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Making It Up As We Go: Students Writing and Teachers Reflecting on Post-K New Orleans

By Doreen Piano, Reggie Poché, Sarah DeBacher, Celeste Del Russo, and Elizabeth Lewis, University of New Orleans

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, writing instructors at the University of New Orleans felt compelled to incorporate personal, social, and political aspects of the storm into their classrooms. In this article, individual instructors discuss a particular pedagogical approach assignment, class theme, or teaching strategy that we adopted, exploring its rationale and reflecting on our students' reactions and responses to place-based and civic-minded pedagogies during a time of crisis.

During the 2006 spring semester at the University of New Orleans, a group of writing instructors met to discuss our concerns and goals about teaching writing in a post-Katrina New Orleans. We understood that our teaching had to reflect the changing social, political, and emotional realities that all of us confronted daily—from the drive to campus through the ruins of once-vibrant neighborhoods to the massive recovery operations occurring throughout the city. In addition because of the university's location near several of the most devastated areas, we also had to consider the micro-recovery operations of people sorting through their mildewed belongings, many of them UNO employees, faculty, and students. Since the truncated Fall 2005 semester, dubbed "the Katrina semester," writing instructors had immediately sensed the need to design writing assignments that made links to local concerns, national debates, and ongoing individual experiences and responses to the flood. So, for

example, students entered national and local debates on whether or not New Orleans should be saved, why they would stay (or not) in New Orleans after graduation, and what city neighborhoods should be rebuilt.

While working on her masters' thesis that argued for the importance of community- and place-based pedagogies, Celeste suggested the idea of preserving teacher and student materials we were generating in our post-Katrina classrooms. Since then, Celeste and Doreen have generated interest and participation among UNO students and instructors to contribute to the Writing After Katrina Archive Project (WAKAP). The goal of collecting these materials is to provide a resource for scholars, locally and nationally, in English Studies who have an interest in writing history and pedagogy, institutional history, trauma studies, and civic education. However, even more significant is that the collected materials reflect not only an array of narratives of the unfolding tragedy but also student and teacher engagement with the subsequent social and political issues that arose after the flood. Not only were students writing and researching on issues from timely trash pick-up to wetland restoration, but also interviewing people, observing reconstruction efforts, attending neighborhood meetings and commemoration activities, and conducting surveys on campus and off.

In his highly germane book *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*, Derek Owens asserts the need for composition studies to localize by re-envisioning the first year writing course as one "where students begin to view their personal and academic needs and desires through the lens of sustainability" (6). He claims that by concentrating on environmental issues that concern all of us, we can, among other things, counter the "placelessness" of college campuses which often functions as distinctly separate from their physical locations. In the aftermath of Katrina the division between academic and home life for all campus employees, students, and faculty, eroded as the campus itself became another representative

space of the emerging fragmented narrative of what happened after the flood. Being on campus that spring, seeing the effects of the flood—the emptied, eerily still campus, its buildings shut down for mold remediation, the closed Student Rec Center, where National Guard personnel had stayed while performing rescue operations, the broken vending machines which hungry evacuees had raided while waiting to be airlifted or bused out—perhaps unconsciously influenced our own reasoning for teaching Katrina in the classroom.

Because the majority of UNO students live in the greater New Orleans area, their powerful responses to these place-based assignments illustrate the pedagogical imperative of attending to aspects of place—local, national, global—especially during a time of crisis. Relevant to the kinds of writing instruction undertaken at UNO is Jonathan Mauk's conception of 'academic third space" as being "born of the juncture between academic space and student ontology" (380). By this, he seems to suggest that context-based pedagogies reflect not only what students bring to the classroom, but what they can take away from it. This means 'carrying' the academia into places that matter to them. Whether specifically Katrina-directed, or not, our teaching practices opened up a space for viewing students' lives, insights, and opinions in tandem with our own: finding our affective responses mirrored in the other—confusion, despair, anger, resistance, spiked with occasional moments of supreme joy and hope—did not necessarily bring us closer together, but at least allowed for a form of recognition to emerge in the classroom that maybe hadn't been there before. Although national coverage of Katrina has diminished immensely in the past year, for residents of southeastern Louisiana the aftermath of the storm continues to affect our lives. Because of the university's urban mission to educate local populations, the need for the continuing development of creative and timely teaching practices that reflect the desires of both students and faculty remains.

Teaching Disaster Along the Mississippi, Fall 2005

Reggie J. Poché

In October 2005, a little more than a month after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I was asked to consider teaching a spring semester course on "disaster writing" at the University of Missouri—St. Louis, where I had been teaching as an adjunct instructor of composition and creative writing shortly after receiving an M.F.A. in fiction writing. Knowing that I am a native of New Orleans, Nancy Gleason, Associate Dean of UMSL's Pierre Laclede Honors College, thought that I was in a unique position to fulfill one of the college's goals—offering timely special topic courses that engage students in critical thought on contemporary culture.

