

CHAPTER 5.

WHY I USE A CHARTER FOR COMPASSION WITH MY CONTRACT

In Chapter 4, I discussed what labor-based grading contracts are and how to initiate them in one's classroom. Part of that negotiation process could be discussing key statements that come from the contract's preamble or its philosophy, but there is another possible aspect of the contract that can be incorporated into those discussions: the ways in which a critical, gradeless writing classroom can cultivate a place of compassion so that the class can do the critical, brave, and difficult work involved in discussing the politics of language and its judgment.

Understanding compassion and cultivating an ethic of care, which as Nel Noddings has discussed is an ethic in which we act on behalf of others from a feeling of "I must" (95-96) that often comes with feelings of joy that stem from feelings of relatedness (144), has been a parallel study of mine alongside understanding labor-based grading contracts. This has led me to using Karen Armstrong's Charter for Compassion, which began as a request in a TED talk she made on February 28, 2008. But my use of a Charter for Compassion in my classrooms began with my personal study of compassion. I had no plans to offer it to my students, no plans to use compassion as a key philosophical element in my labor-based grading contract ecologies. I simply felt a growing need to understand compassion in my own life as more than an emotion or feeling, as doing, as action.

What I realized was that the tough discussions my students and I were often having around whiteness, race, and racism in our judgment practices needed a more cogent and explicit ethical foundation in our assessment ecology. We needed a way to discuss and negotiate a set of agreements that could be ground rules, which we could then use to help us understand each other's motives, contributions, feedback, and actions in the course. I was asking my students to do this hard work without helping them understand how anti-racism and anti-white supremacist work in our writing classrooms can fulfill a basic, human ethical need, the need to be compassionate to others, to relate to others, to care for one another. I felt that a gradeless course environment made the topic of compassion more possible than graded classrooms, since we were

already in the habit of understanding our labors together for other purposes than grade chasing.

Additionally, peer feedback practices in all writing classrooms already lend themselves to thinking about compassion as part of our work. We trust each other to read and offer meaningful feedback, so consciously discussing and creating a compassionate atmosphere seemed appropriate. What I found almost immediately upon incorporating the Charter for Compassion was that when we see socially just writing assessment ecologies as places of caring, compassionate labor that meets the needs of others around us, when we see our discussions of the racial politics of language or the white language supremacy in judging practices in schools as compassionate labor for others, we can enter into and sustain that work in productive ways because we can see better how it is part of our need to form connection, even through understanding our differences.

Knowing that everyone is trying to be compassionate in our mutual labors makes it easier to be brave, rather than comfortable, as Arao and Clemens put it. Creating a “brave” culture in the classroom means that we all are uncomfortable yet safe. When we are uncomfortable, it often means we are in an unknown place. We are confronting things we do not fully understand. But this doesn’t mean we are not safe from harm. Being safe in a classroom can be hard to discern since it refers not just to physical harm, or harm to one’s future opportunities, but psychological harm.

Arao and Clemens’ work on cultivating “brave spaces” as opposed to safe ones in order to do social justice work on college campuses argues that safety and comfort often get conflated by students when doing the hard work of social justice (135). Furthermore, they suggest that participants should spend significant time together defining the space of their dialogue on social justice issues as “brave” and establishing brave ground rules that are conscious of the dominant ideological structures and ideas that produce those structures in order to not reproduce dominance and other social justice problems, the problems in the classroom and society that the dialogue is meant to critique and change. They argue that this opening set of discussions is a necessary beginning to any social justice work (142). Arao and Clemens offer some comparisons between common ideas that tend to define safe spaces and how they might be transformed to be guidelines for brave spaces in classrooms. Table 5.1³⁷ offers one way to visualize these:

37 I want to thank Virginia Schwarz for her roundtable on race talk in classrooms that she conducted at the 2018 CCCC annual convention in Kansas City. At the roundtable, Schwarz shared her version of the charter for compassion, in which she includes a discussion of Arao and Clemens’ article and a table similar to Table 5.1. Schwarz’ charter was based on Lucia Pawlowski’s version, who was also at the roundtable.

Table 5.1. Common safe space guidelines transformed by Arao and Clemens into brave space guidelines

Safe Space Guideline	Brave Space Guideline
Agree to disagree (143).	Engage in controversy with civility (144).
Don't take things personally (144).	Own your own intentions and your impact (145).
Challenge by choice (146).	Challenge by choice, but question your reasons for choosing (be aware) (147).
Respect (147).	Respect (but articulate what respect looks like in the classroom) (147-48).
No attacks (148).	No attacks (but articulate the difference between personal attack and a challenge) (148).

In many ways, as you'll see below, because labor-based grading contracts provide for an opening dialogue about the course's grading mechanisms (the contract negotiations), it also conveniently allows for the setting of ground rules that help students and teacher craft a brave ecological place for brave social justice assessment work. The Charter for Compassion is one vehicle I have found that easily and quickly does this work with students, and like Schwarz' class, I find it an important document to negotiate with my students as we also negotiate our labor-based grading contract.

