without further clarification; what may be woefully apparent to the teacher who marks “x” in the margins to indicate an “obvious error” may not be at all clear to the student. Third, the symbols denoting sentence-level concerns predictably outnumber those denoting global concerns, 56 to 9, even though I included the borderline cases of “inappropriate language,” “inexact language,” and “jargon” as instances of global concerns. And finally, there are *no* symbols that denote praise.

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is far different—in tone, intention, and effect—from asking, “how do you see this paragraph connecting to the previous one?” The former assumes a flaw (“You’re wrong!”) and demands response (“Fix this!”), not conversation; the latter points to a communicative breakdown (“I’m confused”) and requests clarification (“Help me understand what you mean”). Through clarification, a reader may even realize that the confusion belonged more to himself or herself than to the author. But this is precisely the kind of process that a pedagogy of severity forestalls through its monologism, its insistence on student passivity.

As Appendix B illustrates, only one grading strategy appears in all of the students’ responses: the marking of errors. This preoccupation with identifying errors found its most poignant expression in Arthur’s effort to grade the paper. He spent “hours” reading and rereading the essay, but he couldn’t find any errors; he felt exasperated and told me that “there was nothing to mark.” For all his effort, he wrote only two short comments in the margins—by far the fewest of any student—and a lone A above the title. Other students did not have as difficult a time as Arthur in locating perceived errors; in fact, most of the shared strategies used by at least one third of the students involved some form of correction or error identification. Most students (88 percent) made corrections or comments without explanation at all (e.g., Cora circled “But” at the start of the third paragraph without explaining why), presumably because the students thought that the corrections were self-evident (or they emulated teachers who often make the same kind of uninformative comments).

Other popular grading strategies used by at least half of the students included the scribbling over and rewriting of passages of text, the use of arrows, and the underlining or circling of problematic words, phrases, and sentences. A majority of the students (65 percent) also asked questions, but frequently they were implied directives (e.g., Maggie writes “start a sentence w[ith] but?” in the left margin next to paragraph three, clearly implying that the author should not begin a sentence with a conjunction). However, this is not to say that students didn’t ask provocative questions, such as Cora’s observation in the margin to the right of the seventh paragraph: “Isn’t this true in any sport?” What we cannot know, of course, is the extent to which this is a genuine question, something that invites discussion, or the disguised expression of an already settled opinion.

Interestingly, about two thirds of the students (65 percent), in their attempt to act “teacherly” by finding and correcting errors, actually *created* errors; an example of this hypercorrection is Jenny’s substitution of a semicolon in place of the comma between the words “thinking” and “mechanically” in the

second paragraph. In another instance, Maggie, who in her end comments observes that “the grammar could just be fine-tuned a bit so that it reads more smoothly” mistakenly deletes the hyphen in the compound modifier “often-heard” in the second paragraph.

Significant percentages of the students made constructively critical comments about the essay. For example, seven students commented on the lack of an explicit thesis statement. Six students felt that the audience was inappropriate: it seemed as if the essay were written for golfers, not for first-year English students. Six students thought that the essay did not meet the requirements of the assignment; as Tracey put it in her comments, the essay was “more of a descriptive paper than a narrative (personal),” and “no personal experience is stated.” And three students, misreading my attempt to be darkly humorous, criticized the author for making such a pessimistic argument.

The remaining criticisms of the essay, ranging from those shared by at most 47 percent of the students down to idiosyncratic observations, read like a list of “rules of thumb,” what Patricia Harkin would call the “lore” of writing (125); with one exception, each of these “errors” appears at least once in one of the essays that the students had already read in their course reader: don’t write one-sentence paragraphs (e.g., Rose “Lives” 105); avoid repetition of words/phrases (e.g., Thomas 236); don’t begin a sentence with a conjunction (e.g., Cheney 121); don’t begin a sentence with “because”; don’t use contractions (e.g., Rose “Lives” 97); don’t ask a reader questions (e.g., Thomas 238); don’t use “you” (e.g., Rose “Lives” 101).

If not from past teachers or writing textbooks, where are these “rules of thumb” coming from? The students’ comments were similar to the comments that Ralph Cintron received on his own student papers (e.g., “awkward,” “exact word?” and “what?”) (65). They were also similar to comments I’ve received on my own papers written as a student—and to comments I’ve written on papers I’ve graded, despite my best efforts at being a charitable, constructive, dialogic reader. Coincidence? Should we be surprised that students bewildered by academic writing will grasp at any clear-cut “rule” of “good” writing? Or that students whose texts are constantly submitted to scrutiny—“a permanent effort

Should we be surprised that students bewildered by academic writing will grasp at any clear-cut “rule” of “good” writing? Or that students whose texts are constantly submitted to scrutiny—“a permanent effort of correction” (Bourdieu, *Language* 60)—will become preoccupied with error and will in turn read other student texts in the same way?

of correction” (Bourdieu *Language* 60)—will become preoccupied with error and will in turn read other student texts in the same way (see also Shaughnessy 7–13)? Is it astonishing that students frequently criticize but seldom compliment when their teachers likely pointed out errors but less often praised the students’ writing, counting an unmarked page as a compliment? Cintron points out, in a slightly different context, that teachers have a tendency to promote destructive ideas about writing and then complain “when students have thoroughly absorbed that training” (101). These students, just like I am, seem to be products of writing curricula that adhered to the “authoritarian” (Stewart 102) or “‘school’ tradition” (Daiker 104) paradigms of rule-oriented rhetorical theories.

Error identification certainly comprised the bulk of the students’ written comments, but most students (88 percent) also made an attempt to compliment the author at least once. Eight students were particularly impressed with the circularity of the essay’s conclusion, which reiterated and answered the question that began the essay; as Jeremy put it, it is “good to bring introduction back into conclusion.” Other compliments included Jason’s “good word” in reference to “Napoleonic” in paragraph ten and George’s end comment that the “story was very useful.” These compliments lead to an important point: not only is a pedagogy of severity manifested through unrelenting negative commentary, but it also emerges through certain kinds of positive comments teachers make in response to student work, especially those that seem to kill dialogue as effectively as criticisms would (e.g., writing “good job” at the top of an assignment without inviting discussion about why the writing was found to be so good) or those that elevate one student at the expense of others.¹⁰

My students’ efforts at grading differ somewhat from those elicited by Thomas Newkirk (“Direction”; “How Students”) in his comparison of student and teacher evaluation of texts. Newkirk argues that we cannot expect student peer groups to interpret texts as teachers would because students and teachers belong to different interpretive communities. He asserts that student responses do not simply reflect “the indoctrination students have received in previous writing classes” and therefore are not “inferior versions of the teacher’s reading” (“How Students” 284, 298). Instead, he observes that student responses, though differing from teachers’, conform to their own, equally plausible logic. For example, the students in his studies preferred a more rigid organization (as opposed to teachers’ desire for more complex structure), and they were more willing to “‘read in’ details not explicit in the text,” almost to the point of “reacting not to the text at all but to experiences” that they share with the author (as opposed to the teachers’ more detached stance) (“How Stu-

dents” 292). Judging from their responses, my students seemed more attuned to the conventions and strategies of “the teachers’ interpretive community” than Newkirk’s. Instead of “inferior versions,” some responses seemed frighteningly polished; what is inferior is the kind of pedagogy that legitimates those comments in the first place.