How could I teach such a course? What would a course on disaster writing contain? Making sense of Katrina's tragedy seemed to be beyond the power of human reckoning—or at least my own. After all, I was still grieving for my city.

I felt both cursed and blessed to be away from home while Katrina's events unfolded, and I quickly resigned myself to the fact that moving back to New Orleans, which had always been my plan after graduate school, would be impossible. This Antediluvian Plan, as I referred to it, drowned. Teaching a course on disaster writing, then, would be a constant reminder.

I hesitated accepting the course offer for a day or two until I reread "Elegy for My City," an article by the novelist Richard Ford, published on September 4, 2005, one among the many I collected in the weeks after Katrina. Ford's heartbreakingly beautiful prose eventually led me to a rationale for the course. "In America," he states, "even with our incommensurable memories of 9/11, we still do not have an exact human vocabulary for the loss of a city—our great iconic city, so graceful, livable, insular, self-delighted, eccentric, the one New Orleanians always said, with a wink, that care forgot and that sometimes, it might seem, forgot to care."

The cultural relevance of Katrina had emerged only days after the storm made landfall, and many of our nation's best critics, artists, poets, and fiction writers were making contributions to the national dialogue soon after. Their work provided a starting point for designing a creative writing course, which I titled "Flirting with Disaster: Tragedy and the Arts." These men and women were indeed forming a human vocabulary with which we could comprehend one of our nation's greatest tragedies, and my students and I would join them. If I couldn't return home and help rebuild, I could at least bring an awareness of this disaster to a group of students.

On the first day of class, I told my eleven honors students (only two of whom were aspiring writers) that we would be participating in what I see as a literary tradition. From Faulkner's novella, *Old Man*, set during the Mississippi flood of 1927, to the Dust Bowl of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath,* writers frequently look for meaning in disaster. They may also use disaster to arrive at some greater truth, so the pain we all experience through tragedy is not wasted. I expected my students to be equally considerate when writing their own "disaster texts," and since great writers are great readers, they also read many works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry centered on either natural or personal disaster. We even considered the contributions of musicians and artists in our discussions.

Classrooms can be snow globes, hermetically sealed communities of student-thinkers who are reluctant to break the seal and allow the knowledge they have gained flood other aspects of their lives. For them, the classroom is a place to learn what is deemed worth knowing for that particular class, to get the best grade possible, and then to move on to something different. To safeguard against this mentality, I chose readings from several genres that all informed similar disaster themes. Voltaire, who wrote in response to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and even Led Zeppelin, who covered the Delta blues standard "When the Levee Breaks," both have something to say about Katrina. Students

needed to see that philosophy, history, literature, and music—culture in general—cannot be compartmentalized the same way that Katrina's aftermath should not only belong to the people of the Gulf Coast. This was a national tragedy, a shared tragedy, the seeds of which were planted generations ago.

The great Mississippi River flood of 1927, probably the greatest natural disaster ever to affect our nation, served as our first case study. We read John Barry's masterpiece of nonfiction, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927and How It Changed America*, and complemented it with selections from Richard Wright, William Faulkner, Ernest Gaines, Zora Neale Hurston, and others, such as Delta blues musicians, who looked to this tragedy or comparable experiences when making their respective art. We also read contemporary responses to Katrina that were eerily similar. "We've learned nothing," a student said in class one day.

Later, students were then asked to write their own short works of fiction in which disaster was used to explore their chosen themes. Some wrote flood-inspired works; others had different tragedies to share. Then through poetry, students commemorated the Midwest flood of 1993, in which entire towns in Missouri and Illinois were lost.

Not surprisingly, poets were among the first creative writers to respond to Katrina, and I had the pleasure of witnessing students seeking out these poems in both online and print magazines and then sharing them with the class. We came upon the fall 2005 issue of *The Oxford American* in which "Requiem," a Katrina-inspired poem by Yusef Komunyakaa, appeared. It was accompanied by a hauntingly elegant photograph of a traditional New Orleans shotgun house by Michael Eastman, a St. Louis photographer. I asked each student to write his or her own requiem, but although these inexperienced creative writers produced poignant, sensitive verse worthy of praise, I realized that

the true value of this class lay in their enthusiasm for finding (and responding to) the latest Katrina-related prose and poetry.

Empathy was our greatest achievement. As writers themselves, they formed empathy for the professionals with whom they shared the same goal. In turn, they empathized with each other, with New Orleans, its people. I stumbled across a way to have students identify themselves as writers and take on the responsibility such a title entails. They took ownership of Katrina and didn't forget to care.

I brought this goodwill with me when I returned home a year after Katrina for an English instructor's position at the University of New Orleans. But in many ways, I sometimes feel like an outsider. My people, and nearly all of my current colleagues at UNO, were forever changed; they had experienced something I can only identify with through reading and my own writing, which I know cannot compare to having lived through the storm's aftermath firsthand. Additionally, since I don't want to be perceived as an armchair survivor, I am careful with how I incorporate many Katrina-related assignments into my UNO composition classes. At the University of Missouri—St. Louis, my students knew me as a well-informed citizen of the Gulf South, one who could help them navigate through the complexities of Katrina. Now, at UNO, and thanks to my experiences in Missouri post-Katrina, I like to think that I have a kind of dual citizenship.