OUR CHARTER FOR COMPASSION

In the version of the contract I discuss in Chapter 4, the preamble mentions cultivating a culture of compassion in the classroom. This is a reference to the charter. During the first week of class, along with negotiating the grading contract, we work through a short set of activities to build our Charter for Compassion alongside the contract. I use a version of the charter that Karen Armstrong started in order to address interfaith conflict worldwide, with a few slight modifications for our classroom setting. Armstrong is an author and documentarian on comparative religion, and her non-profit organization that now helps individuals and organizations all over the world promote the ideals in the charter explain their mission this way on the website:

Charter for Compassion International provides an umbrella for people to engage in collaborative partnerships worldwide. Our mission is to bring to life the principles articulated in the Charter for Compassion through concrete, practical action in a myriad of sectors. (Charter for Compassion International)

The charter itself was drafted in Geneva, Switzerland in 2008 by a collection of forty-two religious, spiritual, and secular leaders from a number of diverse areas, religions, and locations in the world. The website explains their backgrounds as coming from “government, business, education, philanthropy, religion & spirituality, health care, the environment, peace, and social justice.” It is a simple document that centers on what Harry Gensler, an ethics scholar, has called the universal tenet of all human religions and spiritual traditions, the Golden Rule (Gensler 1). In Christian traditions, it is often spoken as: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The Charter for Compassion International website offers a list of other spiritual traditions that have similar tenets, all provided by Gensler, suggesting the Golden Rule’s universality, which I list below as stated on the website:

- Baha’i Faith: Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for someone that things you would not desire for yourself. (Baha’u’llah Gleanings)
- Buddhism: Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. (Udana-Varga 5.18)
- Christianity: In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Jesus, Matthew 7:12)
- Confucianism: One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct . . . loving kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself. (Confucius, Analects 15.23)
- Hinduism: This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. (Mahabharata 5:1517)
- Islam: Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. (The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith)
- Jainism: One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated. (Mahavira, Sutrakritanga)
- Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbat 31a)
- Native Spirituality: We are as much alive as we keep the earth alive. (Chief Dan George)
- Sikhism: I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all. (Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1299)
- Taoism: Regard your neighbour’s gain as your own gain, and your neighbour’s loss as your own loss. (T’ai Shang Kan Ying P’ien, 213-218)
- Unitarianism: We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. (Unitarian principle)
- Zoroastrianism: Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself. (Shayast-na-Shayast 13.29)

When I first offer it to my class, I emphasize that our use of the Charter for Compassion is not my way of proselytizing or turning my writing course into one about spirituality. But because writing is a social activity, it requires that we interact and read one another—in all the ways one might read another person. It requires that we discuss and come to some ethical agreements about how we'll conduct ourselves in all of our practices. The study of rhetoric and writing has always been closely tied to ethical practice. Ethics was a central concern of Plato's in *Phaedrus*. It was an important consideration of Isocrates' good student of rhetoric. Ethics' role in the study of rhetoric has been long debated in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric* (Rowland and Womack). Richard Weaver's important book, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, draws on Plato's *Phaedrus* to discuss the ethical dimensions of rhetoric. John Duffy more recently argues that the teaching of writing and rhetoric is always already a teaching of ethical rhetoric, that is, rhetoric is always connected to ethical questions and practices (230).

Compassion is my entry and overarching framework for ethical conduct in and through writing in my classrooms. We must have some assurances that those around us are trying to treat us well, to treat us as we would like to be treated if our positions were reversed. Now, the golden rule, as I'll discuss below, is more complex than this, but I try to keep it as simple as possible for my students since our class is not a philosophy class on the Golden Rule. Our charter fleshes out the foundations of our rhetorical ethics by defining through action what compassion will mean.

The template charter, which is adopted from Armstrong's charter, that we read together and discuss, offers a simple promise that all in the class agree to. It states:

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity, and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We in this class acknowledge

that we have failed to live compassionately to some degree.

We therefore pledge to do all that we can, knowing we'll fail on occasion, to restore compassion to the center of our lives (at least in this course and during this quarter) and attempt to engage with our colleagues in this course with compassion. This means we will work to think first of others, their benefit, their well-being, and their learning, knowing that others are compassionately working for our benefit. We will strive to see our interdependence and interconnectedness, and labor for one another.

The following specific actions and behaviors we pledge to do in order to encourage and adopt a compassionate stance toward our colleagues in this class:

As we read together the above charter, I ask us to pause after each paragraph and consider the key ideas. We gather observations about each paragraph, without trying to come to any conclusions. I emphasize two important assumptions that I make from my reading of the charter. First, one cannot be accidentally compassionate. Compassion requires intention. Second, compassion is not simply a feeling or emotion. It is action. We can only *do* compassion, and often we fail at it, so it is a *practice* we develop over time but never perfect.

There are at least five key values that the charter highlights for our initial discussions. I try to make sure that we discuss each by asking questions about the key ideas we identify in the charter's words. I push the class to discuss these values in some way:

- Compassion is a universal human practice.
- Central to compassion is the act of treating others as we wish to be treated if we were them in their situation.
- Compassion is action that alleviates suffering in others, and assumes one's presence with those who suffer.
- Compassion is not selective—every human being deserves justice, equity, and respect, and we should not act or speak in ways that deny others these basic human rights, regardless of who they are or what they express to us.
- Compassion places others' needs and learning first, knowing that we are all interdependent and connected.