However, this doesn’t mean that my students *fully* internalized these conventions and acted only as if they were “really” grading the essay. At least once in their comments, all seventeen students shifted roles from the authoritative “teacher” to more of a “reader” or “student”—even though they were working on an assignment explicitly asking them to read and respond like a teacher. For example, consider how in her response Joan links the essay with her own experiences, just as Newkirk found in his studies:

One short conversation between the author and his golfing buddy drew me in to a 5 page paper about golf as a sport and those who play it. Not only did this paper include a personal experience it actually taught me a little about golf. Now I know its not just my dad and ALL of my uncles who think they are godly because they play golf! I honestly didn’t find many weak points in this paper.

There is an eerie mix of voices and audiences in this passage. The “readerly” voice of the first three sentences surely shifts to a “teacherly,” evaluative tone in the final sentence. But I doubt an actual instructor would write “I honestly didn’t find” on a student’s paper. Behind these two voices I hear a third, that of the “student,” addressed to me—not to the supposed “author” of the text—in an attempt to explain/justify her grade. Notice how Joan writes “this paper” instead of “your paper”; this is a comment intended for a third person, the unacknowledged but actual audience. And, perhaps thinking that she may have overlooked several grievous errors—the kind only English teachers ever seem to find—Joan felt she had to mention that she really did try to find problems with the essay, but couldn’t.

But the question remains, would the students have read and responded to the text differently if I had asked them either to (a) read the essay as any other assigned text for the course or (b) read the essay and offer suggestions for revision instead of grading it? Was I forcing them to reenact a pedagogy of severity? To an extent, yes. Certainly, my students did not challenge the grammar of the essays they had read in the course reader, but, then, I never asked or expected them to. By placing them in a position of “authority” over the sample essay, I was asking them to change their accustomed relationship to texts in an academic setting. As Knoblauch and Brannon note, such a shift changes a

reader's attitude toward the act of reading from granting the author's competency and trying to figure out the author's intentions—which would be, as we see in the next section, a *charitable attitude*—to citing “any idiosyncrasy of form and technique, idea or style, any authorial choice that challenges their personal preferences, as an ‘error’” (161).

But I do not believe that this grading assignment elicited from my students attitudes toward writing evaluation that they would not otherwise have, though it provided them with a forum in which they could more freely express these beliefs. My students' attitudes toward responding to writing in a classroom didn't just emerge from a vacuum. Their willingness to defend their assessments—some quite sarcastic—as “natural” (i.e., “how else could writing be evaluated?”) or “common-sensical” revealed how well the students had internalized their experiences with writing over the years; as a result, what are arbitrary and situated historical practices become for them, as Pierre Bourdieu asserts, “embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history” (*Logic* 56). This embodied history had already revealed itself in early peer review sessions, during which, as mentioned earlier, my students had focused on error identification. When asked to grapple with rough drafts instead of finished, published pieces, my students found themselves, not surprisingly, with few strategies other than those that had been used to evaluate their own unpublished writing; and unfortunately, those strategies frequently belonged to a pedagogy of severity that limited the way students read and responded to the writing of others and, presumably, their own writing.

Charity in philosophy and pedagogy

I have suggested that the impoverished kinds of discursive options available to my students had been acquired and limited by their encounters with a pedagogy of severity. Impoverishment of dialogue is not an accidental byproduct of that type of pedagogy, but a predictable consequence. Why? Because a pedagogy of severity violates a vital presumption of communicative interaction, the principle of charity, cogently formulated by analytic philosopher Donald Davidson. Davidson's work in general and the principle of charity in particular offer powerful conceptual tools not only for understanding why a pedagogy of severity disrupts dialogue but also for constructing an alternative to it, a pedagogy of charity. In this section, I briefly summarize Davidson's philosophy of language, situate it in relation to current work in composition studies, and sketch a pedagogy of charity; in the following section, I describe my efforts to promote this pedagogy and my students' responses to it.

Davidson's philosophy is slowly becoming more familiar to the field of composition studies, thanks largely to the efforts of Reed Way Dasenbrock (*Literary; Redrawing*; "Rhetoric"), Thomas Kent ("Externalism;" "Interpretation"; *Paralogic; Post-Process*), and, more recently, Stephen R. Yarbrough. However, most discussions of Davidson's work have emphasized its theoretical implications at the expense of more concrete applications; one of the purposes of this essay, then, is to attempt to justify the recent surge of interest in Davidson's philosophy by exploring the relevance of one of its central concepts—the principle of charity—to my own composition classroom. But to provide readers with a basic understanding of charity, I must place it in relation to other concepts that Davidson develops in his philosophy of language (which is particularly resistant to brief summation). The following five-part schematic will suffice as an introduction: Davidson's philosophy depends upon *interpretation, charity, rationality, truth, and shared world*.¹¹

Davidson insists that all communication involves *interpretation*; it is never a passive process (*Inquiries* 124). At times, individuals (who each possess a uniquely configured language, also called an *idiolect*) interact in ways that conform to their idiolectical expectations about language use; in such cases, communication appears seamless, almost without effort, because the speaker's guess about how the listener will understand an utterance (i.e., the speaker's *prior theory*) fits well enough with how the listener is "prepared in advance to interpret" that utterance (i.e., the listener's *prior theory*) (Davidson "Nice" 442). However, interpretation is still involved because interlocutors cannot *know in advance* that their prior theories overlap. When prior theories do not converge, and this fact is noticed by the interlocutors, then they must construct what Davidson calls a *passing theory*, which is a "temporary or permanent modification of the individual's prior theory" (Porter 431). Only if the passing theories match (at least roughly, for communication does not require perfect correspondence), will the interlocutors communicate.

The construction of passing theories is constrained by the principle of charity, which requires us to accept others as *rational* beings with mostly true and coherent beliefs if we wish to communicate with them. In other words, we must optimize our agreement with other interlocutors by accepting that they have reasons for their actions (including speech acts), that what they believe and say usually represents accurately the state of affairs of the material world,

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and that knowledge or perception of this material world is shared by all of us (i.e., that we belong to a *shared world*). Charity is not an optional choice, but a precondition for communication. Precisely because communicators cannot as-

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sume shared meanings (though they may later discover that they do share particular meanings), they must assume a shared world; if they assume that they share neither a language nor a world, there would be no possibility for communication.¹² If we assume uncharitably that the speaker is nonrational (i.e., not acting for any reasons), then we could not even guess at the meaning of an utterance because “*any* interpretation would be *equally* likely” or unlikely (Porter 434). Without charity, we cannot link what the speaker says, what the speaker does, and the world.

However, charity does have its limitations: it does not justify beliefs, nor does it guarantee that *particular* utterances are true. According to Davidson, we must assume that another person’s beliefs are generally true, but we cannot know in advance which beliefs are true (“Coherence” 309); the only assurance charity makes is that a rational being’s beliefs are immune from *global error*, the holding of mostly mistaken beliefs (*Essays* 221). Additionally, charity is an assumption we must make prior to communicative interaction; through this interaction, we may decide that particular beliefs of the other are indeed false or incoherent (Malpas 49).¹³

It is through the concept of charity, I argue, that Davidson’s work becomes especially relevant for our profession. There are four reasons for this: (1) charity is conceptually related to truth and rationality, but (2) at the same time it links these somewhat frozen abstractions to actual human conduct, for charity is not so much “knowledge” as an “attitude”; as such, (3) it appears in the junctures between knowledge and communication, theory and practice; and, finally, (4) the significance of charity is often neglected and is even frequently violated in traditional educational practices (which have mainly emphasized truth, rationality, and shared world).