My UNO students often express frustration over the misconceptions about New Orleans they perceive in the media—that no matter how well-intentioned, the rest of the country cannot seem to understand exactly what happened here and what continues to happen. I can provide these students with an outsider's point of view, and I frequently ask them to correct the inaccuracies and misrepresentations they encounter by writing their own responses.

I am often encouraged when I read these essays, written by civic-minded standard-bearers of a wounded and turbulent city. I tell them that they must protect and defend this remarkable fellowship in which they and countless characters of myth, history, and literature belong.

Writing Narratives, Rebuilding Lives, Spring 2006

Celeste Del Russo

When I returned to my post as a teaching assistant in Spring 2006, I immediately sensed a feeling of camaraderie in my writing classroom; that we had all experienced Katrina and had returned to UNO was a commonality we all shared. Returning to the classroom was no easy feat, especially considering that nearly half of my students had lost their homes and were still living in FEMA trailers, hotels, or in friends' basements. I did not want my class to be seen as just one more obstacle to cross on their way to recovery. Rather, I wanted students to realize the classroom as a space for writing in response to tragedy, and hoped this would be beneficial for them as they rebuilt their personal lives.

I saw the goal of the course, then, to get students to translate into writing what they already perceived as issues of local importance and personal relevance to themselves as storm victims and members of an affected community. The course design encouraged students to pull from a variety of local resources, including archives, their own experiences, secondary sources, and more importantly, the social spaces that make up their personal lives (i.e., their neighborhoods, places of employment, family circles, etc.)..

The first essay assignment of the semester prompted students to bring the Katrina Narrative Project[1] into the classroom and share their evacuation and return home experiences with their peers. Students first chose to interview other UNO students, co-workers, neighbors, family members, friends, or strangers and recorded this person's storm experiences which students later shared during class in small groups.

Students then wrote their own narratives, which would eventually be submitted to the KNP to become part of this historical archive.

In preparation for writing their own narratives, in-class writing became a routine activity; these "Where Y'at" sessions, as one student called them, asked students to describe the places they evacuated to, their first time home after the storm, their opinion of national media coverage, or what plans they had for their future at UNO or in New Orleans. Here is how some of them responded:

They are dealing with loss:

> I came back a few days ago to see nothing but an empty house with only brick walls on the outside. The whole neighborhood had about eight feet of water. That was more than enough to destroy almost everything . . .

Being split up from families:

> My mother, stepfather, and three-year-old sister are moving to Atlanta because my stepfather's job in New Orleans was in jeopardy. I didn't realize how very real it was until they were packed up, standing on our street, ready to head out. As I watched them drive down the driveway for the last time, I kept hearing my baby sister ask me why I'm not going with them.

Or experiencing survivor guilt:

> The majority of houses are abandoned . . . When I walk down Oden Street in Gentilly, it feels as though I am completely alone in an area everyone deserted because of some disease. Although I am grateful that I was so fortunate to not have experienced such devastation after Katrina, I also feel guilty knowing other people are suffering.

Embedded in these personal narratives were opportunities for further readings, discussions, and writing assignments that continued to

"locate" students in conversations occurring in New Orleans, making student experience the groundwork for a more localized pedagogy throughout the semester. Through this narrative assignment, students stumbled upon the commonalities and differences of their Katrina experiences and were able to hone in on central topics of local debate—topics that eventually became the subjects of argument and research papers during the semester. For example, one student whose narrative was framed around the night she spent in her car on the shoulder of I-10, her eight-month old son in her lap, wrote an argument paper that called for changes in the evacuation plan, including when the city should call a mandatory evacuation. Another, whose mother was listed as a missing person after Katrina, wrote a research paper on the methods employed by the National Center for Missing Adults (NCMA) and reviewed the overall effectiveness of missing person databases; pulling from various news articles and her personal experience with the operators at the Katrina/Rita Missing Persons Hotline, she eventually presented a pro-con paper on city-wide and national efforts to locate missing loved ones. Lastly, a student who lost his Biloxi home to Katrina and who reflected upon this loss in his narrative, continued in a position paper defending his family's choice to rebuild, and another, whose family was still waiting in mid-October for a FEMA trailer in Arabi, argued for more effective solutions for housing.

Not all students, of course, felt themselves so dramatically affected by the storm. Some students resisted the writing assignments and prompts and expressed the desire to write about topics unrelated to New Orleans; that students "needed a break" from the twenty-four hour Katrina coverage, is a sentiment a few students shared, "it's depressing" is another. Others expressed the feeling that writing Katrina was irrelevant for them, because they had not lost their homes or had "not been affected by the storm."