I've never had a student disagree with any of these key values. In fact, all of my students have agreed with all of them. To me, this is a testament to both the universality of the values and the generosity of my students. They recognize the

goodness in these values and want to be compassionate. They want to care for their colleagues next to them, even though in many cases, they do not know their colleagues yet. In a humanistic way, I want to say that my students have shown me that they recognize the warmth, beauty, and goodness that a person feels when they care for others, when they attend to others' learning and suffering, even when that suffering is not life or death.

I realize there is a big difference in the kind of suffering that is referenced in the Charter for Compassion and the "suffering" that one might endure in a writing course, particularly from the labors of that course. The suffering in a writing course by U.S. college students, like mine, might be best characterized as struggles, not suffering. It is important to acknowledge this in class, since the literature and charter use the term suffering to refer to more serious problems than lack of sleep, or struggling with understanding a text, or even the pain of getting critical feedback on one's draft.

Today, with all that is going on in many parts of the world, with millions of refugees fleeing war-ravaged homelands, with the systemic problems of racism and sexism and Islamophobia and xenophobia in the US, calling the struggles of relatively privileged U.S. college students suffering could be problematic, if it isn't continually recognized that suffering comes in many degrees of severity, that our suffering is the suffering of the relatively privileged—what some call, "first world problems." To avoid confusing students, I keep the term suffering, knowing that we should remind ourselves that suffering is never universally experienced in the same ways or degrees, nor does it have the same consequences to individuals, even in our classroom.

To set the context for our work together, and build reasons for why it is important to a class like ours, I briefly offer some of the scientific research on compassion. This is usually one slide in class or a handout that we quickly go over. Sometimes it is a series of short readings and a reflection done before class. Sometimes we look at all the material in class together. There is a lot of neuroscientific and biological research that asks questions like, is compassion biological, does it have any biological basis or benefits to people, or is it a culturally constructed concept and set of practices? It turns out that there is growing research showing how the human brain is hardwired for compassion. It's biological, with many tangible benefits, and one key to activating compassion is through mindfulness practices.

Psychological researchers, such as Dacher Keltner, who has an eighteen-minute TED Talk on this subject, offers the neurological and psychological research on compassion, revealing ways that it can be measured in the brain and body, and activated through key biologically-driven bodily practices around facial expressions, voice and vocal sounds, and touch (Keltner, "TEDxBerkeley"). If there

isn't time to watch the video in class sessions, his short essay, "The Compassion Instinct" or his condensed video ("Dacher Keltner on the Evolutionary") covers much of the same ground, which can be assigned outside of class or read in class. The article and videos point students to various studies that reveal the biological aspects and necessity of compassion. I've also found it useful to use some of Keltner's and his colleagues' articles, podcasts, and other materials on the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley's website.

Additionally, there have been several notable studies and meta-analyses of such studies on the effects of mindfulness practices on compassion centers in the brain, such as the inferior parietal cortex and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), and the frequency of compassionate (or pro-social) acts by study participants (Goleman; Weng et al.). The Association for Psychological Sciences offers a short news release of Weng et al.'s 2013 study that is written for lay audiences, which shows that compassion can be taught through mindfulness practices. This online article is a good way to discuss this research with students. Emiliana R. Simon-Thomas summarizes some of these research findings discussed at the 2012 conference, "The Science of Compassion: Origins, Measures and Interventions" (Simon-Thomas). Her short article offers several videos of presentations on the science of compassion. Daniel Goleman's short *Washington Post* article on the research of compassion covers similar areas, and Richard Davidson's short video in which he presents his and his colleagues' research (the Weng et al. study) on how compassion is trainable is useful in illustrating to students how biological compassion is, and how it can be consciously cultivated. Davidson's video is particularly useful because he provides an easy method for a loving-kindness meditation that his study participants used as a compassion intervention, which can be easily translated for classroom use, particularly in preparation for reading and providing feedback to colleagues' drafts.

Often, I incorporate loving-kindness practices in my classes to reinforce our culture of compassion. Loving-kindness meditation has a long history in Buddhist traditions, and is called *metta bhavana*, or just *metta*, in the Pali language. Steven Smith, a teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Burma and an advisor for the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, explains that *metta* meditation is:

care, concern, tenderness, loving kindness, friendship—a feeling of warmth for oneself and others. The practice is the softening of the mind and heart, an opening to deeper and deeper levels of the feeling of kindness, of pure love. Loving kindness is without any desire to possess another. It is not a sentimental feeling of goodwill, not an obligation, but comes

from a selfless place. It does not depend on relationships, on how the other person feels about us. The process is first one of softening, breaking down barriers that we feel inwardly toward ourselves, and then those that we feel toward others. (Smith)

Smith's *metta* meditation offered in the short online article is essentially the same method that Davidson's study participants used as a compassion intervention. Often, the first time I offer such a meditation to my students, I provide a guided meditation, such as Emma Seppala's fifteen-minute, guided loving-kindness meditation that includes a sound recording that guides practitioners (Seppala). While both Smith's and Seppala's are essentially the same practice and method, I like Seppala's because she guides the practitioner with her voice. At the earlier stages of the course, such as the initial discussions that build our charter, I do always ask students to do *metta* meditations. Sometimes, I simply show them these resources as a way to reveal the ways various disciplines and people have come to the same conclusions about the human need to be compassionate, showing that there are ways to cultivate compassion and loving-kindness and that these practices have been around a long time. Often I incorporate a simplified version of *metta* meditation in our labor instructions for reading and providing feedback on colleagues' drafts.