This last point is crucial: I believe most of the miscommunications or failures to continue communication that occur in classrooms and consequently discourage learning result from failures to observe the principle of charity—failures that are in part inculcated by traditional classroom practices that form a pedagogy of severity. Multiple-choice exams; assignments that demand only rote memorization or summary over analysis; constant surveillance; constant

assessment, evaluation, and correction of work; teacher-initiated prefabricated discussion topics; teacher-question and student-answer “discussions”: Are these the features of a pedagogy that envisions students to be rational beings with mostly true beliefs? Or is this a pedagogy that distrusts its students, who must be force-fed information and then constantly watched to ensure that the information is retained—and punished if it is not? This is surely an uncharitable pedagogy, a pedagogy of severity that treats students as error-prone, incoherent, and irrational.

It is vital to note that these failures of a pedagogy of severity are not failures on the part of the principle of charity to do what it should do, but rather, they are failures on the part of interlocutors who do not really wish to communicate for whatever reason. Charity is not a binding ethical principle governing people during their interactions with each other, but merely a necessary precondition for understanding between interlocutors. Although charity is required for communication, it cannot force people to desire communication in the first place: It can only force us to optimize agreement *if* we wish to understand.¹⁴ We can choose whether, but not how, to communicate.

However, our decisions about how to respond to this unavoidable exigency of communication in our classrooms are ethical ones. Do we as teachers value the continuation of dialogue (as do, for example, Bakhtin, Buber, Gadamer, Gusdorf, Habermas, Rorty) as a good in itself because of its open-ended potential for understanding, negotiation, and transformation, all of which are essential elements of learning (cf. Knoblauch and Brannon 128)? If so, then we must devise a pedagogy that, in order to promote sustained dialogue, values and promotes a sustained presumption of charity because it is only through charity that dialogue—and the learning potentially fostered by dialogue—can flourish. Such a pedagogy, of course, cannot ensure that people will want to communicate, but at least an awareness of charity could help teachers and students avoid constructing inadvertently unproductive utterances and interpretations that erode presumptions of charity and consequently lead to a cessation of dialogue. We cannot prevent miscommunication, but we can try, as I. A. Richards long ago suggested, to remedy it.

Thus, to counteract the harm of a pedagogy of severity, we need a pedagogy of charity, which has as its central assumption that students are rational beings with mostly true and coherent beliefs. Such a pedagogy needs to be

Charity is not a binding ethical principle governing people during their interactions with each other, but merely a necessary precondition for understanding between interlocutors.

carefully demarcated because the word *charity* has many connotations. A pedagogy of charity *does not* encourage muddled thinking or imply a lack of standards. For instance, charitable attributions of truth and rationality do not erase the differences between students and teachers; our recognition that students have mostly true beliefs must be tempered by our acknowledgment that students' particular beliefs can be wrong. Patricia Bizzell once cleverly remarked that "the academy is not, in fact, so intellectually shaky that a split infinitive will topple it" (*Academic* 142). I agree, but we must also realize that correcting students who have mistaken beliefs will not shatter them: Students are not as fragile as they are frequently represented to be. In fact, I suggest that not correcting a mistaken belief and not assuming a student is rational would be far more oppressive.

However, a pedagogy of charity has the added benefit of raising the "stakes" not only for students, but also for us as teachers. After all, we cannot know with certainty which of the beliefs we hold are true. Consequently, we must risk being persuaded by our students (Lynch, George, and Cooper 68); there is always the danger of changing or being changed in dialogue (Gusdorf 65). We cannot allow ourselves to become dogmatic. We must allow students to scrutinize the rationale behind our pedagogies, for we risk alienating students, as Lisa Delpit and Christian Zawodniak both point out, if they do not understand us. A common complaint students make is that they do not understand what they've been told to do or why the teacher wants them to do it (Harris 36–40). We must demonstrate to students why we believe what we believe is worthy for them to know (Bizzell *Academic* 92, 100). And, as Katherine Schultz argues, we must try to engage with them in rational dialogue, asking them to justify their actions and beliefs. A classroom in which a Davidsonian pedagogy of charity was practiced would not be "student-centered" in the sense of a class without a teacher; on the contrary, it would be a site of what Margaret J. Finders calls "student-negotiated pedagogy" (125). In an ingenious play on the word *negotiation*, Linda Flower (78) asks us to think of it not only in terms of *arbitration* but also of *navigation*, for teachers as well as students, as both sides struggle to make sense of each other. One step toward that goal is to treat students' ideas with respect and with the proviso that they may be constructively critiqued, just as the ideas presented in our professional journals or at our professional conferences are (ideally) treated. Our profession didn't need Davidson to advance any of these particular claims, but what Davidson supplies is powerful theoretical support for understanding why they are worth our attention.

Davidson's philosophy of language also has much to contribute to recent discussions, such as those by Bizzell ("Contact Zones," "4th of July"), Min-Zhan Lu, and Phyllis van Slyck, that conceptualize the classroom in terms of Mary Louise Pratt's multicultural "contact zones." If our classrooms are contact zones—if they are sites of negotiation and competition and even collaboration between students who possess different idiolects—then how are we and our students to make any sense of them? Some currently fashionable ways of thinking about discourse—for example, James A. Berlin's theory of social-epistemic rhetoric (or other variants of social constructionism)—would not leave us much room for hope. Unless the classroom is filled entirely with students and a teacher who belong to the same culture and, consequently, share the same signifying practices (which we know is an impossibility), the classroom would be populated with people who possess different conceptions of reality—people who inhabit different worlds. How would these disparate groups communicate if each perceives "a reality" and not (potentially) mutually reconcilable aspects of a "shared reality"? Theorists who discuss paradigms are fond of using the shift from the geocentric system of Ptolemy to the heliocentric system of Copernicus to illustrate their point about profoundly different conceptual schemes, but this shift, as large as it is, hardly begins to describe the kind of differences I'm talking about between incompatible signifying practices. I can easily imagine the sun orbiting the earth in fancy, if not in fact. But I cannot visualize in my mind a round square or a sheet of paper so thin it has only one-side—and that's precisely the point. If a person could, he or she would really have a different "logic" and a different "reality," one that I could not hope to understand.

Davidson's theory assures us that if we can communicate with others, then their logic cannot be entirely different from ours. Consequently, his work illuminates why students and teachers can communicate, as they demonstrably do, in ways that other theories informed by other postmodern philosophies of language cannot. Davidson does not erase the substantive differences between people or eliminate the danger of miscommunication. Nor does he ignore entirely the political dimension of language, even if he does not foreground it. Rather, his work explains why users of competing ideological discourses can engage each other instead of simply talking past each other—why a linguistics of contact is possible in the first place.¹⁵ If people refuse to listen to each other, we shouldn't blame language but the people who use it. The attractiveness of Davidson's argument is its optimism that communication is theoretically possible, no matter what particular pragmatic or cultural differences

separate us, for there must be much more agreement than we normally suppose between communicators who share the same world.¹⁶

Charitable attributions of truth and rationality are what create common ground for contact between individuals in a multicultural classroom.

Charitable attributions of truth and rationality are what create common ground for contact between individuals in a multicultural classroom. Without them, communication would be impossible between the users of discourses that are increasingly fragmented both culturally and technologically (New London Group 69–71). In short, charity puts the “contact” in “contact zone,” and a pedagogy of charity would help foster those contacts in our student-negotiated multicultural classrooms in ways that a pedagogy of severity could not.