I felt troubled that some students did not see any connection between their current lives and a post-Katrina New Orleans, despite the fact

that many of them commuted daily through scenes of simultaneous devastation and rebuilding, and had no plans to leave the city and surrounding areas after they graduated. And though the effect of traveling and moving day to day through flooded and abandoned neighborhoods has the potential to leave one desensitized, I hoped that by encouraging localized writing, my students might resist this feeling to "shut-down" and instead think of themselves as key players in rebuilding their communities. Asking my students to ignore current events in New Orleanswas like asking them to disregard the yellow water lines that mark the homes on their daily drives to campus; analogous to dismissing the portable classrooms and locked buildings on the Lakefront campus that, at the time, were marked for mold remediation; like asking them to buy earplugs so as not to hear the pounding levee repairs occurring right off campus. It just was not an option.

"Teaching Katrina" in the Composition Classroom, Spring 2006
Sarah DeBacher

Like many of my colleagues, I saw the return to the writing classroom, post-K, as an enormous opportunity. Writing had already played a role in my own healing process. Through daily emails with far-flung friends, in posts on my newly-created blog, and in a letter to the editor published in the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, I had been sorting through a whole host of what had previously seemed like un-nameable pains. Writing was helping me heal, and I looked forward to using writing in the classroom to help heal my students and perhaps even our city. I hoped that in having my students write about the storm, they could see what I did: the transformative power of writing.

Perhaps more than hope, though, I was driven by what felt like a duty to "teach Katrina." Since our private and personal traumas had been so publicly co-opted, so erroneously retold by the media, I felt I had an obligation to "right that wrong" in my own writing, and have my

students do the same in theirs. So the question was, how could I teach Katrina?

Ordinarily, I preferred giving my students "open-ended" (purpose-driven) prompts to "directed" (subject-driven) ones. I believed that my students wrote best when they wrote about subjects that interested them, not ones I'd assigned. Like Donald Murray, I believed that my students needed to find their own subjects—that "it is not the job of the teacher to legislate the student's truth" (5). So, with the rare exception of an in-class timed-writing assignment, my essay prompts provided a purpose for my students' writing (and often, an audience,) but required that my students select subjects of their own. That first post-K semester, though, I questioned whether it was responsible to allow a student to write about any old thing when clearly Katrina was The Most Important Subject on any New Orleanian's radar. After all, hurricane Katrina was the subject that defined us, and the one we had the power—through writing—to define.

So I returned to the task of teaching with the idea that I'd try something new. Instead of assigning "open-ended" prompts that allowed my students to choose their subjects, I'd give them their subject: Katrina. What I later came to realize is that I didn't need to change how I taught writing in order to "teach Katrina." In fact, I quickly learned that "assigning Katrina" would in many ways be a mistake.

For their first essay, I had my students write their own "storm stories" that I hoped they would submit to the Katrina Narrative Project. In them, they'd reflect on their experiences through narration, description, and analysis. My objective was to teach them to recognize the importance of expanding and/or omitting details according to their relevance to a central idea. I envisioned them zeroing in on the details of their narratives, reflecting on them, re-shaping them, and then crafting them into cohesive essays.

But as I read that first batch of essays, I very quickly recognized an all-too-familiar problem. My students had ended their narratives by tacking-on a paragraph of platitudes and generalizations that they appeared unable to connect to their experience. "Family is all that matters," they wrote. Or, "You don't know what you've got until it's gone." In some ways, these soapbox-conclusions were more "earned" by the narratives they'd written than they had been by some of my students in the past, but the failure to effectively analyze their experience was more widespread this time. What happened?

When I talked with my students in conference, I realized that the problem hadn't surfaced because they were unable to analyze *an* experience. After all, we had practiced the steps of analysis in class, and they'd been able to derive meaning from non-Katrina-related narratives we'd discussed. The problem was that they weren't yet able to analyze *this* experience. I'm not sure why I hadn't anticipated the problem before I forced the subject of Katrina on them. It became clear that they were too close to the experience to make sense of it, and in forcing them to try, I realized that I'd put some of them through no small amount of emotional stress (which I'd hear about, as many of my colleagues later did, in my student-evaluations.) Unlike the student whose boyfriend had dumped her on the eve of her tearfully writing "I am even stronger on my own," my students that semester hadn't made the poor choice of subject; I had.

My own issues, however, were similar to theirs: I wasn't far enough from the problem to see that I'd created it. So the first Katrina-specific essay I'd assigned hadn't worked out, I shrugged. So what? By that point in the Katrina-semester, I'd heard of so many inspiring essay prompt ideas, I was wholly wedded to making the directed-subject approach work. So I tried another.

This time, I asked students to write an essay that persuaded their readers to accept their proposal for rebuilding New Orleans. They

would need to do some research in order to understand the complexity of the issues surrounding their proposed ideas, and they'd need to organize those ideas for in-class, timed-writing.