In our early discussions over our charter, which culminate in making lists of behaviors and actions that will encourage a culture of compassion in our class, this contextualizing with the biological and psychological research often can prompt students when making their lists to be very practical and concrete, to focus on the bodily and physical, not just abstract ideals. For instance, some classes have offered items like, "look at others who are speaking in class" next to more abstract actions like, "when someone is speaking, give them your full attention." These may lead to the same set of practices, but each item focuses our compassion work differently. The first, focuses our attention on cultivating compassion through bodily comportment and eye contact. The second is more abstract and may be seen as encompassing the first but often can be translated as simply a state of mind through the key word, "attention." I find practices that are more practical and concrete, ones that focus on moving or positioning our bodies to be more effective in the long run than ones that are abstract. But I think it is okay to record both.

So in the blank space at the bottom of our charter, we build a list of actions or behaviors that can be done in all of our course activities that encourage a culture of compassion. This is the list we build together. After our short discussion on the words of the charter itself and my brief contextualizing of compassion

as a bona fide, researched thing, we build our list of compassionate actions that we promise to do in all our labors of the course. To do this list-building, I give students a short list of excerpts from various scholars and others who talk about compassion, which I initially found on Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education website (Center for Compassion and Altruism in Research and Education).

Since I teach within ten-week quarters, we don't have a lot of time to read in full even one of the articles or chapters that these excerpts draw on, which would be preferable. What I'm trying to offer them in the excerpts is a way to see the academic conversation around compassion, and see it as something other than a touchy-feely, English-teachery thing that might be disregarded as impractical fluff, or too sentimental to be rigorous enough for a college classroom. I'm sure that my own *habitus* is an important part of how well these activities go off in my classrooms, just as it is important to the success of other aspects of my labor-based contract graded classrooms. I always play to my strengths, while also trying hard to call attention to the privileges I have to my students, which is a rhetorical way to be mindful with my students. For instance, my male, athletic stature, and masculine voice likely aids me when trying to convince students that compassion is not simply a touchy-feely thing. I'm also trying to direct them in particular ways, so that their list of actions and behaviors will be meaningful and helpful to us. All of these discussions and activities, which stretch over two class sessions, but take only twenty to thirty minutes in each session, help us understand compassion and come up with practices that cultivate compassion.

The actual work of building the list of such actions and behaviors is really an intellectual discussion that asks students to develop a list of behaviors we can commit to by first considering some of the literature and ideas on compassion. I start us with individual freewriting on the subject, move to group discussions, then a large class discussion. Once each group has discussed and come up with their lists of compassionate actions, I collect them and organize them in our charter. We read together the final version, and each week we vote on two or three compassionate actions we'll most focus on in our work that week. Each day in class, we read the two practices voted on that week. The building of the charter may be stretched over two class sessions. My prompting for our list of behaviors and actions is simple: What behaviors and actions can we do in all our activities that will encourage a compassionate culture in our class?

DISCUSSING THE CONCEPT OF COMPASSION

While each class comes up with their own list of practices and insights into compassion, I now turn to what I see as some of the important ideas in the literature

on compassion that my excerpts draw on, which I believe make for an informed discussion of compassion that leads to the kind of classroom assessment culture I'm aiming for. I do not intend the following to be a full discussion of the concept of compassion, instead it is a summary of the key ideas I tend to discuss with my students about compassion.

It is often stated that Charles Darwin himself saw sympathy and what might be considered compassion to be an important evolutionary trait in all animal communities (Ekman; Goetz et al. 4). The more compassion that exists in a community, argues Darwin, the more numerous the community is. In part, compassion is how we help each other, how those who need it get comfort and aid in communities, and it helps form relationships between individuals in communities. Jacoba M. Lilius, Jane E. Dutton, Monica C. Worline, and Sally Maitlis offer this definition of compassion, and it suggests an etymological and philosophical way to consider Darwin's hypothesis:

Compassion comes into the English language by way of the Latin root "passio," which means to suffer, paired with the Latin prefix "com," meaning together—to suffer together. The concept of compassion and its link to suffering has deep philosophical and religious roots. For instance, Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas noted the interdependence of suffering and compassion when he wrote: "No one becomes compassionate unless he suffers" (cited in Barasch, 2005, p. 13). Ancient Chinese traditions acknowledge the interrelationship of suffering and human concern in the figure of Kwan Yin, often referred to as the goddess of compassion. Hindu imagery depicts compassion through a half-ape half-human deity, Hanuman, whose chest is cleaved open to reveal his heart to others undefended. Some Buddhist traditions induct individuals seeking to cultivate their compassion into the vow of the Bodhisattva, whose life is dedicated to being present with and relieving the suffering of all beings (Barasch, 2005; Chodron, 1997). A recurring theme is thus the relationship between one's own suffering and self-oriented compassion, and compassion for others (Neff, 2003, 2009). (274)

When reading this excerpt with students, I ask them, how does the Latin etymology help us understand the word compassion? What would it mean to "suffer with" another in our classroom, say, during feedback activities or when we have discussions? I point out the various traditions that these authors use to illustrate how universal the idea is. We might also look at the list of golden rules

from various spiritual traditions from Gensler (listed earlier in this chapter) to further illustrate this point. I ask about the universality of suffering itself, something the passage above assumes. What do they consider “suffering” and how should we regard the idea in our class? Is struggling with a dense text for our class suffering? How might sharing one’s draft with colleagues for their feedback be a kind of suffering, or revising a draft that you really like and feel is a part of you also suffering? Might stress and anxiety from outside the course be suffering too?