Charity in practice

It is time to return to a more concrete location, my composition classroom, in order to see how a pedagogy of charity might productively operate. As the discussion of the grading exercise drew to a close, I encouraged my students to try to understand a writer on his or her own terms, even if they do not agree with the writer. I reminded them about the kinds of feedback they had professed to want for their own writing and cajoled them to be the kind of reader for other writers that they would like to have for their own work. And I discussed the danger—for teachers or for any other reader—of too quickly assigning the label of “mistake” to a text-feature: It resolves or dismisses the reader’s confusion (i.e., “I don’t need to puzzle over this any more; it’s just a mistake”), but it also ends further interpretation that could reveal significance not immediately discernible to that reader. As Min-Zhan Lu and also C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon have observed, often these “errors” could also be useful touchstones for discussions of how various languages come into contact with the (relatively) stable discourses of “academy” and how certain privileged writers, such as literary figures like Gertrude Stein and D. H. Lawrence, are “permitted” to make “errors” in ways students are not.¹⁷

In short, I was urging them to become *charitable readers*. And I hoped to help students respond substantively to texts by engaging them in a combination of sustained classroom activities that: introduced a critical vocabulary for discussing writing; allowed time for students to observe my modeling of possible ways to use this vocabulary and charitably respond to texts (and to contributions to class discussions); presented opportunities for students to read, listen, and respond charitably; and assured them that finding grammatical

errors—contrary to what they expected based on past experiences in academic settings¹⁸—becomes important only as an essay nears completion and enters the final stages of revision.

During the tenth week of the semester, I asked my students to write one to two pages of analytical responses to a peer's first draft of the second essay, which was supposed to be a "philosophical argument" that critiqued an implicit assumption made by the students in the first essay.¹⁹ Five weeks earlier, when they "graded" the sample essay, my students were very much oriented to sentence-level concerns, and they did not often use a critical vocabulary to discuss the writing. But now, as the data in Appendix C suggest, these students were not only responding to their peers' writing using critical terms discussed in class but were also delving into the content of the essays. And, more importantly, there seemed to be a much more conscious attempt by my students to interpret their peers' writing instead of correcting it. As I argue below, this charitable move allows my students to offer richer interpretations of the essays they read and better suggestions for revision of those essays; it also allows them to recognize that evaluating writing does not necessarily entail devaluing it and that being a charitable reader does not mean being passive or sycophantic.

For these analytic responses, I asked my students to discuss (1) their peer's argument; (2) the assumptions being tested by their peer or the assumptions underlying their peer's argument; (3) the implications being tested by their peer or the implications of their peer's argument; (4) the kinds of evidence offered; and (5) any breakdowns in the argument, such as logical fallacies. Given this assignment, it is understandable why the terms "argument," "assumption," and "evidence" figure so prominently in the student responses. But the students also frequently used related terms, such as "example" or "counter-example," even though they were not specifically mentioned as requirements for the assignment. These terms, though doubtless familiar ones, were being used explicitly in ways that students had not used them before to discuss writing within my composition classroom. I believe that, in writing these analytical responses that incorporate critical terms, my students are "inventing" for (and in) themselves the voices of critical and charitable readers.

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Let's look at two students, Maggie and Hannah, who effectively used critical terms in their responses to Jenny's paper, which discussed cultural stereotypes of "problem" students. Maggie first compliments Jenny for using "personal experiences, quotes from people, and examples of the media, such as movies, as

forms of evidence for her assumptions.” This observation may not seem very insightful, but I believe that it signals a growth in Maggie’s ability to think critically about writing. What may have been taken for granted—that examples can be used to support an argument—is now conscious, at least during this particular reading of a text. And notice how specific Maggie is with her use of the term, itemizing the examples; she is applying the term instead of simply mentioning it. Later, Maggie challenges Jenny, whom she believes has committed an “either/or” fallacy:

The “Either/or” fallacy was if you get good grades and listen to authorities you are a good person but if you experiment with drugs or fail a class you are a bad person. I think that there can be someone in the middle.

Again, the importance of this passage is in Maggie’s application of the term. She does not simply tell Jenny that there’s a logical fallacy somewhere in her paper; instead, Maggie identifies the fallacy and also explains why it is a fallacy; she even offers a possible (albeit vague) solution.

In her response to Jenny’s paper, Hannah speculates about possible sources Jenny might look at during her research:

There are numerous sources out there for this paper—many movies (especially by Spike Lee), books, magazine articles, documentaries, etc. I think that by including a movie that is fairly recent and popular would work nicely. There are tons of articles in numerous magazines, especially the magazines aimed at teens, such as *YM*, *Teen*, etc.

While such words as “books,” “magazine articles,” and “documentaries” really may be too vague to help Jenny in any substantive way (other than perhaps reassuring her that she should have no difficulty finding materials to research), Hannah is clearly attempting to offer specific advice for Jenny, even if she is not able to recall the names of specific sources. For example, she does not name any of these movies, but she does at least recommend movies directed by Spike Lee. And though Hannah does not seem able to recall any particular title from these “tons of articles,” she at least offers suggestions about particular magazines Jenny might investigate.

Even as they became more critical readers, my students also became more complimentary. Their awareness of the human element, that their writing is being written for and read by another person, was much more heightened than it had been when they “graded” the sample essay. All nineteen responses contained at least one compliment, and seventeen out of nineteen began by offer-

ing positive feedback: “I liked the idea of your essay”; “[Cora] has a great point that she is stating in her paper”; “First of all, I think I should say that I think [Monica] has written a very good essay considering it’s only the first draft.” But these compliments did not consist only of these very general “pats on the back.” For example, in his discussion of Hannah’s paper, which explores why people attach significance to certain physical objects and not others, Rick observes that Hannah “gave great details about the smells and memories associated with objects of value.” In a more extended passage, Tracey compliments George’s organization:

[George] makes an argument that small classes are more effective than large classes. His points are written well and very easy to understand. They seem logical. I liked how he wrote about the small classes right after he speaks of the large classes. This makes his paper flow well.

Clearly, these students are making a movement from vague evaluative statements, such as “I like this essay,” into more specific ways of critiquing a text.

Some students also seemed more comfortable confronting their peers over possible problems, and they did so in ways that charitably attempted to make sense of the writing instead of simply dismissing it. I’m struck by the similarity of some of these kinds of comments to what Peter Elbow calls the “movies of the mind” response (227–31), in which the reader describes how he or she experiences a text without assuming the role of an expert. For example, Jason begins by articulating his understanding of Marcia’s essay about cultural representations of death:

My perception is that death provokes negative emotions when it happens to someone close to a person, and indifferent emotions when the person is not. I think that if my perception of the assumption being argued is correct, it might need to be stated more clearly.

This was certainly one of Marcia’s points, but, in a more insightful move, she also wanted to compare the public reaction to and the media coverage of the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa. Instead of criticizing Marcia for having an unclear thesis, Jason charitably mentions what he finds confusing, but leaves room for his possibly misreading the paper; one can easily imagine a productive dialogue ensuing between Marcia and Jason about exactly what she means.

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In another instance, Rick tries to discern the purpose of Hannah's discussion of how memories become attached to certain objects:

I must say though, that I do not understand the purpose of this paper. Maybe I do not understand the paper because I never read the original paper—essay 1. From the introduction and the conclusion, I can infer that this paper is about attaching significance to memories, such as family heirlooms. But, if this is true, what is the philosophic idea behind it.

So, I am going to believe that the purpose of this paper has to do with significance attached to memorable objects or events.