Initially, the response to my assignment was positive. My students enjoyed reading and discussing articles and editorials published in local and national newspapers, and they seemed to get a kick out of making some rather radical proposals of their own. The assignment proved to be a good one for a careful discussion of audience-awareness, as well. Proposals likely to be granted by a New Orleanian might be rejected by, say, Utah's Senator Bennett (who famously dismissed the city's rebuilding as a waste). Proposals attractive to New England libertarians might get rejected by a single mother from Gentilly now living in Houston. The assignment produced some rich in-class discussions of appealing to an audience comprised of all of these people, and more.

As the date of the in-class writing neared, however, things fell apart. What happened, I think, was that by then (late Fall '05) "Katrina-fatigue" began to creep in. We were tired from living in a broken city. The stores and restaurants where we'd made our groceries were closed, many permanently; we were driving miles to find a working gas station; broken traffic lights and power outages were a fact of life; doctors, dentists, and hospitals were few and far between. The landscape was altered, though it appeared achingly whole, sometimes, in our dreams. And even if we had not lost everything like so many others, we knew (just as the media and those who fed on it told us) that we were bad, bad off. But we were also tired from *thinking* about all this. How would we get through it? Would people come back? How would individuals and neighborhoods recover? The only certainty, we began to realize, was that things would be this way for a long time.

In the midst of all of these feelings, and in the midst of this new reality, writing an essay about the city's recovery seemed almost like a cruel

joke, and my students said so. I tried to inspire them. Imagine the possibilities, I said. Think of the impact your writing can have! When my pep-talks didn't work, I simply commiserated. It was hard, yes, it was hard to write about these subjects right now, but let's do this good work.

When I finally got the poorly-constructed batch of essays, I saw that I'd forced them to engage with a subject they weren't prepared to confront. Their proposals (rebuilding levees *a la* Amsterdam, reinventing public schools, revamping the criminal justice system) while inspiring and heartfelt, lacked development. But why?

The problem was that the subject of rebuilding a city was too complex to address in one two-week/six-class unit (especially when two of those classes were committed solely to writing). In order to present reasonable proposals, they'd need the time to develop mastery of their subjects. They'd need to understand the legislative process, economics, urban planning, social and educational issues, etc., etc. And they'd need to do this in the midst of recovering some semblance of sanity in their day-to-day lives. As if to punctuate the impossibility of this feat, one of my students wrote at the end of a half-finished draft, "I'm sorry but I just can't write about this right now."

I was sorry.

After that semester, I decided to return to my old standby—the open ended prompt that required my students to generate their own subjects. Not surprisingly, Katrina-related subjects continued—and still continue—to show up in my students' writing. Last spring in my class, Katrina appeared in a student's letter to the editor of the Times-Picayune urging her absentee neighbors in a subdivision of New Orleans East to mow their overgrown lawns. In another class, a Latino student argued convincingly that the city's influx of immigrant workers (so criticized by our mayor and the media) was, in fact, a good thing. This fall, a student wrote a wonderfully-engaging informative essay about the fundraising and recovery efforts of her high school's

marching band. Each of these Katrina-related essays has shown me how much more successfully my students have engaged with the subject of the storm when they've done so on their own terms—when their subjects are self-selected rather than teacher-determined.

No doubt, the lackluster student writing I read during the Katrina-semester was not wholly the result of my attempting to "teach Katrina" through directed-prompts. In fact, I question whether any of us was ready to be back in the classroom while we were struggling to get through our day-to-day lives. Even after I returned to student-selection of subjects in the Spring of 2006, it seemed the quality of writing (and perhaps of my instruction) that year immediately after Katrina was comparatively poor.

Still, the condition of the city could not account for the train wreck that occurred in my classrooms that first semester after the storm. My students struggled then because of the way I tried to "teach Katrina." They wrote poorly because I imposed a topic that they were not equipped to write about (at least not yet). In assigning Katrina as a subject, I had attempted to direct them toward discoveries I had already made in my own writing—toward what I saw as its potential meaning. And because I was so wedded to teaching what I believed my student's writing *should* be, post-Katrina, I failed to teach the possibility of what it *could* be. How much of that failure stems from a lack of faith in my students' ability to select "worthy" topics, from a selfish desire to push my own agenda, or from the pressure I felt to teach Katrina, I can't quite say.

I can say that if I had it to do over again, I would teach then as I do now and had done before—through the use of prompts that emphasize purpose and audience and call for students to choose their own topics. Now that I have returned to that approach, when my students choose to write about the storm, they do so with much greater success. And I believe that success comes from my students' understanding that it

is the writer's "responsibility," as Donald Murray put it, to "explore his own world with his own language, to discover his own meaning" (5). In supporting my students' exploration of their worlds (personal and public, local and global) I've discovered just how meaningful their Katrina-related discoveries can be when they confront the storm on their terms, not mine.