Sometimes I’ll offer Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths, which is understood by many to be the foundation of the tradition. Tradition says that these “truths” were articulated by the Buddha after he struggled for enlightenment. They might be stated as: (1) suffering exists in life; (2) craving, desire, and ignorance are the causes of suffering, in short, attachment causes suffering; (3) suffering ceases when one detaches from cravings, desires, and the unknown; and (4) freedom from suffering can be achieved by practicing the Eightfold Path. I offer these ideas not to proselytize but to show the assumptions about the existence and universality of suffering assumed in these discussions of compassion, and how they suggest compassion and suffering go together. I focus only on the first three ideas, not the fourth.

I also emphasize that these “truths” likely should not be thought of as static or “truths” at all. They are practices, actions that help us see that compassion, which includes self-compassion, is not simply a state of mind or a feeling, but a set of practices we do every day. They are labor. Stephen Batchelor, Christina Feldman, and Akincano M. Weber, three long-time Buddhist teachers, explain this very idea about the four noble truths, saying that the term “truth” is not what the Buddha had in mind at all, if one reads them in context of the Buddhist canon, instead, they are practices, or as Feldman says, “liberating investigations.” Stephen Batchelor agrees and offers this understanding of them:

as long as you’re using the word “truth,” you’re going to be just a whisker away from having a dogmatic view. If we take, for example, the second noble truth as it is usually translated—that “craving is the origin of suffering”—to me that is a metaphysical statement. You’re making a very generalized claim about the nature of reality, and so immediately people get drawn into the discussion: Well, is that really true? What about this? What about that? And down you go into the rabbit hole of theology. Whereas if you frame it as a task, the challenge is: how do I let go of craving? Then you are setting up a whole different doorway to the thoughts and the discussions that follow. Your discussion inevitably will be pragmatic.

It won't be, "Is this true? Is this false? Is this right? Is this wrong?" but, "How do you get it done?" (Batchelor et al.)

In short, Batchelor suggests that the Four Noble Truths might be most productively articulated as questions whose stasis is policy (what do we do?), and not a stasis question of fact (what is the case?). So to understand the Four Noble Truths in the way the Buddha offered them, according to Feldman and Batchelor, is to see them as inquiries and action that come to personal insight, which leads to social changes in the community, since they make a point to remind their readers that the Buddha was a social activist who was interested in making the social world a better place.

Finally, in the same dialogue, Akincano Weber offers his version of how to understand the Four Noble Truths as actions. He is inspired by the English monk Nanavira Thera, who offered an analogy between the Four Noble Truths and a scene in *Alice in Wonderland*:

Alice doesn't have a bottle that describes its contents. She finds a bottle that tells her what she should do with the contents—"Drink me"—and then things happen: she shrinks and grows and so on. In the Buddhist application of the analogy, the label on the first truth says, "Understand me." On the second of the truths, the label says, "Give me up." On the third bottle, it says, "Realize me," and on the fourth bottle it says, "Develop me." So if we boil down the teaching of these four truths, they are four different calls to action. (Batchelor et al.)

I like to think of our charter for compassion as a call to action. What are we going to do to make our classroom a more compassionate, and thus a more educative, place for all of us? How are we going to liberate ourselves through our own investigations? How will our labor make us more compassionate, more equal, more free to learn in the ways we can?

Furthermore, if everyone suffers in some way (the first Noble Truth), then compassion is important to helping everyone learn and grow. Compassion may help us notice others' and our own cravings, desires, and ignorance and how they cause us anxiety, stress, and pain (second Noble Truth). We then might be more able to detach from those cravings and desires (third Noble Truth), not to have no desires, but to allow for other ideas, voices, and judgments in the classroom to exist and be valued. Since our context for this discussion is writing and reading texts, I move us to think mostly about the ways we are attached to our judgments and ideas of things, and why we must hold so tightly to them. Why does having a firm belief in something mean we must deny others' rights to hold

firmly to their contrary beliefs? If we wish to listen to, interact with each other compassionately, and grow or learn—i.e., change ourselves—then how does detachment help us do this? How do we, like Hanuman, open our unprotected hearts to others in our class? It is not easy practicing.

I also ask students to consider the last sentence, one that is about people's interconnection, suggesting how someone else's suffering in the world may be connected to their own. I might ask, can you think of some ways that your own success in this class may be dependent on other students' success around you? There are lots of ways this occurs directly. Writing group members who read and provide feedback help writers with their drafts and writing practices. Class discussions of texts and readings are communal ways of sharing insights and readings of texts. In such discussions, we learn how others read a text and learn from their reading labors. The better those around you are at reading a text, the fuller your own understanding of the text is after hearing about others' reading experiences if you are open to them. And the opposite is true. If colleagues do not read carefully or offer thoughtful discussion on a text in class, you will have a more impoverished sense of the text after those discussions, which is a kind of suffering—albeit a suffering you may not be fully aware of. The same is true concerning feedback sessions. So being diligent in our homework and other labors and sharing our understandings together are labors of compassion toward our colleagues, and if we don't do them in the fullest ways possible, we can cause suffering to others.