Instead of dismissing Hannah's first draft as pointless, Rick charitably constructs a rationale that he can understand and arranges his comments accordingly. He acknowledges his difficulties with the draft even as he tries to understand what Hannah is trying to say. Hannah may have in fact written an ambiguous draft, but only by charitably refusing to jump to that conclusion at the start could Rick encourage the kind of dialogue with Hannah that might change his mind, or hers.

There were equally impressive examples of students who would constructively challenge each other without faltering into a weakened stance of "You have your beliefs, and I have mine." Mark offers an excellent instance of this, but

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before I can discuss his response to Jeremy's essay, I need to offer some extended context. Jeremy's personal narrative had focused on his experiences as an employee at a grocery store. He was frustrated at the amount of corruption and incompetence he saw in other employees, who, according

to Jeremy, were not "well educated," and he was particularly annoyed with his African American manager. In a revealing passage, Jeremy writes

[Barry] could barley read or write and dropped out of school in the seventh grade. This was not just the manager of produce, but on of the top four managers in the whole store, and he was barley literate! I instantly lost all my respect for him, after all, I was fifteen and smarter than him.

I did not want to deny Jeremy his personal experience, though I wondered how he knew so many intimate details about his fellow employees. Instead, I asked him in written comments and in conferences to research for essay number 2 cultural representations of the working poor, minorities, and the illiterate. In

what ways were cultural biases affecting his own perceptions? Why was he so willing to make large generalizations based on so little evidence? Why did he equate illiteracy with incompetency or lack of intelligence, as he often did?²⁰

In his first draft of essay 2, Jeremy seemed only to defend his assumptions about the working poor and the illiterate instead of critically examining them, and Mark was confronted with the challenge of responding to Jeremy's paper. He did so tactfully (for the most part), candidly, and critically, in a passage that deserves extended quotation:

I am worried about [Jeremy] in this paper. Maybe his intentions were to stir something in the reader, but he seemed to insinuate throughout the whole entire paper. I like the topic which deals with the lower class worker in our country, but I don't love the way he handles the situation. . . . We live in a world full of racism which has destroyed many minorities in this country. [Jeremy] needs to recognize that people are stuck in the lower class for other reason such as racism, even though some people don't like to think that way. I think [Jeremy] must be careful when he generalizes about this topic because it can get him in a lot of heat.

Although I would not myself write "I am worried" or use the word "insinuate," I took issue, as Mark does, with Jeremy's vast overgeneralizations about the working poor, and I discussed the likely effects his ethos would have on an academic audience. But at the same time I would not (and did not) dismiss Jeremy's text or his beliefs; it would be too easy to label students like Jeremy, as some theorists would, "part of the social problems" of our society (e.g., Jarratt 111; Sosnoski 209). On the contrary, I wanted to understand why he believes what he does—and I wanted *him* to understand why he believes what he does. In other words, I wanted to explore with Jeremy what Cintron has called the "public dimension" of emotions, which acknowledges that emotions "do not just well up from the interior of a person but are distinctly shaped along systemic lines" (131). Only by continuing to engage Jeremy in a rational dialogue—that is, only as long as I talk to him in charitable ways that demonstrate I believe he is a being who acts for reasons and who may change his mind based on new evidence—could I hope to communicate with him and possibly encourage him to rethink some of his strongly held beliefs. Vilifying Jeremy—or as Cintron might put it,

Only by continuing to engage Jeremy in a rational dialogue—that is, only as long as I talk to him in charitable ways that demonstrate I believe he is a being who acts for reasons and who may change his mind based on new evidence—could I hope to communicate with him and possibly encourage him to rethink some of his strongly held beliefs.

“pathologizing” him (131)—would only end my interpretation of his writing and any chance for a sustained and transformative dialogue and would instead result in mutual recriminations and ill-will.²¹ Mark, too, seems to be attempting—successfully—to negotiate this fine line between understanding and disapproval, hardly an easy accomplishment.²²

Of course, not all of my students’ attempts to use critical terms or engage their peers’ writing were successful. For example, consider Hannah’s comments about Jenny’s discussion of a past event: “The personal experience that she includes supports her assumption tremendously. It really adds to the paper.” While it is important for Jenny to know what features a reader appreciates, I don’t believe, perhaps paradoxically, that the comment is specific enough to be generalizable. In what ways does the personal experience “support” the argument? Why is personal experience relevant in this case? Does Jenny make too much of her personal experience? Jenny not only needs to know how this particular piece of evidence fits into her particular argument, but she also needs to learn how to ask questions that evaluate evidence and arguments in other contexts. She needs to be able to move, as Michael Carter would put it, from local knowledge to general knowledge.

Perhaps I am being too critical of Hannah’s response. Is it possible that her comments actually are more informative than I suggest? Am I too quickly—uncharitably—dismissing these comments as the product of a student who, like many others, is not yet comfortable engaging another student’s writing in a productively critical way? I don’t think so, for a few reasons. First, my students have admitted to feelings of ambivalence or even inadequacy about their ability to write or to evaluate the writing of others. Second, I’ve frequently observed and assisted peer reviewers who are hesitant and confused when discussing an essay. Third, students themselves have made similar criticisms of their peers when writing midterm course evaluations, complaining that peers are too polite, too ambiguous, too concerned with surface issues, and often too unprepared for class. My assurances that group performance improves in time and that students are here precisely to learn how to evaluate each other’s writing as well as their own are not always convincing to students who want immediate help with their drafts. Fortunately, as the semester progressed, students’ attitudes toward peer review would become more positive because the discussions of papers became more substantive and less superficial.

Concerns about grammatical or mechanical issues didn’t disappear entirely from the students’ responses, but only four students included comments of this kind. Significantly, they were often placed at the end and assumed the

form of simple reminders to proofread or edit: For example, Anna concludes by writing, “The rest of my ‘complaints’ are little grammatical errors. Watch out for ‘you’ and the difference between ‘optimism’ and ‘optimistic’”; and Jeremy unambiguously notes in the final sentence that “[after you correct] some simple grammar mistakes your paper is pretty well done.”

Finally, we must also realistically acknowledge that certain lapses result from causes other than a student’s failure to understand critical terms or the lingering effects of traumatic educational experiences. For example, consider Jenny’s response to Maggie’s essay defending the use of traditional grading scales, which I quote in full:

I thought [Maggie’s] essay was very well written. She did an excellent job in introducing everything in her introduction and following up with each subject mentioned. Everything flowed well, and she had many good explanations to why grading is a necessity, like competition and to motivate students. I think that she has an excellent start, it seems very well put together. I also think she’ll be able to find many examples to prove her argument through sources since this is an important subject.

Jenny has certainly read Maggie’s essay, but notice how much of the advice is either repetitive (e.g., “excellent job” and “excellent start”; “Everything flowed well” and “it seems very well put together”) or so general as to be applicable to almost any essay. Jenny also doesn’t challenge a single aspect of the paper; it seems as if she believes the essay is practically complete, with little room for improvement. It may be possible, I think, to be *too* charitable, to assume that the author can do no wrong (remember, charity is the starting point for dialogue, not necessarily its destination). Although Maggie might feel reassured that sources won’t be difficult to find, Jenny’s comment does not seem likely to help Maggie actually find any materials.

It would be tempting to think of this analytical response as a student’s earnest but unsuccessful attempt to apply critical terms, but the actual explanation, which Jenny admitted to me when I asked her why her response wasn’t more specific, was that she had fallen behind in her coursework and didn’t have time to spend writing the response. If I wish to understand my students, I cannot always look to excuse a hastily written assignment, even as I sympathize with their hectic schedules; myopic rationalizations lead to misunderstandings as easily as uncharitable ones. We would do well to temper our desire for students’ success in order to avoid reading too much content into students’ writing (Applebee 5). To recognize students as rational is to recognize the diversity of possible reasons—whether admirable, practical, or negligent—for their actions.