Commemorating the Katrina-versary, Fall 2006
Doreen Piano

In August 2006, during the intense media lead-up to the first year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina's landing, I began to notice the growing number of listings of "Katrina-versary" events in the Times-Picayune for musical events, poetry readings, bell ringing and candlelight ceremonies, protest marches, lectures and roundtables, theater productions, even stand-up comedy. Each day the listings grew dominating the events listings like kudzu. With the fall semester starting, I knew that I wanted to incorporate these events into my writing classes, even though after a spring semester of plunging the depths of flood-related issues in my writing classes, I had decided to ease up on teaching Katrina. Not that the issues facing the city had become any less urgent, nor the student writing that emerged anything but amazing, yet as one student succinctly expressed it on the course evaluations: "Too much Katrina."

Teaching during the semester after Katrina was particularly bleak. Building damage such as the open wound of a ceiling where wires dangled freely in one of my classrooms was endemic and periodic black-outs and water main breaks disrupted the normal functioning of the campus. (For at least a month, members of my department were seen scurrying across campus to use other bathrooms since ours was defunct.) Besides that, the university declared financial exigency and departments across campus were bracing for programs cuts, hiring freezes, and even faculty furloughing. Student enrollment had dropped

by a third and many continued to take online classes from evacuation locations, leaving the campus devoid of any student life.

Once a naval base, UNO is not exactly a traditional-looking tree-lined campus. There is too much space between the buildings, too much sun, and the architecture is military spare, but before the storm the students seemed to make the space work for them by organizing outdoor activities and gatherings that made up for the uninspired campus layout. Walking on campus that semester where the distance between buildings stretched out in an endless unbustling sidewalk, I found it hard to believe that this was the same vibrant campus I had witnessed during the first week of classes in August 2005.

A year later, the campus seemed more lively, even though the FEMA trailer-filled neighborhoods surrounding the university continued to remind us of the difficulties of rebuilding. Despite the potential for resistance, I decided to use these commemoration events under the ruse of an observation paper, a writing assignment I often used early in the semester. Only this time, I had a secret agenda. In writing about one of these commemorative events, I hoped that students would also come to recognize the collective need to honor the loss and devastation that surrounded us as citizens of the city, members of the university, and survivors of Katrina.

So often in the past year when discussing whether or not New Orleans should be saved, the majority of students had responded with a resounding, "Yes," basing their arguments on its unique cultural configuration that always included music, food, ethnic diversity, performance, and of course, carnival season. For many local students, these images had been drilled into their heads for most of their lives. The assignment provided students the opportunity to actively work with those representations of New Orleans as 'unique' among American cities, having a culture like no other. However, I soon learned that even students from New Orleans and the surrounding parishes did not

often 'take advantage' of the rich culture that New Orleans ostensibly offered. Many eschewed carnival season all together and rarely went to the French Quarter for fear of crime and parking tickets. As Ball and Lau argue, the marginalization of studying local cultural production in the classroom often fosters student disinterest and "the inclusion of local texts, artifacts, and performances can in itself be a critical move that implicitly confronts the marginalization of place..." (275). I wanted to see if interrogating this concept of uniqueness through an observation exercise could be used effectively as a way for students to become more engaged with their city.[2]

It was not just student indifference, especially in a grim post-Katrina landscape, that inspired this assignment, but I myself had a personal stake in the matter. Having just moved to New Orleans three weeks before Katrina, I had only a handful of memories based on visits to a friend of what the city was like pre-Katrina. On returning to the city, I had some serious ambivalence, often reinforced by my colleagues' amazement that I had come back, about what exactly I was doing there. So, during the assignment's various stages of development, I employed Elizabeth Ervin's astute observation that as teachers we cannot expect students to become engaged citizens and participants if we ourselves are not by attending as many Katrina-versary events as possible. Additionally, we read and discussed an opinion piece written by a UNO colleague for the Time-Picayune about how she and her family were going to 'celebrate' the anniversary. Even more important was my realization that the note-taking I had demanded from the students as part of their drafting process was extremely difficult during ceremonies that were so emotionally laden. Discussing this issue with the class allowed us to question how objective we could really be at these events when our affective responses were often so strong.[3]

Reading over the finished papers that students contributed to the archive, I am struck by the variety of events people attended. Some intrepidly explored territory wholly unfamiliar such as the somewhat

uneasy account written by a returning student who joined a protest march led by Jesse Jackson from the Lower Ninth Ward to Congo Square. Others dovetailed the assignment with their own interests such as a young man who attended a stand-up comedy event. I chose Adrianna Hanrahan's essay because it captures the emotional intensity of that day for many survivors of the storm. Moreover, not content with attending one event, Adrianna attended three different and compelling events to formulate a rich portrait of the day's events.