In their historical treatment of the concept, Getz, Keltner, and Simon-Thomas offer this definition of compassion:

We define compassion as the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help (for similar definitions, see Lazarus, 1991; Nussbaum, 1996, 2001; Table 1). This definition conceptualizes compassion as an affective state defined by a specific subjective feeling, and differs from treatments of compassion as an attitude (Blum, 1980; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), or as a general benevolent response to others regardless of suffering or blame (Post, 2002; Wispé, 1986). This definition also clearly differentiates compassion from *empathy*, which refers to the vicarious experience of another's emotions (Lazarus, 1991). (2; emphasis in original)

These authors point out how compassion is often seen as distinct from empathy, or the “vicarious experience of another's emotions.” Compassion is its own emotional response to others' suffering, but it is not just a feeling. It is a

feeling mixed with a desire to help alleviate suffering seen in others. Our class discussion might ask: is it preferable that people act on their ethical feelings toward others? Is it better to help someone through their suffering, than just to notice it and do nothing? What keeps people from turning their empathy into compassionate action in our classroom, in your past classrooms? How do we notice others' suffering or struggles in our class if we do not always have direct access to that suffering, say in the drafting or revising of a paper, or a reading of a text? Is it preferable to tell those around us when we suffer in silent or invisible ways? If we think we see a colleague suffering, are we obligated to ask about it or call attention to it in some public but respectful way, or maybe a private way?

Often, I bring up the idea that much suffering in classrooms, especially writing classrooms, is created by grading and the institutional requirement of grades. This is one benefit of labor-based grading contracts. Thus in conventional classrooms, one thing that may stop many students from turning their empathy into compassionate action for others is the detrimental effect that such actions may have on their grades, particularly if that grading ecology is set up around a teacher's judgment of so-called quality of drafts. The ecology is one of competition and scarcity of the higher grades. By helping others achieve higher grades, you risk losing your chance at the few higher grades given out. It feels like an unfair choice. And this suffering from grades is not even, particularly if we consider which groups of students are most privileged by white language supremacy that shape standards for grading. Yes, in literacy classrooms, the intensity or degree of suffering by grading can be racialized and classed.

Some students will occasionally say that compassion does not require seeing others suffer. That it is an act that we can do because we know others will appreciate it and benefit from it, even though they are not suffering. There is an element of truth to this, but it is not technically what most scholars understand as compassion since it is intimately linked to suffering of others. As the above discussions show, compassion arises from seeing, hearing, or knowing of others' suffering or struggles. It is action directed at alleviating suffering of those whom we come to understand as less fortunate than us, those who cannot help themselves as we can. It isn't simply doing nice things for just anyone.

What some students are referring to here (compassion that doesn't require suffering in others) might be akin to giving money to those who have plenty of money, without looking for those who are needy elsewhere. It is still nice to do, but does not solve a problem that someone else has. Of course, in our U.S.-based class context, where the kinds and degree of suffering may be minimal, and often not in need of others' assistance, and where we are concerned only with learning, I hear this altering of compassion as a way to fit a third-world definition of compassion into a first-world context. It asks indirectly: what if there is no suffering?

What is our responsibility to those around us then? But suffering need not be about imminent life-and-death situations. As suggested above, it can be about anxiety and undue struggling. So this can be a useful expansion of compassion for the writing classroom setting, a way of considering loving-kindness as part of our version of compassion, but we should continue to be mindful of the ways compassion have been understood to help those who suffer in dire ways and are in need.

Another response to this question, a more ambitious one, might be to ask how can we find those in need nearest to us, so that we might exercise compassion toward them in the process of accomplishing our course goals? This is not an easy question to answer, and many students will not be prepared to answer it or follow up on whatever the class comes to (ideally). Furthermore, the dangers of searching out needy recipients of compassion can end up being a paternalistic enterprise that does more harm than good. I have found that it is better to be vigilant for those needing our compassion, but not try to turn a writing class into a training ground for humanitarian work. But having the discussion about what our individual and collective responsibilities are as people who live among so much suffering and inequality can be beneficial to students.

What it can reveal is that we are all interconnected and our individual learning in school does not have to be—even should not be—an individual affair. What gives us the right to exercise the privilege of learning in this classroom when so many around us are denied this privilege, and suffer in poverty, or sickness, or mental illness? One's education in school may indeed be at the expense of those outside the school, those in the community who suffer without help or compassion from anyone, and do so mostly because of luck of birth. There may be more learning, joy, and engagement when we expand our circle of responsibility and care. Again, it is not easy work, but brave and hard work, work that many might see as far from the work of a writing classroom. But is it? Is the compassion imperative a part of the ethical in learning rhetoric and writing? This is a question each group of students should wrestle a bit with, and I'll return to it in a way in the final Coda chapter of this book.