The praxis of charity: moving from brittleness to suppleness

I have explicitly described how my students made sense of their past experiences with literacy, their encounters with yet another instructor, and their encounters with the writing of others. But implicitly, this essay has illustrated my own attempts to make sense of my students, my own teaching, and the practices of literacy. Like my students, I, too, am situated within larger cultural practices, and I am becoming increasingly ambivalent about how I fit—or, more precisely, how I am fitted—into those practices.

When I first started teaching as a teaching assistant, I was as strict and rigid as any current-traditional rhetorician you could find. My assessment of student writing was much like that of my students' attempts at grading: negative, sentence-oriented, and often nonexplanatory. In short, I adhered to a pedagogy of severity. I wasn't so much teaching students as rewarding those students who could already "write" and punishing those who couldn't. But as I learned more about writing, I became less a disciplinarian and more of a reader: I read my students' writing and tried to make sense of it, to find the rationale behind what appeared (or didn't appear) on the page. I realized that students could make mistakes, but so could I. In Cintron's terms, my approach to writing was moving from brittleness to "suppleness" (133); I was moving, without realizing it, to a pedagogy of charity. Only recently, reflecting on my teaching, do I see in this transformation some of the unformalized ideas that I would find clearly expressed in Davidson's work; perhaps that explains, in part, why I've been so attracted to it.

I believe that truth and rationality, when viewed along Davidsonian lines and guided by the principle of charity, should be incorporated into composition pedagogy if it is to foster student-negotiated composition classrooms that encourage dialogue and communication even when populated by groups of students with multicultural backgrounds. In fact, I would go so far as to say that these concepts are already being employed in classrooms where dialogue thrives, whether or not they are acknowledged by instructors and students. But I agree with Charles I. Schuster that there is value in aligning our theories with our practice; by doing so, we can improve both.

The centerpiece of my pedagogy, then, is the assumption that students are rational beings with mostly true and coherent beliefs. I've tried to "read" my students charitably, and I've tried to encourage them to "read" me and each other charitably as well because I am convinced that charitable readers are

more productive than severe readers because they are capable of transforming not only writers but also themselves. Charitable attributions do not dismiss differences between my students and me, nor do they erase the fallibility of either my students or myself. Because none of us can know with certainty which of the beliefs we hold are true, we must be willing to be persuaded by each other. Just as I examine what my students say and write, I must allow my own spoken and written

A pedagogy of charity requires continual work; it is easier to be severe than to be charitable.

words to be scrutinized. I must demonstrate why I believe what I believe even as I ask them to reconsider their own positions. And I must engage them in the kind of rational dialogue that I ask them to engage in with others. I (try to) treat my students' ideas with respect but also with the acknowledgment that they may be constructively critiqued, just as my own ideas are (ideally) treated in journals, conferences, and graduate seminars—and in my classroom. The “try to” and “ideally” are important qualifications, for a pedagogy of charity requires continual work; it is easier to be severe than to be charitable. And it is a praxis always at risk of failure, not a static achievement.

I think that all my students and I can reasonably extend to and expect from each other is the charitable attitude Cora expressed in her analytical response to Monica's paper: “In trying to evaluate [Monica's] essay, I will try to give her the kind of feedback on her essay that I would find helpful for my own essay #2.” Though she couches her statement in language that appears solipsistic, I suggest that Cora is actually making a move toward establishing a common ground with Monica. She wants to be for Monica the friendly, helpful, sympathetic, careful, potentially sophisticated, but potentially fallible reader she would like for her own writing: a reader who reads “on the premises of the writer” (Rommetveit, *On Message* 63), a reader who is attuned to the “attunement” of the writer (Rommetveit “On Axiomatic” 97). As I read her words, as I try to understand her perspective, I believe that Cora is not seeking a reader who is an all-too-agreeable mirror image, an all-too-implacable opponent, or an all-too-unresponsive abyss, but rather an active, engaged partner in dialogue. That's the kind of reader I want, too, and the kind of reader I try to be. Rationality and truth—tempered by a pedagogy of charity—need not entail rigidity.

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Appendix A: Sample paper to be graded by students

A Test of character

Once, after a maddeningly long round at a crowded public course, I asked my friend Dave why he thought golf was such a popular sport.

“Because it’s difficult,” he said without thinking, mechanically reciting that often-heard platitude. “It’s a test of character.”

But there seemed to be some inconsistency between the romantic myth of the lone golfer nobly struggling to overcome his failings and those hot, sweaty, angry people—myself one of them—mutilating the turf with their clubs. Between complaints about the heat, the slow play, and the bumpy greens, was there much time for thoughtful introspection?

Perhaps for the world-class golfers, the myth holds true. Perhaps that’s why they’re world-class golfers. They consider long hours on the practice range and the putting green not drudgery but meditation. Golf is a decidedly inner experience for them.

But for the rest of us, the hackers of various levels, golf is not solitary but social. If you don’t think so, spend a few hours every day for a week on the driving range, alone. Just you, a pile of cracked range balls, and your calluses. At first, you feel good, relaxed. Your swing is smooth, and you launch some drives well past the 250-yard marker. You laugh and wonder why you hadn’t figured out how to swing a golf club sooner—it’s so simple. On the second or third day, though, the charm has worn off; hitting long drives seems pointless without the satisfaction of waiting for your playing partners to hit before making your own approach shot to the green. You start feeling lonely. You hum to yourself to break the silence. It gets tougher to concentrate. Your shots become erratic. It isn’t long before you’re hallucinating, maybe hearing the golf balls talking to you, laughing at you while they limp off of the tee.

A practice range is interesting only when at least one other person is there. Then it becomes a contest of sorts: the goal is not an accurate shot but an aesthetic one. Whose drives are longer? Who can consistently hit a draw? How solid do the shots sound? A guy who is hitting the ball well on the practice range knows that everyone else is watching him; he half-smiles as he tees up another ball.

Why does he smile? For the same reason we smile when we make a birdie putt to win five skins: we’re saying, “I’m better than you.” This is golf’s motto, which makes the game exhilarating—and excruciating when we hear someone else saying it to us. Golf is our escape from the politeness and political correctness that doesn’t allow us to brag. But golf swings are not created equal; one tends to be better than another, and the tangible proof is where the ball finally rests. Golfers don’t need to boast verbally: the successful shot itself is the statement “I’m better than you.” When you piously bemoan your partner’s errant shot into the trees, you make the same statement. And when your two-

foot putt lips out of the cup, your partner also makes the statement when he rolls his eyes in disbelief and mock-sympathy.

Still, other games incorporate boasting. Why aren't people as fanatical about bowling, or badminton, or ping pong? Golf is difficult, certainly, but so is marathon running and pole vaulting. What sets golf apart is its magnitude of error. In bowling, the field of play is five or six feet wide, and the farthest you can get from the pins is the gutter. And, honestly, it's not very difficult to keep the ball in the lane. In tennis, you may hit the ball into the net or out of the court, but you generally don't have to chase the ball very far.

In golf, however, a bad shot might end up over one hundred yards away (or more) from your intended target—and you have to pursue that golf ball, toiling on a pilgrimage of penance. If you're lucky, your walk is a solitary one, but other people usually follow along, pretending to search for the ball but secretly gloating "I'm better than you." During those times, you wish you were bowling, which is much kinder than golf in that a poorly thrown ball is returned to you—in golf, you dangle after a poor shot. And you may find that shot—if at all—thirty yards into the trees and under a pile of leaves.