Two Years Out, Fall 2007
Elizabeth Miller Lewis

In the harrowing days immediately following Hurricane Katrina's landfall, I, along with my fellow Gulf Coast residents, was flung into a twenty-first century American diaspora. As Chris Rose, the *Times Picayune* feature writer who has become the voice for the Katrina stricken, so aptly put it in the early hours of evacuation, we are indeed in uncharted territory with no map. During the past two years, we have been immersed in an unprecedented cartography project as we reconstruct our personal lives and the infrastructure of our city, addressing major issues such as housing, education, the criminal justice system, and medical care, along with numerous other concerns, for example, electrical service, reparation of gas lines, road repair, reinstallation of traffic lights—the list is endless.

I spent the initial stage of the six week evacuation in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and approximately five days after the storm I was invited to participate in a panel on Katrina at the University of Mary Washington. I was in a traumatic state as I addressed the student body of the university, not knowing whether my mother, who did not evacuate, or my brother-in-law, who as a fireman was a first respondent who had to remain in the city, had survived the storm. I had no idea whether or not my house had flooded; furthermore, on the afternoon of the presentation CNN aired footage of a fire raging out of control two blocks from my residence. Although I was stunned speechless by these

circumstances, I forced myself to go through with the presentation. I was not in a position to prepare, so I had to rely on my ability to improvise, and aside from providing the audience with a first hand account of my immediate experiences with the storm, the topic that I discussed impromptu and at great length (much to my amazement) was the state of education in the city.

As a native New Orleanian, I received my education in the public school system, so I am very familiar with the inadequacies of this system, which graduates many of our University of New Orleans students. In this regard, because of my empathetic connection, I am deeply committed to my UNO students. In fact, Katrina hit one week into the 2005 fall semester, and I became deeply worried about their whereabouts as I addressed the student body of Mary Washington University. Although very disoriented during the presentation, I actually became excited while discussing the prospect of the reconstruction of the educational system. Indeed, the complicated reconstruction of the public education system has become integral to the recovery process, and even two years after the storm, is still in the initial phases. My naïve enthusiasm was quickly tempered by the bitter realization that, as an educator, I myself would be faced with formidable tasks, for example, teaching online during the period of displacement in fall 2005.

Needless to say, the apocalyptic influence of Katrina has had a significant impact on my pedagogical approach and philosophy. In my online teaching of American and British literature courses during the Katrina semester, I drew many parallels between historical epochs and the post Katrina period, and I continue to use this approach in my literature classes. For example, in British literature, students consider how the philosophy of moral optimism in the aftermath of the French Revolution is relevant to our personal perspective during the recovery process. In American literature, we focus on the similarities between the challenges facing New Orleans during the post Civil War

Reconstruction period and the post Katrina period. The student writing assignments connected to these units of study in the Katrina semester were inspired, and I think that they enabled the students to examine the consequences of Katrina from a more objective positioning. I felt like this positioning was important, since we were all coping with acute post traumatic stress in the early days of the recovery process.

In fact, while the critical lens of Katrina informs my teaching approach and syllabus, I have never incorporated an exclusively personal Katrina narrative assignment in the classroom, in the attempt to help my students maintain a more objective point of analysis. However, in my composition classes, their personal experience is incorporated as support, namely, in the appeal to pathos, in their arguments. For example, over the past two years, I have assigned a range of topics that focus on the recovery process. In spring 2006, when we returned to the devastated campus, students were assigned to construct an argument defending their position to return to the University of New Orleans and discuss the major obstacles they faced upon returning. In their argument, they were required to indicate whether or not they would remain in the city after they earned their degree. In the following fall 2006 semester, students were assigned the task of determining which social issue was the most pressing in the recovery process, conduct the appropriate research, and defend their position. In the most recent semesters, spring and fall 2007, the assignments focus on social protest and the recovery process. After studying Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From the Birmingham Jail," students decide which social issues warrant protest, conduct the appropriate research, and make recommendations for protest. Since there are numerous demonstrations that are ongoing in the city related to the issues of violence and public housing, students are able to use these references in their writing. In addition, they are required to follow through with several of their recommendations for protest, for example, by writing editorial letters and circulating petitions. While I have encountered some resistance to the Katrina assignments because of Katrina fatigue, I tell my students

that the recovery process is the reality of our lives and to ignore this fact would be academically irresponsible. Furthermore, I remind them that King insists that we have a moral imperative to address social inequity. In this vein, I am indebted to bell hooks for my belief that pedagogy is often an uncomfortable and painful process. At this juncture, my goal in the classroom, as a result of Katrina, is to inspire my students to social activism, an activism that is palpable and crucial to our recovery process.

As we New Orleanians struggle to restore and preserve the uniqueness of our cultural heritage during this reconstruction process, we are in a continual state of personal reinvention, from victims to survivors. Two years out from the storm, in all of my classes, I have started to encourage my students to consider the possibilities of the privileged vantage point that we have been afforded by this cartographic journey, namely, through the keen honing of global awareness. This perspective was illuminated for me in the summer of 2006, when I returned to Savannah, Georgia, the first stop of my evacuation odyssey immediately following Katrina, with my mother. When I informed a local gentleman that I was from New Orleans, he replied: "This [Savannah] is a dream; you are living in reality. Most people in the world, like you New Orleanians, are involved in a struggle for survival. In contrast, we, in Savannah and, in fact, the rest of America are living in a dream world."