Obviously, there are no firm answers to any of these questions. I merely offer them as ways to get students to think more deeply about a seemingly simple idea like compassion, which could look only like treating others nicely, or thinking nicely about others, and connecting it to the learning and labors in the writing course. This discussion also allows me to talk about some of the structures in the course that help us be more compassionate. For example, I ask several students each week to read to the class their labor journal entries, and we talk about our similar struggles. I often ask the class questions like, "did anyone else have a similar struggle or issue with their labor this week?" It is rare for several students

not to raise their hands. By commiserating in this way, students develop an eye and ear for the struggles others endure in our course, seeing them as similar to their own, or noticing those who seem to struggle more or differently. My hope is that once the struggles of others are made present, students will be poised to be compassionate to their colleagues, to see their responsibilities in the class as more than simply to get their own grade or take care of their own individual learning, but to expand their sense of care and tend to the needs of others.

CONNECTING EMPATHY TO COMPASSION

Noticing the struggles of others as interconnected to one's own learning in a class and cultivating a desire to care for those who suffer requires empathy. Most definitions of compassion, including all those the charter works from in my courses, depend on understanding empathy and feeling empathy for others. While we cannot force students to feel something for others, we can understand the feeling and articulate some intentions for our actions. While seemingly contrary to the passages on compassion discussed above, I believe that *actions come first and feelings of empathy follow actions*, not that other way around. Doing leads to feeling. Bodily position, eye contact, touch, the movements we make, all contribute to how we feel in a conversation or situation. Try arguing intensely with someone while lying down on a couch. Try shouting and being angry at someone while smiling at them. Try studying a picture or page of text really closely, very carefully, while slouched in a chair and your head resting on its back. Now, try studying that picture or text sitting straight up, head slightly leaning forward, breathing a bit shallower than usual and faster. Which position is more conducive to focusing hard and carefully on the object?

What we do and how we orient our bodies in places matters to our feelings and attitudes. Our feelings of empathy toward others, even toward those we don't know very well, is no different. Our bodies must first be in a place and oriented in particular ways, only then can we act compassionately for others. For our class purposes, I urge students to consider that it is unwise to wait to feel empathy if we know we need it to cultivate compassion and interconnectedness. We cannot wait to feel empathy for others. We can consciously construct empathy by positioning our bodies in ways that mimic empathetic responses in the presence of others.

To test this idea of empathy as spatial and embodied, that it can be cultivated by orienting our bodies in the presence of others, we might do a thought experiment. Think of a non-romantic, loving relationship you have with another who is not a family member, maybe a long-time, best friend, one you'd say you have lots of empathy for. How did you gain that empathy over the years? When you

first met this person, did you have the same degree of empathy that you do now? Did you care as much about them initially, were you as deeply affected by their problems and troubles, as you are now? Of course not. So how did your feelings of empathy change? Could your increase in empathy have occurred through being in the presence of your friend and practicing such bodily orientations that lead to increased feelings of empathy? Could you have been cultivating dispositions, a *habitus* marked in bodily ways, by how you lean closer and listen carefully with furrowed eyebrows as your friend speaks, or just being in their presence as they suffer or have troubles. Being with someone else as they experience trouble often makes us more sympathetic to their plight. When we say, “we’ve been there with you,” or “we’ve gone through a lot together,” it draws on this intrinsic quality of being in the presence of others who suffer. I think, empathy is a human response to being in the presence of others’ suffering or struggling, and it becomes a disposition through the way our bodies are habitually oriented in space. Doing this over and over, perhaps out of politeness at first, but later out of a growing sense of empathy, creates empathy, and so cultivates compassion.

If there is time, perhaps an activity that demonstrates the connections between spatial and bodily orientation and how we feel toward others and their ideas can help develop discussions about empathy. One measure of empathy is how well we listen and retain the stories and ideas that someone else offers us. When we are more empathetic, we want to listen more carefully because we understand that the other person who needs or asks for our empathy is soothed by or appreciates our empathetic listening. Their suffering is noticed or listened to. So one empathy activity might place students in pairs and ask one student (student A) to either lie down on the floor, if it is comfortable to do and student A is able and willing, or turn their chair away from the other student (student B) and recline as much as possible, so that they are in a relaxed position. Student B will then read or tell a story to student A. The story can be one about a time that student B struggled, failed at something, or was sad about something, or something that they are genuinely excited about at the moment. It should be a story they are willing to share. It should have specific details, and be written down first, likely prepared before class. Student A listens to the story, and student B reads their story to student A. Once they’ve finished, they switch positions and Student A reads while B listens. Finally, they sit down and freewrite for five minutes: What was your colleague’s story about? What details do you remember? This takes fifteen minutes.

You then repeat this process with new pairs, only this time, change the orientation. Have the listening student sit straight up and alert in their chair, facing the other student, looking into their eyes or face the entire time. Once you have two freewritten summaries, ask students, perhaps in groups of four (the two

pairs), to compare the summaries. Which one did you remember in more detail? Which one were you more interested in? How did your bodily orientation affect your ability to listen? How did your orientation affect your feelings of focus or attention to the story? How did your partner's bodily orientation affect your reading of your story?