Of course, these defeats are offset, all too rarely, by Napoleonic triumphs. After cracking a long drive flush down the middle of the fairway, you smile inwardly as you hear the grudging compliments and stride past the timidly stroked shots. The quest for the long drive seems primal: an accurate drive says "I'm better than you," but a long drive, even if off the mark, shouts in a deep-throated voice, "I'm stronger than you." This is why we roar for Tiger Woods and politely applaud Hale Irwin. Driving distance is golf's uncivilized, bestial side.

Putting is quite the opposite. It is refined; it requires skill, a cunning eye, and the fluid hands of a jewel cutter. Putting has agonies unknown in every other aspect of golf, stemming from the immutable law that a one-inch putt and a 280-yard drive both count as a stroke. That's why putters are thrown or broken more often than any other club. Countless would-be professionals have marched onto a green to face a birdie putt only to stagger away with a fat +1 on the scorecard.

Ah, but making that birdie putt, knowing that you've played the hole as well or better than Jack Nicklaus could—is there a more sublime pleasure? The birdie putt, like any other, begins with a dream, but it continues with startled hope as the ball nears the hole and ends with ecstasy as the ball rattles into the cup. While retrieving the ball, you stare back at the distant tee-box and ponder, "Wow, I got this little sphere from there to here in precisely three strokes." Then you look at the other members of your foursome and think, "I'm better than they are."

And for one moment you are, until you duck-hook the next tee shot.

My claim that golf is popular because it is boastful may be unsettling. Some people prefer to think of the sport as being wholly (or holy!) rational and civilized. They point to the game's history and traditions; warfare, too, has history and traditions. Some golfers claim that they don't play against the other members of the group but against the course—they want to break "par." But "par" itself is a social term, denoting the score that could reasonably be expected of a good golfer. So, in essence, scoring below par isn't beating the course; it's beating a fictional, quality human opponent. A golfer concerned with testing his character would only want to beat his own personal-best score, not par.

All this is not to say that golf isn't rational and civilized. It is. What golf allows us to do is boast in a socially acceptable way. Driving replaces fist fights in demonstrating strength; putting replaces debating in showcasing intelligence ("I'm smarter than you" is supplanted by "I'm more skilled at reading greens than you"). And golf authenticates these boasts in ways that force the losers to accept the truth (something apparent in golf but murky and insignificant in the rest of our lives). Your boss can't argue against a missed putt like he can about your deserving a raise.

So, returning to Dave's statement, is golf a test of character? If golf tests anything, it tests *other people's* character for us. When your friend Kirk, who hits a high slice every time, doggedly tries to play a draw, you discover something about his character. When your wife Shelley, who wouldn't dream of cheating, nudges the ball for a better lie, you learn something about her character. But golf tells us nothing about our own character we didn't already know: that we like to win, hate to lose, and love to brag.

Appendix B: Types of comments made in papers "graded" by seventeen students

Cited a problem with the text	17
Complimented writer	15
No explanation at all for comment	15
Asked questions	11
Scribbled over and rewrote	11
Used arrows	11
Created error through suggested correction	11
Underlined words or sentences	9
Circled words/phrases	9
Liked circularity of essay ending	8
Advised against using conjunction to begin sentence	8
Thought a paragraph should not have one sentence	8
Commented on lack of explicit thesis	7
Commented on audience	6
Thought "It is" is not a sentence	6
Commented on essay's not meeting genre criteria	6
Advised against repetition of words	5
Disliked use of "Ah" as an introductory phrase	5
Commented on transitions	3
Commented on essay's possible cynicism	3
Used ¶ symbol	3
Commented on essay's possible humor	1
Commented on predominantly male perspective	0

Appendix C: Critical terms used in student evaluations

Frequency of critical terms in nineteen written responses by seventeen students

Assumption	28	Counterargument	2
Example	28	Purpose	2
Argument	18	Thesis	2
Evidence	13	Contradiction	2
Sources	11	Complex question	1
Counterexample	10	Either/or fallacy	1
Fallacy	4	Logic	1
Focus	4	Implication	1
(Over)Generalizations	4	Major premise	1
Organization	4	Transitions	1
Topic	3		

Distribution of critical terms: number of students using particular written responses one or more times

Example	14	Thesis	2
Assumption	11	Contradiction	2
Argument	9	Complex question	1
Evidence	9	Counterargument	1
Sources	8	Either/or fallacy	1
Counterexample	7	Implication	1
(Over)Generalizations	4	Logic	1
Logical fallacy	3	Major premise	1
Organization	3	Purpose	1
Topic	3	Transitions	1
Focus	2		

Notes

1. Today's students become tomorrow's teachers: Maggie is an education major. Although she writes that she would run her classroom differently from her American history teacher by writing more positive and dialogic comments, she concludes her essay by stating that "I hope to be as good a teacher as he was someday."

2. In her draft, Maggie acknowledges that she was given a fair grade.

3. Fortunately, Maggie's story has a happy ending. Later in her paper, Maggie asserts that she used the teacher's negative comment as motivation for studying

harder and more effectively for the course: “I used the teacher’s criticism as motivation because I knew that I was fully capable of getting a good grade in the class and I was determined to prove that to him.” She even speculates in her essay that this was in fact the intention behind her teacher’s comment: “he wanted to get through to me by touching my deepest desires to do well.” However, Maggie recognizes that while she may have in fact *benefited* from the teacher’s stern comment—though I suggest she succeeded *despite* it—other students may have responded to similar remarks by giving up or even hating the teacher. Accustomed to good grades and teacherly compliments, Maggie may have taken the teacher’s comments as a splash of cold water waking her up, rather than as part of a relentless deluge dragging her down.

4. The class actually had eighteen students, but one declined to grant permission for me to cite his work. To respect his wishes, I do not refer in any way to his written comments or oral contributions to the class discussion. So, to avoid confusion, I pretend that the class has only seventeen students. I refer to my students by pseudonym, and I cite their texts with their written permission.

5. As Bruner states, “Obviously, a school’s classroom is no match for the law in tradition-making. Yet it can have long-lasting influence. We carry with us habits of thought and taste fostered in some nearly forgotten classroom by a certain teacher” (24). Although it is possible to overestimate the impact of school on students, I think it best to err on the side of caution, particularly when these “habits of thought and taste” are fostered in multiple classrooms by numerous teachers.

6. After I collected the graded essays, I admitted to the students that I was really the author. This caused a stir among the students. Mark, who is a very vocal student, complained, “It’s not fair!” Although I assured them that I had a “thick skin” and that I would in no way penalize students for their opinions, I could understand his point. Was this really an ethical assignment? Wasn’t I violating my students’ trust? I also wondered at my own reactions during the class discussion. Even as I complimented the students on finding problematic aspects of the essay, particularly its sense of audience and its impersonality, I felt somewhat defensive—even offended—when students were criticizing *my* writing for being ungrammatical. It was a sharp reminder of how much we risk when we present our writing for other people’s assessment, a risk students are continually asked—required—to take.

7. I discuss only the students’ written comments because I believe that they are much more illuminating than the grades themselves. But for those readers who are interested, the class, using the university’s scale, assigned the following grades: one A, four ABs, four Bs, six BCs, and one C. One student wrote comments but did not assign a grade.