Implications and Considerations

In the aftermath of the storm and subsequent levee failures, the rhetorical dimensions of "the local" that include a rich set of regional-related topics, individual and collective memories, and commonplaces have factored heavily into our teaching practices and subsequently our students' responses at the University of New Orleans. In fact, it was just such an idea that inspired Celeste to argue in her masters' thesis that the first year writing program at UNO should be redesigned to reflect the new realities in which we all find ourselves living and working and

learning in post-Katrina. In nearly two and a half years of writing after Katrina, our students' desire to move on and relegate the tragedy to the past is understandable. Many of us may feel the same way. However, we have an academic, civic, and even moral responsibility to continue Katrina-related dialogue and discussion in our classrooms and within the university at large. Attending a recent commencement, several of us listened to one speaker after another invoke the storm as a momentous occasion that forced a seismic change in our lives. How we continue to respond to the conditions we face as writing teachers and as locally concerned citizens must always be considered from the vantage point of where we are in the process of recovery. While the immediacy in which our teaching practices were situated directly after the storm forged a pedagogy in which improvisation became key to our classroom approaches, we now have the ability to perceive more measured ways of continuing to teach Katrina.

For those of us contributing to this article, it's clear that what unites our different approaches to the classroom is an acknowledgement of the value of the local. Tantamount to that is an investment in viewing the classroom as a public space—connected to the rich public culture for which New Orleans is known—in which issues relating to students' material lives are woven into historical and literary histories as seen in the pedagogies of Reggie Poché and Elizabeth Lewis, or in the localized pedagogies of Celeste Del Russo and Doreen Piano. Yet, as Sarah DeBacher's contribution points out, the delicate balance between imposing Katrina-specific assignments and allowing more space in writing assignments for Katrina to emerge as one of many possible directions a student's writing may take is illustrative of the need for us to be sensitive to the students we teach and the circumstances of their lives. However, this does not mean we should ignore their material realities. As Nedra Reynolds has argued, space and place influence the scene of writing; "the kinds of spaces we occupy determine…the kinds of work we can do or the types of artifacts we can create" (157). With this in mind, the question becomes: how do we sustain the vital

dialogue we began in our classrooms in the immediate aftermath of Katrina without risking student alienation or even worse, as the disaster becomes more remote, indifference to our ongoing changing realities that continue to be influenced by a post-Katrina landscape?

One answer would be that while the geographic and cultural specifics of our pedagogies are situated within the local, it's important, as many global studies scholars suggest, to keep in mind that the local is always mediated through and influenced by global conditions and circumstances. The tension between being at "ground zero" and viewing the ways in which discourses of New Orleans, the aftermath of the storm, and the recovery process are constructed and circulated nationally and internationally can provide new directions for our pedagogies that may consider critical frameworks that consider translocal connections of national and global environmental tragedies such as comparing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to the 2004 tsunami within a framework of global warming and/or sustainability issues.

Additionally, the student materials collected in the Writing After Katrina Archive Project must continue to grow so that it represents the entire lifecycle of the post-Katrina period and even more significant adds a much-needed counter-narrative that conveys how residents of the afflicted areas responded to the crisis through writing. If we stop collecting these materials, Katrina will be recorded as a mere historic episode of death and grief and not a stimulus for progressive change. The archive is not meant to be a time capsule, a repository that will be opened periodically and treated as a curiosity. If students recognize how their writing can contribute to the larger national debates on social and political issues, they may learn something greater about the purpose of writing and the significance of their memories. Yes, we write as individuals, but our reading is collective. Consequently, the archive has the potential to showcase and safeguard the inheritance our nation will eventually gain from Katrina in the same way that narratives collected

from the founders of jazz have historicized, and even mythologized, our city's contribution to American culture. Katrina may ultimately offer an even greater contribution; she may even find a permanent place in critical dialogue as the feminist and civil rights movements have. With respect to those whose voices drowned, we must carry on and allow history to write the final page.

Notes

[1] The *Katrina Narrative Project*, created by Provost Frederick Barton, has facilitated the collection of interviews of Katrina survivors by students in English, History, Sociology, and Anthropology courses. The archive will be housed in the UNO library and accessed by future scholars, researchers, and anyone interested in learning about those who survived the storm.

[2] Additionally, I had several international students in a basic writing course who approached the assignment in a completely different manner—rather than using the event to reflect and remember, the international students learned a much different story from what they'd heard and read in their native countries. In fact, a local student brought two students to Katrina Exposed, a photography exhibit at the New Orleans Museum of Art, and acted as their native informant, filling in the details of the storm and answering their questions.

[3] Not all students were enamored with this assignment and one student-observer at the UNO ceremony noted how bored people looked as if they had been forced to attend.

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