The discussions together about what they observed might make observations about the ways our attention and care for others is not simply an inner thing. Our bodies and others' bodies' orientations and spatial proximity to our own matters to what and how we perceive things, what we remember, and our abilities to focus, remember, concentrate, and engage. This same activity can be done with reading too by asking students to read similar short passages in various bodily positions, standing, sitting, lying down, slouched in a chair, with one's face close to the passage and farther away, etc.

Martin L. Hoffman, a clinical psychological researcher, who has done extensive work on empathy, explains that

Compassion . . . is not a sharing of another person's emotional state, which will vary depending on what the other person's emotional experience seems to be, but an emotion of its own . . . In compassion, the emotion is felt and shaped in the person feeling it not by whatever the other person is believed to be feeling, but by feeling personal distress at the suffering of another and wanting to ameliorate it. The core relational theme for compassion, therefore, is being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help. (289)

So empathy is important to compassion and is mixed with the action to alleviate the suffering of others. It's a feeling of distress over another's suffering. It urges us to do something. It is a pathway to action. But if we don't always feel empathy in strong enough ways that move us to action, then we cannot be compassionate. So can we be compassionate without, at least initially, being empathetic toward another? I think so, at least as a method to begin, to cultivate empathy in ourselves. I've never met anyone who has disagreed with the idea that being compassionate, doing actions to alleviate others' suffering, is not preferable and ideal for everyone, so building empathy as a bridge to more compassionate action in the future seems safe to me as a set of practices for the writing classroom.

So we can cultivate empathy and compassionate acts simply by orienting our bodies in the material places we make in the classroom and doing particular things for others, first out of duty or respect, then out of caring and compassion. Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius, a neuropsychologist and neurologist

(respectively), argue that our brains can be programmed to be more empathetic and compassionate. Empathy can be practiced so that it is habitual. Doing this, they argue, leads to neurochemical responses in the brain that make us happy.

Hanson and Mendius offer several strategies for cultivating empathy that come from research on the brain. They define empathy as a connection with another that completes a thou-I relationship, one in which you know that the empathetic one feels your feelings. Empathy is a reassuring stance and understanding between individuals that makes clear each is understood. They explain, “[w]e are social animals, who, as Dan Siegel puts it, need to feel *felt*” (138; emphasis in original). Listen to that. We need to *feel felt*. Can you deny this? Hanson and Mendius call empathy “respectful and soothing” and is generous because one is willing “to be moved by another person” (139). They offer this explanation: “empathy is neither agreement nor approval. You can empathize with someone you wish would act differently. Empathy *doesn’t* mean waiving your rights; knowing this can help you feel it’s alright to be empathic” (138). From this understanding of empathy, they offer six practices that will sound familiar, given what I’ve said above, but are nevertheless helpful in building the compassionate practices in a classroom charter for compassion or just talking about how a class will understand the ways we can be empathetic and compassionate toward one another. Here are the six practices, with a paraphrasing of Hanson and Mendius’ suggestions about each one:

- **Set the stage:** Remind yourself to be empathetic and that it feels good to be so. Relax your body and mind so as to be open to others, keeping in mind that your thoughts and feelings are here and others’ are over there. They are separate but you are present with the other person’s thoughts and feelings. “Keep paying attention to the other person; be *with* him [her/them]” (140).
- **Notice the actions of others:** Take careful note of how the other person moves, positions their body, makes facial expressions, etc. Imagine yourself doing those same bodily expressions and movements so that you can feel what they are feeling (140).
- **Sense the feelings of others:** First “tune in to yourself . . . your breathing, body, and emotions,” then “watch the other person’s face and eyes closely . . . Relax. Let your body open to resonating with the other person’s emotions” (140-41).
- **Track the thoughts of others:** “Actively imagine what the other person could be thinking or wanting” (141).
- **Check back:** When it is appropriate, “check with the other person to see if you’re on the right track” (141). This is similar to Peter Elbow

and Pat Belanoff's response strategy of "say back" (Elbow and Belanoff 8).

- **Receive empathy yourself:** "Be open, present, and honest. You could also ask for empathy directly" (142).

Once we finish our initial discussions of compassion and build our Charter for Compassion, I reference the above practices and the full charter in all labor instructions, reminding us of our commitments to be compassionate. I have found this use of compassion as a companion to labor-based grading contracts to be very useful and successful, particularly because my writing classrooms focus on understanding the ways Standardized Edited American English (SEAE) and dominant discourses expected of students in school are historically associated with a white, middle-class racial *habitus*, and those discussions require compassion and empathy. I also make explicit the ways that using such a white racial *habitus* in the judgment of writing perpetuates white language supremacy. These two focuses are ways I offer critical language practices for students, ways to be critical about language, how we judge it, and its consequences on others. They also tend to be a hard pill to swallow for many students. It makes many white students feel uncomfortable. So in order to be brave, we must find ways to support a safe environment that may also be uncomfortable for some. A culture of compassion that everyone actively defines, builds, and maintains is the way I've helped do this important work. While I've not done any explicitly empirical or quantitative study of how the Charter for Compassion has affected my classrooms, students mention it positively in end of quarter course evaluations and in their final reflective documents at the end of each quarter. Ultimately, each teacher must decide what is agreeable with their own pedagogies and teacherly stance in the classroom. I find compassion agreeable and helpful.