8. Such ambiguity can lead to undesired results, as Leon Coburn illustrates in his anecdotal contribution to *Comp Tales*: “A student I once had wrote almost entirely

in clichés. For two or three papers, I would write ‘cliché’ each time I saw one, and they kept proliferating. I finally asked her if she couldn’t reduce their numbers, but she gave me a puzzled look, and said, ‘I thought you kept marking them because you liked them’” (40).

9. Certainly, authors—whether students, instructors, or professional writers—will make mistakes, and these should be pointed out, but what we need to change is the *presumption* of error: students are often considered “guilty” of “error” until proven “innocent.”

10. Of course, people often simply compliment each other: A pedagogy of severity, after all, is only one set of practices through which people are enculturated into social behaviors.

11. I realize that *truth* and *rationality* are especially contentious terms; for a recent attempt to rehabilitate them, I refer readers to my “Methods, Truths, Reasons.”

12. Davidson’s position here is similar to Alfred Schutz’s “transcendental social fact,” which is the assumption “that the sector of the world taken for granted by me is also taken for granted by you” and “even more, that it is taken for granted by ‘Us’” (12).

13. It should be noted that Davidson is hardly alone in making this assumption; concepts similar to charity are guiding tenets of recent research in dialogism (e.g., Blakar 241), discourse analysis (e.g., Blum-Kulka), hermeneutics (e.g., Apel 158–59, 258–62), and philosophy of language (e.g., Grice). The importance of Davidson’s contribution, however, is its thorough articulation of why charity is necessary (a point that is often assumed to be self-evidently true) and its connection of philosophy of language with a philosophy of action.

14. We must keep carefully in mind the difference between *optimal* agreement and *total* agreement. Charity does not require that a listener accept as true every single belief of a speaker, but it does presume that false beliefs can be reconciled only against a background of widespread agreement. For example, if I disagree with a student’s claim that Abraham Lincoln was the twentieth president of the United States, I need not dismiss the student as an irrational being, for the claim itself assumes much that I would accept as true: that Lincoln was a president, that there is an office of the presidency, that there is a United States government, etc. The disagreement does not reflect a disjunction between incommensurable world views.

However, we cannot neglect the fact that interpretations in a classroom (and elsewhere) are often made as part of a series of ongoing communicative interactions, not as discrete, one-shot events. As disagreements mount (i.e., as ascriptions of false beliefs pile up), and especially as they become more profound and difficult to reconcile or optimize, charitable attributions of truth and rationality become increasingly difficult to make, until communication breaks down entirely. For example, let us imaginatively revisit the example of Maggie and her instructor. Let us suppose

that Maggie understood perfectly well the grade and the comment but that she thought the instructor's beliefs about her study habits were false. Because a few false beliefs generally do not threaten intelligibility—depending on what those beliefs are, of course—Maggie may decide to ignore her resentment and continue to treat her instructor charitably, thus remaining open to dialogue. But suppose that disagreements not only continue to occur but also intensify (e.g., Maggie feels confronted by inexplicable grading criteria, vague comments, veiled insults). At some point, Maggie might consider the instructor unreasonable, inscrutable, arbitrary, bewildering—in short, impossible to talk to. This point marks the final termination of dialogue: It is a point that should never be reached in a classroom, but it is a point to which a pedagogy of severity too often leads.

15. This transcendental perspective has been criticized by, among others, Sidney I. Dobrin and Helen Rothschild Ewald, for its apoliticism. Such accusations are accurate to the extent that Davidson's philosophy—and much of the analytic tradition—does not foreground the role of politics and power in discourse, but they miss the larger point that language is not reducible to politics and power; on the contrary, they play out through discourse. Although they are connected, language is not isomorphic to a politics; that is why it can be politically transformative, rather than merely reflective. To my mind, the greatest value of such a perspective on language is that it provides hope for the possibility of communicative interaction between speakers belonging to different cultures and speaking different languages; no language is, in principle, incommensurable with any other, though pragmatic constraints may make communication difficult, perhaps even temporarily impossible.

16. A significant amount of research suggests that we are warranted in our charitable attributions; in fact, it seems as if we find rationality and truth wherever we find users of language, both oral and written. William Labov's work demonstrated convincingly that African American speakers of "nonstandard English" have "the same capacity for conceptual learning, and use the same logic as anyone else" (201). Jane. H. Hill observes that "language differences do not seem to be related to differences in logic in the narrow sense" (21). And Hugh Mehan finds that the distinction Walter J. Ong and others have made between the thoughts of literate and nonliterate people is unfounded: "Pre-literate and literate people are equally logical and rational" (161). That is why literate people can communicate with preliterate people, and vice versa, in the first place. We also find charitable attributions of truth and rationality in the classrooms of theorists, such as van Slyck and Lu, who navigate us through a variety of cultural practices that, for all their differences, appear to be quite coherent; other researchers have examined the rationales behind the writing of students who have been institutionally labeled as "basic" (Shaughnessy) or "remedial" (Hull and Rose; Hull et al.; Rose "Language").

17. We cannot wish away the existence of errors; students (and their instructors!) will make them, and they should be addressed and amended. But we need to consider carefully how to discuss errors with students. Trying to understand why students make these errors and helping them understand their underlying logic, as Mina Shaughnessy suggests, is far different from defining students as “irremediable” or “ineducable” (3). And further, as Frank Smith discusses, errors are a necessary part of learning; if we encourage students to fear making mistakes because of excessive penalties, learning is not possible (228–29).

18. And other settings as well: Schools aren’t the only places in which misspellings and other errors are frowned upon.

19. Having misunderstood the assignment, Tracey and George each turned in two responses to peers’ essays. I include them in the totals of Appendix C—which explains why there are nineteen responses by seventeen students—because I am only trying to capture some sense of my students’ responses to writing.

20. I agree with Richard E. Miller’s argument that teachers should not suppress student writing that expresses sentiments that they find reprehensible—writing that Miller, following Mary Louise Pratt, calls “unsolicited oppositional discourse” (390). In fact, Miller claims, classrooms are already remarkably effective in suppressing the appearance in writing of sentiments widely held and expressed outside of classrooms (398). Instead of silencing and punishing students who hold these beliefs, which would likely only drive those beliefs below the surface and harden them further, Miller advocates “a classroom where part of the work involves articulating, investigating, and questioning the affiliated cultural forces that underwrite the ways of thinking that find expression in . . . [unsolicited oppositional discourse]—a classroom, in short, that studies the forces that make such thoughts not only permissible but prevalent” (397). Miller understands full well that the “self-reflexivity” of students that he encourages will not “guarantee that repugnant positions will be abandoned” (407), but at least it allows for the possibility of a continued dialogue that may be transformative for the student (and, one would hope, though Miller says little about it, for the teacher).

21. Miller argues that we must “take students as they are and not where we wish them to be” (405). Citing this same quotation in a footnote, Dennis Lynch and Stephen Jukuri concur (286); they contend that a teacher should always begin by (charitably) trying to understand, rather than reshape, students who hold beliefs that he or she finds disagreeable, because it is only by continuing to communicate with these students that the teacher “might effectively ask them to afford equivalent attention to the experiences and communications of those who do not entirely share their world view—for . . . the quality of relations between teachers and students create[s] the conditions within which students develop, or not, the motivation to engage others and be reciprocal in the same way” (284).

22. Jeremy was genuinely surprised and dismayed at the reactions to his essay; he thought he was expressing “common-sense” attitudes that everyone shared. Confronted with a wider audience than he was used to, Jeremy acknowledged that he needed to rethink his position and its expression; subsequent drafts attest to his earnest efforts to do so.

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